

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 1/28/87 -- Vol. 5, No. 29

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in MT 4A-235.

 D A T E T O P I C

02/04 MT: CONTACT by Carl Sagan (Rm. 4A-217) First Contact
02/18 LZ: RINGWORLD ENGINEERS by Larry Niven World Creation
02/18 MT: Book Swap
03/11 LZ: THE DREAMING JEWELS by Ted Sturgeon Children (and Child-raising)
04/01 LZ: THE BOOK OF THE NEW MOON tetralogy Artsy-fartsy SF
 by Jean Wolf
04/22 LZ: MURMURS OF EARTH by Carl Sagan SF-related Non-Fiction
05/13 LZ: TO YOUR SCATTERED BODIES GO by Reincarnation
 Phillip Jose Farmer

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3E-433 957-5619
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3M-420 949-5866
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 1C-117 576-2068
MT Librarian: Bruce Szablak MT 4C-418 957-5868
Jill-of-all-trades: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070
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1. Some things work out better than anyone expects them to. One was the idea of having Carl Sagan write a science fiction novel. His COSMOS TV series was the surprising disappointment of the 1980-1981 season. After that, it was announced he was writing a science fiction novel. Most people assumed it would be ghost-written and would trade off the Sagan name. The best that was expected was a competent juvenile. Surprise, folks! CONTACT turned out to be a very credible and enjoyable SF novel to the point that Sagan was a serious contender for the John W. Campbell Award for best new SF author. In fact, when a recent Ace Science Fiction special (a well-respected series of novels published by Ace Books) published a first contact story recently, the comment I heard was that it was pretty good but not up to CONTACT. Our next discussion at Middletown will be of Carl Sagan's CONTACT.

2. It has become a regular cliché story in science fiction:

structures discovered in space too regular to be natural. In the stories it is always the first irrefutable proof of the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligence. It happened for real once in the past, but turned out to be a false alarm. The discovery was of pulsating energy sources in space that seemed to be an artificial

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phenomenon but turned out to be just rapidly rotating neutron stars, known now as pulsars. Well, it's happening again and this time it's harder to explain either as artificial or natural.

What has been found seems too regular to be natural and too big to be artificial. They are luminous, blue, and (apparently) ppppeeeerrrrfffeeeccctttlllyyyy sssshhhhaaaappppeeeedddd arcs of circles found in space roughly 300,000 light-years in length. When Mark Thorn brought this to my attention, I thought it was absurd. Sorry, Mark, you were right; the January 17 SCIENCE NEWS carries the story and it is for real. Undoubtedly there will be a number of possible natural explanations. Natural explanations for any phenomenon are not that hard to come by, though three current explanations are refuted in the article. But if I wanted to leave a billboard to demonstrate intelligence to other intelligent species in space, something that other species would be likely to understand, something geometrical would be what I'd go for. That combines the mathematic and the visual. And I'd make it big. It is hard to imagine a civilization with the power to build the arcs, but given the power, they are what I'd build.

Don't get me wrong. I am not claiming that they are proof of intelligent extra-terrestrial life. The greatest probability is that they are not. They are probably a natural phenomenon. But they happen to be very like something that would be very useful to an intelligent species looking for someone else to talk to.

(If you think the above is a joke, take a look in the SCIENCE NEWS.)

3. In a world of scarce resources, natural numbers are a rare exception.

Mark Leeper

IN MEMORIAM

January 27, 1967: Roger Chaffee, Virgil Grissom, Edward White |
January 28, 1986: Gregory Jarvis, Christa McAuliffe, |
Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, |
Judith Resnik, Dick Scobee, Michael Smith |

"Almighty ruler of the all
Whose power extends to great and small
Who guides the stars with steadfast law,
Whose least creation fills with awe;
Oh, grant Thy mercy, and Thy grace,
To those who venture into space."
--Robert A. Heinlein

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WILD CARDS I edited by George R. R. Martin
Bantam Spectra, 1986, \$3.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

What if? What if? What if...after World War II aliens had dropped a virus that caused all sorts of mutations. (Space aliens, that is, not German aliens or Japanese aliens.) 90% of the mutations are fatal, but the other 10%--they are the "wild cards."

