

ALEXIAD

(ΑΛΞΕΙΑΣ)

\$2.00

With the advent of the new year I have resumed the attempt to live a more minimalist lifestyle. I have been able to cut down on buying a lot of frivolous things like the stuffed spider that sorely tempted me at a local thrift store but I still buy books the library does not have. I have found two mantras helpful, the first a quote from, I believe, the movie *Fight Club*—The things you own own you. The second is the phrase you don't need it. These helpful phrases have helped me resist no few temptations to acquire things I know very well I most certainly do not need. I have not applied it too much to ebooks, which do not take up any physical space.

— Lisa

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Deadline is **April 1, 2020**

Reviewer's Notes

Cracked.com had an interesting article titled "The BS Movie Rumor Industry's Making the World Stupider".

https://www.cracked.com/article_27075_the-bs-movie-rumor-industry-making-world-stupider.html

The bs'ing had to do with how obscure fan theories became more important to fans than the actual content of the original. What the fans found insignificant was that the original was dictated by directors and by other controlling entities.

The only surprise is that anyone would find this idea new. Harlan Ellison™ once complained (and being Harlan, you know how he complained) that he had been accosted by an audience member who seemed utterly unable to comprehend the concept of a script; who seemed to actually believe that the actors spoke the dialogue and carried out the actions entirely on their own.

This seems almost deconstructionist; the idea that the meaning of a work is what the reader thinks, not what the author wrote. Except in another sense it might be fan-fiction based.

The origins of fan fiction predate literacy. There were a number of extensions of the poems of Homer, composed by others trying to link local heroes to the great Matter of Hellas. Then there were all the prequels and associated epics connected to the *Song of Roland* (where, inconveniently, all the heroes had died valiantly fighting the paynim Saracen).

Even when the concept of authorship, if not copyright, had come into being, this continued. If you've ever read *Don Quixote*, you may have noted that the second part contains a lot of annoyed references to a "false history". After Cervantes wrote the first part, someone came out with a fan fiction sequel, and that annoyed him.

And it continues today. You never heard of *The Last Ringbearer*? It blows the cover off the fascist propaganda story of Mordor being evil, shows "orc" to be a racist slur, and reveals Gandalf's evil. Kirill Yeskov is responsible, that is wrote this.

I'd like to say what Arthur Conan Doyle said to Arthur Whittaker, author of the Sherlock Holmes pastiche "The Man Who Was Wanted": "Write about your own characters." But I'm not in a position to do so.

— Joe

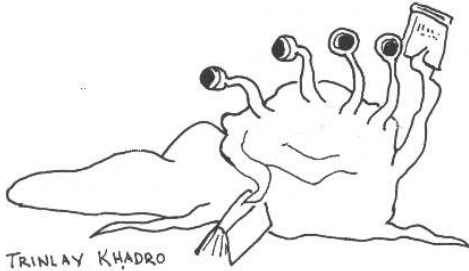
Michael D. Resnick

March 5, 1942 — January 9, 2020

I miss the rains down in Africa

RANDOM JOTTINGS

by Joe



Buy my books. (All available on Amazon.com for quite reasonable prices, except the Hugo-nominated *Heinlein's Children*, which can be bought from NESFA for a reasonable price.)

https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B01BMIC4MU?ref=pe_1724030_132998070

— Advt.

The Greek government has announced the issue of a € coin for general circulation and a €10 collector's silver coin for the 2500th anniversary of the battle of Thermopylae. The € coin will be like the Canadian \$2 coin, with a nickel rim and a copper center. Go tell the Lacedaemonians . . .

OBITS

We regret to report the death of **Christopher John Reuel Tolkien**, on **January 16, 2020**, in Draguignan, Département de Var, France. Born on **November 21, 1924** in Leeds to Edith Mary Bratt Tolkien and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Christopher served in the Royal Air Force during the war, rising to the rank of Flying Officer. Afterwards he read English at Trinity College, Oxford, earning a BA and a B.Litt.

He had been reading his father's works and became an assistant to his composition. He joined the Inklings, the famous literary society, on his father's recommendation, and was the last surviving member.

After his father's death, he compiled various notes to produce *The Silmarillion* (1977), then other collections, headed by the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996), and including *The Children of Húrin* (2007), *Beren and Lúthien* (2017), and *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018)

"And when that ship passed an end was come in the Middle-earth of the Fellowship of the Ring."

A CONSPIRACY SO IMMENSE
Review by Joseph T Major of
THE ADVENTURE OF THE PECULIAR

PROTOCOLS

"Adapted from the Journals of John H. Watson, M.D." by Nicholas Meyer
(2019; St. Martin's/Minotaur Group;
ISBN 978-1-250-22895-6; \$25.99;
Minotaur Group (Kindle);
ISBN 978-1-250-23711-8; \$13.99)

Nicholas Meyer's Baker Street Irregulars investiture is "A Fine Morocco Case". Not surprisingly, when Dr. Watson has to go to 221B Baker Street on an errand, he notes the fine Morocco case, and feels some pleasure that the syringe kept therein is no longer used by the owner to inject *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1974) of cocaine into the owner's veins when the owner is bored. (If the alternative is the owner emptying a revolver into the walls of the flat while shouting "I'm bored!" over and over again, though . . .)

The story begins on January 6, 1905, with a brush pass. Watson has run into his old flatmate, who is bored. Not that bored, one hopes. Mycroft Holmes passes by, there is some fraternal badinage, and takes his departure. Not before passing on the covert message to meet him at the Diogenes Club.

Where the topic is antisemitism. It seems that pages of the manuscript of a plot against all nations and peoples of the gentile world has been recovered from the body of a young woman found dead in the Thames. She was working, evidently, for an Irish policeman named William Melville — the first chief of the British Secret Service. And the manuscript is parts of a typescript of a work which will go down in infamy; *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*.

Piercing the flimsy pretext of its origin is simple enough; the work, in Holmes's opinion, is utterly self-contradictory. The question then is finding out the perpetrator of the forgery. (And Watson plays a significant role in noting how the adaptation from *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* has been hyped.)

But that's only half the struggle. Now that the crime has been shown to exist, the perpetrator must be revealed. Which entails a journey into the wilds of Russia, stalked by the Okhrana at every turn. There was the prospect of murder on the Orient Express.

And once they find the man, Holmes brings out a cruel streak. This publisher is no bored army officer in a Siberian garrison or PTSD-wracked Vietnam veteran trying to make a living by dying, yet Holmes terrorizes him into a confession by that method.

That settles it. The thing is utterly discredited and no one will take it seriously ever again. See Will Eisner's *The Plot* (2005; reviewed in *Alexiad* V. 6 #2) for how well that worked.

Historical note: Holmes and Watson could not have been made Officers of the Order of the British Empire in 1905 as that was not founded until 1917. So Watson could have died without the OBE. Thank God, he died without the OBE.

THE DICTATOR

Review by Joseph T Major of
HOW TO BE A DICTATOR:
The Cult of Personality in the Twentieth Century

by Frank Dikötter
(2019; Bloomsbury Publishing;
ISBN 978-1635573794; \$28.00;
Amazon.com Services; \$11.99)



"I approve this book."

— Admiral-General President-Prime Minister
Haffaz Aladeen, Supreme Leader of
Wadiya

Jagshemash. The movie is dedicated to Kim Jong-Il, "in loving memory" and Sacha Baron Cohen showed up at the Academy Awards ceremony carrying an urn with what he claimed was the ashes of the Dear Leader.

Dikötter surveys the ways and methods of eight of the more notorious dictators of the last century, describing their cults of personality. Some were grandiose, like Stalin and Hitler; others were petty, like Jean-Claude Duvalier. Their patterns of rule showed similarities.

The Dictator will present himself as "just one of the people". Thus Mussolini and Duvalier alike visited all over their countries. The Dictator, by way of contrast, may be withdrawn, as Stalin was (in spite of those stories about how he took a break from the vast task of governing the Soviet Union by going down to the railway yards and unloading boxcars). The Dictator is "in touch"; Mussolini and Stalin alike insisted on reading mail from the "little people".

The methodology gets darker. The Night of the Long Knives, the Great Terror, these were commonplace, and the other dictators also revised their circle of associates frequently and without cause or warning.

The Dictator is publicly revered. Stalin had cities named after him, "Adolf-Hitler-Platz" was a common street address in Germany, and Ceau escu built the world's largest Presidential Palace. Some Dictators had statues of themselves erected nationwide, others didn't, but the thought was there. (This is another tribute to the great predictive ability of Edgar Rice Burroughs; the effusive cult of personality in

Carson of Venus (1937) where all Korva pays tribute to the Dictator Mephis is a simple portrayal of life under a Dictator.)

The Dictator is a great thinker. *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, distributed in such magnitude that China ran out of red plastic for making the covers, was only the best known of these. Most Dictators had their thoughts published at great length, in many volumes, imposed on the public. (*Mein Kampf* was a mandatory wedding gift for Aryan couples.)

The Dictator has Image. The great face of Mussolini on Fascist Party headquarters, for example, which looks like a headquarters for a Bond villain. Or to take someone who was closer to a Bond villain, Duvalier, surrounded by his evil henchmen the Tonton Macoutes, began to dress and act like the Vodun spirit Baron Samedi. (You *do* remember the ending of *Live and Let Die*, with Baron Samedi [Geoffrey Holder] on the front of the train.)

The Dictator is not a man of law. The governments of these countries were conspicuously void of any law save the Dictator's word. (As they said of Hitler: "The German constitution is to be simplified. In future it will consist of one sentence only: 'The Führer himself both appoints and executes his Ministers.'" *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany 1933-1945*, F. K. M. Hillenbrand (1995))

Beyond that there is an ideological fluidity. Mussolini, for example, could never quite be pinned down on the tenets of Fascism. Which led to:

It will be seen that, as used, the word 'Fascism' is almost entirely meaningless. In conversation, of course, it is used even more wildly than in print. I have heard it applied to farmers, shopkeepers, Social Credit, corporal punishment, fox-hunting, bull-fighting, the 1922 Committee, the 1941 Committee, Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else.

— "What is Fascism?", by Eric Arthur "George Orwell" Blair

(This lack of definition has greatly advantaged later activists. And calling someone "Fascist" means they are not allowed to express an opinion at all.)

The work of Hervey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity* (1941), about how the psychopath has a "mask of sanity", a semblance of normality and even affability, over a complete lack of humanity, could be relevant in this. Dikötter cites lavish praise of Dictators, apparently sincere, from outsiders.

One can dissent from Dikötter's choices. A chapter on the other half of Hispanola might be interesting, showing how Trujillo applied these methods, for example. Yet what he shows is a dire methodology of tyranny and

the appalling pettiness of those who execute it. Good-Bye! Chenquie!



