

(NJ) Public Library, 7PM November 16: THE FOREVER WAR by Joe Haldeman, Old Bridge (NJ) Public Library, 7PM
 January 25, 2018: OLD MAN'S WAR by John Scalzi, Old Bridge (NJ) Public Library, 7PM

Northern New Jersey events are listed at:

<http://www.sfsnnj.com/news.html>

MT VOID Policy on Fiction:

Up until now, we have avoided publishing fiction for a number of reasons, mostly because we are basically a non-fiction zine. (Yes, I know that is circular reasoning.) Also, fiction tends to be longer than the non-fiction reviews, essays, and so on that we do. (Yes, the longer non-fiction gets "serialized," but we are not going to serialize fiction. However, now that flash fiction is becoming a "thing", we may on occasion include some flash fiction (defined as 1000 or fewer words). We have a preference for the shorter forms: the Six-Word Story, twitterature (140 characters), the dribble (50 words), and the drabble (100 words). [-ecl]

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for March:

Z, the very last film of "31 Days of Oscar", the series I discussed last month, is a very recommendable film. The film is based on a true story. The police and military in Greece was fanatically right wing and very repressive. The left-wing opposition puts much of its hope for the future in a liberal and pacifist Deputy in the Greek government. He is coming to town (Athens?) to speak at a rally for nuclear disarmament, and the police, in league with the military, are doing all they can to get in his way. Then the Deputy is mortally injured in a traffic accident and dies shortly thereafter. The police are supposed to be investigating the accident, but they do not want to be successful. They are just as happy the Deputy is dead. To save face the government sends as investigator an examining magistrate who they expect to be a puppet of his bosses. But the magistrate refuses to let the government control him and investigates for himself this accident that may have been a murder. The film is directed by Costa-Gavras who specialized in political films. The story was adapted from the novel Z by Vassili Vassilikos. The musical score by Mikis Theodorakis, who wrote the music for ZORBA THE GREEK, has become a classic.

Z will be the last film of the February not-so-mini-festival "31 Days of Oscar", which just happens to extend to March. Z will play 4:00 AM on Saturday, March 4.

Back in 1973 I had a personal gripe. The best science fiction on television was on Saturday morning as an animated revival of "Star Trek". The writing was not at all bad by writers like Larry Niven and David Gerrold--known science fiction authors. But the animation was really weak. It was very bad, pinchpenny, animated cartoon style. If the Enterprise was flying through stars, the left side of the star field was a mirror image of the right side. I guess it was cheaper to animate that way. The whole show was done in very limited animation. I remember complaining at a party that they did not know how to use that medium. Anything that the mind's eye could picture it should be cheap to show with animation. Disney knew that. Why can't animated films show more visual imagination? And almost as if it were aimed to prove my point a French-Czech feature-length film, FANTASTIC PLANET was released just about the same time. On the Planet Ygam humans, called Oms, are domesticated to be pets for sixty-foot humanoid blue aliens called Draags. Oms are to Draags a lot like mice are to humans. The animation is crudely done by current standards, but the alien flora and fauna are often witty and funny. Some birds have umbrella-like wings. The tiny humans meet in caves and plot to escape the giant Draags.

I assume most people reading this have a special interest in the Cinema of the Fantastic. But with TCM having finished up its 31 Days of Oscar, they had to decide what to do next. I guess they decided to have a short remembrance of their programming last October. I guess you could call it "32 Hours of Halloween". Starting Thursday, March 23 at 8:00 PM, and going to March 25 at 4:00 AM they have 32 hours of (not particularly rare) fantasy films.

