

July 26: FIRE WATCH by Connie Willis, Old Bridge (NJ) Public Library, 7PM

Northern New Jersey events are listed at:

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

Bread Magic (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Some cultures believe in sympathetic magic. Some people from some cultures believe that powdered rhinoceros horn is an aphrodisiac. Because rhino horns are pointed and sharp they believe that ingesting rhino horn will make a patient have a phallus that ill have the same properties. We think that Western culture is beyond all that, but the idea is strangely popular in the West. Here we believe that if a bread roll is twisted into the shape of a bagel, it will magically become a bagel and can be identified as a bagel. I can assure you that a lot of what passes for bagels really is not. [-mrl]

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for January:

I have wanted to recommend THE FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX (1965) in the past, but I could not tell the major plot twist, because that twist really is the heart and soul of this film. I cannot recommend this adventure film any other way but tell you the idea behind the film.

So ** SPOILER WARNING **

A twin-engine Fairchild C-82 Packet cargo plane crashes into the Libyan Desert. Most survive the (excitingly filmed) smash up. But the crash is only the beginning of the problems the survivors face. As the survivors try to find a way to save themselves and they simply fail. It seems rather obvious that they are all going to die. Then a German engineer says that with materials from the crash used as parts and scrap they have everything they need to build a new plane and fly it to safety. They can do it if they can work together. But they are not yet ready to cooperate. This will be of particular interest to engineers, but it is an exciting film all around. [Friday, January 19 8:00 PM]

You know, I want to defend John Boorman's film EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC (1977). Fans and critics alike brutalized this film. I saw it of its first day of release. At that time it was not great, but it was okay. After I saw the film it was pulled from theaters and partially re-cut. Most people who go to a sequel go expecting it to be more of the same thing they saw in the original, but with less prestigious actors. Too often a sequel is either a thinly disguised remake or it is an entirely different story just re-using the same characters in an entirely different story. So what should a part 2 be that is true of EXORCIST II. The sequel should do what the second half of a novel does for the first half. It should create a wider context for the first half. It should tell the viewer the rest of the story. In this case it should tell why was Regan the one possessed not someone else? There is a reason. EXORCIST II introduces an entire new mythology, that of the so-called "good locust". Boorman tries a number strange touches, and they are hit and miss. But a few do hit. EXORCIST II is rarely seen but deserves another look. [Saturday, January 20, 04:00 AM]

My choice for best film of the month is Leo McCarey's almost forgotten MAKE WAY FOR TOMORROW. This is really one of the great American films. But like Italy has its BICYCLE THIEVES it is our equivalent extremely poignant and bittersweet film. An elderly couple has their relationship terminated by the Depression. After a lifetime of being together and deeply in love with each other they find they the world is tearing them apart. The husband is too old to be employed so they cannot save their home from foreclosure. They have several children but no one of their children can take in both. They are forced to separate and circumstance says they will never see each other again. Their time of being together is coming to an end. They have one final afternoon in their lives to be together. It is a very moving story. Orson Welles said of this film that it would make a stone cry. [Saturday, January 20, 7:45 AM]

TCM starts the year right giving us January 3rd and 4th to celebrate the new year in a big way with 1950s monster films. They have a full 24 hours of monster movies.

6:00 AM THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD, THE (1951)
 7:45 AM THEM! (1954)
 9:30 AM GIANT BEHEMOTH, THE (1959) 11:00 AM GODZILLA (1954, Japanese version)
 12:30 PM RODAN (1958)
 1:45 PM ATTACK OF THE 50 FOOT WOMAN (1958)
 3:00 PM QUEEN OF OUTER SPACE (1958)
 4:30 PM INVISIBLE BOY, THE (1957)
 6:15 PM FORBIDDEN PLANET (1956)

My suggestion, by the way, would be to skip QUEEN OF OUTER SPACE and maybe ATTACK OF THE 50 FOOT WOMAN. You can't go far wrong with the rest. [-mrl]

IT DEVOURS by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor (copyright 2017, Harper Perennial, \$21.99, 347pp, ISBN 978-0-06-247605-0) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

We should all be allowed our guilty reading pleasures now and again. I apparently have at least three: the extended "Dune" saga, written by Kevin J. Anderson and Brian Herbert; the neverending "Ender Saga" by Orson Scott Card; and what appears to be a new guilty reading pleasure, the "Welcome to Night Vale" novels. There really is no justification for the various guilty reading pleasures--well, maybe there is. In the case of Dune and Ender, I'm something of a completist as well as an eternal optimist. In both of these cases, not only have I read all the other books in the series (well, sort of in the case of Ender. I haven't read the Ender books that are collaborations between Card and someone else), but I keep hoping against hope that the books will be good.

And then there's Night Vale. I've been reflecting on my reading cycle during the year, and it generally involves reading the Hugo finalists as well as trying to stay ahead of the game when it comes to the next year's finalists. There is also the occasional ARC that I read that the publishers are nice enough to let me have copies of. Out of the 30+ books I've read this year (yeah, I know. I'm a slow reader; that's just the way it is), there are just a few that I've picked up because I was looking for something to read that I didn't have a commitment for. I need a break in my reading. Something silly, something light, something that isn't up for an award or has won an award in the past or just might be up for an award. That something is Night Vale.

If you are unfamiliar or indeed haven't heard about the wildly popular podcast "Welcome to Night Vale", please go take a few minutes to look it up and see what it's about. I can wait. I'll be right here when you get back. Got it? Good.