The Dictator
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1645170/>

YOU DON'T KNOW HIM
 Review by Joseph T Major of
AGENT JACK:
The True Story of MI5's Secret Nazi Hunter
 by Robert Hutton
 (2019; St. Martin's Press;
 ISBN 978-1250221766; \$29.99;
 Macmillan (Kindle); \$14.99)

In early 2014, MI5 released several files that would shed light for the first time on the story of a brilliant wartime agent known as "Jack King". Posing as a Gestapo officer, the man had infiltrated a number of extremist right-wing groups in Britain during the Second World War. When these MI5 files were first released, the identity of this "genius" agent was a mystery. After much speculation, most of it wrong, it emerged that "Jack King" was in fact Eric Roberts, a humble bank clerk who had been working at Westminster Bank when he was pulled out of job by MI5. His manager at the time had been suitably perplexed.

— Henry Hemming, *Agent M*

But Roberts eventually became disenchanted with Knight. And with another man he found out about . . .

Since the publication of *The Double-Cross System In the War of 1939 to 1945* (1972) entire libraries of thrillers about omnipresent Nazi spy

rings in Britain, being broken up by hardboiled American investigators from SHAEF, have become absurd. But if Squarejaw Sam Sledge, ~~TOUGH~~ hardboiled private eye from the Big City, drafted into the US Army to give the Nazis a punch in the face, were to bust the head of the Nazi underground in Britain, he would find a not particularly aggressive-looking bank clerk. Now, it seems a whole another mass of text has been rendered absurd; the British controlled the domestic pro-Nazi movement to the same degree that they controlled the infiltrated spies.

Like a lot of young people in twenties Britain, Eric Roberts had flirted with fascism. Liberal democracy had failed, killed by the Great War, and it was time for a government where only the strong survive. But he didn't take to it.

When the war came, he was noticed by someone who had been there and done that. M (Maxwell Knight, that is, not Sir Miles Messervy) called on him when the fighting broke out, and Westminster Bank wondered why they were losing a clerk. Eric Roberts faded into the mist and Jack King, daring Aryan agent of Gestapo Müller, stepped forward.

The bulk of this book is a recital of the contacts and efforts of the fighters for Wahrheit, Justiz, und der Aryanweg. While there was concern about their adherence to the enemy and the enemy's policies, the portrayal here is of a pathetic band of losers, talking tough about their devotion to Fascism but entirely unable to do anything more. You will recall that "John McMurdo" in *The Valley of Fear* (1914, 1915) had to step carefully to avoid promoting or even participating in violence. "King" was luckier.

But all things must pass, and the career of "Jack King" came to an end as the war ended. However, Eric Roberts had caught the spy bug, and managed to stay on in the Circus for ten years more, in a desk job, though. Age and health and changing times took him down, and he retired and moved to Canada.

Nevertheless, he was remembered, and before the end of his life he was visited by emissaries of the old bosses. He had a final gift for MI5; the name of a man he suspected was a Soviet agent. This man's friends had scampered off to the Socialist Motherland, but Anthony Blunt was still ensconced in the British establishment.

And then, anonymous, unknown, Eric Roberts died. However his legend lived on.

A MAN CALLED 48100
 Review by Joseph T Major of
AGENT OF INFLUENCE:
A British Campaign, a Canadian Spy, and the Secret Plot to Bring America into World War II
 by Henry Hemming
 (2019; Hatchett Book Group;
 ISBN 978-1-5417-4124-7; \$28.00;
 Hatchette (Kindle); \$17.99)

7771 had wondered if Sir William S. Stephenson was related to William Stephenson. Both were Canadians of Icelandic descent. But it turns out that Sir William had been adopted. (If you don't know the other guy, he went back to his ancestral roots and changed his name to "Vilhjalmur Steffanson", but that's another story.)

A thrilling work of fiction has made the story of British Security Coordination ring across the world. As Sir Arthur C. Clarke said, "The truth, as always, is far stranger."

Britain was in peril in the summer of 1940. Public opinion in the U.S., on the other hand, was very much, "that's their problem". This lack of perception needed to be challenged. Enter William S. Stephenson, air ace, financier, and chap willing to give it a go.

He set up shop in Rockefeller Center, running the British Passport Control Office until someone realized that that was the cover the SIS station chief used, a fact that was widely known. So it became “British Security Coordination”.

The security seemed to involve a broad spectrum of information, “white”, “grey”, and even “black”. The most notorious example of the latter being the infamous German Plan for South America, which was entirely invented at BSC to influence American public opinion,

It helped that Stephenson had support at high levels, such as the President himself. They had a common goal.

As opposed to the other guy. Hemming portrays a tragic fall of a hero, as Charles Lindbergh becomes more involved with less than savory persons, becoming antisemitic, and generally forfeiting his public esteem. (What I found hard to believe is how none of his seven children by those three German women ever saw a picture of *die erste Atlantikflieger* and thought, „That looks like Vati.”)

Stephenson also found a fellow agent who wanted to organize, and as a result we got William J. Donovan setting up the Office of the Coordinator of Information, which then budded off the Organization of Strategic Services.

All things come to an end, and after the war the now knighted Stephenson went back to public life. Except, he kept on wanting his version of things published. First off, there was the Most Secret history, *British Security Coordination: The Secret History of British Intelligence in the Americas 1940-1945* (1946, 1998). But this was kept locked up for official reference. Thus Stephenson had his former subordinate H. Montgomery Hyde write a biography, *The Quiet Canadian: The Secret Service Story of Sir William Stephenson* (1962). But this was restricted by the Official Secrets Act and had some less than veracious paybacks towards opponents.

And then Sir William fell ill, had memory lapses, and fell into the hands of the coincidentally-named William Stevenson, who produced a thrilling novel titled *A Man Called INTREPID* (1978) in which Sir Wil-

liam ran the entire covert war. This would have been acceptable had it not been portrayed as a serious work of history. "Nigel West" (who also wrote the introduction to *British Security Coordination*) was at some effort to refute some of these fables in *A Thread of Deceit* (1985). (For example, INTREPID was the cable address for BSC; Stephenson would have been referred to as 48100, as US office (48) station chief (100).)

There is still a considerable level of puffery in the story of this effort. Hemming works at cutting it down to size, but the myth may be unresolvable. (He had a personal connection; his grandfather worked for BSC.)

STORY OF A BOOK TUMMLER

Review by Joseph T Major of

OUTWITTING HISTORY:

The Amazing Adventures of a Man Who Rescued a Million Yiddish Books

by Aaron Lansky

(2004; Algonquin Books;

ISBN 978-1565124295; \$24.95;
2018; Amazon.com Services; \$1.99)

[illegible]

"Aoyb pasirung hat a nomen, es
muzn zeyn Indyana Jones!"

Indy was beginning to wonder if he would survive this expedition. Everywhere he went the summons was urgent and not to be disobeyed: "So eat already!" He was burning out on gefilte fish. Once he got through the dinner, and the heartburn and indigestion, he could begin the excavations. So often the books were buried under tons of old furniture, tsotchkes, rugs . . . and then, when he went to sleep, he kept on having that nightmare of his son killing him.

This is as much the story of the recovery of a culture as it is of the recovery of books. Aaron Lansky began this career of accumulating the biggest collection ever by taking a course on the Holocaust. One of the first, in fact. Which led him to ponder the society that had been destroyed, which in turn led him to learn the language the people had spoken,

And then he began to recover books. Too many books. This book tells of an endless career of toil, of recovering books about to be thrown out, of rescuing books that had been thrown out.

In the process he recovered much of the vanishing Yiddish American culture. There were little socialist discussion groups in every tenement, and they were at odds with those deviationist nogoodniks in the next building over. Lansky described meeting the publishers of four century-old Jewish socialist journals, each with its readership dwindling away to nothing, and unable to merge because of irreconcilable ideological conflicts.

One problem that was of a different order was so eat already. It seems every aged couple

insisted on feeding the boychik, then telling him their life stories. This made sticking to schedules impossible.

The search extended worldwide. Going to Cuba to recover the last archives of the Cuban Jewish community — the few who remained while most of them went to Miami, for example. Or helping restore the library of the Argentinian Jewish center after its bombing. Or most amazing of all, finding the *only existing copy* of a book that was banned by the Communists the day it was printed.

The fact that he was willing to listen has its own corollary, as when he was a tumbler at one of the last of the Catskills resorts. (Since he is a vegetarian, presumably he would not make Kornbluth's error of ordering bacon for breakfast.)

He met so many famous people, and the relicts of more. This alone seems to be a constant theme; having listened, he wanted to learn more.

Not everything was well. When he started sending out email appeals for funds, he was sickened by the spew of antisemitic responses. It seemed the listmakers couldn't easily discriminate between German names and Yiddish names, and the haters are always ready.

And finally, they got a splendid headquarters, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The Yiddish Book Center preserves and distributes Yiddish books — their collection is digitized, and you can buy print-on-demand books on acid-free paper.



NOTHING AS RELAXING AS "MR. TAMBOURINE MAN" PLAYED
ON A TENOR SOUSAPHONE...

One wonders. In a community where writers from Herman Wouk to Michael Chabon openly derogate and despise Jewish culture, how did the YBC not run into more opposition? Lansky does mention some (a Haredi Orthodox organization that threw the Yiddish books at their center into the cellar, because they were secular, for one) but one would think there would be more opposition.

And one would think there would be more ego. Lansky does describe how he got shut out in a joint television interview with Leo Rosten,

but wouldn't there have been more egos? Notice, for example, he never approached Asimov. Was he turned down? And Dr. A. the tuchis-pincher couldn't have been the only one.

Cartoonist Yaakov Kirschen explains the name of his cartoons "Dry Bones" by citing Ezekiel 37. Which has G-d asking the bereft and abducted Ezekiel "Can these bones live?" Having been rhetorical, G-d says, "I am going to open your graves and you will live."

Now these bones will live.

(For an introduction to the younger generation about all this, there is *The Book Rescuer* (2019) by Sue Macy, illustrations by Stacy Innerst.)

Yiddish Book Center
<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>

MALBROUGH S'EN VA-T-EN GUERRE

Review by Joseph T Major of

LAST OF HIS KIND:

The Life and Adventures of Bradford Washburn, America's Boldest Mountaineer

by David Roberts

(2009; William Morrow;

ISBN 978-0061560941; \$28.00;

2009; Harper Collins (Kindle); \$8.49)



Cancel culture, it turns out, is nothing new. Had the devoted acolytes of the Frederick

Cook Society had Twitter when Bradford Washburn published his devastating analysis of Dr. Cook's "climb" of Mount McKinley (Denali), their venom would only have traveled faster.

Roberts wrote this tribute to his mentor and friend, the man who publicized mountain climbing across America with energy, enthusiasm, and a need to make a living, not long after his death. Washburn had a variety of skills, it turned out, and a long and eventful life.

Henry Bradford Washburn was born in 1910 into a Boston Brahmin family of Boston Brahmins, a man deeply rooted in New England society and culture, descended from Governor Bradford of the Plymouth Colony. (One suspects H. P. Lovecraft would have admired him, and penned a blasphemous and mephitic tale of how he was eaten by squamous and rugose Things in the abhorrent and cthonic mountains of Alaska. Iä! Iä!)