Thursday, March 23
 8:00 PM GOJIRA (1954)
 10:00 PM KING KONG (1933)

Friday, March 24
 12:00 AM INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1956)
 1:30 AM THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD, THE (1951)
 3:15 AM X FROM OUTER SPACE, THE (1967)
 5:00 AM 20 MILLION MILES TO EARTH (1957)
 6:45 AM NOSFERATU (1922)
 8:45 AM CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI, THE (1920)
 10:30 AM WOLF MAN, THE (1941)
 12:00 PM CAT PEOPLE (1942)
 1:30 PM HORROR OF DRACULA (1958)
 3:15 PM FRANKENSTEIN (1931)
 4:45 PM MUMMY, THE (1932)
 6:15 PM GORGON, THE (1964)

8:00 PM WIZARD OF OZ, THE (1939)

Saturday, March 25

10:00 PM LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING, THE (2003)
 1:30 AM CLOCKWORK ORANGE, A (1971)
 4:00 AM SOYLENT GREEN (1973)

Now as to what I think is the best film of the month, well, it may not be the best but it is good and a rare opportunity to see it. The film is SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (1982). No, it is not the Johnny Depp version. These were the actors of the stage production, especially George Hearn and Angela Lansbury. It has tremendous acting rather than digital effects. That will be Tuesday, March 21 at 1:00 PM.

And noticing that brought my attention to another, shorter slate of fantasy films. I wonder what's up.

Tuesday March 21

4:00 AM WESTWORLD (1973)
 5:30 AM 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (1968)
 8:00 AM DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE (1932)
 9:45 AM INVISIBLE MAN, THE (1933)
 11:00 AM M (1931)
 1:00 PM SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (1982)

Enjoy!

[-mrl]

Near-Future SF (tweet by @Kosmogrrrl):

Charles S. Harris sends us this tweet from @Kosmogrrrl:

Increasingly impressed with anyone who manages to write near-future SF under these conditions

1. Suspect in North Korea killing 'thought she was taking part in TV prank'
2. Robert Mugabe could contest election as corpse, says wife
3. German parents told to destroy doll that can spy on children
- ...
6. Zealandia -- pieces finally falling together for continent we didn't know we had

[Sorry for the abridgement; the tweet had a screen capture that did not capture the entire screen. -ec]

THE SKILL OF OUR HANDS by Steven Brust and Skyler White (book review by Dale L. Skran):

Quick review: In spite of an intriguing premise, this book is not recommended. In fact, it should be avoided.

I have long had a soft spot for Steven Brust after reading his first novel, TO REIGN IN HELL, in 1984. I am not a Brust completist, but I have read most of the Vlad Taltos fantasy novels. Toward the end I felt Brust was running out of ideas, but I did read a lot of them. When I saw he had started a new series co-authored with Skyler White, a much less well-known fantasy writer, featuring "The Incrementalists" I bought HANDS, the second book in his new series.

The general idea is that for 40,000 years humanity has been guided by a small group of witches? superhumans? mutants? that have a shared memory and can pass that memory into new bodies. They claim to have memories going back 40,000 years, but in HANDS the oldest character is only 2,000 years old. This is surely an interesting idea, but it is dreadfully executed by Brust and White. Among the many issues with HANDS are:

- This is a set-piece propaganda story. The good guys are liberal open-borders advocates and the bad guys are the worst sort of cardboard stereotype racist police and bigoted thugs.
- The writing style emphasizes conversation over description, with the result that the plot, limited though it may be, is hard to follow.
- HANDS feels like a short story padded out with an immense amount of dull conversation.
- The Incrementalists have supposedly lived for hundreds of years, but they talk and act like 60's activists with limited life

experience. Not a one of them is remotely plausible as a character.

- With characters this old, the reader might expect to get a lot of historical perspective. However, with the exception of some flashbacks to the days John Brown, the abolitionist, there is no such historical knowledge on display.

- Much of HANDS seems incomprehensible, but now that I realize it is the second book in the series, this makes more sense. HANDS desperately needs a summary of the first book so the reader has a clue who Celeste might be.

In short, HANDS is a significant step down for Brust. I felt his work in the Taltos series was declining, but HANDS represents a still further drop. I pushed myself through the entire book on the theory that eventually it might improve, but it never did. I have not read many books that dealt so superficially with the issues they purport to examine, or were so dull in the telling.

I'm not going to bother rating HANDS--I recommend it to no one but someone writing a thesis on propaganda fiction. It ought to be compared to things like THE IRON HEEL (Jack London) and LEVEL 7 (Mordecai Roshwald), but Jack London is a far better writer than Brust/White, and at least LEVEL 7 had a real message that is hard to dispute--nuclear war is a bad idea. Another comparison is to the various Jerry Pournelle novels from the 70s that were suffused with right-wing, even monarchist, political views. Alas for Brust/White, Pournelle at least was capable of telling (for the most part, anyway!) an entertaining story to wrap his politics in. [-dls]

BURLESQUE: THE HEART OF THE GLITTER TRIBE (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: A company of performers revives the fun and slightly naughty atmosphere of the old burlesque that died about 1940. There is a neo-Burlesque that is having a healthy revitalization. They create, work hard, and have what appears to be one heck of a good time. Jon Manning directs a film of interviews of people involved with the show. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

I have to admit that when this film came along I was unaware that there was still Burlesque alive in the 21st century. For those who don't know it is a lot like vaudeville, a live stage variety show, generally with skimpy costumes and a strong sexual accent including striptease performances. The original Burlesque came to the US about the time of the close of the Civil War. It supposedly died out about the time of World War II. But the people in this film are among those who have revived it as a sort of neo-Burlesque.

(As I see the film BURLESQUE: THE HEART OF THE GLITTER TRIBE I see that there is something of a revival. My wife put "New Jersey Burlesque" into a search engine and discovered that tomorrow there is to be a New Jersey Burlesque Festival not far away from where I am writing. OK, so I suppose that is evidence along with this film that burlesque still lives.)

I think this film could do a better job of explaining itself, but I guess the Glitter Tribe is this particular company of Burlesque performers. People involved with the show talk about just about anything, but as far as the film is concerned no real names are ever used. You identify people like, "oh yes, she is the one who works all night on her costumes."

We get to see some of their acts and in between there are interviews with the performers talking about life, sex, what their families think of their chosen profession, and the excruciating hours working all day and preparing their acts all night. Some of the acts are really creative. One woman loves eating burritos, eating them every day. Her idea for an act was to come out of a six-foot brown paper sack, wrapped in a human-size cloth tortilla and then again in aluminum foil, like a burrito packed to go. She works her way down to the filling, which turns out to be the very scantily dressed performer herself with a cloth jalapeno covering the parts to keep the act legal.

I guess that takes me to the nudity. It either would not be a true revival of Burlesque or a very bad documentary if there were not a lot of backstage nudity. Except for what we see in the performances themselves, nothing is intended to be very erotic. The performers seem to like the idea that they are doing something that they like and can put their entire selves into. Though some have had very painful backgrounds they are dedicated to this regimen.

This is a light and lively documentary that turns into a surprising pleasure. I rate it a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10. BURLESQUE: HEART OF THE GLITTER TRIBE will open in select theaters March 3rd and on VOD/iTunes March 7th.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6296208/combined>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/burlesque_heart_of_the_glitter_tribe

[-mrl]

LAVENDER (2017) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Warning: Spoiler at the end of this review

CAPSULE: An amnesiac has a spectacular car accident that shakes loose some hidden memories of her younger self. Obsessively trying to piece together her past, she goes to live at the farmhouse of her youth. Canadian director Ed Gass-Donnelly co-writes and directs this mysterious melodrama involving a woman passing into a strange world of repressed memories and perhaps the supernatural. LAVENDER would have made a good 1970s TV-movie or a just-okay current theatrical film. This is more an exercise in suspense than one of logic. And it satisfies neither suspense nor logic. Horror film fans who do not suffer from amnesia will have seen much of the film's content before. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) or 5/10

Abbie Cornish plays Jane, a woman who remembers only parts of her youth, and who is fixated on the past. She likes to take pictures of old abandoned farmhouses to try to recreate a feel for earlier days. But when she is almost killed in a car crash she starts seeing visions of her own forgotten past--images she might have preferred to forget. She discovers her parents and sister were murdered in a massacre reminiscent of IN COLD BLOOD. And now Jane is starting to remember her nightmarish history. She discovers that a farmhouse she photographed and which had fascinated her had been her original home.

