

# MT VOID 03/09/18 -- Vol. 36, No. 36, Whole Number 2005



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## Squirrel Sports (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Last week I mentioned my theory that squirrels might intentionally run in front of cars for the thrill of the experience and to show off for lady squirrels. In the intervening week I got news of Olympic snowboarder Daniela Ulbing of Austria on one of her runs almost had a run-in with a squirrel who might well have been playing chicken. The squirrel ran in front of Ulbing's snowboard, but made it out alive. And the squirrel, whose name is being withheld, had world wide fame for his five minutes.

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

[-mrl]

## Gender Pay Gaps? (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Back when I worked for Lucent or Avaya--who remembers which one?--we had our Affirmative Action meetings. I remember a meeting when the room was segregated with the female attendees on one side of the room and the males on the other. They were talking about the Gender Pay Gap, the problem that a man would be paid more for a job than a woman would doing the exact same work. The women were glaring at us men because we were males just like the management people who were responsible for the gap. I know that I was not responsible for anybody's salary. I think that the people who \*were\* responsible had their own AA meetings with much better food. I think we males were there mostly to act as lightning rods to absorb female resentment. It occurred to me at the time to wonder just how true the claims were. I just would have

been surprised to find out that there was a lot of prejudice against women in the salaries being paid by the company.

That meeting came back to me today when I listened to a "Freakonomics" podcast. They were talking to some economists who were looking at the male-female Gender Pay Gap. They had many contradicting estimates as to just what percent the gap was. They were talking at a new study done at Uber. Uber pays its drivers following an algorithm that does not use gender at all. It is completely blind to gender. If there is a Gender Pay Gap, it must come from factors other than gender discrimination. We could see what the claimed Gender Pay Gap is at Uber when gender discrimination has been taken out of it (or never was in). The company does not have the software to discriminate and the passengers have no way to discriminate.

What did they discover? In the discrimination-free environment male drivers made about 7 percent more than female drivers. If one looks at all jobs across the board, Uber or not, the pay gap is just about the same 7 percent. This does not say that gender discrimination does not exist, but it does not seem to be a major factor.

So what did they find?

About 20 percent of the 7 percent Gender Pay Gap had to do with choice of area that the drivers went to picking up fares. Particularly profitable drives, for example, are taking passengers to the airport. If the driver is in a ritzier neighborhood in the early morning hour he or she will likely get a more profitable fare. Sunday afternoons are also profitable because other drivers prefer to be home and watching football. For these fares women seem to do better than men. The Gender Pay Gap for Uber drivers is not the result of gender discrimination but of driver strategy.

Also, more women tend to leave the job after a shorter period of experience. The six-month attrition rate is about 63 percent for men and 76 percent for women. Even with drivers of the same experience, men will average three drives for every two women will do.

But that still does not account for a chunk of pay gap. What does that turn out to be? Apparently men drive faster than women. That means they are done with a trip sooner than a woman driver would be. That means more trips per hour.

So with no gender discrimination possible in the system claims of a gender gap at Uber may not be reasonable.

You can read a transcript of the episode at:

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

[-mrl]

**FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS** by **Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley** (audio book published by Trout Lake Media, narrated by Jim Donaldson, 8 hours 35 minutes) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of Mary Shelley's **FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS**. While I did not read--or in this case listen to--the novel because of the anniversary, it does seem appropriate that I picked this time to read what is generally considered the first true science fiction novel. I would imagine that most people, myself included, first encountered **FRANKENSTEIN** as the 1931 movie of the same name, which is somewhat based on the novel. As we know, the movie recounts the story of a scientist who, along with his assistant, pieces together a human-like creature from the pieces of dug up corpses. Most infamously, Henry Frankenstein's assistant Fritz acquires the brain of a criminal for the Creature (played by Boris Karloff), thus lending the story the conflict it needs when the Creature comes alive and begins wreaking havoc throughout the local countryside. There have been many movie and literary adaptations and spinoffs of the original **FRANKENSTEIN**. I am particularly fond, of course, of Mel Brooks' movie **YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN**, in which Peter Boyle portrays the Creature. I'm also fond of Michael Bishop's 1994 novel **BRITTLE INNINGS**, which links the **FRANKENSTEIN** story and baseball.

It probably would surprise no one who has only seen the movie that it bears only a small resemblance to Shelley's novel.