Naturally he went to Harvard, where he found the basis of his future career in their climbing society. The next few years of his life were set to preparing for an expedition, going on it, writing it up, and lecturing about it. He was a mainstay of the *National Geographic Magazine*, incurring the ire of its leaders when he published in unworthy venues such as *Life*. But then, he had had his first book published when he was sixteen.

When he got married (he proposed to a woman he had never even kissed) he found a soulmate. As when she decided to leave their children to go on a climb with him, and played a major role in the ascent. Barbara Washburn was the first woman to reach the summit of Denali (Mount McKinley).

When the war came, Washburn did support work, which seemed in this case to collect information on how shoddy and useless Army Air Force protective gear was. Perhaps not surprisingly, it turned out that the officer in charge of procurement was thoroughly corrupt. Surprisingly, the man was convicted and sentenced to prison. (Virginia Gerstenfeld (later Heinlein) would have been envious.)

But, Washburn wanted to have others see what he had seen. He assiduously studied photography, and went beyond merely taking snapshots to developing advanced camera equipment, such as a mount for a camera that made it possible to take photos from a small plane without them being reduced to blurs from the plane's motion. Beyond that, he developed an artistic skill for perfectly framing his shots while including points of reference (the climbers in their setting).

As if this weren't enough, he lectured thrillingly and widely on his climbs, making a decent living at it. Most climbers have to work at seasonal jobs and live marginal life styles in order to be able to afford the time off. But Washburn had a regular job and enough of a relationship with the bosses that he could take off.

Oh that job. He was director of what became the Boston Museum of Science, and built

up a mediocre and unvisited establishment into a thriving and rich facility.

How he could be so influential and popular came from his personality. Roberts describes him as always having enthusiasm for new things, as if he were a Forrest J Ackerman with better judgment.

Washburn got involved in one of the Cook controversies. But he had been there and done that, including indisputably climbing Mount McKinley (Denali). The Cook fans threatened his job and more — and, again, this was the fifties, long before the era of Twitter cancel culture. Indeed, the Frederick Cook Society is still going strong.

Bradford Washburn died in 2007, after a long and rewarding life. But not without a family scandal; tragically, his son had molested his own sister's children.

One small problem is the puffery. Every mountain-climbing team mentioned is said to be full of formidable super-experts. I suppose Roberts is being generous to people he knows.

But perhaps not, as he was criticized for even mentioning the molestation scandal. As we are finding our own famous people having such degrading incidents in their lives, perhaps we have nothing to say.

TRUMPYBEAR

by Lisa

It is late night at the hotel and I am watching the television when I see something odd being offered. Up to now everything advertised has at least purported to serve some practical, useful purpose. This new item does not. It is a stuffed animal called Trumpybear. No, I'm not making this up. This stuffed bear is verily and truly called Trumpybear. Firefighters, police officers and even a retired Marine were touting their ownership of Trumpybears. The bears do not seem to me to have much of a resemblance to the President but they do come with a pocket containing an American flag blanket.

You too can have your very own Trumpybear for forty dollars plus six dollars shipping and handling. Yes, indeed, friends and neighbors, for the price of a Kindle 7 tablet you too can proudly boast that you own a Trumpybear like the one riding around on a motorcycle somewhere in America. Never mind that the Kindle 7 tablet actually serves a useful purpose. You could also for that price own at least two pocketknives or a new coffee pot. That nearly fifty dollars spent at a thrift store could go quite a ways toward preparing for winter.

As you may have guessed by now I have no plans to acquire a Trumpybear. It has been a long time since I have been into stuffed animals. The last time I bought a new stuffed animal for myself was back in 2001. There were two Beanie Babies whose proceeds went to benefit firefighters and police. I bought one of each. But it is nowise claimed that the money for Trumpybears goes to charity. If I thought it did I would not have written this. If

some of you should want and buy a Trumpy-bear that is your business. For me, it would not be a great difficulty to think of a thousand things I would rather have.

The Joy of High Tech by Rodford Edmiston



Being the occasionally interesting ramblings of a major-league technophile.

More Things Change

Betelgeuse is dying. Though long known as a variable star, in recent years it has been undergoing a rapid decline in brightness. This has many people watching the star very closely.

The origin of the star's name is a bit confused. The traditional explanation is that "Betelgeuse" is derived from similar Arabic phrases meaning either "the armpit of Orion", or "the hand of Orion." Both are quite understandable, since the star is in the constellation of Orion. In English there are four common pronunciations of the star's name, the most common of these popularized for sounding just like "beetle-juice." More formally, Orionis (Latinised to Alpha Orionis) is the star's designation as given by Johann Bayer in 1603. One possible reason for the confusion about the Arabic name is that Betelgeuse is moving very rapidly with respect to the other stars in Orion and may eventually leave the constellation completely. Maybe it was recorded at different times in the past as being in different parts of the constellation.

For centuries Betelgeuse was one of the brightest stars in the sky, generally being ranked eleventh. In the infrared it was actually the brightest star as seen from Earth. For about the past century astronomers have been able to measure stellar brightness with instruments, instead of using a Mark-I Calibrated Eyeball. Even before that, however, it was known that the brightness of the star varied, with multiple overlapping cycles of brightening and dimming.

Betelgeuse is a red supergiant. The more massive a star is the faster it ages, and Betelgeuse is currently something like 12 - 20 times the mass of our Sun. This after ejecting huge amounts of matter in the recent (on an astronomical scale) past. Even though it is only about nine million years old, Betelgeuse is a

star late in its life. It has therefore expanded to an enormous size, as most older stars do. It is also very unsettled, which causes bubbles of hot material from deep in the star to occasionally come to the surface and sink back. This changing mix of hotter and cooler stuff on the star's surface makes Betelgeuse appear brighter and fainter over time. However, in the past few years it has fallen a huge amount in visible brightness. By mid-December of 2019, it had dropped to 23rd brightest (as seen from Earth). Some studies seem to show the star is also shrinking.

For stars of this type, the next stage is a supernova.

When it blows, Betelgeuse will appear to be about half as bright as the full Moon, as seen from here. Though it is too far away to cause serious problems here on Earth — for the type of supernova it will produce — at the brightest it will be visible during the day, and may be a distraction for creatures which use moonlight for navigation. However, that event may be more than a hundred thousand years in the future. Or it could have already happened. (See below.)

By cosmic coincidence, there has not been an observable (from Earth) supernova in our galaxy since just before the first uses of the telescope to examine the heavens. Though supernovae have been observed in other galaxies since then, modern astronomers have never had one close enough to watch what the star does during the preliminaries. If Betelgeuse blows soon (keep in mind that it is about 650 - 700 light years away (current estimates put the star considerably further away from us than did most previous ones) so it could have already popped and the light of that event be on the way to us) we should learn a great deal about supernovae.

Now, let's talk about Eta Carinae (aka Carinae). Yes, it's another supergiant star about to go supernova. Actually, it is a star system, containing at least two stars. These have a combined luminosity greater than five million times that of the Sun. The system is located around 7,500 - 7800 light-years away from the Earth, in the constellation of Carina. In 1837 it attracted attention from astronomers by suddenly brightening in an event known as the Great Eruption. It went from a 4th magnitude star to the second brightest star in the sky. For a while some thought it was an actual supernova. However, it's rapid rise, short period of brightness and rapid decline to much dimmer than it had been before led to the understanding that what had happened was actually much smaller than a true supernova. In 1892 it had a lesser eruption. Starting in 1940 it began a sustained rise in brightness, until today it is about as bright as it was before the Great Eruption.

It is now known that Eta Carinae is actually two stars, which orbit each other with a period of about 5.54 years. The primary is a peculiar star similar to a luminous blue variable (LBV) but generally classified as an O. It is thought to have originally been 150-250 Solar masses. It

now believed to have lost at least 30 solar masses, much of that going into the cloud of gas and dust known as the Homunculus Nebula, which is inside the much larger Carina Nebula. This huge star is expected to explode as a supernova in the near future (in astronomical time). When it does, it should be about as bright as Venus. Depending on how it goes supernova (see below) the gamma radiation produced could have a minor impact on the ozone layer and be a slight threat to satellites and humans in space, but both of these are very unlikely. The Carinae system is too far away and turned the wrong direction to send much gamma towards us, even if the supernova produces a large amount.

Eta Carinae A is very strange in many ways. As one example, it is the only star known to produce ultraviolet laser emissions. The secondary star in this system — Eta Carinae B — is also hot and highly luminous. It is probably also of spectral class O, and is around 30-80 times the mass of the Sun.

Exactly what caused the two recorded eruptions — similar events have happened to other stars, and are known as supernova impostor events — is unknown. One of the more adventurous hypotheses is that this was previously a triple star system, and Eta Carinae A absorbed the other member.

Because of the distance and the obscuring nebulae, learning details of this twin-star system is difficult. We don't know exactly the age or metallicity of either current member, or what stage of fusion burning either star is at. This makes predicting when either will go supernova very difficult. It even provides confusion as to exactly what type either supernova would be! The fact that these two stars are relatively close complicates predicting when either would pop. It is thought that they are slowly spiraling together, but a merger would take at least many thousands of years. Even if one goes supernova before that, the effect on such a close neighbor is a matter of speculation. If both are close to going supernova, one exploding could even trigger the other!

There is a small chance one or both stars have already gone supernova, and the light simply hasn't reached us yet. That is much less likely than with Betelgeuse.

Stars close to going supernova is a fascinating topic. I recommend anyone interested look up both of the stars (or star systems in one case) briefly described here. Especially Eta Carinae.

I have written before in these columns about how changes in nature — particularly in the supposedly eternal, immutable and perfect heavens — drove some people to look beyond the dogmatic explanations of scholars and churches and objectively investigate what was actually happening. Astronomical observers no longer have to settle for "Well, your eyes must be wrong, because those star charts were made by the ancient Greeks, and they were never wrong." It was the realization that the ancient Greeks often were right, and that the heavens

had changed since those ancient star charts were made which helped drive the rise to the modern understanding of the universe. Not only positions and brightnesses but even the colors of some stars have changed over the previous few thousand years. Betelgeuse may actually have been yellow within historic times.

This is the advantage of the scientific method. When done right, it provides an objective view of the universe, correcting erroneous ideas through testing and evaluation. When Albert Abraham Michelson and Edward W. Morley asked of the Universe "Which way is the Earth moving through the luminiferous ether?" the response of the universe was essentially "Huh?". Because there is no luminiferous ether. Therefore, the results they obtained were nonsense when analyzed from the viewpoint of the assumption that there was. Trying to figure out why the speed of light was the same in every direction regardless of the movement of the Earth is one of the things which led to the Theory of Relativity. This process continues to today.

So, in the words of the movie and the books, Keep Watching the Skies! Even if Betelgeuse or Eta Carinae don't go Boom! in our lifetimes, the heavens have always been interesting.

