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**ME-163** (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s I was always interested in science fiction and in non-fiction topics related to science fiction. I was interested in rockets and that got me interested in German World War II rockets, specifically the A4--better known by its propaganda name, the V2. The V2 got me interested in the V1, a glider with an external engine. Somehow that external engine I thought made the whole craft look so much sexier. The V1 and V2 were without crew but still they had a look of the future. When I read about these weapons I was occasionally hearing about something that looked like a little stubby jet with a propeller nose. It was called an ME-163, or a Messerschmitt-163, or more simply the Komet. It was the world's first and so far only combat rocket plane, and besides being a weapon of war it had a lot in common with the later-built rocket plane Bell X-1 that Chuck Yeager flew through the sound barrier. Cool.

<https://tinyurl.com/mtv-163>

That was it. That was the first rocket to which you could strap a human with any possibility (small as it was) of the human surviving the flight. There was an exhibit on the ME-163 that I saw on my recent visit to the Cosmosphere Museum in Hutchinson, Kansas. Suddenly I found the ME-163 to be really fascinating. Enemy pilots would see this thing fly past them too fast for them to even see what it was. That should have given it combat superiority, but it turned out to be the wrong weapon for the wrong war.

One of the things I found interesting was the Germans' near-total disregard for the people who made the craft successful. The V2 was built with slave labor and I believe that more people were killed in producing V2s than by being targets for the weapon. But as reprehensible as that was, at least you can see enough of the Germans' mind-set that if these people were slaves they were disposable. But the ME-163 was built with very little regard for pilot safety. The plane carried only one person and that person-- an ally, I assume--was treated as expendable as Kamikaze pilots. The plane had a range of only 25 miles and had a maximum of only 450 seconds worth of fuel. But it flew at 624 miles per hour, in its time the world's air speed record. It had no wheels for landing. It was fired off from a trolley to save weight but not to protect the pilot. It could be launched, in the air, and in combat in just seconds. But for the pilot it was a deathtrap.

The rocket fuel was ultra-highly corrosive as well as ultra-highly flammable. The fuel could literally melt human flesh. Whether the fuel splashes on the pilot or the pilot touches the fuel, it is going to be very bad for the pilot.

The plane turned out to be bad for fighting because it was just too fast. The pilot/gunner had about 2.5 seconds to aim his guns and fire. That just was not enough time before the target was behind him.

Like a lot of decisions made in wartime, building the Komet was a mistake. The project never got the commitment from the German government to develop correctly. The final score: Fourteen ME-163s were lost in battle and a total of only nine Allied aircraft were reported lost to the rocket plane.

The Komet was a good idea that was just not ready for primetime. Or in some ways perhaps it was too ready for primetime. [-mrl]

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**THE SHAPE OF WATER** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Spoiler Warning: This review gives away a big piece of the plot of the film.

**CAPSULE:** A military project is examining a captive amphibian-man. A cleaning woman befriends the amphibian- man and decides to try to set him free. Michael Shannon's performance is a major high spot. The plot is very, very similar to that of a once well-known play, Paul Zindel's "Let Me Hear You Whisper." Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

By now Mexican director/writer/producer Guillermo del Toro has been around making horror movies such as PAN'S LABYRINTH (2006) and also making comic book adaptations. His comic book films are not my cup of tea, but at least they were physically beautiful films. I consider his horror films are generally excellent. His premier film was CRONOS, one of the rare horror films that played the art house circuit. His most recent film, THE SHAPE OF WATER, does not fall into either of the previous categories. It is more a hard- edged fairy tale. I would say the film has one major problem...

In 1969 and again in 1990 PBS adapted to television Paul Zindel's play "Let me Hear You Whisper." In this story a downtrodden cleaning woman in a secret government laboratory finds a dolphin in a tank and befriends it. It has been trained to sing the words to "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." From that song Zindel takes the title of the play. The cleaning woman discovers to her horror the dolphin is really being trained to fight wars undersea and be blown up with the munitions he carries. She determines to steal the dolphin in a laundry cart and set it free. That is much like del Toro's story but Zindel's name does not appear in the credits of the new film.

I will not describe here the plot of *THE SHAPE OF WATER*, but I will let people who have seen the film draw their own conclusions. Del Toro says his inspiration for this film was *CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON*. Certainly the amphibian man in this film could be based on the Creature. But I know of no statement from the filmmakers that mentions this film and Zindel's play in the same breath. I did not see Zindel's name anywhere in the credits. I will be interested to see how this problem plays out.

Unfortunately, what is original about this film is a mixed bag. There are some remarkable visions as we might expect from the director of *PAN'S LABYRINTH*. But even the images outstay their 123-minute welcome in what seems like a longer production than was needed. The score by Alexandre Desplat has not much melody, but manages a dreamlike quality.

One of the (several) features of the script is an incident of sexual abuse and harassment. I believe there is no way del Toro could have known how timely this theme would be when the film was released, but it works well for the film. The film is set in 1962 and the government doing the best it can fight--clean or dirty-- mostly dirty--to oppose the Soviets who are happy to fight just as dirty.

Sally Hawkins plays Elisa Esposito, the cleaning woman who is separated from most other people by being a mute. Michael Shannon plays well in a part much like his previous work in "Boardwalk Empire." He makes an all-purpose villain and exudes an air of menace. Elisa's best friend is Octavia Spencer, who shone in *HIDDEN FIGURES* and this season is in both this film and in *GIFTED*.

If I had to choose the two most creative horror directors I would choose Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Guillermo del Toro. I am sorry to see del Toro resorting to uncredited near-remakes of other people's stories. Still the film is engrossing and visual enough that I rate *THE SHAPE OF WATER* a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5580390/combined>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_shape\\_of\\_water\\_2017](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_shape_of_water_2017)

[-mrl]

**THE POST** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

**CAPSULE:** In 1971 the owner of the Washington Post is faced with a Constitutional issue of whether to publish the contents of the Pentagon papers or to allow the government to gag her newspaper. Steven Spielberg directs a good cast led by Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks. Hanks, Streep's editor-in-chief, is pushing for the newspaper to exercise the First Amendment right of the newspaper. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

In 1971 Daniel Ellsberg was fed up. He had been on the team of military analysts who had reported on United States relations with Vietnam from the years 1945 to 1967. The report had concluded that the whole time the United States knew it could not defeat the North Vietnamese. The report looked at various strategies that could be tried including rigging elections. Representatives of the military and the government lied to the American people about the United States's strategic position. Men kept being sent to Vietnam to fight a war we could not win. In frustration Ellsberg leaked the report to the New York Times and the Times published some of the conclusions. Ellsberg then leaked more of the report to the foundering Washington Post. The government threatened to treat the releasing of information from the Ellsberg leak as an act of treason. The legal battle that ensued went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. How the Post got into this position and what they did about it is the basis of *THE POST*, a film directed by Steven Spielberg.

The decision to print or not print fell to the reluctant Kay Graham (played by Meryl Streep). Graham inherited the Post when her husband died, but her opinions on how it should be run are ignored if she does not put her foot down, and she rarely if ever does. This was 1971 and Graham only nominally was a publisher in what is considered a man's business. Part of this film is her struggle to be taken seriously.

Now Graham had to make a decision that could land her in prison and shut down the newspaper. Her corporate advisors tell her to cooperate with the government demands. On the other side of the argument was her editor-in-chief Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks), who insisted on publishing and exercising the paper's First Amendment free-speech rights. For him it was extremely important since the news that was being censored involved the reason that thousands of soldiers were being killed.

Steven Spielberg has chosen to make this docudrama when it would have a particular resonance. Today there are political information leaks and people are being threatened by their government. The government is again (still? trying to suppress information. Spielberg has a talent for taking complex social issues a clear explanation. Here the major issue is whether the government has the right to censor leaked information by claiming that revealing the information will help our enemies. Here he directs an original screenplay by Liz Hannah and Josh Singer. Two or three times someone will make a two- or three-sentence speech very succinctly worded. He did that in *LINCOLN* also.

One minor unexpected touch of the script: the name I would associate most closely with the Pentagon Papers leak would be one Daniel Ellsberg. In this film everything that happens does so because Ellsberg stood up and spoke the truth rather than endorse lies. When told that releasing information could get him imprisoned he simply asks, "Wouldn't you go to jail to stop a war?" The Ellsberg character gets only a small part in this film. He deserves more.

From time to time we need a film like THE POST to remind us what democracy is for. I rate THE POST a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10. It will have a limited release in December and a wider release in January.

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6294822/combined>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_post](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_post)

[-mrl]

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**THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA and "All You Zombies"** (letter of comment by Charles S. Harris):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA](#) in the 11/24/17 issue of the MT VOID, Charles Harris writes:

Evelyn quoted from THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA by Friedrich Nietzsche: "Man shall be trained for war and women for the recreation of the warrior; all else is folly."

Heinlein might have agreed. In his "All You Zombies," the Unmarried Mother realized she could never become an astronaut (women can't be astronauts, of course). So she "decided to join the W.E.N.C.H.E.S.... Women's Emergency National Corps, Hospitality & Entertainment Section, what they now call 'Space Angels'--Auxiliary Nursing Group, Extraterrestrial Legions."