There are indeed creepy things going on in the old house. And someone is leaving her small wrapped gifts that are artifacts of her past. Ed Gass-Donnelly, who co-authored the script and directed, has tried to foster suspense by having Jane have slow explorations of the house, never finding a lot important. That is one problem for the viewer. He is put through a lot of suspenseful scenes but makes little progress toward solving the central riddle. And the riddle is never completely solved. What is solved is only what is suspected anyway.

There is cinematic homage to THE SHINING. Jane's daughter Alice seems to have an invisible imaginary friend who talks to her about her mother, much as Tony talked to Danny in the Kubrick film. Also while THE SHINING had its topiary maze, LAVENDER has the main character hysterical in maze built of bales of straw. (Don't people in horror films know there are simple strategies like the right-handed rule to avoid getting lost in a maze?)

The farmhouse was subtle. It does not scream "haunted!" the way Eel Marsh House did in THE WOMAN IN BLACK. The film manages a little bit of atmosphere, but the story is too predictable and not enough original. I would rate LAVENDER a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 5/10. LAVENDER will be released to theaters, VOD and digital HD on March 3, 2016.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4680980/combined>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lavender>

SPOILER AHEAD: If you want to know how things are going to turn out in the plot, notice the film stars Abbie Cornish, Dermot Mulroney, and some lesser-known actors.

[-mrl]

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE (letters of comment by George Phillies and John Purcell):

In response to [Evelyn's review of VARNEY THE VAMPIRE](#) in the 02/17/17 issue of the MT VOID, George Phillies writes:

Thank you for the heroic deed of reading VARNEY THE VAMPIRE. Was he actually a vampire? [-gp]

Evelyn responds:

Yes. [-ecl]

John Purcell writes:

I don't believe it. Evelyn not only read VARNEY THE VAMPYRE, but also reviewed it back in 1987. Well, I suppose every thirty years this novel should be resurrected. It will probably take the next reviewer thirty years to recover and read that damned novel, anyway. Oh, by the way, I'm already approaching page 100. Only 1063 pages to go in the 2004 Wordsworth Edition I own. [-jp]

WAY STATION (letters of comment by Philip Chee and John Purcell):

In response to [Joe Karpeirz's review of WAY STATION](#) in the 02/17/17 issue of the MT VOID, Philip Chee writes:

I've been thinking. Petticoat Junction has a rail spur that goes from nowhere to nowhere because some time back the connection to the greater rail network was disconnected. On the other hand this might be deliberate. What if Petticoat

Junction was a WAY STATION to a galactic rail network?

For example, over the course of the show, each of the sisters had been portrayed by several different actresses. But none of the characters apparently notices the changing faces. Perhaps this is just BRITISH<<<<<<< GALACTIC RAIL rotating their staff? [-pc]

[The '<'s represent backspacing. -ecl]

John Purcell writes:

Great review of Clifford D. Simak's WAY STATION, one of my favorite books he wrote. It definitely deserved the Hugo Award. I had the pleasure of meeting Cliff quite a few times when I lived in Minneapolis and attended Minicon every single year, where Simak was a constant presence. Him and Gordon R. Dickson, that is. I treasure those memories. [-jp]

Superbugs and Project Blue (letter of comment by Philip Chee):

In response to [Mark's comments that microbes resistant to antibiotics will survive better and reproduce](#) in the 02/17/17 issue of the MT VOID, Philip Chee writes:

Not only that. Horizontal gene transfer means antibiotic resistance can jump to other species of microbes like lightning. [-pc]

In response to [Greg Frederick's comments on Project Blue being able to directly image planets in the Alpha Centauri system](#) in the same issue, Philip writes:

Can't the JWST [James Webb Space telescope] do that anyway? [-pc]

Stigmata (fiction by David Rubin):

Stigmata

It started simply. In a Delaware public school, in September 2013, the principal walked into the lunch room and told the students that no one would eat before prayers, and called a student to the podium. The student began, "In the name of Jesus..."

Yusef, the Jewish child raised his hand.

"That's not the brucha we use at home. We don't pray to Jesus."