AVATISTIC FEARS

Review by Lloyd G. Daub of

INTERFERENCE:

Sentience Craves Sovereignty

by Sue Burke

(2019; Tor; ISBN 978-1-250-31784-1; \$27.99; 2019, Macmillan (Kindle); \$14.99)

Robert Ardrey: "We were born of risen apes, not fallen angels, and the apes were armed killers besides. And so what shall we wonder at? ... The miracle of man is not how far he has sunk but how magnificently he has risen. We are known among the stars by our poems, not our corpses."

Spiders. Reptiles. Thunderstorms. Dark basements.

For many people, I've just scared them half to death, by sheer instinct. Or at least got them to say "Ew!" Such fears are called 'atavistic.' They refer to those fears of our most distant ancestors, who spent much energy and time learning to understand the why of these things, and so leave their descendants less fearful. And trying to pass on what they learned so that we could throw it away because they are dead and there's a new post on Twitter. So we forget, and the fears remain.

The first doesn't bother me much, the second two not at all, and for the last I believe strongly in electric lights. So I'm OK. Just keep the lights on, thunderstorms, and tell the animals they should stay away.

In this Horror-SF book, Sue Burke torments me with other things that instead do hit

me where I live: like being eaten and only then killed by a wild animal; or being punished — especially physically and brutally — for something I did not do; or worse, suffering for no fathomable reason at all.

Perhaps the first one on my list is not really atavistic for you, or even for me. After all, I can understand why the animal eats and kills. I would just prefer not to experience it. (Like I would prefer not to be smothered or to drown. Let's face it; I'll risk boredom in favor of immortality.)

But my revulsion of these things for me is the stuff of nightmares. They are my reason to look away from the movie screen when they happen to actors, or not attend their movie at all. But a book can throw these fears at me when I could not know that going in. And Burke plays on them all.

She also horrifies with things most people don't react against atavistically. (Perhaps we should.) Things like the unjust loss of liberty. Both physical and mental. Oh yes, fear of those are high on my list, too. Especially the idea of losing my mental liberty to a force I do not even know exists and cannot defend against. Being controlled against my will. Even if the intention of the robber of liberty is 'for my own good.'

SF has played these notes many times. This book gives us a new player to grab the pipe from the piper, and one that is more subtle and less suspected. Well done!

So much for the beginning and theme of *Interference*. A symphony of shudders. Be warned — parts of this border on torture porn like in her first book, *Semiosis*.

Be warned on another point. This book is even less character-driven than her first. For example, the play on one character's atavistic fears drives her to the stars, even at the risk of committing murder to do it. (Maybe voluntary manslaughter would be the charge?) A lot of author and reader energy is invested and laid on this character, who then disappears almost immediately and almost permanently from the book when we reach the new planet. Her purpose is to reveal the author's un-Ardreylike reflections on human nature in general, not in particular. She is a type model for the self-interest-über-alles that drives everyone else. And everything else.

This should help you understand when these themes are revealed about her aliens. (By the way; I remember my complaint from *Semiosis* that one of these is species is named by the humans and does not reveal their own actual name for their kind. It was a violation of the Pax settler's philosophy against indulging in so-typical human cultural imperialism. In *Interference*, Burke handles this complaint with a deft and amusing copout.)

(In exchange, I will only mention the Mary Sue character, and what seems to me the Yuge dystopian plot hole of western civilization being wiped out, and yet the survivors from Red China and Islamic lands manage to perfect cloning and continue — even expand — the pursuit interplanetary colonization. And with-

out many Chinese or Islamic names among them, if any.)

As for the other characters, little or no effort is expended on any 'arc' or development of their basic psychology. The nice people have few flaws to overcome, and the bad people no redeeming qualities, and no one seems to be affected very much by a long trip to the stars and meeting aliens. Or by the long time spent with others. This is not that sort of book. Burke is capable of it, and since this time the plot plays out in a single generation it could be done. But the author is not interested in that here.

What she seems concerned about is the struggle for existence, at both the instinctive and intellectual level. Naturally species without sentience will strive for life and progeny. Sentient species cover up natural instinct with psychology, and struggle for existence by any means necessary beyond what Nature (or Nature's God) gifted them with. Including technology and exploiting the non-sentients at will.



What Burke is looking at is exploiting sentient life at will. And in *Interference*, we are warned that humans are not the top predator in this arena. To go further into the plot, such as it is, would spoil the fun embedded in her events, and the horrors revealed by her themes. Enjoy both.

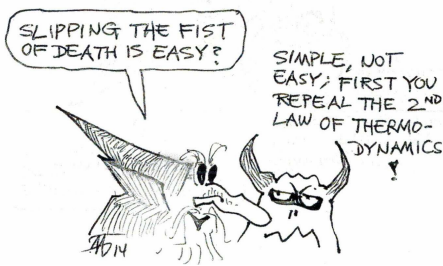
SHOW ME, DON'T TELL ME

Review by Lloyd G. Daub of

THE ANDRÔMÈDA EVOLUTION:

A Novel by Daniel H. Wilson

by Daniel H. Wilson and Michael Crichton
(2019; Harper; ISBN 978-0062473271;
\$29.99; 2019; HarperCollins Publishers;
\$14.99)



This will make a great movie, someday. Especially in today's Hollywood of CGI and almost nothing else (looking at you, Doolittle 2020) versus the human interaction and reaching for an emotional audience connection filmed by the evil white Hollywood long past. "They had faces. And voices," as the lover of old movies once said. Now they have costumes that hide the one and distort the other. And every plot in every genre is just another conspiracy to take over the world/galaxy/paradise — and pollute it.

But Hollywood can still handle this book. The visual descriptions are strong, the sets are exotic, the ending exciting, and the characters are as multi-ethnic and multi-gender as any "woke" producer could want. And if not, Zee or Zhee can jam them in there. There's room. Maybe the military scenes early on can show a trans character or two genders and get it over with. It will be a popular movie.

Too bad that right now what we have is a novel. That means we need the plot to be shown in words, not told in sermons. There aren't many, but they stick out to the readers from a different church. They just seemed like more. And few as they are, the sermons are woke and anti-western civilization. So it will be enough for many parts of fandom.

Where Daniel Wilson does give us real characters and real emotions and real dialog for them, not to mention flattish character arcs that at least are arcs, today's Hollywood can always substitute yelling and witty wisecracks and the F-bomb every third word like all their other scripts. (Do not forget the nude scene that needs to be inserted.) Wilson's problem as a novelist is he can never quite get the hang of how he wants to tell this story. Not even with the example of Michael Crichton's solution on the desk before him as he typed.

I sympathize with part of his problem. He is a different writer than Crichton. But the example should be followed better. Don't say that character feels this or thinks that. Let the character say it in dialog, or in a report. Wait even reports are supposed to not be preachy or say what the reporting witness thinks the other one is thinking. So use a debriefing or press interview for speculation. Wilson does use that technique at times; he should have stuck to it if he wants to preach. Let the characters deliver the sermons. Maybe that is not a novelist's first rule, but it is an important one.

I sympathize with another problem Wilson faces how to tell all the pieces of a complex story without getting bogged down in 'Do I say this now? Do I wait for a later chapter?' Wilson solves part of his problem in this regard, and the novel hangs together pretty well. But he throws things at the reader late that I think we should have seen much sooner, if only to better understand the stakes Humanity and our intrepid Wildfire team face.

One example of this is a table that may or may not be real for Earth. It comes into play on page 140, and I would have wanted it mentioned much sooner. It is the sort of table that reflects a problem I had with Sue Burke's *Interference*, reviewed elsewhere. It's about what happens to life on Earth as we know it depending on the number of humans killed in an epidemic or other natural disaster. The parallel comes at Scenario C: deaths numbering in the billions, just like Burke says in her book. The scenario's title is "Civilization Extinction." When that many lives (as a percent of any sized population) are lost in a short time, human life continues, but civilization must start over.

Wilson's organization problem is that he wants an exciting 'Will they/we make it?' book, and such a table earlier will add to the tension. But in order to get his story going and remain understandable, he has to give away the 'Will we make it?' part right away. His organization solution is to pretend he's borrowing from a number of after-action reports from which he pieces the story together like a reporter or historian. The sheer number of sources needed for this research effort reveals in his Acknowledgements section that civilization is still with us, thank you Wildfire very much. Were the novel laid out as a how-it-happened history, then the narrator can be forgiven for a bit of preaching if zee must.

But that is not how this book is done. It is a mis-mash of narration, foreshadowing, ominous warnings, research revelations and something resembling a novel. Along the way, then, Wilson gives us the exciting plot of who saves Humanity and how it is done, while interrupting events with things like "As we learned later from studying the video, she —". That can work out well, and usually does. But he continues the fiction long after he should drop it that humanity is no longer in danger. Historical novels are usually told in the third person for a reason. But they still leave the sermons to the preacher characters.

Oh by the way. How convenient that the lab happens to have one male space suit and one female space suit. Just what we needed. Thanks, Mr. Wilson.

BEST FOR WHOM?

Review by Lloyd G. Daub of
THE BEST OF JERRY POURNELLE:
The Collected Tales of a Science Fiction Legend

by Jerry Pournelle, edited by John F. Carr
 (2019; Baen; ISBN 978-198212417-5;
 \$16.00; 2019; Baen (Kindle); \$8.99)

532 Nika uprising against Emperor Justinian I in Constantinople fails, 30,000 killed in the Hippodrome by troops loyal to the Emperor

I found that reference recently at one of those "Today in History" sites. It settled a niggling memory that an event in one of the stories in this volume was awfully familiar. A mental itch scratched. As Doc Smith once wrote, anything is grist for the writer's mill. AKA, 'write what you know, or what someone else told you. It's not plagiarism, it's allusion.' If you know Byzantine history well enough, put it to work on another planet in another century. Well done, Jerry Pournelle.

Undoubtedly there are more such disguised historical references in this volume. Certainly there are bits and pieces here from a long life spent writing well, such as a failed novel's beginning being republished as a short story. Here you will find stories published before, published never, published but overlooked (looking at you, Lucifer's Surfer), and one that was bought on the terms that, if the publisher failed to let it appear, it could never be seen until publisher and author were both dead. So here it is at last.

You will have no trouble knowing which of these stories is which, because like all good anthologies the editor has a little introduction before each one. Some are longer than others. Unlike some anthologies I have encountered, none of the introductions are longer than the story itself. Close at times, though.

I will admit that I am not the greatest fan of science fiction, not when compared to my strong interest in science fact. Like with Sagan and Asimov, I always preferred Pournelle's non-fiction to his fiction. I bought this volume because it was a convenient way to see how much I was missing by not reading more of his fiction. To the relief I am sure of his fans, there was a good amount of pleasure to be found here by a benighted infidel like me.

There are also pieces of the sort we should see in a volume like this that rightly turns it into a *Gedenkschrift*. Pournelle definitely deserves it.

