

MT VOID 02/17/17 -- Vol. 35, No. 34, Whole Number 1950

```

e e e e e @ @ e e e e e @ @ @ e e e e e e e @ @ @ e e e e e e e e e
@ @ e e e @ @ e e e @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @
e e e e e e e e e e @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @
@ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @
e @ @ @ @ e e e e e @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @ @

```

Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
02/17/17 -- Vol. 35, No. 34, Whole Number 1950

Table of Contents

[Philcon 2016 Convention Report Available](#)

[Not Just a Boast](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)

[Return of the Dread](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)

[WAY STATION by Clifford D. Simak](#) (audio book review
by Joe Karpierz)

[Project Blue](#) (letter of comment by Gregory Frederick)

[Walls, THE LORD OF THE RINGS, Autism, THE DISPATCHER,](#)

[and THE EXPANSE](#) (letter of comment by John Purcell)

[VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by James Malcolm Rymer or Thomas Peckett Prest](#)

(book review by Evelyn C. Leeper)

[This Week's Reading](#) (THROUGH FIVE ADMINISTRATIONS:

REMINISCENCES OF COLONEL WILLIAM H. CROOK)

(book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)

[Quote of the Week](#)

Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, mleeper@optonline.net

Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, eleeper@optonline.net

Back issues at http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm

All material is copyrighted by author unless otherwise noted.

All comments sent or posted will be assumed authorized for
inclusion unless otherwise noted.

To subscribe, send mail to mtvoid-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

To unsubscribe, send mail to mtvoid-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

Philcon 2016 Convention Report Available:

Evelyn's Philcon 2016 convention report is available at <http://leepers.us/evelyn/conventions/phil16.htm>.

Not Just a Boast (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

The nature film SEASONS shows what northern Europe was like at the end of the last Ice Age with all sorts of new life. It shows forest life through the four seasons, including winter. I could just imagine the old bear telling the young ones who were tired of winter, "You think you got it tough? When I was a cub, winter was 12,000 years long." [-mrl]

Return of the Dread (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

One problem with science fiction is that when it looks at future threats to the human race it looks at very unlikely futures, but not what we see happening in our world around us. The sort of threat they warn about is what happens if the world is pierced by a small black hole, but we pay less attention to problems like cybercrime. I am not saying that being pierced by a black hole is impossible, but it is extremely unlikely under normal conditions. Cybercrime is not just more likely; it is a reality. The frequency of stories that look at that sort of threat is disproportionately small.

One of the issues that may have been covered, though I have not seen it, is anti-biotech resistance. We are looking at a future with far fewer antibiotic drugs than are in our current medical arsenal. This is a problem that lies on the Earth with its head in rich countries and its feet in some of the poorest regions.

The wealthier countries were so astonished with antibiotics when they became available that they went antibiotic-crazy. They used them as if they had magical powers. For example, they used them in efforts to treat colds. Antibiotics are completely useless against viruses and colds which come from viruses. For the same reason they are useless for ear and sinus infections or various sorts of influenza. They have been added animal feed in large proportion to stimulate growth in poultry.

The result is a nice demonstration of evolution in action. Some microbes are lucky to just by chance have the right DNA to make them resistant to antibiotics and they will live through applications of antibiotics that will kill off the less resistant microbe strains. The next generation will be microbes that are antibiotic strains. So the richer cultures have overused antibiotics selecting for drug resistance. But if the problem is created in wealthy cultures it is much amplified and harder to control in poorer regions. India, as is a case in point, is a hotbed of antibiotic resistance.

India is a very poor country. Half of the population do not have in-door toilet facilities. This makes it a breeding ground for drug resistant microbes. And complicating matters where people can afford it India now is also becoming a major user and abuser of antibiotics.

Ramanan Laxminarayan says in his paper drug resistance in India:

"Antibiotic use is a major driver of resistance. In 2010, India was the world's largest consumer of antibiotics for human health... The convergence of factors such as poor public health infrastructure, rising incomes, a high burden of disease, and cheap, unregulated sales of antibiotics has created ideal conditions for a rapid rise in resistant infections in India."

<http://tinyurl.com/mtv-indiadrug>

This is a condition where epidemics of untreatable infections are not just likely but almost inevitable. And these same epidemics will almost certainly spread worldwide.

We probably have lived through a temporary bubble of microbial diseases being effectively treatable. Go back just a few generations and people lived in fear of disease, and go forward even less and that fear may return. In some places it already has. Fiction that portrays a future free from these fears may be missing the obvious.

See also <http://tinyurl.com/mtv-indiadrug2>.

[-mrl]

WAY STATION by Clifford D. Simak (copyright 1963, 2008 Audible Inc., 7 hours 5 minutes, ASIN B001COY8SS, narrated by Eric Michael Summerer) (excerpt from the *Duel Fish Codices: an audio book review* by Joe Karpierz):

I've been reading science fiction a very long time--something like 48 years if my math is right--and one of my favorite authors back in the day was Clifford D. Simak. His novel *PROJECT POPE* was up for the Hugo in 1982 at Chicon IV, which not only was my first Worldcon, but my first con, period. I'd never read *WAY STATION*, though. It sounded intriguing, and I've had it on my Kindle for a few years now. But it sat there, untouched. However, I had access to the audio book of *WAY STATION*, so I decided now was the time, and at just over 7 hours in length, if I didn't like it, I wouldn't be wasting a significant amount of time on it.

Enoch Wallace is a Civil War veteran living in Wisconsin. He is the caretaker of an intergalactic way station, a stop-over point for aliens traveling through our spiral arm of the galaxy. He's been at his job for over a century; nobody seems to question him all that much as he keeps to himself and only has contact with the mailman and a local deaf mute girl. Eventually, though, the U.S. government takes notice of the long-lived individual and begins to investigate him. Wallace calls them the watchers; he knows they're there, but as long as they don't bother him he's not going to be worried about it.

Things change when an alien dies while at the way station. The U.S. government steals the body and inadvertently escalates a growing movement in galactic civilization to shut down the way station network in our end of the galaxy. And while Wallace is able to use an alien math chart to determine that Earth is on the verge of a nuclear holocaust, galactic civilization itself is collapsing due to the loss of a mysterious talisman that allows contact with a spiritual force that holds society together. Wallace finds himself on the verge of having to make a decision that will affect all of mankind, a decision that he does not want to make.

WAY STATION is not really about the way station that Enoch Wallace is caretaker for; it is merely the item that anchors the story, that allows Simak the story he wants to tell about civilizations getting along with each other, the sharing of knowledge, the maturity of one man as well as the human race. While Wallace has grown to be open-minded, he fears that the planetary governments may not take the same view if he needs to tell everyone about galactic civilization and the Earth's part in it. It's the tale of a man who has had to overcome much when coping with the idea that we are not alone and that his life will probably never change, and yet everything will change if he has to inform the world's governments of the existence of aliens.

WAY STATION is a perfect example of the difference between novels of fifty years ago and those of today. These days, we have sprawling doorstops in which every little detail must be explained and examined; no stone must be left unturned in describing to the reader the context of the story in which he or she is being immersed. Today, there is much emphasis placed on scientific accuracy and plausibility and describing in excruciating detail the science of what is going on in the story (as examples I present to you Neal Stephenson's SEVENEVES and Kim Stanley Robinson's AURORA).

I think that if Simak had tried to go that route with WAY STATION the story would have been ruined. The details of how the aliens travel between the way stations is almost irrelevant, although Simak does give a brief explanation. The details of how Wallace's house was modified by Galactic Central to turn it into a way station, or what its protective materials are is almost irrelevant. It is enough to know that it works, that it fits the need of the story. This gives Simak the room to give depth to the character of Enoch Wallace, to spend time on describing the Wisconsin countryside, to philosophize upon man's place in the galaxy. Modern writers could learn a bit from writers of an earlier age, I think.

Eric Michael Summerer is a competent narrator who never took me out of the story. His style is more of a reader than a narrator, although he did try to vary his voices depending on the character. As I've said before, as long as a narrator doesn't take me out of the story, then he or she has done their job well enough.

WAY STATION is a worthy Hugo winner, and one that I know wish I'd read sooner. [-jak]

Project Blue (letter of comment by Gregory Frederick):

A group of scientists are attempting to raise money to fund a project to directly image for the first time an Earth type planet in the Alpha Centauri system (closest star system nearest to Earth ... 4.3 light years away). A refrigerator size telescope (with available tech) in orbit would be able to do this because of the relatively close location of Alpha Centauri.

<http://www.projectblue.org/the-mission/>

[-gf]

Walls, THE LORD OF THE RINGS, Autism, THE DISPATCHER, and THE EXPANSE (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Mark's comments on walls](#) in the 02/10/17 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

[Mark wrote,] "Rumor has it that after King Kong was removed from Skull Island the natives rebuilt and extended the wall. But, sadly, they are still waiting for the dinosaurs to pay for it." [-mrl]

Mark, you are so going to pay for that bad joke. [-jp]

In response to [Mark's comments on THE LORD OF THE RINGS](#), John writes:

I first read THE LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy (and THE HOBBIT) in college back in the mid-70s, and was totally blown away by the immense detail and inter-connectedness between the books. To say that Tolkien's world building is a cultural phenomenon would be an understatement, and I have to say that Peter Jackson's envisioning of LOTR was beautifully done. I am no scholar of LOTR, but I would have to say that any serious fan of high fantasy literature should read these books. Spectacular work. I haven't read--nor seen--any of the GAME OF THRONES books/episodes. Some day I might, but it's going to be awhile. My current reading project is VARNEY, THE VAMPYRE (serialized 1845-1847, first book edition published in 1847) by James Malcolm Rymer. At 1166 pages, this is a whopper of a task. I did some calculations and discovered that I could finish this massive tome in 30 days if I read 39 pages a day. That doesn't sound too bad, but considering the typeface and print size, I could very easily go blind in the process. Oh, well. The things I do in the name of researching an article: I'm writing an overview of 19th century vampire novels for a literary journal, and a shorter version will appear in Robert Jennings' fanzine FADEAWAY later this year. It all depends on when I finish reading this blasted book. I have already consumed a half dozen other novels in this milieu, starting with John Polidori's 1819 THE VAMPYRE and ending with Bram Stoker's DRACULA (1897). Some of these are fun, the others pedantic. Oh, well, indeed. [-jp]

Evelyn responds:

What the heck--see my 1987 review of VARNEY THE VAMPYRE below. [-ecl]

In response to [David Rubin's comments on autism](#), John writes:

Thank you for reprinting David Rubin's blog post about Autism and Asperger's Syndrome. We believe our three-year-old grandson has Asperger's, but he has not been formally diagnosed as yet, although he does display common traits of this

condition. Eventually we hope that a proper diagnosis is determined before he enters school in a couple years. [-jp]

In response to [Joe Karpierz's review of THE DISPATCHER](#), John writes:

I will have to get a copy of Scalzi's THE DISPATCHER. It sounds good, and I enjoy his writing style. Thank you for the recommendation. [-jp]

In response to [Joe Karpierz's review of BABYLON'S ASHES](#), John writes:

Of all the television skiffy that I watch, "The Expanse" series on the SyFy Network is one of the better shows. Sad to say, I don't have any of these novels written by James S. A. Corey, but after reading Joe Karpierz's review of the audiobook, I may have to start acquiring them. They certainly have a fervent following in the sf community.

And this brings me to the end of another letter of comment, but one last comment needs to be made: stop writing about interesting books to read! I am already backed up into the afterlife on my To Be Read Shelf. Yeesh... [-jp]

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE by **James Malcolm Rymer or Thomas Peckett Prest** (Dover, 1972 (originally published 1847), two volumes, ISBNs 978-0-486-22844-0 and 978-0-486-22845-7) (book review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

As the heading indicates, this is not your normal horror novel. It's old (almost 150 years), it's long (868 pages, or close to 900,000 words--by comparison, DUNE checks in at about 200,000), and no one is sure who wrote it. The greatest of the penny dreadfuls, it is described by E. F. Bleiler as "the most famous book that almost no one has read." Well, I'm never one to turn down a challenge, so I determined to sit down and read it.

It's not half-bad. Okay, so that's not a glowing recommendation. But considering the length, I think the fact that I managed to read it all and have a reasonably enjoyable time of it says something. The first half moves along at a good pace, as the Bannerworths find themselves tormented by the actions of Sir Francis Varney, who is trying to drive them from their home. There is the romantic subplot, with Charles Holland and Flora Bannerworth, which follows the standard Victorian pattern. There is comic relief, with Admiral Bell and his first mate Jack; this comic relief becomes a bit overdone at times, with the plot stalled while the admiral and Jack have yet another squabble. Eventually we find out just what Varney wants the house for and we begin to sympathize with him and his predicament as he is chased by the mob and forced to seek shelter with the Bannerworths, the very family he has been tormenting. There is a brief section in which Varney is describing his history that is reminiscent more of FRANKENSTEIN than of DRACULA, and in fact throughout the whole first volume, the vampiric elements are quite understated.

