

[illegible]

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Kate Wilhelm has passed away at age 89. She had won two Hugo Awards (including one for her novel *WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRDS SANG*) and three Nebula Awards, and was also a founder of the SFWA and the Clarion Workshop. Her husband was Damon Knight.

Stephen Hawking has passed away at age 76. He appeared in THE BIG BANG THEORY and STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION. What more needs to be said?

Many will say that President Trump's call for a "Space Force" just shows how fixated on aliens he really is. [-ecl]

3/18/18, 4:30 PM

I see in the news "Florida passes bill preventing marriage of anyone under 17." What happened to our Second Amendment rights to shotgun weddings? [-mrl]

A Squid by Any Other Name (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Evelyn sent me a link to a web page that was discussing why people prefer the word "calamari" to "squid" when talking about food. A dish with calamari in its name attracts more people than one with the same name but for use of the word squid it is claimed. They quoted a line or two from a children's book. "The man gave the squid to dad and I have the weird feeling dad thinks were going to eat it. I'm having calamari from the shop instead."

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

I am not sure when the story was written, but this seems to be one more place where my thinking runs against the norm. Squid and calamari do seem to conjure images in my mind, but the squid sounds the more exciting to me. "Calamari" is Italian for "squid". When I picture calamari I picture it enshrouded in a tomato sauce. That is an Italian dish and one of my favorites. If on the other hand I picture a squid dish I picture the squid almost naked in a sauce with an East Asian taste and flair to it. Maybe Squid in Black Bean Sauce. Both dishes sound good to me, but the Asian sounds more intriguing. I wonder if time has passed and the little girl's story would no longer be realistic. I guess most restaurants that come from a European culture call squid "calamari". And restaurants that come from Asian culture call calamari "squid".

I guess I am not sure if, say, an Italian sea diver saw a squid swim by would he think it was calamari or a squid? Outside the context of food, is the creature ever called a calamari?

And what about you out there? Do people out there feel better about eating calamari or squid? Or does it matter to you?

I know the food industry is very careful about their use of words that might sound somehow "off" to their customers. I used to get prunes at my Costco. I notice that Costco no longer deals in prunes. They instead carry Dried Plums. I guess a plum sounds better than a prune, even if they are the same thing.

The product has not changed but the verbiage is different. For that matter the people who sold horse mackerel saved their market share by renaming their product "tuna fish".

But back to squid/calamari. As much as I enjoy it I have an uncomfortable feeling about eating it. A squid is a member of the Coleoidea subclass, along with octopus and cuttlefish. These are the most intelligent of any invertebrates. I really like eating these creatures, but I don't like the idea I am eating intelligent creatures. I think cuttlefish are the least intelligent of the three, but that is not saying much. I at one time liked eating all three, but so far it is only octopus that I have resisted eating. An octopus has a very alien intelligence. In fact it is not clear if one octopus is not really eight animals cooperating. About two-thirds of its neurons are in its legs. And if an octopus is killed, in some senses each remaining leg lives on. I think I have written about octopuses in the MT VOID before. Squids, though not as intelligence, share many of the same tricks for survival.

So I wonder if I should just let squid survive and not become calamari. Meanwhile it is no longer common to see cuttlefish on restaurant menus. [-mrl]

BLACK PANTHER (film review by Dale Skran):

Marvel has done it again. They have taken a relatively minor comic character that until this year most ordinary folk had never heard of and re-created them as a break-out smash hit, except even more so than usual. BLACK PANTHER seems on its way to being one of Marvel's biggest hits, and is almost certain to rank among the most popular superhero movies of all time. As I write this, BLACK PANTHER leapt to \$513M domestically and \$408M internationally, for a grand total of \$921M. This beats the recent WONDER WOMAN, and ranks #3 behind only THE AVENGERS and THE DARK KNIGHT.

What makes this all the more impressive is that BLACK PANTHER features an essentially all-black cast with no well-known white actors (I'm slighting Andy Serkis here, of course), and mainly takes place in Africa. Although it is reasonable to observe that BLACK PANTHER is enormously popular among blacks, it is obvious that lots of non-blacks are buying tickets as well.

I'm not going to recap the plot except to note that it does actually follow to a large degree the "Killmonger" story line from the comic book. Certainly the movie captures all the essential features of the Black Panther as a character, while modifying his powers in a way that makes them more plausible in the context of the Marvel Universe.

Among the great aspects of BLACK PANTHER are:

- A wonderful, quirky and yet believable royal family surrounding T'Challa that is everything the Inhuman royals are not, including good actors.
- Much as Robert Downey defines Tony Stark/Iron man, Chadwick Boseman has created the definitive T'Challa/Black Panther, simultaneously regal, intelligent, brave, and vulnerable.
- Astounding special effects, especially in bringing the imaginary African Kingdom of Wakanda to life.
- A large number of well thought out fight scenes, yet not so many that the movie seems like one long battle.
- Stunning pageantry in an apparently authentic African style - A story that is "in" the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but one in which the central focus is on T'Challa and Wakanda.
- In Killmonger, a great villain with plausible motivation and the right background to be truly threatening.