Shelley's novel is told as a framing narrative. The story starts out recounting the correspondence between Robert Walton and his sister Margaret. Walton is traveling to the North Pole to gain scientific knowledge. While on the journey, he and his crew first spot a dog sled driven by a large man, then rescue a man who is near death. The man is Victor Frankenstein, who has been pursuing the man in the dog sled. As Walton nurses Frankenstein back to health, they become friends. Walton shares his story of intense desire for scientific knowledge. Frankenstein, seeing much of himself in Walton, recounts the story of how he arrived on Walton's boat and why Walton should think twice about his intense thirst for knowledge.

The framing narrative becomes layered as Frankenstein first recounts his story of becoming obsessed with scientific knowledge, and especially that of how to bring life to an inanimate being. He almost quite literally becomes the "mad scientist", spending all his time researching the subject and then, once he discovers the actual process to bring a creature to life, doing nothing but what it takes to make it happen. He rarely eats and sleeps, and his relationship with his family

deteriorates to almost nothing. He does finally bring the Creature to life, but once he sees it he is appalled and disgusted with what he has done, and he aims to destroy it.

Next comes the Creature's story as told by the Creature itself, which takes up the bulk of the novel. Unlike Karloff's portrayal of the Creature, the novel shows the Creature learning about himself, learning about language--to the point where he becomes erudite to the point of sounding as if he had what we might call a college education--and learning how and why he is shunned by the rest of humanity. He then realizes that he is what he is because of Frankenstein (resulting in what would be a fascinating study of the nature versus nurture--or in this case, lack of nurture--discussion) and vows to deprive Victor of happiness much like Victor has deprived him of happiness. Eventually the narrative returns to Frankenstein's story and eventually Walton's, culminating with Walton meeting the Creature itself.

It was somewhat surprising to me how short the novel actually is. As readers we have been trained to expect complex stories like this to be at least double the length. And while there is much detail that could be discussed--and I refuse to be concerned about spoiling a story that is over 200 years old at this point--I will stop here and let those who have yet to read the novel go ahead and do so without giving it all away.

I was pleasantly surprised by FRANKENSTEIN. I guess I've been conditioned by the movie, which I've seen several times, to expect one thing while the novel turned out to be entirely something else. While the name Frankenstein usually is used to refer to the Creature, it's pretty clear that the real villain of the novel is Victor himself. His hubris in creating life from where there is none--and at the time FRANKENSTEIN was written the implication was that Victor was stepping where only God was meant to tread--resulted in a Creature who quite understandably was ticked off at his situation and who also quite understandably blamed the only person he knew to be responsible for his plight. The Creature was shown to be a compassionate being, and one who gave Frankenstein every opportunity to shut down the violence and death that was occurring around him. Yet, Victor chose to let it continue, and indeed brought so much suffering upon himself by his actions the reader might be tempted to believe that he is the Wretch (as the Creature is sometimes called) and not the Creature itself.

Jim Donaldson provided an adequate narration of the novel. As I listened to the book, I felt that his voice and tone were perfect for the gothic nature of the story. His gravelly-voiced rendition of the Creature could not have been easy for him to do; at the same time, I was taken out of the story by his portrayal of the Creature. He sounded like a crotchety old man, which does not fit with my image of the Creature. That could be due to me being influenced by Karloff's rendition of the Creature, although his guttural roars do sound like an old man too, I suppose.

If you've never read the book, I suggest you do so. It's interesting to contrast the novel and the movie, and of course that's something we do with today's movies anyway--from LORD OF THE RINGS to HUNGER GAMES to anything else. I can see why this is considered a classic, and it's well worth the time for you to read it for yourself and, hopefully, come to the same conclusion. [-jak]

#### **ACTORS OF SOUND: A FOLEY ART DOCUMENTARY** (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

**CAPSULE:** This documentary is a study of the task of being a film Foley artist and the prospects for the future of sound effects art. A Foley artist is the sound effects person who manages all the minor and subliminal sounds in a scene. If the sound is not right it is the Foley's task to decide what the sound should be and what in the real world would make just that perfect sound. Lalo Molina scripts and directs this account of the Foley artists' use of the sound from props and the hunt for objects that make usable sounds. It also looks at the future of the Foley career. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

Of late we have gotten some good documentaries about the internals of the process of filmmaking itself. Last year's HAROLD AND LILLIAN: A HOLLYWOOD LOVE STORY was about a storyboard artist and a reference librarian. This year we have ACTORS OF SOUND about Foley artists.