In the second half, Rymer (or Prest or whoever) seems to run out of steam. Instead of a single story, we get a series of episodes of the sort:

- mysterious nobleman comes to town
- greedy mother arranges to have her daughter marry him, even though the daughter doesn't love him and/or loves someone else
- on the wedding day, someone shows up, points to the groom, and shouts "That's Varney the Vampire."
- Varney flees and (optionally) the girl marries the man of her dreams instead

After several iterations of this plot, interspersed with musings by Varney himself on how much horror and misery he is bringing to the people that he meets, Rymer finally changes direction and wraps up the novel by having Varney tell his life story, or at any rate major parts of it, to a sympathetic minister. Having done this, Varney apparently decides that he has served his literary purpose and departs, somewhat dramatically, from the scene. Without ruining the ending (what makes me think anyone will read this, anyway?), let's just say a sequel is unlikely.

If this seems like a flimsy plot to hang almost a million words on, remember how many films Universal Studios, Hammer Studios, and who knows who else have made based on Bram Stoker's DRACULA. Yes, it's padded unmercifully--at one point a character is waiting in someone's library and picks up a book to read and the next chapter of VARNEY consists of the story she reads! Yes, many of the characters are two-dimensional or less. But there is also genuine horror, genuine humor ("people will talk even when they have not anything particular to say, so that we cannot wonder at their doing so when they have"), and a genuine story. I'm not sure that I'd recommend that you plow through the whole of VARNEY THE VAMPIRE, but you might give the first half--which can stand on its own without the second half--a try. [-ecl]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

THROUGH FIVE ADMINISTRATIONS: REMINISCENCES OF COLONEL WILLIAM H. CROOK (ISBN 978-1-3316-2057-0) consists of Crook's experiences and observations during his time as body-guard, clerk, and dispersing

agent to Lincoln, Johnson, Grant, Hayes, and Garfield, and Arthur. (He was not on duty when Lincoln was assassinated, and no longer a bodyguard when Garfield was.) Crook actually served under twelve Presidents--Lincoln through Wilson--but these memoirs cover only six. Arthur is covered in the same chapter as Garfield, and apparently Crook considered them one administration.

Mixed in with the more straightforward observations, we catch glimpses of less reported aspects. We see the casual racism of the time--not just the use of terms such as "darkies", but descriptions such as "we saw some [Union] soldiers not far away 'initiating' some negroes by tossing them on a blanket. When they came down they were supposed to be transformed into Yankees. The darkies yelled lustily during the process, and came down livid under their black skins. ... The President [Lincoln] laughed boyishly; I heard him afterward telling some one about the funny sight." (It reminded me of the scene in BOARDWALK EMPIRE when some white character just reaches over and rubs Chalky White's head "for luck"--apparently this used to be considered [by whites] acceptable behavior! You can tell, of course, that White is less than thrilled.)

It was of this same visit of Lincoln to Richmond that Crook says, "It was nothing sort of miraculous that some attempt on his life was not made. It is to the everlasting glory of the South that he was permitted to come and go in peace."

There is much made by Crook and others of Lincoln's premonitions about his death. (For example, Crook says that evening was the only time Lincoln did not say "good night" to him, but rather "good-bye.") But Crook also quotes Lincoln as saying, "I have perfect confidence in those who are around me--in every one of you men. I know no one could do it [assassinate me] and escape alive. But if it is to be done, it is impossible to prevent." While it is true that Booth was eventually killed, it is certainly conceivable that he could have escaped.

Crook describes the actions of the Congress in 1866 and 1867 to effect Reconstruction by opining, "The first was tragic, culminating as it did in negro Suffrage, the disenfranchisement of the majority of the better class of Southerners, ..."

There are also small asides illuminating the characters of the men and women Crook encountered. For example, of President Hayes he wrote, "At the commissary the very best things were to be obtained at cost price. This President Hayes refused to do. 'I prefer to buy like other men,' he said." But he was also careful to absolve Grant of blame in availing himself of the commissary, preceding this by, "It had been the custom during the Grant administration to buy the groceries [for the White House] of the army commissary. This was perfectly natural and proper because of the army associations of General Grant." (I am not sure I would say this was proper, since by the time he was President, Grant was not longer in the Army.) [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

Two things are infinite: the universe and human
stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe.
-- Albert Einstein

[Tweet](#)

Go to [our home page](#)