The volume begins with an introductory biographical piece by the editor. Interspersed with the fictional pieces are reviews of the guiding themes of Pournelle's writing Larry King on the Future History, and an explanation of the technology Pournelle employed in his mythos (by Doug McElwain).

As you and I would expect, the stories are also interrupted with personal reminiscences by Larry Niven, David Gerrold, and Steven Barnes, concluding with one by Robert Gleason. All are interesting, although they can border on hagiography. Or Mary Sue-ism. Collectively they suggest that a scientific and technological biography of Pournelle would be almost of more interest than a merely literary summary of his life. Hint, hint to someone.

As I am sure you will be relieved, I intend

no review of the fiction in here. You've either read them already or deserve to read them as I did with no idea who these people are or what will happen. Parts of his future history were obsolete in Pournelle's lifetime. Other parts were nonsense at birth. What works, from one end of the volume to the other, is internal consistency. Given a deeply thoughtful and hopeful envisioning of one possible future, work it out in stories and novels set within that vision.

As Johnny Carson (among others) said about comedy and audience: "If they buy the setup, they buy the gag." If you accept Pournelle's layout of Humanity's future, you can recognize these as real people whose type you may know already. As I said above, Pournelle's was a long life of good writing. I bless his memory.

WEATHERING WITH YOU

[tenki no ko]

Reviewed by Taras Wolansky

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9426210/>

This new feature-length anime, filled with beautiful, painterly images, is in limited release in theaters.

I saw it in a special screening from Fathom Events, accompanied by an interview with the director, who partly explained why the film is so gorgeous: he hijacked a good part of his animation staff from Hayao Miyazaki's legendary Studio Ghibli.

Teenage runaway in Tokyo meets and falls in love with a "sunshine girl" who can control the weather. He hatches a scheme to monetize her abilities, renting out her services to picnics and other outdoor events.

But the more she uses her powers, the worse the weather in Tokyo gets. And ancient legends about sunshine girls suggest it will all end badly ... especially for the girl.

The boy has to make a choice which, as the director explained in the interview, at least part of the audience will find controversial.

The film also shows how presumably well-intentioned child labor laws make life very difficult for underage runaways in the city.

DOOLITTLE

Reviewed by Taras Wolansky

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6673612/>

Doolittle, starring Robert Downey Jr., is the kind of movie that makes you question the habit of going to the movies. I'm not sure why I stayed all the way to the end. I guess the popcorn was good. (Free refill.)

Clearly the studio knew it was a bomb. What was obviously designed to be a summer, 3D, CGI spectacular was instead dumped in the middle of January, 2D only.

Somebody compared it to a children's movie from the 1970s, when the studios' attitude was "kids are stupid, they won't know the difference". The screenplay is

sub-professional, and talented performers are miscast and misused.

As the pirate king, Antonio Banderas is more Gollum than Blackbeard.

And the great Jessie Buckley (Wild Rose) is not just wasted but humiliated as the bedridden Queen Victoria whose need of an exotic cure drives the standard quest plot.

For no good reason, instead of an illness, the film has the Queen being poisoned by her courtiers. Perhaps the white hero had to be balanced by white villains. Or it's now a requirement that aristocrats be presented in a negative light, as in the Disney cartoon, *Frozen*.

There's a boy and a girl involved in the story. The film is a little schizophrenic, as far as political correctness is concerned: the girl is (of course) depicted as more competent than the boy, yet he goes on the voyage and she doesn't. (Apparently she is Queen Victoria's only defender in the palace, which has a staff of maybe five or six.)

N.B.: The 1967 *Doctor Dolittle* starring Rex Harrison was also a flop. It was a misbegotten effort to repeat his success in *My Fair Lady* (1964).



BAD BOYS FOR LIFE

Reviewed by Taras Wolansky

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1502397/>

With some trepidation, I went to see *Bad Boys for Life*. After all, I had never seen *Bad Boys*, nor *Bad Boys II*. (I didn't go to the movies very often when those films came out.)

But all the other movies playing in my neighborhood, that I hadn't already seen, were left-wing propaganda of one kind or another. So I went to see *BBfL* — and basked in the sheer professionalism of it.

It is an almost perfect entertainment, expertly mixing violent action, self-deprecating humor, and credible sentiment. I had a great time!

And if it's true that the box office is double what the studio expected, it's well-deserved.

TOO MANY JOKERS

Review by Taral Wayne of

JOKER

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7286456/>

Imagine a dimension of time and space that is as far away as Manhattan in 1970, and as close as your nearest comic book

shop. Inhabiting this crossover, between surrealism and the larger-than-life pageantry of four-colour printing, is one Arthur Fleck. Arthur's ruling passion is to appear as a stand-up comedian, and make his entrance to the applause of a top-rated, late-night talk show. But between his ambitions and the limit of his abilities, lies only the place where his dreams will be dashed and where ultimate where the ultimate joke is himself. For you have entered the Comic Book Zone.

After the bad taste left in my mouth from watching Jared Leto as the Joker in *Suicide Squad*, I was skeptical of yet another repellent and uncharismatic take on the character. Despite my misgivings, however, the trailers drew me in. It had become obvious that depicting the Joker as a "realistic" pathological killer was becoming something of a cliché, as directors seemed totally absorbed by a need to believe that a character such as the Joker could exist. Yet there was a sense of conviction in Joaquin Phoenix's performance I couldn't discount.

I browsed the DVD section at Wal-Mart last month, and was able to buy a copy of *Joker* sooner than expected. Rather than waste money on a Blu-ray copy, or the newer overkill "Ultra" version, I was content with plucking an ordinary \$19.95 DVD from the shelf. Unless you own a 19-foot television, no one really needs that sort of resolution.

The film was pretty much what I was prepared for. In fact, the entire story can be compressed into the trailer without much loss of comprehension. Yet I would hesitate to say that it lacked substance or development. To the contrary, the film is a substantial one if you are receptive to nuance. Watching a clown beat up on the streets of Gotham is one thing. Watching Arthur Fleck "lose it" as he tries to amuse a small child, but is overcome by a fit of manic, involuntary laughter, is another thing entirely.

Although thoroughly grounded in the comic books, on another level *Joker* was a straightforward film about a believable person, beset by personal demons and a deteriorating society. The film makes no concessions to camp or superhuman abilities. Batman makes no appearance in the film. Bruce Wayne is still a child, the murder of his parents does not happen until later, and the Joker isn't directly to blame for that crime.

In fact, I found it more than a little disappointing that the Batman mythos is all but unnecessary to *Joker*. Bruce Wayne could have been easily named Byron Wooster, the city called New York, and it would have made little difference. It is true that the Joker wears face paint and dresses gaudily, yet that is natural for a clown. Even the name, Arthur Fleck, flies in the face of canon.

There is almost no good reason why this movie should be about the Joker at all. It

might have been any film about the genesis of any psychotic murderer.

Don't get me wrong about revisionist films about the Joker. As they go, Keith Ledger's was brilliant, if a little unorthodox. In keeping with the *Dark Knight* trilogy, this was not a cartoon character, but a man whose scarred face was at times painted, and his hair rinsed green. Like the *Dark Knight*, this is a Gotham City that is believably real. Jared Leto, on the other hand, was a Joker in a superhero movie like any other, but who had all whimsy of a sex-fiend hopped up on meth. While he might appealed to a director striving for a more dangerous take on the Joker, I have to ask, "Why so serious?"

I suppose it must be blamed on the change from a society fascinated with larger-than-life figures, to one in which we are afraid of real-life dangers that we suspect lurk on our all-too-real streets.

And yet the images that lie behind a decaying, modern-day society already feel dated. The blames for our ills have already turned into stale clichés. Much of the story of *Joker* was a remake of Robert De Nero's *Taxi Driver*, made in 1976. Even the name of the driver, Travis Bickle, taunts the imagination.

But while *Taxi Driver* is set during the Vietnam War, *Joker* is set explicitly in the middle 1980s. Old cars, period advertising and unfashionable suits were carefully employed to create an authentic cinematic ambience. But are we only watching shadows of the Reagan era, or are these really the issues of today?

There are certainly resemblances between 1980 and 2020, but there are also differences, that the film appears to be papering over. To be sure, the Reagan era had its tensions, but it was also a time in which some Americans felt an upsurge of primal pride. After the fall of the Soviet Empire, there were grounds for optimism. No one expected that the reforms Reagan promised would actually begin to disassemble the future we expected, and lay the groundwork for the dystopia of today. However, rising hysteria over immigration, fears of terrorism, the resurgence of anti-Semitism, looming ecological collapse, and a very real chance that the United States is fated to become a right-wing autocracy are the issues of 2020, not 1980.

Throughout *Joker*, we are being preached to on the evils of capitalist society. The people of Gotham are emptying into the streets, looting, burning, tearing the bricks down one by one — mirroring the violent emptiness the Joker feels inside. Once again, this seems to be only the shadow of events from 1975, and not the genuine issues of today.

Despite similarities, the eras are not interchangeable. The insights to be gained from one are not the same as from the other, and the identification with the DC universe is not entirely a seamless fit.

Arthur Fleck certainly has no solutions to offer . . . only his pain.

There's no doubt that this is a serious film, meant to be understood as an artistic statement by the director, and not just another popular cinuc-book action flick. There is violence in *Joker*, but hardly enough to satisfy the bloodlust of a modern audience. What will become of the Joker in the future, however? Will there now follow several sequels, as Bruce Wayne grows into adulthood, and seeks revenge for his parents' murder? That seems to be the direction in which the film points, though as Batman, Wayne may have broader goals than just fighting the Joker — who would be twenty years older by the time Batman takes up fighting crime. Anyway, it would be missing the point to pursue how ordinary the Joker really is . . . he has no superpowers or even any particular ambition other than to get even for imagined slights. In fact, there is no particular reason, after his arrest, that the Joker would ever be outside the walls of an asylum again. He is merely the tinder that will ignite Gotham City to decades of violence. It will be far better if this movie remains without a sequel, as far as the Joker goes. It is best if the DC universe is not referenced in the movie at all.

Putting comic books aside, and all comparisons to other Jokers, watching this movie was time well spent on a serious drama that, for all intents and purposes, had no fantasy content. Unless you think you are unable to enjoy a film without anyone donning a mask or exhibiting superpowers, his is a film well worth seeing.

The film ends on an oddly funny note. After his capture, the Joker is interviewed in prison, and is given the opportunity to explain to his psychologist how he came to be where he is, and *what* he is. While he appreciates the humour of the situation, Arthur Fleck observes that, "she wouldn't get the joke."

She was expecting Cesar Romero, maybe?

