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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
09/08/17 -- Vol. 36, No. 10, Whole Number 1979

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Slow Adopter (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

One problem with retirement is that I am no longer keeping up with technology. When I was working, I got a lot of current technology on the corporation's tab. Now I have become a very slow adopter. I think instead of seeing my self-driving car I expect to see myself driving car. [-mrl]

Highest Recommendations for Ten Years (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I frequently find myself talking to people who know that I have this hobby of reviewing film. The first question I am asked is what films do I recommend. Well I they ask about current films I may know a film or two. But the truth is that if don't keep current on films. If I hear a film is good I will make a note of it and then put it in my NetFlix queue. That means in two or three months I might find out that a given film would have been worth recommending. Too late.

There are older films that I consider classics like BICYCLE THIEF or AMERICA, AMERICA. But this is not what people are mostly looking for. I think what they really want is something that they might have gone to see in a theater in the last ten years, but somehow the word of mouth was not strong enough or it just did not interest them at the time. Now they might give some films second chances. Really what they would want is a film of the last ten years or so.

Okay. That is not hard to find. Here are the films that I thought were the best of the last ten years. Each of these films rated a high +3 on the -4 to +4 scale, meaning it was really close to getting a perfect +4. In reverse chronological order:

TRUMBO (2015)

Dalton Trumbo has been for many years a person of singular interest in Hollywood. He went from being one of the most respected film writers to being blacklisted for his political beliefs and unable to sell his work. After refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, Trumbo was added to the notorious blacklist. For years he could sell

his film writing only under a false or borrowed name. His story is very much the story of the Hollywood blacklist. In 2007 that story was told in Peter Askin's film TRUMBO. The current TRUMBO is a narrative film telling the story of how Trumbo came to be blacklisted and how his case eventually broke the blacklist. The story is told well and with wit, and it tells how the First Amendment was seriously threatened by the government sworn to uphold it. And it tells how a small set of filmmakers fought and defeated the Hollywood blacklist. Jay Roach directs a screenplay by John McNamara from the book by Bruce Cook.

The Trumbo presented is far from being saintly. In many ways his family had life worse than Trumbo himself. And Trumbo is mostly blind to the needs of those around him. His family is presented as being understanding, but politics was destroying his family's relations just as it was hitting artists and filmmakers. One nice touch in the writing is nice explanations of Trumbo's philosophy. When his daughter asks him if he is a communist (and is she herself)? He shows through a quick thought experiment what he believes and why her own philosophy might be consistent with the (theoretical) principles of Communism.

THE IMITATION GAME (2014)

Benedict Cumberbatch, one of the busiest actors in filmmaking, turns in a bravura performance as computer theoretician and code- breaker Alan J. Turing who broke the Nazi Germany military Enigma code and later was legally prosecuted by the British legal system for homosexual acts. The film's release could not have been more timely and topical and it gets more so each year that passes. THE IMITATION GAME is a thriller that really does thrill and at the same time draws viewers into a mathematical problem.

PAN'S LABYRINTH (2007)

Guillermo del Toro gives us one of the masterpieces of the fantasy film. A child's fairy tale fantasies help to shape events in a military outpost after the Spanish Civil War. This is a film that works as a fantasy film and even better as a war film. Del Toro is one of the finest fantasy filmmakers in the world and this is his finest film.

I consider this one of the great fantasy films. For me it compares favorably with THE WIZARD OF OZ and THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN matching their creativity. I would give it a high +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10. Warning: Just because it is a fantasy film does not mean I recommend it as a family film. This is most definitely not a film for children. Most of the horrific scenes are in the non-fantasy story line. There is painful, nightmarish carnage onscreen and implied. This film is suggestive enough of painful images that members of my audience were seen to wince and leave the room.

Those should keep you busy. THE IMITATION GAME is even on NetFlix Streaming. [-mrl]

INFINITY WARS (The Infinity Project) edited by Jonathan Strahan (copyright 2017, Solaris, 356pp, ASIN: B0742MK14F, ISBN-10: 1781084912, ISBN-13: 978-1781084915) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

The sixth entry in Jonathan Strahan's "Infinity Project", INFINITY WARS, explores what war would be like in the future. That, however is such an oversimplification as to be misleading. There's military science fiction, and then there's the type of military science fiction as depicted by the terrific fifteen stories written by some of the best in the science fiction field that are included in this volume. The stories here are largely character driven, and focus on the impact that war has on its participants as well as those people who are not active participants. As usual, Strahan has assembled a star-studded diverse group of writers, both new and old, both unfamiliar and well-known.

I've always been a sucker for anything Peter Watts writes, and his story "ZeroS" does not disappoint. A group of zombies--resurrected humans who are used to test new weaponry that is essentially an upgrade to the human body, turning them into enhanced humans--are dispatched to fight a series of encounters that is beta testing for the weapons systems. The story explores the humanity that the soldiers still have--even though they are technically dead--as they witness first hand the violence of war and the atrocities they are visiting upon their victims. The zombies--the ZeroS of the title-- don't actually know what's going on at first. All they know is if they serve their period as ZeroS--they will eventually be returned to real life. But as the realization that they are nothing but test subjects hit them, the conflict between war and wanting to live again comes to the forefront. It's a terrific tale.

Another favorite is Elizabeth Bear's "Perfect Gun", about a freelance operative named John who buys a "rig"--a war machine with an AI for a brain--to allow him to provide his services to the highest bidder. It took time for John and the rig to build a relationship--an odd term to be using between a mercenary and a war machine--that once built, proved to make for a profitable period for John. Profitable, that is, until moral ambiguity entered the fray. The reaction of the ship--whose John (and we, for that matter) never learned, made it's own decision by the end of the story. "Perfect Gun" lets us know that even AIs have their limits.

Caroline M. Yoachim provides another favorite, "Faceless Soldiers, Patchwork Ship", about a soldier that is heavily modified

to infiltrate an enemy ship to try to prevent said enemy--the Faceless, who modify themselves by using body parts from conquered foes--from making progress using "fire kittens" to teleport-- because that's what they do--weaponry, and thus turn the tide of the war. The modifications to Eknudayo's body come with a catch; if she doesn't complete her mission within a specified period of time, she will actually become a member of the enemy race. It's a fascinating story about the lengths participants in war will go to in an effort to prevent the enemy from gaining an advantage.

Garth Nix gives us the delightful "Conversations with an Armory", in which military personnel at a lonely, isolated, and nearly abandoned outpost desperately try to activate and open an armory, controlled by an entertaining but strictly rule following AI, so as to get at its stored weapons cache and as a result defend themselves against an attack. This is not a deep, thought provoking story by any means, but in its own way lets the reader know that there can be a humorous side to war as well as the side we're all too familiar with.

These aren't the only terrific stories in the book, of course. "Dear Sarah", by Nancy Kress, shows us how war can affect familial relationships, and not in a good way. An Owomoyela gives us "The Last Broadcasts", about the deceptions involved in war and how one participant reacts to that deception once the truth comes out. It's a powerful lesson about war not being just about guns and ships and explosions. Dominica Phetteplace's "The Oracle" is a tale of realizing not all that you wish for, especially in war time, is a good time, especially when it comes to the AIs involved. E.J. Swift gives us "Weather Girl", a rather interesting story with a twist I don't remember having read before, about being able to block enemies from determining weather patterns and how disastrous storms can be used as weapons. Sometimes weapons have unintended consequences--in this case it's a former partner of the protagonist getting caught in the path of the storm--result, and those consequences do weigh heavily on the people who make those decisions. Eleanor Arnason's "Mines" is a study of people living on an Earth devastated by climate change and how those people cope. Here, mines dot the landscape, and these mines and how they are detected are the backdrop of a relationship between two people. It's a touching, powerful tale.

I could continue, but I think that you get the idea of how these stories operate. They make you think about war in a different way-- a way that may not be something that you're used to. Stories by Carrie Vaughn ("The Evening of Their Span of Days"), Indrapramit Das ("The Moon is Not a Battlefield"), Aliette de Bodard--rapidly becoming a favorite of mine--("In Everlasting Wisdom"), David D. Levine ("Command and Control"), Rich Larson--a rising star in the field--("Heavies"), and Genevieve Valentine ("Overburden") all give us glimpses into the future of war and its effects on those involved.

Once again, Jonathan Strahan has assembled an outstanding anthology; he's one of the best there is at putting themed anthologies together, and of course his annual "Year's Best" is always a treat. Strahan has his pulse on the field when it comes to short fiction, and he always seems to pick the best of the best. I highly recommend Infinity Wars and everything else Strahan puts together. Reading any of his books will be time well spent. [-jak]

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

Think of this column as "speed reviewing":

HOLLYWOOD ENLISTS! by Ralph Donald (ISBN 978-1-4422-7726-7) is a reasonably good coverage of Hollywood films during World War II. Donald lists a half dozen tropes that one finds in war propaganda ("the enemy are beasts", "we are just defending our way of life", and so on) and examines how films made in Hollywood exemplify these tropes. This would be of particular interest to fans of war movies, but a bit pricy for the casual reader.

COUNTERFEIT WORLDS: PHILIP K. DICK ON FILM by Brian J. Robb (ISBN 978-1-8402-3968-3) covers all the films based on Dick's works, including films that never got all the way through the film-making process. The only problem is that there are a lot of books about Dick's films, and unless you are researching them particularly, you probably do not want to read them all. (And if you are, you are probably looking for primary sources anyway.) I can say it seems more comprehensive than many others I have seen.

THE BEST AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY 2015 edited by Joe Hill and John Joseph Adams (ISBN 978-0-544-44977-0) is (in my opinion) a better than average annual anthology. In part this may be because I prefer slipstream stories (or if you'd rather, stories closer to mainstream). Hill has taken his selection from sources outside the traditional science fiction and fantasy markets (much as Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling for their series of "Year's Best Horror and Fantasy"). The result is an anthology that should have broader appeal than the various traditional "Year's Best Science Fiction" series. Its placement in the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt series of "Best American X" should help them get this wider audience as well. However, it has a downside of covering only *American* stories, rather than all those in the English language.

THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2012 edited by David Brooks (ISBN 978-0-547-84009-3) starts off with an essay on why Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance", promoted for well over a hundred years, is full of bad advice and to blame for much of what is wrong with the country today. The rest are equally thought-provoking, interesting, and in general worth reading.

In TALKING BACK, TALKING BLACK: TRUTHS ABOUT AMERICA'S LINGUA FRANCA by John McWhorter (ISBN 978-1-9426-5820-7), McWhorter lays out what I think is a convincing argument that Black English (which has some formal name in linguistics such as "African-American Vernacular English") is not just English spoken badly, but a genuine dialect or language in the same sense that Yiddish is not just German spoken badly, but is a separate dialect or language. (The difference between a dialect and a language is that "a language is a dialect with an army.") [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

It isn't necessary to have relatives in Kansas City in
order to be unhappy.

--Groucho Marx

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