The principal replied, "That's what you do at home. Your public school is in America, a Christian nation, so you do it our way or you can go to the side room there and do it your way."

Yusef got up and went to that back room, He found a small room, probably used as a closet before now pretty much empty, with nothing in the room but a cross pasted up. He realized he couldn't do the prayer for the loaf or the wine. He didn't have either. He had a bad habit. Whenever he got especially nervous or upset, he started to scratch, even though there were times that he scratched himself raw and got infections. He scratched his head now, prayed in Hebrew, then went back to his seat, next to his classmates.

His friend Chuck asked him why he couldn't pray like everybody else.

"You know I'm Jewish", he said. We don't pray to Jesus.

"Then who do you pray to?"

Before he could answer, another classmate said, "Jews don't pray to anybody. They're atheists, like Marx and Lenin."

"We do believe in God. We just don't pray to Jesus."

"My priest says that the only way to the father is through the son, so if you don't believe in Jesus, you don't believe in God."

"So does my pastor!" another boy sai.d

"My rabbi says that only God is God and all this Trinity stuff is a way of worshipping a false god?"

"Are you saying Jesus is a false God?"

Then it started. He hoped he imagined the words, Jew boy. As he sat, he felt the redness where he scratched and resisted the urge to scratch some more.

At three, he came home, kissed the mazuza and his mother.

"How was school?" his mother asked.

"We prayed today, at lunch. Isn't that illegal in a modern public school? Doesn't that defy separation of church and state?"

"Some atheists made it that way. We all know that the Constitution permits freedom of religion and all this talk of separation of church and state can't stop it. You'll be happy to know I and your father are working on that. We already got the principal to agree to it, so think of us, as you pray at lunch."

"But it didn't feel right, Mom. I tried to do the prayer the way the rabbi taught me to, but I only ended up scratching."

"We warned you about scratching like that. Remember when scratched so much your skin got so red and infected we had to take you to the hospital?"

"Yeah, Mom. But it's hard to be the praying Jew."

"Your classmates know you're a pious Jew. Now as the prayers make them more pious, you'll have an easier time."

"Yes, Mom"

The next day, he heard the whispers he hoped weren't and tried not to look around as he walked.

"HEY, JEW BOY!"

He heard it loud and clear, this time, as it was yelled into his right ear. He looked right, and someone pulled on his left payis, the long sideburns orthodox Jews keep. "OWW!" he shouted, and felt his head pulled to the left, as someone on his right pulled off his yarmulka. He never saw it again.

In class, he started scratching his head, but pulled his hands down and started to scratch his palms and wrists, stopping when he noticed they were getting red.

At lunch he sat for a moment when he heard the principal call for the prayer.

"But you, Yusef, may go to your room."

He heard the other students laugh as he went to his little closet. The cross was gone. Its place was the word, "Jewish place", written with thick marker, and a bible on a table. "Christian Bible, of course", he thought. "Well, this time, I have my bread and wine."

He went into his backpack to find his can of grape juice had been opened and spilled. He found his kosher salami sandwich, but a container of milk had been added, leaving the meal unkosher. He left the room and went back to his seat.

"How was your meal?", someone yelled. Several students laughed. He began to cry to himself and didn't even try to stop himself from scratching.

The next day, he came in, staying close to the wall, holding his backpack close to his chest. Someone tried to grab his payis, but he had taped them down. He kept his yamulka in his backpack until he got to class.

"Today will be different", he thought.

Lunch came and he was surprised to see his mother there. "Since I helped establish the prayers, I have the privilege of watching you lead the lunch prayer", she said.

Lunch time came, and he stood in front of the room, with his mother on one side of him and the principal on the other. He had a full, freshly baked loaf with a real knife and real bottle of wine in front of him. He opened to the correct page of what this time was a Jewish prayer book, when a note fell out. He picked it up and it was a computer printed page full of nothing but the word Jew boy, repeated over and over.

He started to cry and scratched himself all over, especially his head, his hands, his feet, and even his side. All those spots began to bleed, so the teachers picked him up and took him out. "Wilmington or St Francis hospital?" the secretary asked "Delaware Psychiatric, and call his psychiatrist. He's had a nervous breakdown."