The barkeep to whom she's telling her story knows both terms: "We use still a third name, it's that elite military service corps: Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen." [-csh]

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**Sine Wave Length** (letters of comment by Dan Ritter, Neil Ostrove, and Gregory Benford):

In response to Mark's comments on unanswered questions in the 12/01/17 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Ritter writes:

[Mark wrote,] "My experience with Quora was that it suffered badly from a problem that seems to be endemic on the Internet. Intelligent websites become less intelligent as they get more people accessing them. They start with questions like "what is the arc length of sin(x) from 0 to two pi?"

That's a simple question. Note that it will be twice the length of the arc from 0 to pi, and Google for that:

<http://www.math.usm.edu/lambers/mat169/fall09/lecture30.pdf>

answers that it cannot be done with the Fundamental Theorem, but numeric approximations can be made. The answer for 0 to pi is "approximately 3.8202." So twice that is approximately 7.64. [-dar]

Mark replies:

I am afraid that I was trained in pure mathematics. That means the words "approximately," "virtually," "almost," and "not" are all synonyms. [-mrl]

And Neil Ostrove writes:

I'm not, and the answer can't be expressed in terms of elementary functions. See <https://tinyurl.com/void-sine-wave>. [-no]

Gregory Benford sent in the actual formula:

$$\int_0^{2\pi} \sqrt{1 - \cos^2(x)} dx = 4 \sqrt{2} E(1/2)$$

Mark adds:

It is rendered in ASCII math notation which is not highly readable, but probably gives the precise answer. [-mrl]

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**THE WHEEL OF TIME and "Reader's Digest Condensed Books"** (letters of comment by Philip Chee and Paul Dormer):

In response to [Fred Lerner's comments on THE WHEEL OF TIME and providing an abridgement thereof](#) in the 12/01/17 issue of the MT VOID, Philip Chee writes:

Didn't Readers Digest once put out a line of condensed novels?

(Also, does RD still exist?) [-pc]

Paul Dormer responds:

Seems to. There's even still a UK edition:

<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/magazine>

[-pd]

Evelyn adds:

In 1997 the name of the line of "Reader's Digest Condensed Books" was changed to "Reader's Digest Select Editions", and is still being published. The latest volume contains "My Not So Perfect Life" by Sophie Kinsella, "The Twelve Dogs of Christmas" by David Rosenfelt, "Don't You Cry" by Mary Kubica, and "Home Sweet Home" by April Smith. [-ecl]

More can be found in the Usenet thread at <https://tinyurl.com/void-rdcb>.

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

BURNING PARADISE by Robert Charles Wilson (ISBN 978-0-7653-3261-5) is an alternate history which presumes that World War I was cut short by the interference of an alien intelligence, but an alien intelligence unlike those one is used to seeing in science fiction. However, in the grand tradition of so many novels, this is not known to the vast majority of humanity, and those who are aware of it are not entirely accepting of the situation, to say the least.

Wilson uses this as a way of examining intelligence, and what an alien intelligence might be like (and for that matter, what an alien intelligence \*is\* like). I am not sure he is entirely convincing in his conclusions, but there is food for thought here. The plot, however, is not quite up to the level of the idea, being mostly a standard thriller plot.

FROM HOLMES TO SHERLOCK by Matthias Boström (ISBN 978-0-8021-2660-3) is a history of Sherlock Holmes from the original conception of the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to the present portrayals in film, television, and other popular media, along with the creation and growth of organized Sherlock Holmes scholarship and fandom. But it is more a series of anecdotes than a continuous history, and Boström has a distinctive writing "trick": he will introduce a famous character giving just his first name or nickname), write two or three pages about him, and then reveal his full name. (E.g., "George loved working outside. He was always chopping wood, ..." and then two pages later, "Even though he told a lie, George Washington was praised by his father.") It is clever the first one or two times we see it, but does become tedious after a while.

Boström has included a lot of information about the publication and portrayal of Sherlock Holmes on the Continent, which most histories ignore. On the other hand, he mentions Clive Merrison's achievement only in passing. Merrison is the only actor to have portrayed Holmes in a dramatization of every one of the canonical stories, as well as several newly written ones, yet it is mentioned only as a contrast to Jeremy Brett's (failed) attempt to do so. (And a word for Michael Williams, who played Watson in all of these.)

Because this traces so much of the previously undocumented history of the scholarship and fandom, as well as of the copyright status, disputes, and machinations which have impacted everything Sherlockian, it is a must for the serious Holmes fan. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Books are the curse of the human race.  
--Benjamin Disraeli

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