WORLDCON BIDS

2022
Chicago
Mid-August — Labor Day Weekend
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Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
May 4, 2022
<https://jeddicon.com/>
[YES THIS IS A REAL BID]

2023
Chengdu
August, 2023
<http://www.worldconinchina.com/index-e.html>

Memphis, Tennessee
August 23-27, 2023
<https://www.memphis23.org/>

Nice, France
August 2-6, 2023
<http://worldconinfrance.org/en/>

New Orleans

(On hiatus)

2024
Glasgow
August 8-12, 2014
<http://glasgow2024.org/>

2025
Seattle
Mid-August 2025

Perth, Australia
(On hiatus)

WORLDCON

2020
ConNZeland
Wellington, New Zealand
July 29-August 2, 2020
<http://ConNZeland.nz/>

2021
DisCon III
Washington, D.C.
August 25-29, 2021
<http://discon3.org/>

NASFiC

2020
Columbus, Ohio
August 20-23, 2020
<http://columbus2020nasfic.org>

CONGLOMERATION 2020

The ConGlomeration committee has announced that ConGlomeration 2020 will be the final one. The committee is aging and they have found no successors.

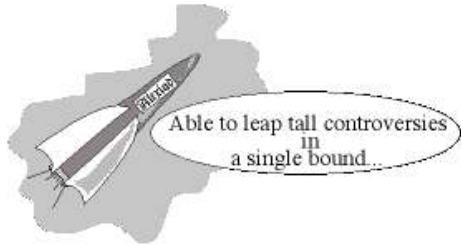
One thing they point out is that so much fan activity has shifted to the internet. There are groups for every interest and meeting in person is no longer so essential.

So history repeats itself.

Unless, that is, their appeal for new people to take the jobs of those retiring is successful. There are few enough fan-run cons these days and losing one, especially here, is bad.



Letters, we get letters



From: **Joy V. Smith** December 23, 2019
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Thanks for another issue of *Alexiad* — just in time for Christmas. Good to hear news of the Baker Street Irregulars. Btw, I used to get *The Skeptical Inquirer* magazine — always interesting. Thanks for the background on Peking — the naming of. I lost track...

I also lost track of Richard Jewell. I didn't remember — or know — much about him until recently. Thanks for the con reports by Leigh Kimmel; I haven't been to one recently, and I enjoyed hearing about them, though it sounds as if they were too busy to really enjoy them as they kept busy in the dealers' room.

"After Munich" was well done. Your work, I assume, Joe? ("Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting" is a popular quote! I didn't remember its origin.) More interesting news and discussions in the LOCs.

I think I have to share credit with the translators of the King James Bible.

—JTM

Merry Christmas, etc. to all and a Happy New Year!

From: **Timothy Lane** January 10, 2020
timothylane51@gmail.com

I checked Gary Corby on wikipedia, and they listed him as living along with his books, and nothing much else. From that I checked his website, and that didn't have much more. It would seem that once he started the series he never went much more than a year between books until the hiatus after *Death on Delos*. On the other hand, he suggests at the end of that book that Nicolaos, now that he's a father, is planning to seek a less perilous profession.

Although I had seen some Gahan Wilson cartoons (one college floormate had a lot of *Playboy* on his wall), I didn't know who he was until I came across his "Science Fiction Horror Movie Pocket Computer" in a best of

the year anthology. I later picked up a lot of his books

I also had a lot of Charles Addams books, perhaps even a complete collection of his cartoons (at least those in books). Thanks to the TV show *The Addams Family*, he was a much more familiar figure. Plus, someone had already given me one of his collections, *Addams and Evil*, before I went off to college.

Paul Harvey once had a "Rest of the Story" piece on the Year Without a Summer. It seems that the publisher of an almanac had left out his prediction for the weather for July 4. Informed this as it was going to print, he told the printer to put something reasonable in. The printer pranked him by having it snow on July 4, which made that almanac the only one that got it right.

It was disappointing to read Leigh Kimmel's Imaginarium report and learn how far the Ramada Convention Center has fallen. I believe the 2016 ConGlomeration she mentioned was the last con we attended. I wonder if the decline in the Ramada is why ConGlom moved. But it was nice seeing that she and Larry had good hardback sales at Archon. I've bought a few from them over the years.

Robert Kennedy: I've never heard of white slaves in the Americas, though I certainly can't rule it out. There certainly were white indentured servants, but that wasn't the same thing. I once read that the early black slaves in the British colonies were themselves indentured servants.

George W. Price might appreciate the scene in Richard Powell's comic masterpiece *Pioneer Go Home* (which was made into the Elvis Presley movie *Follow That Dream*, which didn't include this scene) in which Gumpian protagonist Toby Kwimper sees someone playing a slot machine. He figures the guy would never accept a job like that — but willingly works that crank despite net losing money.

Perhaps one reason even people like us have replaced "sex" with gender is things like Disqus not allowing the word "sex", though they do permit "sexual". I use "gender" sometimes when I'd rather use "sex" because of that. I hope Price has read Mark Twain's "The Awful German Language" and its evisceration of German gender. I think his explanation for the change in use is quite reasonable.

Ah yes. „Ah, woeful, woeful Ash-heap! Let us take him up tenderly, reverently, upon the lowly Shovel, and bear him to his long Rest, with the Prayer that when he rises again it will be a Realm where he will have one good square responsible Sex, and have it all to himself, instead of having a mangy lot of assorted Sexes scattered all over him in Spots." The U.S. Embassy in Berlin distributes a German translation of the essay. (!?)

—JTM

Grant's observation about the Lensman

series reflects how each story goes, not Smith's intentions (which he had no way of knowing). It could also be that Smith was simply taking care in case he was unable to complete the series.

His notion of prison for habitual criminals is basically the same idea as the penal system in Heinlein's "Coventry".

From: **Robert S. Kennedy** January 18, 2020
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My thanks for Vol. 18 No. 6 (December 2019, Whole Number 108).

And a HAPPY NEW YEAR to everyone.

In the previous issue I mentioned that the Mayor of Boise was a Basque... We recently had an election and he ran for a fifth term. The woman for whom I voted came in third. No one had a majority so there was a run-off election between the Mayor and the head of the City Council. The Mayor had originally appointed her to the City Council. She is obviously an ungrateful woman. She won handily and the Mayor was defeated. I would not vote for the ungrateful woman and voted for the Mayor. Having the person, or persons, for whom I vote be defeated makes me feel right at home from where I lived prior to moving here.

Joe: So now you are on Medicare with a generous supplemental policy. The company from which I retired provides a secondary policy. But they clearly state that it is not a supplemental policy and that is certainly the case. You would appear to be lucky.

As a long time subscriber to *Skeptical Inquirer* I found your comments interesting. The only real problem I have with the magazine is their persistent attacks on religion. It's in virtually every issue. Enough is enough.

In the previous issue I mentioned Michael A. Hoffman II and his book *They Were Slaves* concerning White Slaves in early colonial days here. You comment that he "is a notorious Holocaust Denier". I guess that places Hoffman in the same category as David Irving whose book *The Destruction of Dresden* is one of the few books to make it here when I moved. However, their stupid/ignorant claim about the Holocaust doesn't mean they are wrong about other particulars. I did have questions about Hoffman's book until I read *White Cargo* by Don Jordan and Michael Walsh which confirmed what Hoffman had to say. Well, enough of that.

See Chapter 5 of *Lying About Hitler* (2001) by Richard J. Evans.

—JTM

Your review of *THE SUSPECT* concerning Richard Jewell was much appreciated. I recently read somewhere that the person actually responsible for the destruction of the innocent Richard Jewell was the Director of the FBI, Louis J. Freeh. I don't remember where I read

it. I look forward to seeing the movie by Clint Eastwood.

There's a good article "Decoding the Denisovans" in the January/February 2020 *Discover Magazine*. Also, in the same issue of the magazine is another fine article "New Member of Our Family Tree Found in Philippines". There is a short article "Were Neanderthals just unlucky?" in *The Week* magazine for December 20, 2019. We appear to have a lot of cousins and more will probably be found.

George W. Price and others: Yes, words have gender, people have sex. On forms when *Genders* appears, if possible, I cross it out and write in Sex.

From: **George W. Price** January 24, 2020
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December *Alexiad*:

Dale Speirs attributes "the decline of apas and zines" in part to "Ruinous postal rates." Tell me about it! I recently got an inquiry about mailing Advent's three James Blish titles to Sydney, Australia. I had to tell the prospective customer that it would cost US\$51 for the books, plus US\$52.85 for postage by the cheapest rate.

I suggested that she should first try to order through an Australian bookstore that might (I don't know for sure) be able to have U.S. books sent as bulk freight. If they can combine orders from a number of customers into one large freight shipment, that should be a lot cheaper than mailing many small packages.

It used to be possible to mail books anywhere in the world at a reasonable "bookpost" rate. It took a long time — two or three months by ship to Australia — but it cost only about \$2 or \$3 per book. Ah, well — "Them days is gone forever." Now everything goes by air, and the rates are sky high too, even to Canada.

Robert S. Kennedy notes that "There were White Slaves in the colonies prior to and during the African Slave Trade." For a rousing fictional account, read Rafael Sabatini's 1922 historical novel *Captain Blood*. (Errol Flynn starred in the 1935 movie version.)

Peter Blood is an Irish physician who is caught up in the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion against King James II in 1685. Dr. Blood takes no part in the uprising, but after it is put down he is convicted of treason for having treated a wounded rebel, because "who aids a rebel is a rebel." At the so-called Bloody Assizes he is condemned to death. But then the king commutes the sentences of Blood and 1100 others to ten years of slavery in the West Indies. Blood is sold to a plantation owner on Barbados.

A Spanish man o' war raids the colony. While most of its crew are ashore sacking the

town, Blood leads a small band of white slaves in capturing the poorly guarded warship. Doctor Blood becomes Captain Blood and sails away to a spectacular career as a buccaneer and pirate, mostly against the Spanish.

After King James is deposed and exiled in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Blood is pardoned and made Deputy-Governor of Jamaica. Oh, and he marries the niece (and ward) of that unpleasant planter who had bought him as a slave.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1965>



Sue Burke says, "I got laryngitis and couldn't talk for two days, which amused my husband far too much." That reminds me of an old gag which is egregiously sexist, but reflects a serious point:

"Did you hear? Explorers in the Amazon jungle have discovered a tribe of wild women with no tongues!"

"No tongues?! Why, how can they talk?"

"They can't. That's what makes them wild!"

The serious point is that there really is a good evolutionary reason why women tend to be more talkative and fluent than men. Since women are generally smaller and not as strong as men, they can't get their way by threats and brute strength. They have to be persuasive, not combative, and that leads to greater facility and practice in talking.

See that Tale from the White Hart, "The Defenestration of Ermintrude Inch" (1957) for how this can lead to problems.

Still, that does not explain why women are smaller than men. Has anyone heard of a good evolutionary reason for that?

Taras Wolansky mentions a review of a book about how the Native American population was reduced by perhaps 90% by diseases brought by European invaders. He observes that "It's dangerous to your career to write anything that seems intended to reduce white guilt. That Native Americans were merely paying the price for thousands of years of isolation from the plagues of the Old World is not 'useful' history."