I'm calling a lawyer, and you can bet the papers are going to hear about this!" his mother yelled.

Next week, he returns with his mother, his father, his principal and a cop, to pick up his things, for the last time.

They pass through a crowd of students.

"Not a word", the principal says, but a few grow close, with tears in their eyes.

"I'm so sorry we did this to you" one says.

"Where can I get a yamulka?"

"How do I grow payis?"

"Can I join your shul?"

The principal says, "I can understand your apologies, but why do so many of you want to convert? Isn't that a bit much?"

A student pulls out a newspaper. The headline says "SCHOOL HAS NEW SAINT, JEWISH BOY HAS STIGMATA" [-dr]

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

INVISIBLE PLANETS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SF IN TRANSLATION edited and translated by Ken Liu (ISBN 978-0-7653-8419- 5) includes thirteen stories by seven authors, as well as three essays on Chinese science fiction. The two authors probably most familiar to Western readers would be Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang (or alternatively, Cixin Liu and Jingfang Hao). Liu (no relation to Ken Liu) won a Hugo for his novel THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM, and this volume has a self-contained excerpt from it. Hao also won a Hugo, for his short story "Folding Beijing", which is also included here.

Ken Liu has attempted to include stories showing a range of approaches and styles. One is its first publication in English, while the rest are reprints from F\$SF, CLARKESWORLD, INTERZONE, UPGRADED, WORLD SF BLOG, LIGHTSPEED, UNCANNY, CARBIDE TIPPED PENS, and tor.com. Of these, CLARKESWORLD has made a concerted effort to publish science fiction in translation on a regular basis; as was noted on the "Coode Street Podcast", this approach is much more effective and respectful than having a one-shot issue of works in translation, and then returning to all English-language stories for all the issues after that. But it is also more difficult, because you have to work at continually finding works worth translating (mostly in languages you do not read), and finding translators for them. Luckily, for Chinese science fiction, we have Ken Liu, a real treasure, dedicated to finding and translating Chinese science fiction, even though that takes time away from writing his own fiction.

The variety of works Ken Liu has chosen means that not all of them will please everyone. I found Chen Quifan's stories a bit too cyberpunk for me. Xia Jia's stories "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight" and "Tongtong's Summer" reminded me a bit of Zenna Henderson, not in subject matter, but in feeling. (Or at least in how I remember Henderson; it has been a long time.) Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" could be described as "1984 meets FAHRENHEIT 451", and indeed there are internal references to support this. Ma's other works as described by Liu in his introduction sound fascinating, but he also says that the myriad cultural references in them would make them incomprehensible to most Western readers. Liu's comments about how the Chinese version of "The City of Silence" had to be phrased to get past the censors, and how the English version changed that are worth reading.

Liu compares Hao Jingfang's "Invisible Planets" to the work of Italo Calvino; I see a similarity to Jorge Luis Borges as well in the use of description rather than plot or characters to define the work. "Folding Beijing" is a Hugo winner; 'nuff said.

Tang Fei's "Call Girl" just did not work for me, nor did Chang Jingbo's "Grave of the Fireflies". Liu Cixin's "The Circle" is the excerpt from THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM I mentioned earlier, and I really liked his "Taking Care of God", which I would rate as the best in the book.

Of course, one of the things to say about Chinese science fiction is that it is not a monolithic genre. Yes, the effects of Communism and its decline have influenced some Chinese writers, but others draw their inspiration from post-colonialism, the successes of science, the failures of science, and even the influx of Western science fiction, both in English and in translation. There are visions influenced by cyberpunk, visions influenced by Chinese history and traditions, and influenced by various literary movements, and visions that defy categorization. The result is that a collection of a dozen stories can hardly represent the broad range of Chinese science fiction, anymore than a similar-sized volume could represent American science fiction. The best one can consider this is as a sampling of the past decade. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Cleanliness becomes more important when godliness
is unlikely.

-- P. J. O'Rourke

Tweet

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