IT DEVOURS is the second "Welcome to Night Vale" novel. The first one takes a lot of time and effort to introduce all the characters that the podcast has introduced, with the effect that the novel is slowed down considerably until all the introductions are out of the way. The other thing that made the first book a bit of a slog was that it wasn't in the form of a radio broadcast as narrated by Cecil. IT DEVOURS has neither of those problems, and thus it flows more freely and readily than the first. However, that doesn't mean the novel is all that much better than the first.

There have been loud rumblings in the outskirts of the town of Night Vale, as holes open up and whole buildings are swallowed into the earth. Carlos, Cecil's husband, is a scientist that is investigating the rumbling disturbances. One of his assistants, Nilanjana Sikdar (who, as I've just learned, actually appeared--or was mentioned--in episode 107 of the podcast), is assigned by Carlos to investigate the sites of the disturbances while he continues his experiments and investigations in the lab. The investigation involves The Congregation of the Smiling God, the house that doesn't exist, the desert wasteland, the dog park, and the lighthouse on the top of the mountain. The Congregation believes that their Smiling God will come and devour everyone's sins. Nilanjana learns that bit of information from Darryl, one of the Congregations most fervent believers. As the mutual attraction between Darryl and Nilanjana grows, she comes to the conclusion that the leader of the Congregation may be planning something more significant and sinister than the people of the church imagine.

That's the elevator pitch, of course, and while Fink and Cranor didn't write it, I think it does a reasonable job of selling the story--to fans of "Night Vale". If you don't listen to "Night Vale", this is just another ordinary mystery/thriller involving love, faith, and humor. There is a good amount of humor, and unlike the first "Night Vale" novel I laughed out loud a few times during IT DEVOURS. And to be fair, Fink and Cranor do deliver a twist to the story that was not, in my opinion, telegraphed in the least until just before it was revealed. However, nothing is really resolved here. And while there is conflict between the scientists, the Congregation, and the town of Night Vale itself, the resolution was not really what I would have expected.

I guess that's okay. Night Vale is a strange place, where nothing is as you'd expect it to be. I think that one thing I should be expecting, after outings, is that the novels are just okay. And I guess that's all a guilty pleasure needs to be anyway. [-jak]

The MT VOID, STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI, and THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [the 12/22/17 issue of the MT VOID \(#1994\)](#), John Purcell writes:

Wow! Only six more issues to go until you folks hit the big 2000th issue. That appears to be the February 2, 2018, issue. I sense a Landmark Issue is in the works. Then appearing on the morning of Friday, June 8, 2018, will be MT VOID #2018. Seems to me you two are going to have a heck of a New Year. Thank you for letting us readers be a part of it. [-jp]

Mark replies:

Oh, great. Until you mentioned it we had not given it any thought. We are open to suggestions [-mrl]

In response to [Mark's review of STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI](#) in the same issue, John writes:

So what the heck is there to natter about in this particular issue? Well, from my perspective there are a couple things to say, the first being that I haven't seen any of those movies yet, including the latest STAR WARS movie, which I suspect I will be seeing in the next week or two just so I can natter with my students about it when classes resume on January 16th. I have three weeks, so I'm not worried. On the other hand, my two sons-in-law have seen it: Zach only once, but Eric is the big Star Wars fan in the family so he has seen THE LAST JEDI four times already! Naturally a bunch if not all of the Christmas presents they received yesterday were STAR WARS related. Even our grandson (who is 4-1/2 years old) did not escape the grandparents' SW merchandise onslaught. He loved them, naturally. [-jp]

And in response to the [two reviews of THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS](#) in the same issue, John writes:

I may have to re-read THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS. It has been something close to 35 years since I first read it, and remember finding it a bit daunting at the time, although I did appreciate its significance and impact on the genre. Perhaps now I will appreciate the novel much more now that I am All Grown Up and believe what this book is about is worth reading more than once, especially the older one gets.

Yeah, I think that will do it for now. Thanks again for sending this to me, and I look forward to many more. [-jp]

Mark replies:

Good to get your responses. [-mrl]

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

ALICE'S PUZZLES IN WONDERLAND by Richard Wolfrick Galland (ISBN 978-1-4351-6327-0) is your typical puzzle book, with the puzzles couched in "Alice in Wonderland" terms: instead of John and Jim you have Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and so on.

The real problem is that of the 75 puzzles in the book, at least two have incorrect answers.

The first is as follows: The Hatter finds a \$50 bill. He went to the butcher and pays him the \$50 he owed him. The butcher bought a pig from the farmer for \$50. The farmer paid the carpenter \$50 he owed him. The carpenter paid the King \$50 in taxes. The King paid the Hatter \$50 he owed him for a hat. Then the Hatter recognized the bill as the original \$50 bill and realized it was fake. What was lost in this and by whom?

The other puzzle involves a shrinking potion and a growing potion. A witch has a quart iron cauldron of the growing potion and a quart bronze cauldron of the shrinking potion. She then takes three ladles of the stuff in the iron cauldron and poured them into the bronze cauldron, which she mixed thoroughly. Then she took two ladles from the bronze cauldron and put them in the iron cauldron, then a ladle from the iron to the bronze, and then two ladles from the iron to the bronze, mixing each time. Alice then asked which would make her shorter.

The answers--incorrect and correct--will be given next week. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.

--Mae West

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