With so much comic goodness going on, it would have been easy to ruin things by making PANTHER a tired political tract with cardboard bigoted white villains. The writers/director have wisely avoid simple-minded nonsense and written a multi-layered story where each character can be understood in a variety of ways. Just a few ways of looking at BLACK PANTHER include:

- Killmonger represents the Malcom X/Magneto/Begin axis that suggests freedom can only be won by armed violence, while T'Challa encapsulates the Martin Luther King/Professor X/Rabin view that in the end the minority must seek co-existence, not conquest.
- Wakanda is a multi-level metaphor, in some ways representing a rich and powerful America that seeks to keep immigrants out while avoiding global responsibility. Alternatively, one might view Wakanda as an American black upper class that seeks to run away from any responsibility for blacks in general.
- In another interpretation, the American trained Killmonger represents the spirit of Western colonialism, pitted against the native African freedom fighter, T'Challa/Black Panther.

At the same time, the script seamlessly integrates all these metaphors into a dynamic yet plausible plot. One thing is certain; we are going to see a lot more of Chadwick Boseman as the Black Panther!!! In a fashion somewhat similar to that of WONDER WOMAN, the sole white heroic character, a CIA agent, is portrayed as bit bumbling, but morally upright and totally willing to sacrifice his life for others. Continuing the metaphors, the CIA agent represents America at its best, while Killmonger may be America at its worst.

Another way the movie adds realism is via a segment in which T'Challa retrieves his fiancée, a Wakandian spy embedded with a group of African women being transported in trucks by what appear to be either African slavers or terrorists. This sequence serves to remind the audience that slavery and kidnapping are not exclusively white institutions.

Fans may feel that Klaue [the Master of Sound in the comics] (Andy Serkis) is slighted in PANTHER, and treated as a bit of a clown. My observation is that Klaue has appeared in a previous Marvel movie (AGE OF ULTRON), and is portrayed in BLACK PANTHER as having been a thorn in the side of Wakanda for decades, so he isn't that insignificant. Also, I wouldn't be totally surprised to see him return from death in a future film, transformed into living sound and eager for revenge against T'Challa.

I'm rating BLACK PANTHER a very solid +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. I've seen it twice, and I might be inspired to raise the rating to +3 after I see it again. This move is fine for tweens and up, with no sex and extensive super-heroic violence. Although a must-see for comic fans, BLACK PANTHER is highly recommended to a general audience both as a stand-alone introduction to what Marvel is doing with superheroes, and so that you can participate in what increasingly appears to be a new cultural phenomenon. There have been some excellent essays/reviews on BLACK PANTHER, including notably one in TIME that are worth reading to gain a better understanding of the surround for this break-thru film. [-dls]

PRODIGY (2017) (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: The government is holding a girl, age nine, who has the mental powers of Hannibal Lector plus some that Lector never had. A psychologist is brought in to solve the riddle of the super intelligent but dangerous girl. There are very strong performances from Richard Neil as the psychologist and especially Savannah Liles as the child. The film keeps to its low budget with very limited locations. Alex Haughey and Brian Vidal share writing and directing credits. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

The Government has a secret. They are holding someone as an illegal prisoner. The prisoner is Ellie (played impressively by Savannah Liles). She is a nine-year-old girl with flaming red hair and freckles to match. She also has the intellect and mental

powers of a Hannibal Lector and perhaps even more. The government keeps her in a very high security cell while the decision is being made just how to handle this superbly dangerous little girl. Their latest attempt is to bring in psychologist Jimmy Fonda (Richard Neil). He is probably the government's last chance to control Ellie before her captors decide her threat must be eliminated. What unfolds is a drama of dialog between the girl and the psychologist as Jimmy digs in to solve the mystery at the heart of Ellie's psychosis. His technique involves standard tests like the Rorschach test. He is obsessed by chess and carries his chess set where he goes. But most important in his therapy is just plain talk trying to bring the young girl out of the monster.

This basically is the story of a psychologist trying to cure his patient. There are certainly some science fiction touches added to the story to make it more engaging to make the film nominally science fiction, but the accessories are really just add-ons to the story. Deep down the film is a lot like that of EQUUS or GOOD WILL HUNTING. The causes of Ellie's psychological kinks are really MacGuffin. This case there is a genre twist to the story to give a science fiction fan audience something to think about and some plot twists to tighten tension. The story centers on the team that holds the prisoner. There is one woman (Olivia played by Jolene Andersen) and several men. Olivia is sympathetic and empathetic toward Ellie and the men (other than Jimmy) are each somewhere between apathetic or openly hostile toward Ellie. It is up to Jimmy and Olivia to solve the puzzle of Ellie's personality before the approaching deadline.