The form of this, uh, book is unusual. It's called a "mosaic novel." No, that doesn't mean it's based on the Biblical books of Moses. It is rather a collection of short stories and connecting threads set in this alternate universe. The stories are more strongly connected (in the mathematical sense) than other shared universe collections I have seen, with characters from one story appearing in others. On the other hand, the stories are presented with their own titles, and a table of contents would be helpful for finding your way around.

And how is this alternate world different from ours? Not much.

McCarthy goes after the "wild cards" along with his other targets. Even among the wild cards themselves there is factionalism. There are the "aces," those with valuable powers such as teleportation or great strength. And there "jokers," those whose mutations are disfiguring, such as reptilian skin or feline face. The jokers are outcasts, treated as sub-human by most people, restricted to Jokertown, dumped on by the police--if this sounds familiar, it is. "Strings" by Stephen Leigh is the story of the Jokers' Rights Movement, but it is also the story of the march on the Winter Palace, and of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and of the marches in Selma, and of the Stonewall riot.

In the end the value of W_i_l_d_C_a_r_d_s is not what it says about superheroes, but what it says about us. If there were superheroes, we would use them and mistrust them and mistreat them as much as we do anyone else. And W_i_l_d_C_a_r_d_s reminds us that finding a new group to persecute does not end the persecution of the old groups. As with all good science fiction, it uses that which is fantastical to reflect reality. It gives us the ability to see ourselves as outsiders would see us. If we see the "jokers" persecuted simply because they are "different" and we empathize with them, perhaps we can translate this back to our own lives. And what if we did? Now T_h_e_r_e'_s a "what if?" I'd like to see!

NEW BARBARIANS by Keith Mitchell
Ace, 1986, \$2.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

The premise of P_r_o_c_u_r_a_t_o_r was that the Roman Empire never fell (something to do with Pilate pardoning some obscure teacher or something). This sequel continues that idea, but does even less with it than P_r_o_c_u_r_a_t_o_r. In both novels, the plot consists mostly of battles.

Although the weaponry is somewhat mechanized, the books are basically stories of the Roman legions against the barbarians--in N_e_w_B_a_r_b_a_r_i_a_n_s, the Azteicans.

The gimmick of having all sorts of well-known places have Latin names and of having people with Roman names ruling the world (still under an emperor, no less) is starting to wear thin. There is no indication of any change in Roman ways over the last 2000 years, in spite of enormous technological change (up to about the World War II level) and extensive contact with other civilizations. And, as I said in my review of P_r_o_c_u_r_a_t_o_r, one may argue that the fall of the Roman Empire was caused as much by its own size in an era before modern communications as by any external religious movement. Oh, and in N_e_w_B_a_r_b_a_r_i_a_n_s they're just realizing--after 2000 years--that lead plumbing and utensils are poisonous. I find this interesting only because it wasn't mentioned at all in P_r_o_c_u_r_a_t_o_r and I commented on it in my review of that novel. Is it possible Mitchell is reading my reviews? And the Aztecs also are still the same as when Cortez "discovered" them--or at any rate, still the same as the popular image of what they were. I suspect that the actual Aztec society was very different from the popular conception. In addition, the Aztecs were relative new-comers when Cortez arrived, and it strikes me as unlikely that they, rather than other Amerindian societies, would have survived the intervening 500 years. My money would be on the Incans to have expanded their empire north.

N_e_w_B_a_r_b_a_r_i_a_n_s, like P_r_o_c_u_r_a_t_o_r, is probably of interest mostly to readers who enjoy setting up fictional conflicts ("What if the Romans had fought the Aztecs?" "What if the Klingons had fought the Kzinti?"). As an alternate history novel that actually tries to predict a fully-realized alternate history from a small change, it doesn't make it.

