

MT VOID 09/01/17 -- Vol. 36, No. 9, Whole Number 1978



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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
09/01/17 -- Vol. 36, No. 9, Whole Number 1978

Table of Contents

[Greece Trip Report and Philcon Convention Reports](#) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Grocery of the Living Dead](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)
[Of Kangaroos and Thinking Cars](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)
[ANTI-MATTER \(a.k.a. WORMS\)](#) (film review by Mark R. Leeper)
[THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE by John Scalzi](#) (audiobook review by Joe Karpierz)
[NEVER LET GO](#) (film review by Mark R. Leeper)
[1977, TAFF, Worldcon, Television Shows, HAROLD AND LILLIAN, and THE MARTIAN](#) (letter of comment by John Purcell)
[This Week's Reading](#) (THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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Greece Trip Report and Philcon Convention Reports (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

My trip report on our vacation to Greece earlier this year is available at:

<http://lepers.us/evelyn/trips/greece17.htm>

My con reports for Philcon 2015 and Philcon 2016 are available at:

<http://lepers.us/evelyn/conventions/phil15.htm>

<http://lepers.us/evelyn/conventions/phil16.htm>

[-ecf]

Grocery of the Living Dead (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Evelyn goes to a grocery store called Aldi that seems to attract people to the store. Any time we go in we see these people wandering the aisles listlessly. (I guess a few have shopping lists.) But I look at them and ask myself, "Aldi lonely people, where do they all come from?" [-mrl]

Of Kangaroos and Thinking Cars (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I remember hearing long ago that Australia had a serious traffic hazard in places where you might least expect a traffic

hazard. The problem is something we could call kangaroo manners. If a kangaroo intends to cross a road he/she will carefully walk (bounce?) up to the road safely on his side of the road. The roo will very politely look both ways and then will bound across the road regardless of anything that is coming. Kangaroos assume that anybody else will watch out for them. Why not? They are bouncing along on this flat land. They are nice and visible and the masters of creation in these parts. It is just part of driving in Australia that the driver knows that he/she needs to watch out for kangaroos. The kangaroo may do just about anything when crossing a road so the driver has to be prepared for just about anything. Sometimes that is possible and sometimes it is not. That is why in Australia 90% of car collisions involve a kangaroo doing something stupid.

Well, this sounds like a cute little animal story. It really is a story about technology. Recently something happened that constituted a new threat to kangaroos. The new thing in their lives is the driverless car. There are lots of animals that might be hit and injured by driverless cars. But there is software in the driverless car system that knows how to avoid all of the common breeds of moving wildlife. If an emu steps in front of an approaching driverless car the software guiding the car knows an evasive maneuver so car, passengers, and emu all will get home that night and the emu will have a heroic story to tell its family of how it beat one of those... those funny shiny things... You know.

Anyway, the problem that Volvo engineers are having is that the kangaroo has a distinctly different behavior from just about any other animal. Well, you can guess it if you just look at one, with those weird back legs and the I-don't-care look in its eyes. And those legs are the key to the whole problem. Most animals pace or run. Kangaroos bounce. The car judges where the animals it sees are by how the leg moves forward and back over the ground. A kangaroo's legs do not move forward and back. They go up and down. On dry land a kangaroo cannot move his/her hind legs apart from each other. The two legs act as one and the tail is used for balance. It is basically a different means of locomotion. It is very hard to associate the leg with a point on the ground. I bet your current car does not have a kangaroo tracking system. In the future it will.

So maybe Volvo engineers can figure out how their cars can react safely in the presence of a hopping crazy roo. Does that mean your Toyota in Canada will have to know how to react to kangaroos in Australia? After all you may want to ship your car to Australia and to drive it there. It will need the kangaroo software package.

I wonder how many other breeds of animal will all cars have to know about.

See the Guardian article on this problem at <http://tinyurl.com/mtv-kanga>.

[-mrl]

ANTI-MATTER (a.k.a. WORMS) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: CAPSULE: Quantum teleportation may have side effects. This film is like a Whitman Sampler of cutting edge physics ideas packed into a science fiction mystery. ANTI-MATTER is very much auteur science fiction. Newcomer Keir Burrows writes and directs based on his own story. This is a film that could well earn a cult following. There is little visual flash to the story but it is an accomplished technical mystery. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

The technical revolution in filmmaking is allowing some films to be made at a small fraction of what they would have cost a few decades ago. This means if a young filmmaker comes along with a good idea for a science fiction plot, it is not so hard to turn it into a film. So we are getting better science fiction films made without being hampered so much by budget constraints. Examples include time travel films like PREDESTINATION, CHRONO-CRIMES, and PRIMER. The latter involves a group of young science entrepreneurs who accidentally find a means of time traveling, strictly to their own disadvantage. ANTI-MATTER feels like it will be this year's PRIMER and has much of the same look and feel. Probably it will go directly to DVD, but I expect it will still get an audience.

The main character of ANTI-MATTER is Ana, played by Yaiza Figueroa, in the kind of role that used to go exclusively to white males. At Oxford Ana is a PhD student on a four-person team of physicists exploring some super-physics effects. They find a phenomenon that seems to have the power to make objects disintegrate. Before long they find that they also can teleport objects. Ah, but will it teleport a human? The physicists draw lots to see whom they are going to teleport. It turns out to be Ana (big surprise). The team prepares to send Ana--presumably taking adequate precautions to be sure that they are not at the same time teleporting a fly. The moment of teleportation should be the greatest moment of Ana's life, but when it is over and she is successfully teleported, suddenly she cannot remember whether it actually even happened. It turns out teleportation has unexpected memory effects. Her other team members seem suddenly reticent to discuss the results with Ana. At this point the film turns into a mystery as Ana has to figure out what could have happened and why her team mates are unwilling to talk to her. She finds that the formerly close-knit team are no longer so friendly. What is going on? Burrows juggles multiple red herrings to maintain suspense.

The science may of course be a little bogus. But the dialog that describes it sounds like it really has some meaning. That is another parallel to PRIMER. It is interesting to see what Burrows finds in other films to borrow. There is even a tribute to

PLANET OF THE APES.

ANTI-MATTER is director Burrows' first feature length film, but he seems to have a good idea of what he is doing both in the writing and in this direction. The film does slow down a bit toward the middle of the film, but it does come back and while it does most audiences will stick around to see where the film is going. Yaiza Figueroa is a newcomer as well, but she also holds the audience's attention.

The ending has some logic problems but it still is an idea I have not seen elsewhere. And a film with new ideas is always welcome. I rate ANTI-MATTER a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10. The indistinct English accents may be a problem for some viewers.

Release date: September 8

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4881364/combined>

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

[-mrl]

THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE (The Interdependency #1) by John Scalzi (copyright 2017 Tor, 2017 Audible Audio, narrated by Wil Wheaton, ISBN-10: 076538888X, ISBN-13: 978-0765388889, ASINB01L2PERQY, 336pp, 9 hours 16 minutes) (audiobook review by Joe Karpierz):

With THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE, John Scalzi starts off (I believe) his new contract with Tor in typical Scalzi fashion. The first book in the "Interdependency" series contains everything the reader has come to expect out of a John Scalzi novel: snappy dialogue, engaging characters, a good dose of action ... and something to think about. Scalzi takes a space opera and makes it relevant to our day, filling it with commentary that fits with what's going on in the world today while at the same time not hitting the reader over the head with it. The novel is entertaining and fast paced while at the same time giving us some pause to think about how an interdependent society--not unlike ours--would survive a catastrophic event.

The Interdependency--not only the title of the series but the titular empire--is a group of planets that are connected by the Flow. The Flow is what allows travel between star systems. Yes, it's yet another way to get around the FTL problem, but it also provides the mechanism by which the story is driven. The Flow is not a two-way tube like your local subway might be; it's actually a series of tubes (I call them tubes, for a lack of a better word, I guess) that travel in a single direction. Thus, there are two tubes between planets--one outgoing and one incoming. A ship enters and exits the Flow via "shoals". There are entrance shoals and exit shoals. However, there is no choice as to where the shoals are placed. In fact, most shoals are near planets that are uninhabitable; the residents of the planets live in artificial habitats. Since the residents of planets cannot provide everything they need for themselves, the Flow is not only used as an interplanetary highway carrying passenger ships, but as trade routes.

The action of the story takes place on two planets: Hub, where a vast majority of the Flow routes converge, and End, the planet furthest away from Hub. Hub is, naturally, the seat of the Empire; End is the dumping ground for criminals, malcontents, undesirables. It is important to note that in order to make the Interdependency work, the Empire is made up of a system of, for lack of a better term, royal families, who negotiate trade deals, fight amongst themselves, and of course, with each other. The system as set up is ripe for political intrigue, power struggles (both within and between families), and plots within plots within plots.

Sound familiar? Sure, there's a bit of an homage to Dune in this book (and since Scalzi has said that he started writing the book in a Dune-like tone as he wanted to try that kind of writing style, but eventually abandoned it as not working this time around, this makes a bit of sense. Royal houses, scheming, backstabbing, and plots to take over the Empire are all either DUNE or, as I now think about it, GAME OF THRONES elements. But unlike DUNE, which really doesn't, at least in my opinion, have an impending major catastrophe on its hands, THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE has one big problem on its hands: what happens when the Flow begins to shift, changing the travel and trade routes, abandoning some planets altogether? All right in the middle of one family trying to wrest the Empire from another? In DUNE, the resolution to the problem at hand is which house is stronger than the rest. In THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE, the issue is how is the human race going to survive, as the connections between the planets of the Interdependency as they are known are going to disappear. Will humanity find a way to cooperate, or will it go down in a blaze of not so much glory?

This book is fun. There is a wide range of characters, from solemn to profane, from buffoons to cunning schemers. This book made me laugh--not in the out loud non-stop laughter one gets at a standup comic's performance, but at the situations and the characters' reactions to them. By the time we get to the end of the novel, we like the people Scalzi wants us to like, dislike the people he wants us to dislike, and maybe, just maybe, feel sorry for the buffoons.

The book is masterfully narrated by Wil Wheaton. This is not the first of Scalzi's books that Wheaton has narrated. He changes voices well enough so that the listener can readily tell the difference between characters as the story goes on. His pacing seems accurate, and he certainly doesn't do anything to throw the listener out of the story.

Almost.

I've gone to conventions and listened to John Scalzi perform--and anyone who has seen him live understands that it's a performance (and even he will admit to that)--enough times to know what he would sound like in certain situations. Mentally, I can replace Wil Wheaton with John Scalzi and not miss a bit. I can sense Scalzi in not only what Wheaton is reading, but how he is reading it. To my ear, Wheaton sounds like Scalzi. And for some reason, that threw me out of this book just a little. It certainly didn't deter from my enjoyment of the book, it just unnerved me now and again.

In any event, Scalzi continues his high quality of writing with THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE. I expect no less out of the next installment of The Interdependency. [-jak]

NEVER LET GO (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Filmed in large part in Morocco, NEVER LET GO is an action thriller about a new mother traveling in North Africa when her baby is kidnapped. NEVER LET GO has some good action, too much really, but suffers from an overly formulaic script. What could be a credible suspense plot is squandered on a new mother suddenly exhibiting Jason Bourne's superhuman strategic talents for fighting and chasing. The film is produced, scripted by, and directed by newcomer Howard J. Ford. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) or 5/10

[Following the main body of the review is an important note on the statistics given and a comment that could be considered a spoiler.]

NEVER LET GO begins with a home invasion in which a baby is stolen and is reported missing. It then tells the viewer this dire statistic, "Over 800,000 children are reported missing every year. The first three hours are critical. After that, there is less than a 25% chance of finding them." The 25% statistic is not referred to again, and it just overhangs the narrative. This is a film mostly about a different child snatching.

In the main plot Lisa Brennan (played by Angela Dixon) is a young mother who is traveling with her baby daughter in Marrakech, Morocco. She is sitting on a beach with her baby when a man comes over to talk to her. That moment of distraction was all someone needed to grab the baby and make off with her.

So far it is a reasonably believable circumstance. Now things start going haywire with both the thieves' plan and with the film's script. They picked the baby daughter of Lisa and Lisa has the fighting and chasing skills of a James Bond or a Jason Bourne. It seems that Lisa may look domestic as a mother taking care of her baby, but she is actually also a US government agent. The script explains why she has this amazing skill set, but it still makes it too contrived and convenient that she has nearly the powers of a super hero.

This somewhat ruins the suspense since in spite of wounds that would have stopped another person short, she can transform herself from a good mother to a "mean muthah." She can chase up walls, bounds from rooftop to rooftop; she seems to be an adept martial artist. After she is badly cut in her side she needs just a needle and thread to stitch herself up without benefit of anesthetic. No problem. In general she is the wrong person to steal a baby from. She is called on to kill the baddies in her quest to get her baby back and does not suffer any qualms.

NEVER LET GO has a pacing problem as the script seems to be designed to show off Dixon's skills, but as with many action films, when the action really gets going the plot narrative stops dead. For ten-minute intervals Lisa climbs walls, runs over the tops of buildings, survives car accidents, and generally does her action hero thing. All this time the story is on hold. This is not really a criticism since it probably is what most of the target audience wants to see. Once we have seen her hugging the baby, it is hard to really think of her as the action hero. But the acting serves the film better than the plot does. I rate NEVER LET GO a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 5/10.

NEVER LET GO was available on DVD and VOD as of August 22.

[Reuters, the international news agency, reports that the domestic danger from kidnappers is much lower than represented here. See the April 26, 2012, article MISSING CHILDREN IN U.S. NEARLY ALWAYS MAKE IT HOME ALIVE at <http://tinyurl.com/mrl-kidnap>.]

[SMALL SPOILER ALERT: Do not expect much along the lines of suspense. The real villain of the story is instantly recognizable as the bad guy of the piece. If you cannot figure out who is doing what to whom you don't see enough mystery films.]

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3833474/combined>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/never_let_go_2015

[-mrl]

1977, TAFF, Worldcon, Television Shows, HAROLD AND LILLIAN, and THE MARTIAN (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [the 08/25/17 issue](#) of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

The latest issue number of VOID reminds me of the year 1977, when I did not go to WorldCon (saving up for the following year in Phoenix) and the debut of STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE, triggering the rise of big budget science fiction movies. Other things happened that year, too, I know, but it's early in the morning and I'm only on my first cup of coffee. Cut me some slack, okay?

Not only that, but I *think* I am pretty much over my jet lag since returning from Europe one week ago today. Valerie and I had a wonderful time visiting fans and seeing some truly incredible places during my five-week TAFF Trip [attending Worldcon]. I managed to keep sort of a running diary on my Facebook page of major events with pictures, and realize that when looking over my notes and entries for that thirty-eight-day jaunt how bare-boned my accounts were. No matter. Probably this upcoming weekend I will begin working on the next issues of Askew and Askance, both of which will begin accounts of TAFF trip events and other related stuff. Overall, we had fun and enjoyed the trip.

Being back home also means catching up on the television shows we recorded on Direct TV, such as PREACHER, IZOMBIE, THE LAST SHIP, DARK MATTER, KILLJOYS, and a bunch of other programs. Movies were not recorded because they tend to be repeated. I am glad you mentioned HAROLD AND LILLIAN is on in September since that is a movie that sounds really interesting and received great reviews. It was released only two years ago and is the kind of story that would reveal some of the many layers that create the Hollywood mystique and culture. I am looking forward to seeing this film.

There is a "The Martian Wikia"? Figures. The phone booth/kiosk reference in the book and movie is generally passed over because Mark Watney is a very well-read and intelligent fellow, so his knowing about phone booths and Superman is part of American cultural literacy. I remember the audience chuckling in the theater at that scene in the original SUPERMAN movie (1978).

That should do it for now. Coffee cup is empty and needs refilling. It is good to be home. Keep these weekly zines coming, folks. I appreciate them very, very much. [-jp]

Evelyn adds:

John also notes that he is not in the flooded area of Texas, though they have gotten some rain. [-ec]

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

After seeing some of the paintings of N. C. Wyeth at the Brandywine River Art Museum, I decided to re-read my childhood favorite, THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne (no ISBN for the Scribner's edition) in the Scribner's edition. I still love the book, but as an adult I see a lot more flaws than I did as a child.

For example, there was no storm as is described in the first chapters of the book. Indeed, to have a storm blowing so strongly northeast to southwest for several days from east of Virginia to the Pacific Ocean is probably meteorologically impossible. (Andy Weir maintains the tradition of starting a book with an impossible storm in THE MARTIAN.)

Cyrus Harding comes from Massachusetts, and Neb is described as a slave from his estate that Harding freed. Since no slaves appeared on any census in Massachusetts after 1790, this would make Neb at least 65 years old. All I can say is that he is mighty spry for a man that age.

The escapees throw away all their personal effects, even their pocket knives, in an effort to keep the balloon aloft. After they do this, and the balloon continues to fall, they climb into the rigging and cut the basket loose. With what?

Similarly, later they clean a capybara before roasting it. I am not sure what is involved in cleaning an animal to cook it, but I suspect knives or other cutting tools are required.

While they are throwing out all their possessions, even matches and pocket knives, *two* of the castaways (conveniently)

keep their pocket watches.

A big deal is made of the necessity for tinder, and how its loss is a disaster, yet in Chapter XIV, Pencroft "struck a light and set fire to a twig," apparently without any tinder. (Okay, maybe Verne just did not mention it.

In Book I, Chapter XII, Neb and Pencroft "naturally" become the cooks, "to the one in his quality of negro, to the other in that of sailor." The implication is that it is Pencroft's training, but Neb's innate genetic make-up, that determines this.

In this old (bad) English translation of Book II, Chapter II, Neb dances like a "n*****". In French, the word is "negre"--the same neutral word used everywhere else in the book.

Jup is way too human-like. I agree that orangutans are very intelligent, but they are intelligent in their own way. The idea that the castaways could dress Jup up and have him wait at table is not believable. Then again, knowledge of orangutan abilities was fairly minimal in Verne's time, and their close similarity to humans probably led many to assume they were as trainable as other "savages."

How did they get back into Granite House after they all went to search the island for the escaped pirates? When they all left they let themselves down by a double rope and then pulled the rope down by pulling on one end. When they returned, they "re-entered Granite House, and with the help of a double rope, shot with an arrow through the window frame, they re-established communication between their domain and that of the sun." You can't just shoot an arrow into a window and then climb it. Even if it was shot *into* a wooden window frame, it would not be strong enough to support the weight of a person climbing it. (There is no indication that they had a grappling hook, and even if they did, they could not shoot it high enough or far enough.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

When I speak of the beauty of a game of chess, then
naturally this is subjective. Beauty can be found in
a very technical, mathematical game for example.
That is the beauty of clarity.

--Vladimir Kramnik

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