Savannah Liles--age twelve--is older than the nine years she is playing, but she does not seem that much older. Still, she does a good job of tying the story together well and gives a good performance. I rate PRODIGY a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5017936/reference>

[-mrl]

BINTI by Nnedi Okorafor (copyright 2015, Tor.com, 96pp, ISBN 978-0-7653-8446 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-7653-8525-3 (trade paperback)) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

BINTI has been on my to-read list ever since it was published back in 2015 by Tor.com. Tor.com has gained quite the reputation for publishing high quality short fiction, especially novellas. BINTI won the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Novella of 2015, and was a finalist for several others.

Binti is a member of the Himba people, an ethnic group from Earth. They are a people that keep to themselves, and while they have superior technology, no Himba has ever been accepted to the prestigious off-planet university, Oomza Uni. Binti has a talent for mathematics, and while she is in line to take over the family business from her father, she has secretly applied to the university and has been accepted. She steals away in the dead of night to the spaceport to leave, her family unaware of what she has done.

She is the only Himba on the ship to the university; the rest of the passengers are members of another ethnic group, the Khoush. Binti is shunned by the rest of the travelers, who are curious about her hair and her otijze, the clay made from a particular type of soil from her homeland. She also carries with her a piece of ancient technology she calls an edan, which she secretly carries with her (we find out much more about the edan in the sequel to BINTI, BINTI: HOME).

BINTI is a story of conflict, of otherness, and the willingness and ability to make peace with one's own decisions. Binti has a lot to think about and come to terms with. No Himba has ever left the planet before her; she constantly questions her decision to do so. She knows that she has let down her family and will be a pariah when she returns. Still, she is built for conflict as a master harmonizer, and when the Meduse attack the ship to avenge a loss suffered at the hands of the Khoush she must use all her skills to try to survive the encounter.

BINTI is both an interstellar space opera and a character study of how a shunned outsider can influence events around her, shaping the course of galactic politics and relationships. Binti may not be your typical science fiction hero, but then again BINTI is not your typical science fiction story. We can all learn a lesson from both BINTI and Binti in this day and age. I don't think we should miss the chance to learn that lesson. [-jak]

MADAME (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: A wealthy American couple living in Paris, Anne and Bob, are giving a very fancy and sophisticated dinner party. But superstitiously, to avoid having thirteen guests, they draft Maria the maid to be a silent guest just to be the fourteenth. The attractive and apparently glamorous mystery guest, Maria, excites the crowd, and soon the maid is romantically involved with one of the other guests. This is not at all what control freak Anne had in mind. She decides to fix the problem herself. This is a French film directed and co-written by Amanda Sthers. The film has a French feel, but most of the comedy dries up by the midpoint.
Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) or 5/10

What starts as a romantic comedy with a fairy tale touch gets more serious as time wears on. Anne and Bob (played by Toni Collette and Harvey Keitel) have a stressed marriage. They live in a beautiful mansion in Paris and are planning a very extravagant dinner party with the two of them and ten guests (one being the Lord Mayor of London). That makes 12 of them. Then their son shows up unexpectedly. Now there are 13. The apparently superstitious Anne believes that a gathering of 13 people is extremely unlucky. She drafts her faithful maid Maria (Rossy de Palma), pushes her into some of her best fashions and tells Maria to go to the dinner but to just not talk. Maria will be glamorous if she just sits and does not speak or so says Anne who does not believe it herself. This brings Maria into contact with London art broker David Morgan who is immediately attracted to Maria.

This is a turn of events very different from what Anne planned and she does not want the maid to enter her exalted circle of friends. As time goes by Anne is more frustrated that Maria is not willing to obey Anne's wishes. Anne's presence wears thin. We never see why Anne does what she does unless it is just that she has a god complex and wants to control others like puppets. Perhaps director Sthers is just not fond of Americans. Toni Collette's petulant pouty face is her strongest asset in this role. Later in the film we find ourselves just disliking Anne. But as much as Collette irritates the viewer the viewer is attracted by de Palma, not physically but she has a nice warm manner. Someone comments that all the children seem to like her. So do cameras.

Given that one of the Americans manipulates people and the other may be pulling a scam of art fraud, this film may mirror the attitudes of the French toward Americans in the Era of Trump. These are Americans who should stay home.

The sweet wine of the first act turns to vinegar by the time this short 91-minute film completes. I rate MADAME a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 5/10.

MADAME will be in theaters and on VOD March 23, 2018.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6045466/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/madame_2018

[-mrl]

ANNIHILATION (letters of comment by Gregory Benford and Paul Dormer):

In response to [Mark's review of ANNIHILATION](#) in the 03/02/18 issue of the MT VOID and lax Madapaty letter of comment in the 03/09/18 issue, Gregory Benford writes:

Yes, I found the visuals in last forty minutes striking enough to justify the sluggish priors. Debt to the Strugatskys' ROADSIDE PICNIC seemed ignored... [-gb]

Paul Dormer writes:

There was a big news article in the paper about this film today. Apparently it was considered too cerebral for European audiences and is going straight to Netflix here:

<http://bit.ly/2GhFqGj>

[-pd]

Ian Stewart (letter of comment by Gregory Benford):

In response to [Gregory Frederick's review of CALCULATING THE COSMOS](#) in the 03/09/18 issue of the MT VOID, Gregory Benford writes:

Ian Stewart is the best, yes. [-gb]

FRANKENSTEIN (letters of comment by Paul Dormer, Scott Dorsey, and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Joe Karpierz's review of FRANKENSTEIN](#) in the 03/09/18 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

[Joe writes,] "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." [-jak]

For some reason I never got to seeing that film until fairly recently--in the last ten years or so--long after I'd read the book. [-pd]

Scott Dorsey adds:

It is, in some ways, a remake of an earlier silent movie and one of the few remakes that surpass the original. [-sd]

Keith Lynch responds:

I saw it decades ago, but not before seeing countless spoofs, so I didn't find it at all scary. It was impossible to be scared by Frankenstein and Dracula in the era of Frankenberry and Count Chocula.

The only things I found unexpected were how slow-paced it was, and that the assistant was named Fritz, not Ygor.

Nearly all 1930s remakes were great improvements on the original. Another example is THE WIZARD OF OZ.

By a remarkable coincidence, January of this year was not only the 200th anniversary of the publication of the novel, it was also the month in which the release of YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN became closer in time to the release of the 1931 FRANKENSTEIN than to the present.

A fun trivia question to annoy people with is who played the title character in the 1931 FRANKENSTEIN. The correct answer is Colin Clive, who played Frankenstein, not Boris Karloff, who played his creature. [-kfl]

Paul Dormer replies:

There were a couple of news items last week about Frankenstein. In one, there was a discussion about the genesis of the novel in Percy Shelley's interests in galvanism. It stated Mary Shelley hit upon the idea of a scientist who creates a creature "stitched together from body parts". The stitching together of body parts does not appear in the book and Frankenstein specifically says that as he had trouble creating the smaller parts of the body, he deliberately made the creature about eight foot tall. I did send a correction to the paper but they didn't publish it.

There was also an article about how "millennial snowflakes" sympathise with the monster, suggesting that whoever wrote that article hadn't read the novel.

There was a rather good stage production done at the National Theatre a few years ago, directed by Danny Boyle. One curiosity was that the actors playing Frankenstein and the creature alternated their roles. And these actors were Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller, both known for playing modern versions of Sherlock Holmes on TV. Alas, the day I saw it, Cumberbatch was indisposed and there was an understudy playing Frankenstein. [-sd]

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

DROWNED WORLDS edited by Jonathan Strahan (ISBN 978-1-78108-451-9) was inspired by J. G. Ballard's THE DROWNED WORLD (and by climate change and rising sea levels, of course). While one might expect some stories about how to combat the inundations, the anthology title probably influenced authors to consider a world already past the tipping point.

So "Elves of Antarctica" by Paul McAuley seems to have the underlying theme "you can never go home again" (or perhaps "no one steps in the same river twice"). "Venice Drowned" by Kim Stanley Robinson, "Brownsville Station" by Christopher Rowe, ...--the list of stories which look at adaptation rather than prevention goes on and on. One might get the feeling that all the authors have given up on resisting the change. Now as I said, the title of the anthology does rather imply that the stories will be about drowned worlds, not worlds save from drowning.

I suppose this is somewhat re-assuring, because these stories are on the whole about how we will continue in some fashion, but there is also a negative feeling that it is all hopeless.

One side note: Though in real life, the only city I can think of named for a fictional character is Tarzana, and in science fiction the cities seem to be named for scientists ("Goddard City") or science fiction authors ("Bradbury Town" or "Clarksenville"), Ken Liu (in "Dispatches from the Cradle: The Hermit--Forty-Eight Hours in the Sea of Massachusetts") has taken a decidedly different approach and has one character referring to "the last time I visited Watney City in Acidalia Planetia."

I tend to make notes when synchronicity pops up. The latest is two mentions of Lorenzo Marques (the capital of Portuguese East Africa, which became Mozambique). One mention was in THE HUMAN FACTOR by Graham Greene, the other was a couple of days later in CHURCHILL AND ORWELL by Thomas E. Ricks. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives
whole.

--Roger Caras

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