

<http://tinyurl.com/void-openculture-amazing>.

Science Fiction (and Other) Discussion Groups, Films, Lectures, etc. (NJ):

August 10: THE MARTIAN (2015) & THE MARTIAN by Andy Weir,
Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 5:30PM
 August 11: HAROLD AND MAUDE (1971), Middletown (NJ) Public Library,
12N
 September 8: ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004),
Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 12N
 September 14: QUATERMASS AND THE PIT (1967) & "Aficionado"
by David Brin,
Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 5:30PM
 September 28: THE INVISIBLE LIBRARY by Genevieve Cogman, Old Bridge
(NJ) Public Library, 7PM
 October 12: SOLARIS (1972) & SOLARIS by Stanislaw Lem,
Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 5:30PM
 October 13: THE EXORCIST (1973), Middletown (NJ) Public Library,
12N
 November 9: CAT PEOPLE (1942) & "The Bagheeta" by Val Lewton
(available in Marvin Kaye's WEIRD TALES and Peter Haining's
VAMPIRE OMNIBUS), Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 5:30PM
 November 10: CACHE' (2005), Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 12N
 November 16: THE FOREVER WAR by Joe Haldeman, Old Bridge (NJ)
Public Library, 7PM
 December 8: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946) or JOYEUX NOEL (2005),
Middletown (NJ) Public Library, 12N
 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>

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for August (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Another month and another of my very subjective selection of films to watch out for. I have two movies I can recommend, both dating back to the 1950s. One is a hard-bitten story of longshoremen on the docks of Manhattan, filmed on location. It is shot in black and white with a kind of gritty realism that one rarely sees any more. The other film will introduce you to Marabunta, the biggest monster in 1950s film--twenty square miles of agonizing death, brought to you by George Pal.

George Pal is a film producer known for films with some sense of wonder. His was the second science fiction film of the 1950s, DESTINATION MOON being beaten to the boxoffice by ROCKETSHIP X-M. But in the 50s he also made WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE, WAR OF THE WORLDS and in 1960 THE TIME MACHINE. After he made WAR OF THE WORLDS he made some films of genre interest even if they were not really science fiction. In 1953, immediately following WAR OF THE WORLDS he produced HOUDINI and in 1954 he produced THE NAKED JUNGLE. Sadly HOUDINI and THE NAKED JUNGLE are not seen much any more. But Monday, August 7, at 8 PM TCM is running THE NAKED JUNGLE. Now the melodramatic and lurid title of the film may be one reason the film is so little seen these days but it is a top-flight adventure film.

THE NAKED JUNGLE is Pal's adaptation of the suspenseful short story "Leiningen Versus the Ants" by Carl Stephenson. The story tells of a Brazilian cocoa plantation besieged by a huge swarm of army ants. One character describes the horde as, "twenty square miles of agonizing death." They are called Marabunta and will eat a plantation down to lifeless twigs. Leiningen (played by Charlton Heston) is determined not to lose his plantation that he grew from scratch. Those familiar with the story may be a little disappointed that the plot is padded out with the subplot of the arrival of Leiningen's mail order bride (Eleanor Parker).

Incidentally the "twenty square miles" guy is William Conrad, a very popular voice on CBS radio at the time on "Escape" and "Suspense." The story was so popular Escape dramatized it three times with Conrad playing Leiningen. The story was also done on Suspense with a different actor.

[I try not to put spoilers in my film descriptions. Through the first half of the film what Marabunta is is kept deep and mysterious. However, since I thought it was important to say this film was based on this famous story, it sort of tells you what the threat is. It is not killer pineapples.]

Shakespeare's plays seem to be mostly about royalty and people of high rank in society. Dramas we see have shifted to stories about more common people. The 1950s brought us some films about hardworking laborers who had race issues and were prayed upon by crime. The best of these and also the best remembered is probably ON THE WATERFRONT. One of the

more rewarding ones was *EDGE OF THE CITY* (1957). The film is shot on the docks to add a texture of realism. John Cassavetes plays a new stevedore who is bullied by his boss (Jack Warden), but also finds a friend in another boss played by Sidney Portier. Warden's bullying gets worse when Cassavetes goes to work for Portier. Warden does not like to see a white man working for an African-American. This was the first film directed by Martin Ritt, who went on to direct *THE FRONT* and *NORMA RAE*. *EDGE OF THE CITY* was also known as *A MAN IS TEN FEET TALL*. It was based on a television play "A Man Is Ten Feet Tall." Leonard Rosenman provides the powerful score. At the time there were not too many stories of blacks and whites being close friends. TimeOut complains that Poitier's character is "whiter than white." [Thursday, August 10, 12:00 noon]

What's the best film of the month? There is no obvious choice. One film that gets better each time I see it is *SHIP OF FOOLS* (1965). The year is 1930 and the passengers of a ship to Germany live in the shadow of what would turn into a world war. They live their separate lives but there are reflections of the war that is to come. Stanley Kramer directs. [Friday, August 25, 3:30 PM]

[-mrl]

VALERIAN: CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS (film review by Dale L. Skran):

Based on French comic you've never heard of--"Valerian and Laureline"--and directed by Luc Besson (*LE FEMME NIKITA*, *THE PROFESSIONAL*, *THE 5TH ELEMENT*) Valerian has landed in the local box office like a ton of bricks. Reportedly the most expensive independent film ever made--\$209M--VALERIAN has not impressed the critics--and is likely to sink without a sequel.

This is not the best SF movie you are going to see this year, and Dane DeHaan as Valerian is unimpressive. A small, thinly built, almost rat-like man, he is miscast as a dashing James-Bond like hero, forced to spout cliched lines that might work if spoken by someone like Chris Pine. Cara Delevingne looks nothing like the comic character, but does a better job at living the part than Dane, although this is in part true only because Dane does so poorly.

Having said all this, if you are an SF fan and/or a comic fan, you absolutely must go see this visually awesome movie. The screen explodes with fantastic effects and visions never before put on screen. Don't worry about the odd dialog or the choppy, perhaps comic derived episodic nature of the plot. Just sit back and enjoy a visual feast that is almost without parallel. VALERIAN is far better than many other films promoted as being impressive to the eyes. The plot is not bad--and is certainly better than that of AVATAR, for example. The movie is overlong but just enjoy it for what it is--something beautiful that you will not soon see the like of again.

VALERIAN is highly recommended. I'm rating it with dual ratings: visual impact: +4, and the movie per se: +1. DO NOT MISS THIS MOVIE. I recommend the 3D version. [-dls]

A CLOSED AND COMMON ORBIT by Becky Chambers (copyright 2016, Harper Voyager, 384pp, ASIN: B01CNLOZ3G, ISBN-10: 0062569406, ISBN-13: 978-0062569400, narrated by Rachel Dulude) (excerpt from the *Duel Fish Codices*: an audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

A CLOSED AND COMMON ORBIT is the second of Becky Chambers' "Wayfarers" series. It has been shortlisted for the Clarke Award as well as being a finalist for Best Novel for the Hugo Award. The first Wayfarers novel, *THE LONG WAY TO A SMALL, ANGRY PLANET*--book which I did not read--turned out to be a very popular space opera. The things I'd been reading about *A CLOSED AND COMMON ORBIT* indicated that it was not necessary to read the first book to read this one. While that made me feel a bit better about reading it for the Hugo Award, I was a little leery because in my long history of reading science fiction, I've found that even if a book is said to stand alone, it typically doesn't. This one, however, fits the bill nicely.

The story takes place not long after the events of *ANGRY PLANET* (I'm going to shorten it to that, since I really don't feel like typing that over and over again). The story is written in one of the classic forms of following two separate characters and eventually bringing them together near the end of the book. One of the characters is Lovelace, an AI on the ship Wayfarer who wakes up in a new body with no memory of what happened on the Wayfarer--or that there even *was* a Wayfarer. The other character is Jane 23, who eventually becomes just Jane, who is a cloned child who works for what appears to be an illegal operation gathering scrap and trying to turn it into something useful. The kids are watched over by despotic "Mothers", who supervise the work and punish the girls for bad behavior. The children disappear after they reach 12 years old. Nothing is said about what happens to them, but the reader can surmise that it can't be good.

Lovelace, once she discovers who she is--and was--changes her name to Sidra as part of the effort to build herself a new life. She's new to the social interaction scene, and unlike we regular humans who just have to learn how to deal with regular humans, Sidra must learn how to interact with numerous alien species. Sidra has been befriended by Pepper and Blue, who

try to help her along with her acclimation. Blue is an artist while Pepper fixes things. They both have their own shops and their own way of dispensing advice and help to Sidra. Sidra goes through a gamut of growing pains while trying to experience all those new sensory inputs. She even shows a bit of a rebellious side as she wants to modify her internal code so that she isn't compelled to tell the truth. Jane escapes the mothers while on a forbidden overnight adventure to determine what she saw when there was an explosion at the factory in which she worked. She ends up on a derelict shuttle, and is befriended by the ship's AI, Owl. Owl is Jane's mentor. Jane, like Sidra, is trying to find her way in a strange world, as she has no experience with anything outside her fellow clones (although she doesn't know them as that) and the factory in which she works. She escapes when she is 10 years old, and it is amusing to watch her grow up through the years. Chambers' depiction of a surly, moody, rebellious teenager is spot on.

ORBIT (see ANGRY PLANET) is fun, lighthearted space opera--although now that I think about it, not much of it happens off planet--that investigates what it's like to grow up and assimilate oneself into a strange society. This isn't a traditional space opera as much as it is a character study, a view of a slice in time of the lives of two individuals who come together for a common cause at the end of the novel. There is a plot, but there isn't. Chambers definitely has someplace she wants to go, and she knows how she wants to get there, and there is a direct line from point A to point B for both Sidra and Jane--and really, it's no spoiler for me to tell you that Pepper is Jane all grown up--but there is no conflict central to the novel. The reader is just along for the ride.

Rachel Dulude provides a bright, happy, shiny voice to the story. Her reading of the Jane portion of the story is appropriate and spot on, as her voice starts out as if it is telling a child a story, then changing it as Jane grows up through the teenage years and beyond. She didn't noticeably change voices for each character, but that was okay as her narration made the story flow and kept it interesting.

Will I go back and read ANGRY PLANET? Probably not. Did I like ORBIT? I did. And that's what matters. [-jak]

THE GOD WAVE by Patrick Hemstreet (book review by Dale L. Skran):

This first novel comes with hyperbolic quotes on the cover and a jacket blurb that introduces the idea of a scientific experiment that induces superhuman abilities. As part of my practice of picking up an occasional first novel that appears intriguing, I bought it off the shelf at B&N. In spite of all of the above, THE GOD WAVE is at best competent.

The writing per se is not the issue. WAVE violates one of the basic rules of adventure fiction, which is to immediately put your main character in a difficult yet interesting situation, and watch as they dig themselves out of the hole. Instead Hemstreet opens with a very long buildup to the action which appears intended to help you to care about the rather large cast of characters. Alas, the characters never move beyond thin nerd and scientist stereotypes, and simply are not engaging. The action picks up somewhere around page 50, but even then seems pedestrian and muddled. You will find the average X-man or Avengers comic has more depth than this stuff. THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATOO is a good example of a novel that starts out very slowly, but once it gets going there is engaging characters and taut action. THE GOD WAVE is no DRAGON TATOO!

WAVE also suffers from being the first of apparently several books, and simply stops at a contrived resting point without resolving very much. The only potentially interesting aspect of the book is that our heroes split into two groups, one of which has to fight and the other run. This may eventually be developed into a Magneto/Xavier type conflict, but is just started in this book.

Overall, I don't recommend THE GOD WAVE. [-dls]

DUNKIRK (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: In an unusual stylistic view, Christopher Nolan writes and directs his re-creation of one of the most heroic retreats in history. 400,000 British soldiers had been fighting in Europe and now were surrounded by Germans, stranded on the beaches of near the French town of Dunkirk where they were vulnerable to attack from the land, sea, and air. At the same time as he is telling the story, Nolan does some strange experiments with cinema time that the inattentive viewer (like me perhaps) might easily miss. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

Dunkirk is an odd choice for a patriotic account of the British in WWII. Usually films about World War II engagements are about major victories like MIDWAY or occasionally defeats like TORA! TORA! TORA!. DUNKIRK is a film about a retreat. Was it glorious? Well, it was after the Brits had disastrously bitten off more than they could chew in Europe and could not get the support they needed to protect them as they backed off. They were lined up on the beach at Dunkirk where they could be picked off like clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. They were staring across the English Channel from Dunkirk to Britain, nearly defenseless. They waited skittishly to be evacuated, but no rescue appeared to be forthcoming. The eventual rescue

was not the stuff of great victory and glory. In fact why it was not a horrendous defeat is a question still hotly debated today. What did happen was that the British military mobilized ships to pick up the waiting soldiers and effect a rescue. But what made the operation particularly memorable is the large number of civilian volunteers who took private boats and crossed the channel themselves at risk to their lives as they rescued the waiting British troops. The small boats were in deadly danger from the Luftwaffe patrolling the skies above. The battle began May 26, 1940, and finally ended on June 4, with about 198,000 British and 140,000 French and Belgian troops being evacuated from Dunkirk. Readers may remember the Dunkirk beach scenes recreated for the film ATONEMENT (2007).

Was the rescue glorious? To a great extent it was certainly heroic. The film documents an expedient retreat. There also was the fact that everybody knew that the Brits needed a great victory at that point. But great victories were in short supply just then. The Dunkirk evacuation gave the public not just an action to be proud of, it was one in which ordinary civilians valiantly banded together to have a part in providing a victory.

DUNKIRK is an unusual war film in that it was shot with very subjective sensory points of view with liberal use of hand-held cameras and subliminal sound. This gives the film the viewer a feel of what it was like. The film has a sort of you-are-there immediacy. The film actually takes a trick or two from "found footage" films. Long stretches we see have no word spoken. Director/writer Christopher Nolan lets a scene explain itself without words. What dialog there is is spoken in thick accent. That adds to the realism, but makes parts of the film hard to follow. The style is much like that used in DAS BOOT (1982).

One film cannot follow more than a small fraction of the stories of the Dunkirk action. Instead we follow three plot threads: one on the water, one on the land, and one in the air. Nolan carefully orchestrates the sound design in each of these environments. It has some texture and a tempo that is a bit overwhelming. On the other hand Hans Zimmer's film score probably would not stand on its own. It is non-melodic. It seems there is a constant minimalist musical texture for the film like it was produced in a machine. When something is exciting or suspenseful Zimmer simply picks up the tempo, playing the same sound only faster. The score serves as a pulse for the film, marking off time.

Since his first film MEMENTO (2001), Nolan usually plays with time in his films. He experiments while going from one of the three threads to another. One thread covers a single day, one covers more than a week, one is somewhere in between, though the stories are told in parallel going from one thread to another.

The film has a very moving performance by Mark Rylance (of BRIDGE OF SPIES and WOLF HALL). He shows the courage and sacrifice of a civilian volunteer who is taking his small boat into the conflagration that most people would leave to the military. Nolan acting veterans Tom Hardy and Cillian Murphy are on hand. Murphy shows the deep psychological price soldiers are called on to pay. Kenneth Branagh has not much to do but is the personification of the British anxiety, worrying for its 400,000 risked soldiers.

Most characters remain nameless, so the viewer is cautioned to pay close attention to faces. The film is entirely humorless and drenched in subdued colors. This (appropriately enough) makes the whole film a downbeat experience. But Nolan uses unusual and new techniques to make the viewer feel as if she/he is actually experiencing the action--for better or worse. This is one of the great WWII films. I rate DUNKIRK a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5013056/combined>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/dunkirk_2017

[-mrl]

Scholastic Aptitude Test (letters of comment by Dale L. Skran and Jim Susky):

In response to [various comments on the SAT](#) in the 07/21/17 issue of the MT VOID, Dale Skran writes:

Several comments on the SAT:

Like all such tests, you will do much better if you are familiar with the way the questions are asked. When I first took the PSAT, I did not score especially well in math, and it was quite obvious to me that this was in part due to my unfamiliarity with a SAT favorite, the "quantitative comparison" question. After buying a \$20 book and doing a few practice tests, I raised my math score something like 100 points when I took the SAT.

Above a score of 700, SAT math scores mean almost nothing. My son took the SAT several times, but was never able to get above 750. However, scores at this level mean you are getting one or two questions wrong out of the entire test!!! Anyone who thinks that getting 780 rather than 740 really means something is deluded. And of course SAT math scores are not good predictors of mathematical creativity.

The SAT in general, but especially the Math SAT, dresses up easy questions in complex window-dressing. Thus, in many

ways a high SAT score mostly suggests an ability to score well on SATs, and to decode complex SAT questions, rather than reflecting underlying academic knowledge or core intelligence. But of course, it does require intelligence to decode those tricky SAT questions.

The old SAT verbal tests was a pretty good proxy for how much you read. In my view, just reading a lot of books pretty much assured you of a score over 700. With the many changes in the SAT over the years, this may or may not be true.

The SAT has been re-normed and revised so much it is unclear how a score from 1980 compares to a score from 2017. I am certainly suspicious of any claims based on SAT average scores changing over the years.

Everything I have read suggests that the SAT is a decent measure of how much schooling you have had, and a decent predictor of future college grades. Further, my own experience suggests that there is a meaningful difference in academic ability between someone with SAT 500s and someone with SAT 700s. However, the SAT is overly verbal and will not give good results for immigrants. The gold standard for culture-free testing is something call Raven's Progressive Matrices, which is entirely non-verbal. Unfortunately, in 2015 the questions for the RPM were leaked to the Internet, so this test can no longer be considered reliable going forward. [-dls]

And Jim Susky writes:

In 1975 and '76 I twice sat for the "SAT". Scores were 660/690, 630/750--verbal/math. The engineering school I attended got the second set of scores. I discovered the 660 verbal was good for Composition 101 credit, so I did not sign up for that. In my fifth year I turned in evidence of the 660 and thus cheated myself of Dr. Parshall's tutelage.

Fast forward to 1996. I saw an SAT prep manual in a bookstore, opened it, found that I could do the math problems with no pencil, and got curious about how I might perform 20 years after I first "sat".

We'd gotten 28.8kb/s Internet service in Dec 1995, so I did a little looking around, thinking that the SAT was an objective "standard" measure over the 20 years. I found that the SAT had been "renormed"--a euphemism for diluted, so that "standard" was not actually a standard.

Somewhat later, I discovered that one could join Mensa by turning in a pre-1983-ish SAT scores (instead of the usual "IQ test").

Unlike the National Merit Test (which was a bear) the SAT is not a rigorous math test and has no significant time-pressure. Much like a near-4.0 GPA in high-school math, it does not distinguish between those in the 95th and 99th percentile (or perhaps a narrower upper range). I suspect, had I taken the SAT after lunch, instead of a sleepy 8AM, both my math scores would have been higher (and math scores in general). Still, I doubt whether engineering professionals at age 58 would get higher scores than they did at 18--rust, excel, and all that.

I think I would certainly perform better now at the Verbal test. I wonder whether those old mid-70s tests are out there? One would not need an answer key--but the scoring metric would be necessary. [-js]

Mark responds:

I help students and can do most of the problems without benefit of pencil myself. The SAT test relies very little on computation. It is mostly can you see relationships and manipulate structures. It also tries not to require memorization which is why they have those rarely needed geometrical formulas at the beginning of the test.

If you want to take the SAT again to see if you are better or worse than originally, well, forget it. As Heraclitus said, you cannot step in the same river twice. The test has been modified over the decades since you took the test the first time. Beating your high school self will not illicit much of a reaction from him.

But you can compete against your current self by finding lots of puzzles and tests over the internet. Poke around sites like

<https://tinyurl.com/void-problem-solving>

Look at websites that use the words "math" and "Olympiad". You can find lots of puzzles to sharpen your wits. [-mrl]

Jumpers and Pinafores (letter of comment by Paul Dormer):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on jumpers](#) in the 07/21/17 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "Actually, I think what we call a jumper is called a pinafore in the UK. It is designed to be worn over a blouse. [-ecl]

Pinafore dress, actually. A pinafore is a protective cover for a dress, a bit like an apron.

A jumper in the UK is a top, a bit like a sweater, usually knitted.

Hence the old joke:

What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo?

A woolly jumper. [-pd]

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

A quickie look at a few books I've read, since the bulk of my reading will be covered in a theme article (next week, I hope):

THE GREAT GOD PAN by Arthur Machen (ISBN 978-1-535-41671-9) is supposed to be a classic of horror fantasy, but whether it is the archaic style or something else, I did not find it horripilating at all.

VACATION GUIDE TO THE SOLAR SYSTEM by Jana Grcevich and Olivia Koski (ISBN 978-0-143-12977-6) is part fact, part fiction. The premise, obviously, is fiction--there are no tours to other bodies in the solar system. Most of the physical description of what one will find (temperature, surface features, and so on) are factual. The descriptions of underground hotels, rock-climbing expeditions, and parachuting through the atmospheres are pure fiction. I just attended a panel at NorthAmeriCon '17 on "Off-World Vacation Spots" that may have been inspired by this (I am not sure of the scheduling), and I wish had been more like this. (Brother Guy Consolmagno's part of it was, at least.) My con report should be out soon, so you can compare and contrast.

THE NOVEL OF THE CENTURY: THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE OF LES MISÉRABLES by David Bellos (ISBN 978-0-374-22323-6) covers not only the story of the writing of the novel, but the history of France that shaped it, as well as explanations of monetary units, clothing, names, and other details that readers may miss or misunderstand. In particular, Bellos discusses why the title is one of only a handful of foreign titles not translated into English when their books are.

Bellos has one rather strange writing quirk: he sometimes uses the first person singular. Obviously, a biographical work describing, for example, searching for a lost manuscript would have more use of the first person singular but usually a writer of non-biographical non-fiction writes in the third person. For example, he says "many people doubt this is what Hugo intended" (if he does not necessarily agree) or "it is doubtful that this is what Hugo intended" (if he does). But Bellos will write, "I doubt this is what Hugo intended." I am not saying there is anything wrong with this, but it is a much more informal style than one usually finds in such works. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

You have come into a hard world. I know of only one easy place in it, and that is the grave.

--Henry Ward Beecher

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