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE CASE OF THE RALEIGH LEGACY by L. B. Greenwood
Atheneum, 1986, \$13.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

One of the big appeals of the original Doyle stories is their accessibility--except for the occasional detail that may have been familiar to Victorian audiences but has fallen into obscurity, there is no special knowledge required to understand the story. This is why Sherlock Holmes is so popular throughout the world. I have found him in Spanish in the Lima airport, in Swedish in a bookstore in Stockholm, and even in Chinese in a comic book in Nanjing. This novel, however, does not share that accessibility. If you're not an expert on Sir Walter Raleigh and Elizabethan England, a lot of the story will be difficult to follow.

Greenwood does manage the characters fairly well, however, avoiding the out-of-character problems that so many pastiches seem to have. I find her recreation of the Victorian Era rather skimpy, but acceptable. My real problem was following clues dependent on knowledge of Elizabethan politics and nicknames and the subtleties of Devonshire accents. The novel does have the virtue that the "name" that Holmes is associated with had been dead for over two hundred years--a delightful change from the "Holmes-meets-famous-person" trend that has developed in most pastiches these days. If your knowledge of English history is more up to snuff than mine, or you're willing to be lost a fair amount of the time, give it a try. (Serious readers might consider reading a biography of Raleigh before starting.)

RIVALS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES edited by Alan K. Russell
Castle Books, 1978, \$?.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

When I reviewed T_h_e_F_u_r_t_h_e_r_R_i_v_a_l_s_o_f_S_h_e_r_l_o_c_k_H_o_l_m_e_s edited by Hugh Greene a while back, I mentioned this anthology as one that should not be confused with Greene's first anthology entitled T_h_e_R_i_v_a_l_s_o_f_S_h_e_r_l_o_c_k_H_o_l_m_e_s (note the definite article in Greene's title). Obviously the symmetric proviso applies here.

This book looks like one of those "instant remainders" that appear in Waldenbooks and other stores. bearing no imprinted price, they are labeled "Special Value" and go for something-or-other and ninety-eight cents. I can't even remember where or when I got this volume. There is another volume, R_i_v_a_l_s_o_f_S_h_e_r_l_o_c_k_H_o_l_m_e_s_2. Castle Books also publishes T_h_e_O_r_i_g_i_n_a_l_I_l_l_u_s_t_r_a_t_e_d_S_h_e_r_l_o_c_k_H_o_l_m_e_s.

As such books go, this anthology isn't bad: forty stories by fifteen authors, with the original illustrations. Most were written in the last decade of the Nineteenth Century--as the editor points out, between the time of Holmes's death in Reichenbach Falls and his "return"--literarily speaking--in T_h_e_H_o_u_n_d_o_f_t_h_e_B_a_s_k_e_r_v_i_l_l_e_s. These stories served to fill that gap and they still provide interesting diversions for fans of Sherlock Holmes, but had Holmes not retained his popularity to this day, these stories would probably not be in print now.

COMFORT AND JOY
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: An amazingly deft comedy lampoons the gangster film and creates real and believable characters at the same time. Scottish director Bill Forsythe becomes, with this film and L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o, one of the best comedy directors in the world.

Alan "Dickie" Bird is known to just about everyone in Glasglow as the host of the most popular radio morning show in town. But soon Mr. Bird is going to experience some changes in his life. First his girl will leave him, then he will witness a crime. Soon he will be drawn into the dark sinister netherworld that is professional ice cream. Glasgow will soon be ripped apart by the vicious turf war between Mr. Bunny and Mc. McCool if Dickie Bird cannot negotiate a settlement through shuttle diplomacy.