It is thus not politically correct to point out that nasty diseases can spread both ways. It has been widely theorized (but not conclusively proven) that Europeans picked up syphilis from the Native Americans and brought it home to Europe, where it hit the whites much harder than the American indigenes. For about the next century syphilis had a very high death rate, until Europeans developed resistance. If this is true, doesn't it warm your heart to know that we may be descended from the toughest syphilitics?

Let's give them a dose of applause. Clap!

—JTM

From: **Lloyd Daub** January 24, 2020
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I read very recently of the death of Christopher Tolkien, son of J.R.R. I would call it a heavy blow, were it not for the wonderful career he had even at his advanced age, standing watch over his father's texts almost until the darkness fell. Instead I note the joy it brought me to track down and own all his research publications on his father's works, plus the definitive version of many of the tales left uncompleted. A lesson to me in my own writing to strive less for "perfect" and more for "get it done." I also do not save my drafts in indecipherable scribbles on the reverse of scrap paper, but save them to files on two portable drives and endless emails to two accounts. The only thing I would ever have suggested to him was to organize his version of the *Silmarillion* as a true collection of tales from olden times, allowing their competing visions to take the place of a continuous narrative in one voice so to speak. That is, he over-trimmed what was available, leaving out some of his father's best prose and poetry for the sake of consistency. An example is the sparse tale of Tuor's journey to Gondolin as given there, versus the greatly detailed and more realistic expanded version seen in *Book of Lost Tales*. But I would never have dreamed of saying this while he was still alive, lest he take it as not appreciating him the way I did. R.I.P.

There was an interesting alternate history thread on alternatethistory.com titled "No Longer Oneshot Row" where JRRT got early treatment for the stom-

ach ulcer that killed him in our history. He lived to be a hundred, brought out some of the past work on Middle-earth, and got into a tiff with Terry Brooks.

— JTM

RE: Reviewer's Notes, RE: Skepticism. I gave up on CSICOP when it was still CSICOP. It was as useless as today joining a group devoted to debating Antifa. While it was nice to be on the side of reason and facts and logic, there was no getting through to the other side. So there was little point in paying my dues to help them keep wasting time and breath. It was fun to read about the ghosts and UFOs and such, and then learn something of what was really going on in the incident. But even that got to be 'same old — same old.' Their evidence changed no more than our side's arguments. I did at least get to buy Larry Kusche's book debunking the Bermuda Triangle with reason and facts and logic. But you will note that the BT is still the predominant go-to concept for the news media and WWW. Skepticism is wasted on them as well. Cf. any number of other topics, like global climate warming change or Bigfoot.

RE: Against Me I remember when I was helping to teach a survey of WWII class while working on my History Master's. I took delight in pointing out to my students that Rabaul, PNG, the base being fought over in the period covered by that part of the class, was located entirely inside the caldera of an active volcano. The students were at last impressed by some part of the class. The city has since been abandoned.

RE: George Price LOC: I have ordered a copy of *Of Worlds Beyond* and I thank you for mentioning it. It will be of great use to me in my writing, and I hope I don't have to re-write Books 1 and 2 all over again as a result [smile].

Best wishes to health and happiness to all.

From: **John Purcell** January 28, 2020
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askance73@gmail.com

Good heavens, but it feels like years since I have written a loc to *Alexiad*. Forgive me, Joe, but I confess that I have been quite busy this past year. There are definitely many things occupying my time recently, but I really do still take the time to check out the fanzines on efanzines.com and definitely read many of them. Perhaps part of the reason for not writing a whole slew of letters of comment is that I have also become a bit selective in this regard. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that that is a major part of the reason for my loocing lapse. Let's go with that for now. Of course, my instinct for procrastination probably figures into the equation, but I'll get back to you on that someday.

A couple of things on the first page of the

latest issue of *Alexiad* — good grief, how many total issues is this now? 108? — caught my interest. Like Lisa, I am very concerned about Santa Anita Racetrack in California for where all these horse race fatalities have occurred. I understand that there is an on-going investigation of that track due to the sheer magnitude of equine fatalities there in the past few years, and I truly hope that there is a clear answer as to what in the world is going on. Is all this a result of management turning a blind eye to the care of the horses, the conditions of the track, the expertise of the training staff, and so forth. No question, it is too much, and I am surprised that Santa Anita track has not been temporarily shuttered until they figure out what in the hell is going on there. Something is obviously wrong, and it must be fixed.

Also on page one, Joe's comments about skepticism are well stated. In this country, a healthy skepticism has been replaced by unfounded fear. One thing I try to teach my composition and rhetoric students is to not be afraid of asking questions about a position, and if they are making a point in their own arguments, they need to support statements with documentable, verifiable proof. I am afraid that a major part of the problem facing our society is sheer laziness. I try to encourage students to keep asking "why," and not accept things at face value. Don't simply take somebody's word for it, but ask the straightforward question, "where did you get that information?" If the response is, "because I said so," then the argument will go absolutely nowhere. Like I said, I fear that ignorance is growing at an exponential rate because people have become massively lazy. It's too much trouble to figure it out, look it up, or logically think something through. I dunno. All this argument does is make me a bit depressed. Ergo, time to move onto a different topic.

So often, I have seen, a discussion between skeptics and their opponents ends with both sides declaring victory, walking away, and blocking and banning the other side.

Your next obituary section is going to be sadder than usual for most of us here in the science fiction fanzine world. The recent loss of fan artist extraordinaire Steve Stiles leaves a massive hole in our lives, and at the upcoming Corflu 37 convention (which I am co-chairing with Pablo Alberto Miguel Vasquez) in mid-March, I am planning to have a proper tribute to Steve's inspired lunacy and career in fanzines. This one hurts. A lot. We are all going to miss Steve terribly much.

So, yes. Corflu Heatwave is being held at the College Station Hilton Hotel and Convention Center over the March 13-15, 2020 weekend, and there are still rooms left in the convention block. It is shaping up to be a good and proper Corflu. Go the link www.corflu.org and click on the links to join and make reservations.

We look forward to seeing many of our friends there.

Taral Wayne's reminiscences about Disney Afternoons reminded me how much my son Daniel was a big *Darkwing Duck* and *Rescue Rangers* fan. He loved those shows. I admit to being partial to *Pinky and the Brain* of the shows Taral mentions, but my favorite cartoon shows from that time period — late 1990's — were *Invader Zim*, *Ren and Stimpy*, and *Rocko's Modern Life*. Fun stuff.

I liked *Batman: The Animated Series*.

— JTM

No Worldcon for us this year, and we have not ruled out NASFiC yet. That could still happen. On the Worldcon schedule you listed, DisCon III and Chicago in 2022 are very likely. Having been to France a few years back, I am very interested in the Nice bid for 2023; I was supporting the New Orleans bid, but now...? It happens.

Well, I had better get some grading done before I leave for the day. The fershlugginer real world awaits. That and Corflu 37 preparations. Busy, busy.

From: **Lloyd Penney** January 29, 2020
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With just a few days away from the deadline, here I am with some comments on the 108th edition of *Alexiad*. With some luck, I shall achieve minimum coherence. I might even learn to spell properly...

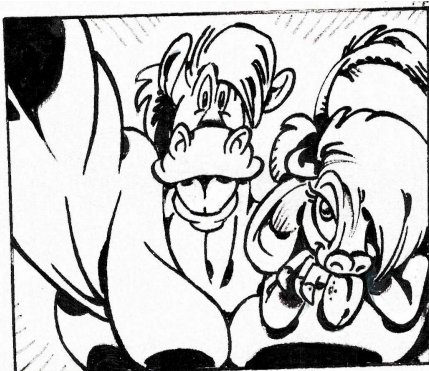
We have had to change our personal doctor, too. Our past doctor, we found him when we first moved to Brampton, northwest of Toronto, about 30 years ago. He has helped us a lot, but recently, he has talked about retiring, and he doesn't seem able to have any time to discuss issues of importance with us. His clientele is gigantic, and we were convinced he was the busiest doctor in Brampton. We stayed with him even after moving down to Etobicoke, especially because it was so difficult to find a family doctor. A new practice has opened in Etobicoke, mere walking distance away from us, so the decision was made. We also cancelled our private insurance plan, and any money we were shoveling into the plan (from which we received very little) is now going in a bank account. We have decided to be our own insurance, and that's been a good idea already.

I had to tell supplemental policy salespersons that I already had a good supplemental policy and it was paid for by the retirement system. One guy still tried to sell me a policy because, he said, it had copays so low that I

would make money. I finally hung up on him.

It has been a long time since I was able to enjoy some cartoons on a Saturday morning, let alone a Disney afternoon. There's only one or two modern animations I like, and I don't get to see them enough. Taral's article really took me back.

The local...if Dale Speirs' letter is any indication, I'd better beware of buses, just in case. I have to admit there are a number of zines out there where I am the only regular correspondent to the zine/clubzine. I doubt a bear will find me, but I suspect that I am good with fava beans, and a nice Chianti. Buses and bears and me, oh my!



THE SELFIE

My loc...I have just finished an edit of a YA novel by Shirley Meier, with mixed results, I admit...well, I still have a lot to learn about weighing proper English grammar, usage and punctuation against style, but I hope that will come with time. I also make comments on the manuscript, but I do not make corrections. That's for the author to do.

We're missing Paul Gadzikowski's cartoon, in more ways than one. With that, many thanks for this issue. Take care, and see you again soon.

Alas, his focus has shifted, and he now concentrates on his triangle fan fiction cartoons.

—JTM

From: **Sue Burke** January 30, 2020
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As you may have heard, Illinois legalized pot, so I've received junk mail from local stores: "We make shopping for cannabis simple." I never expected that in my youth. For now, though, the stores are all sold out, and the streets of Chicago smell a bit fragrant, even though smoking in public is officially

banned. Emergency room physicians warn that it's easy to overindulge with edibles. I'm content to stick with beer as my anodyne.

Regarding women's rights, Taras Wolansky recalls seeing women in Columbia University in the 1970s. Those were not Columbia students. Barnard students were allowed to attend some classes, but women were only accepted as Columbia students in 1987. Among other Ivy League schools, Yale and Princeton accepted female students in 1969, Brown in 1971, Dartmouth in 1972, and Harvard in 1977. Joe mentions a women's restroom at Harvard that appeared in a Marilyn French novel. It's worth noting that some Harvard buildings had no women's restrooms at all at the time. As I said in an earlier LOC, when I began high school, a variety of important institutions and organizations had quotas for women: 0%.

George Price says that the power loom made it possible for women to earn enough to be self-supporting. That goes against what I know about the history of textiles. Women had been weavers since ancient times. As artisans they operated looms they owned, and as professionals they were able to earn a living. The industrial revolution transferred ownership and operation from artisans to textile mill businesses, and the results were dangerous working conditions, pitiful wages, and irregular employment for both men and women (and for a time, children). That's still the case, and textile work has moved to countries where the laws are lax and the wages are lowest.

As for the idea that revolvers are equalizers between men and women, that's a nice slogan, but there's not much data pro or con. In any case, it says something sad about men that women need to be armed against them.

My holidays were quiet. In fact, my life is pretty quiet these days. I get up, I write, I read, I have a beer, I go to bed. Except for the defeat of the Green Bay Packers in the NFC Championship football game, all my adventures and calamities are fictional, which suits me fine.

From: **Taras Wolansky** December 1, 2019
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Thanks for the December issue.

In Lois McMaster Bujold's *Shards of Honor*, the Emperor of Barrayar needs to rid himself of a troublesome Crown Prince, so he arranges a nice little war and lets the enemy do the job. This reminds me of something that happened in Iraq recently ... How did we get the information on Gen. Soleimani's whereabouts again?

I've caught the first few episodes of the new show, *68 Whiskey*, produced by Ron Howard, which is sort of "M.A.S.H. in Afghanistan".

Times have changed though: the very first scene of the very first episode has a corpsman and a secretary humping in the supply building, proceeding to digital gratification. (This is on the Paramount network.)

On the other hand, another feature of the story is very familiar from many TV shows and movies made over the last 20 years or so. The soldiers, positively portrayed for the most part, are pitted against evil, greedy mercenaries, employed by intelligence agencies.

Like all those other programs and movies, *68 Whiskey* doesn't actually lie outright. It merely leaves out the fact that such mercenaries are former soldiers, mostly retired special forces.

On another subject, *Asimov's* abortive censorship of Norman Spinrad's essay about how fantasy is polluting SF's precious bodily fluids will not persuade me to cancel my subscription. Because I already did, months ago, due to the company's craven treatment of the Campbell Award. (Not that I necessarily think they were wrong to change the name.)

When I called in, the clerk asked me if there was anything they could do. "Not really. I simply disapprove of something the editor did." "Oh! I think I know what you mean. I read about it in the paper!"

Nowadays "fascist", like so many later terms, has become an anti-concept; the term is not intended to describe an opponent's views but to silence them.

Taral Wayne ("Dizzy Afternoons"): The Disney cartoons you reference were after my time. Given the way *Fantasia* (1940) has been censored, were any of them altered for political correctness, or simply suppressed outright (like *Song of the South*, 1946)?

Sue Burke: That women were largely freed from jury duty, in the bad old days, was a legal privilege of women, not of men. (I celebrated, when the courts here in Ulster County accepted my doctor's note and permanently excluded me from jury duty.) Just like not being drafted and not being sent to Vietnam was a legal privilege that women had.

In general the legal system was and is biased in favor of women. Spree killer Charles Starkweather was executed; his partner, Caril Ann Fugate, got out after 17 years, still a young woman.

In the bad old days, relatively few wives had their own income. As a result, credit card companies needed to be sure that the husband would be responsible for his wife's debts. Just as today parents have to sign for a college-bound teenager's credit card.

As far back as I can remember, women have paid less for auto insurance than men, and still do. One of the arguments against the Equal Rights Amendment was that it might force women to subsidize men. This was deemed less acceptable than men subsidizing women, as in collegiate athletics.

Tim Lane: "German espionage by 1944 was wretched ..." Michael Korda's excellent book on the Battle of Britain describes great inadequacy even at the beginning of the war. For one thing, German estimates of how many

fighters the Brits had left were grossly optimistic. Also, in some cases the Japanese had collected more info on British airfields than the Germans had.

But the Japanese Naval Attaché went to Taranto after the British attack, and then asked German Intelligence to send some one to Pearl Harbor to reconnoiter the place.

— JTM

Robert S. Kennedy: I just watched the grand finale of *The Good Place*.

Obviously the English would have preferred to use white slaves, obtained locally, but the supply was limited and they didn't survive very long in the tropics. Then they discovered you could buy large numbers of slaves cheap from African monarchs.

George W. Price: Flogging would of course be unconstitutional in the United States, as "cruel and unusual".

"Just ask yourself which you personally would prefer: horrendous pain that's over in a few minutes, or being separated from family, job and society for years." Add to that the assaults and rapes and murders prevalent in prisons, and the former alternative looks even better.

The idea that it's unjust to require flight attendants to be good looking seems strange to me. Actors and actresses are not chosen solely for acting ability, nor TV personalities and corporate spokespersons solely for communications skills.

In the days when air travel pricing was strictly regulated, airlines had to compete on amenities, including pretty stewardesses. Even today, upscale restaurants seek to improve their atmosphere with an attractive wait staff.

Joe: "I would think that you of all people would remember the Holodomor."

In fact, my mother was a survivor. She told me how, as a little girl in Kiev, she saw peasants dead of starvation lying in the gutters.

It took place right around the time that the Nazis were taking over Germany, and may have given Hitler the idea that he could get away with mass murder and come out of it smelling like a rose.

From: **AL du Pisani** February 2, 2020
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I have the bad habit of travelling and getting an epiphany. But usually it happened on my overseas trips. This time around it was for my December holidays, when I realised something, and are initiating some changes in my life. I do expect this to take some time to realise, and will only share once some of it have come off.

I had a good holiday. I had one persistent

issue during the holidays, and the costs of travelling from my home to the airport and back is horrendous. I saw my brother and sisters, and my mother arranged her own official eightieth birthday party, which we all attended.

I rested a bit, and could start the year afresh. In some ways things are not bad at work, and I am achieving enough to keep me going. The bad part of it is when I have a success early in the day, and then run into trouble during the latter part of the day – That makes the day seem like a failure. If I struggle the entire day, and have a success late in the day, I can leave on a high note. Unfortunately, it seems as if I need to sleep on any issue before I can successfully address it, so my successes are much more likely to happen in the morning.

South Africa is still struggling – The two most dire items are still electricity and transport: Eskom is still in dire straits, even though a new CEO have taken over. Since he is not an industry guy, industry commentators think that it will take him a year to two to come up to speed with how bad things really are. He has in any case announced that he cannot see things getting better for at least 18 months – since that is how long he expect the rectification of the basic minimum of deferred maintenance to start addressing the issues.

We went into the December holidays with a week of load-shedding – including the first time stage 6 load-shedding was implemented. Now each stage of load-shedding is an indication that there is 1 GW of demand more than can be supplied, and the load-shedding stages currently goes to 8. Stage 6 load-shedding was a disaster – Firstly the schedules had not been announced, and secondly, the people implementing them did not know what they were supposed to do.

In Johannesburg, load-shedding is implemented in 4 hour blocks, with a half hour period in which they restore power afterwards. With stage 1, you can expect to have one load shedding instance every two to three days. Stage 2 is roughly two days out of three with load-shedding. In Stage 4 you start to have one day out of three with two load-shedding incidents, and one incident on the other days. At stage 8 you can expect to have three load-shedding incidents per day, i.e. you do not have power for half the day.

The unions have announced that they have a solution for Eskom's problems – Force all pension funds to invest in a bailout. (Prescribed assets is the term used.) On condition that no jobs are lost. This has not gone down well with the people who will be robbed of their life savings.

South African Airways went through a rough patch – There was apparently a plan to kill it off in early December. The problem with this plan was that it would have allowed the people who might be criminally liable for running SAA into the ground to get away scot-free, while leaving the government with a R50 billion price tag. SAA was then placed into business rescue, a step that South Africa commercial law allows for a company facing bankruptcy. And the business rescue officials have already started by

calling for tenders for the sale of aeroplanes.

SAA has other problems that may not be as simple to address. The technical services, which was at one stage regarded as a hidden jewel, has apparently been run down and looted enough that no outside airline will make use of them. I heard a claim that an entire aircraft engine has gone missing. Rebuilding that will take time and skilled personnel. I heard in December that the major South African insurers will not offer any travel insurance for delayed or cancelled flights for travel on SAA. And the passengers are getting skittish – I just read a report that more often than not the aircraft is flying half empty, if not worse. Figures quoted were 12 people in a 100 seater aeroplane, or 50 people in a 150 seater.

Over and above all of the current economic troubles, the comment period for proposals to expropriate any piece of land in South Africa have just closed – It is not known exactly how much of a disaster the proposed legislation will be, but the worst is expected. Like a lot of politicians, ours are incapable of learning from the mistakes made by others, including the country next door.

One of the more interesting things happening in South Africa during the last couple of years has been semigration – Where a person, usually some kind of businessman or executive, moves away from Johannesburg and the Gauteng region with his family, to settle in the Western Cape, mostly in the Cape Town metropolitan area and adjacent towns. Where the businessman then flies up to Gauteng for the work week, to continue his work, and down to be with his family for the weekend. (I have no idea how the accommodation in Gauteng works.)

One of the reasons South Africans can be a bit blasé about the current crop of politicians and the things being wrong in the country – We are used to Africa trying to kill us.

I hope that you have an environment that is a little bit more friendly. That you will find stuff to give you hope and the will to continue. As to a great extent SF and the friends I have made through it grants me hope.

WAHF:

Martin Morse Wooster, with various items of interest.

Cathy Palmer-Lister, with thanks.

Thanks to **Gary & Cora Flispart, Guy & Rosy Lillian**, and **George Price** for their Christmas cards.

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DAD'S STAR WARS: EPISODE IX-A

Rey looked away from the Force Ghosts. She felt comforted, her life resolved. Then she heard someone say, "Who are you?"

"I'm Rey."

"Rey who?"

She looked back at the ghosts, feeling the Force in her. "Rey Skywalker."

"You look like my grandniece. I had a grandniece Rey," the man said. Now she looked at him. He was an elderly man, with a kindly look on his face. He was wearing a brown shirt and short brown pants, and had a flat little hat over his white hair and a white armband with a strange crimson mark.

"Go on," she said carefully. If he were. . .

"Her father hid, like me. I heard from him, every now and then, and then he quit messaging. He said nice things about his little girl Rey."

"You hid? From . . . Palpatine?"

"From everyone. He wanted to get rid of me, and when he fell, everyone else wanted to get me. It did not go over well with the others."

"Others?" By now she was utterly confused, and the world was even more turned about than it had been.

"Come on out, sir, she's all right."

A little group of old men, all dressed like — her great-uncle? — came out from behind the other buildings. There was a fat and fussy man in front, with some strange wire and glass contrivance on his face. A taller man, with a more benevolent look, was at his shoulder.

They came up to Rey. "So you're the Jedi. Stupid girl," the fat man said.

"She's the Jedi! We're doomed, doomed!" This was another one of the men, who had a perpetually horrified look on his face.

The leader, or so he seemed to be, addressed Rey again. "You're going to need some helpers. You can't do everything alone, and we'll help."

Rey looked back, but the ghosts were gone. She would have to trust her own judgment on this. These were not Jedi, they could not become Jedi . . . but they were willing to help. She let out her breath. "Come along."

The leader said, "Sergeant, get the gear loaded on that ship. Bring the men over and introduce them to . . . 'Rey' you said your name was?"

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Art: What we are mainly looking for is small fillos. Your fillo will probably be scanned in and may be reused, unless you object to its reuse.

Contributions: This is not a fictionzine. It is intended to be our fanzine, so be interesting.

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