There was a crisis in shooting SPARTACUS. They were filming a huge panning shot of a Roman army. There were hundreds of extras playing Roman soldiers. After the scene was shot the actors were sent home in their hundreds. Then it was discovered the recorded sound was useless for some reason. They could not call back a whole army. What was there to do? Jack Foley (more on him later) pulled out of his pocket a ring of keys and shook them in rhythm. For all anyone knew it sounded right so hundreds of actors were played--on the sound track--by a ring of keys. That Foley artist was Jack Foley, the man whose name became the name of the task. All the studios except Universal Studios would orchestrate their sound like they orchestrated the elements of the picture. Starting in the very early days of sound Universal would re-record all of the sounds in the picture to get a perfect recording of each sound. The technician who did this for Universal Studios was Jack Donovan Foley. And the art he invented became an industry standard.

What is a Foley artist? Consider if you are shooting a (sound) film there are probably noises all around the actors. But few of those noises are initially recorded in a condition good enough to be incorporated into the final film. There may be dozens of sounds, each applied to the soundtrack of the film one at a time. The Foley artist has to look very closely at the frame of film

and figure out what sounds should be present. If an actor is walking in snow the Foley artist will have to do something like putting shoes on his hands and grinding the shoes alternating into a box of kitty litter. It may not look like the actor in the scene, but what is important is that it sounds just right. The film shows and interviews Foley artists of this country and of other countries like India and Germany where Foley artists take it easy and perform sounds sitting down.

Foley artists do not get rich, but they still love their job. Artist Shelley Roden says her ideal job would be to be an athlete, a musician, or an actor. Those are exactly the talents being a Foley artist requires.

In an industry like the movie industry that is going high-tech, what is the future of the Foley job? Most sound people are convinced their job as they do it will not go away. There have been attempts to digitize Foley sounds and automatically create the right sound for the right occasion. The sounds it made sounded right but the sound overall sounded dead. The real Foley artists are making noises the old-fashioned way.

Foley is an art that has been going on in almost every film you see, but you have probably have not known it was happening nor known the names of the artists. They rarely get awards, but they love what they do. I rate ACTORS OF SOUND a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5675516/reference>

What others are saying: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/actors\\_of\\_sound](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/actors_of_sound)

[-mrl]

**Film Score: ANNIHILATION by Geoff Barrow and Ben Salisbury, for the film ANNIHILATION directed by Alex Garland** (film score review by Mark R. Leeper):

Alex Burrow and Ben Salisbury had previously scored EX MACHINA (also for Alex Garland).

To begin with, the story of ANNIHILATION is intentionally disorienting. Somewhere on the eastern seaboard a region square miles in size seems to have undergone a radical transformation. Only a little way inside the perimeter is visible. In this region called "the shimmer" the standard laws of physics are upended. Dozens of explorers, all men, have been sent in to investigate this weird space. None have returned and are assumed dead. We follow a squad of five, this time all women, and experience this piece of truly alien real estate.

What demands would a plot like this place on the score? The music should sound alien and should itself be disorienting. Those modest goals the score does well. There is nothing for the happy viewer to hum to himself leaving the theater. There is no melody and no harmony in almost any of the score. If that is the intention of the composer, that is indeed the tone that the score does project. Divorced from the rest of the film, the music is possibly not recognizable as music. Most to the music falls into a short spectrum from raucous to peaceful to soporific. There is some recognizably choral music somewhere about Track 6, but there are no words sung. Other places we hear what sounds like an electronic oscillator and just for variety. It sounds like the buzzing of insects or a radio tuned in to another dimension. For variety's sake they have some guitar music in Tracks 2 and 6. This is still all texture music. Its main message is you do not understand what happens in the shimmer and you never will.

Gosh. I miss melody. Even in science fiction film scores. [-mrl]

**CALCULATING THE COSMOS: HOW MATHEMATICS UNVEILS THE UNIVERSE by Ian Stewart** (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This science book delves into the realm of mathematics and its role in understanding our Universe. Astronomy and math have been used for many years as partners in the discovery story of our Universe. Ian Stewart starts with the Sumerians and Babylonians recording observational data of the planets and stars on clay tablets around 1200 BC and probably earlier. Much later, Kepler calculated the orbit of Mars from rather accurate observations created by Tycho Brahe and Kepler proved that the orbit was a conic section known as an ellipse. Kepler produced his three mathematical patterns known as the Laws of Planetary Motion in the early 1600's based on his calculations. Newton deduced his law of gravity a math formula based on the planets orbiting the Sun using an ellipse. Newton invented new mathematics, calculus to help him determine the motions of the planets and ordinary objects on the Earth too. Beyond this Newton revolutionized science by creating a mechanical version of physics. Einstein worked on his theory of General Relativity which explains how gravity works by causing the curvature of the space-time continuum and he used Riemannian geometry which is a form of non-Euclid geometry in this theory. In 2015 an ingenious application of math determined how the comet which the spacecraft Rosetta orbited was formed. Statistics and 3D geometry methods allowed the scientists to determine that this comet's duck shape was created by a gentle collision. Some of the various theories of the Multiverse are discussed in this book also. These include the following: Quilted

Multiverse, Inflationary Multiverse, Landscape Multiverse and the Quantum Multiverse. Each uses advanced math to understand that multiverse; for example; the Quantum Multiverse uses quantum mechanics mathematics and the Landscape Multiverse uses String Theory mathematics. This book does require a devoted reader since Stewart does include some detailed descriptions touching on advanced math concepts but it is still a very good read. [-gf]

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#### **Sporting Animals** (letter of comment by Barry Litofsky):

In response to [Mark's comments on squirrels](#) in the 03/02/18 issue of the MT VOID, Barry Litofsky writes:

For several years until recently, in retirement I drove a 35-passenger tram giving birding tours at JN "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel, FL. As I was driving along, often a northern cardinal would fly across right in front of the tram, me missing it by inches. I used to call them kamikaze cardinals. I never could figure out why they did this, but it sounds to me like your squirrel! I never hit one, or maybe they never hit me, but came awfully close. The tram is like a big bus with a flat front end and no windows. No other type of bird did this! [-bf]

Mark replies:

This may well be another example of a sporting animal. Relatively frequently I find a bird has flown into a window and killed itself. I don't think I have ever seen a bird fly into a car windshield. Your tram pushes a cushion of air in front of it. That cushion may blast the bird to safety.

In the last year Evelyn and I were on a cruise ship. I made the mistake of trying to walk around the fore-deck. We came darn near to getting blown off the boat. There is a very strong cushion of air in front of a moving vehicle.

See the first article in this issue for more information on sporting squirrels. [-mrl]

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#### **ANNIHILATION** (letter of comment by Lax Madapaty):

In [response to Mark's review of ANNIHILATION](#) in the 03/02/18 issue of the MT VOID, Lax Madapaty writes:

I will see ANNIHILATION. Sometimes you just have to feel Cinema. Not try to make sense of it and analyze it endlessly through repeated viewings. And once you 'figure out out' and go talk to the film maker, they might laugh at the very notion and most likely not confirm your understanding of the film. [-lm]

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

THE COMPLETE TALES OF JULES DE GRANDIN, VOLUME TWO: THE DEVIL'S ROSARY by Seabury Quinn (ISBN 978-1-59780-927-6) is the second of five volumes, comprising all the Jules de Grandin stories published in WEIRD TALES between 1925 and 1951. I became acquainted with them from the six paperback volumes published in the late 1970s, but these included only about a third of the stories. This is the first time all the stories will have been published other than in a limited edition. (The first volume was THE HORROR ON THE LINKS, reminiscent of Agatha Christie's "Hercule Poirot" novel, MURDER ON THE LINKS, and de Grandin has been called "the occult Hercule Poirot.")

Alas, the suck fairy seems to have visited these tales. They are not terrible, but their flaws are more obvious now. For starters, there's the obvious one: a detective of the supernatural is difficult to make fit the traditional detective story mold. It is not that there are no rules to the supernatural, but that the readers do not know them all. So when de Grandin is suddenly able to overcome a zombie by putting a piece of meat in its stew, or overcome a demon by using some obscure plant, it is out of left field. It's as if the readers of a normal detective story had no knowledge of fingerprints or blood types or gunshot wounds.

Another problem is a relic of Quinn's time--the stories are incredibly racist. Indians, Tibetans, Muslims--they are all pagans and devils and worse to Quinn.

One might claim that Quinn is at least an equal opportunity stereotyper, because de Grandin seems to have an unending collection of French exclamations: "nom d'un fusil", "pipe d'un chameau", "nom d'un canon", "nom d'un porc", "larmes d'un poisson", "mord d'un chat", "vie d'un coq", ... In my experience, people tend to stick to a fairly small collection of expletives, rather than inventing a new one each time.

These stories were terrifically popular when they were first published, and worth reading for their historical interest. Quinn "pushed the envelope" on sex and graphic violence (and this may be \*why\* they were popular). But for most people I suspect that the first few of these might be sufficient. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

There is no more common error than to assume that,  
because prolonged and accurate mathematical calculations  
have been made, the application of the result to some  
fact of nature is absolutely certain.

--A. N. Whitehead

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