Bill Forsythe is Scotland's best-known director in the country. His films to this point have been T_h_a_t_S_i_n_k_i_n_g_F_e_e_l_i_n_g, G_r_e_g_o_r_y'_s_G_i_r_l, the highly successful L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o, and (about a year ago) C_o_m_f_o_r_t_a_n_d_J_o_y. Probably L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o will remain his most popular film, but C_o_m_f_o_r_t_a_n_d_J_o_y shows best his comedy. The film is very funny, but the comedy

always works through subtlety and incongruity, never through obvious gags. The humor always comes from scenes that on the surface are serious but which have a very funny side if you know what to look for. As a result, some people I know find the film very funny and others see little of the humor.

With an amazingly deft hand, Forsythe lampoons the gangster film without ever creating an unbelievable character or situation. On the contrary, Forsythe's characters are more believable than most you find in films. In C o m f o r t a n d J o y it is perfectly believable that there would be an ice cream Godfather of Glasgow or hoodlums who will break up a gang meeting bickering over dessert. And the characters and situations are real in a way that Inspector Clouseau pole-vaulting over a moat never was.

C o m f o r t a n d J o y comes from one of the smaller and lesser known films industries of the world. It didn't hit the theaters with the impact of a Mel Brooks comedy and few people have heard of it. But it is funny in ways that far more familiar filmmakers cannot even come close to. Rate it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. Get this one at your local video store.

THE JOURNEY OF NATTY GANN

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: If this film failed at the boxoffice the fault was in the boxoffice. Excellent and touching story of a girl riding the rails to cross the country and find her father during the Depression. Strongly recommended for all ages.

People are probably getting tired of hearing me harp on this theme, but it comes up again and again that Disney Studios are probably the

most under-appreciated filmmakers in the country. After they shot themselves in the foot in the '70s with films like S_u_p_e_r_d_a_d, their films are getting nowhere near the play they deserve in the '80s. Their

Touchstone films are getting some attention, but the ones coming out as

Disney are being ignored. Both N_e_v_e_r_C_r_y_W_o_l_f and T_h_e

J_o_u_r_n_e_y_o_f_N_a_t_t_y

G_a_n_n were among the top ten films of their years. At least where I am,

N_e_v_e_r_C_r_y_W_o_l_f played for a week or so and T_h_e

J_o_u_r_n_e_y_o_f_N_a_t_t_y_G_a_n_n

never played at all. T_h_e_J_o_u_r_n_e_y_o_f_N_a_t_t_y_G_a_n_n is a film of equal or

higher quality than S_t_a_n_d_b_y_M_e (to pick a film it has a few rough similarities to), yet it didn't get a tenth of the press coverage and I am pretty sure it got a much smaller fraction of the bookings.

The basic plot of T_h_e_J_o_u_r_n_e_y_o_f_N_a_t_t_y_G_a_n_n is simple. During the

Depression a girl, 12 years old or so, becomes separated from her father and due to accidental circumstances must do whatever she can to travel on her own from Chicago to Washington State in order to find him again.

On the way she has her share of brushes with the law, with a cross-section of people, and with either a dog or a wolf who befriends her in sort of an equal partnership. Whether it really is a dog or a wolf is

never really established, incidentally. The film's one false note is that the girl and the wolf understand each other a little too well and a

little too fast. The film plays equally well either way and I am told

that a dog was used in the film, though Natty insists he is a wolf. I

am not sure what the distinction is and apparently a number of the

characters in the film are not sure either. The story is episodic, but

then a picaresque story should be. The plot could have easily

degenerated into a set of Little Orphan Annie adventures. Instead,

Meredith Salenger, who looks a lot like a young Natalie Wood, proves she can carry a role even better. Roy Wise as the father is also very good.

Jeremy Kagan (T_h_e_B_i_g_F_i_x,T_h_e_C_h_o_s_e_n) gets seriously affecting

performances out of everyone involved. The photography and the music

are both uniformly beautiful. This could be then-newcomer James

Horner's best and most lyrical score to date. It is unlikely you will

find a much better crafted film at your local video store and if this

one is there, grab it. Rate it a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale.