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3/22/18, 11:30 AM

(By the way I use the general term "film reviewer", not "critic." All film critics are film reviewers but not all film reviewers are film critics. I never call myself a film critic. I guess that is my zero-eth rule.)

There are common sense rules that I think a reviewer should respect and follow, but since I have not gotten buy-in from anybody these are my rules for myself. I want to state the ground rules I follow. First and foremost is the Hippocratic rule of film reviewing: DO NO HARM. (Incidentally, the oath to do no harm does come from Hippocrates, but it is not in the Hippocratic Oath itself, as any doctor can tell you.)

DO NO HARM should be the first rule for any film reviewer. Do not harm the viewing experience for your reader. Your reader may be going to give some precious time and perhaps some hard-earned money to see the film. Do not harm this person's experience. I take this so far that I have on occasion lied to the reader to not spoil plot twists. Honesty is less important than preserving the viewing experience.

The question of what is or is not a plot spoiler could be a separate topic all by itself. For me a "spoiler" is a revelation of a plot twist where that twist occurs more than ten minutes into a film. Ten minutes is just my rule of thumb. There are films that do not get to their premise until well past the ten-minute mark. I either have a spoiler with a warning or I have to be tricky.

I often try hard to not reveal a twist even by only implication. For example if John believes X and the viewer eventually finds out X is false I will probably not say "John believes X" but "John knows X." That is a fib in good cause.

Good reviewers will at least give a spoiler warning if a spoiler is coming up. Not all reviewers are "good" in this regard. I have pointed out spoilers that should have warnings and have been accused of being of the "spoiler police" for saying that spoiler rules should be adhered to. So be it. I have heard another reviewer say that he can freely spoil surprises in the film he is reviewing because it came "pre-spoiled" by being a bad film. That reviewer went on to tell the twist ending of the film. Such reviewers are stealing from their readers regardless of the reviewer's attitude toward this film.

I have seen film reviewers go all "creative" with their writing style. Some will in doing it give away the surprise ending of a film because it makes their writing sound better or make it sound funny or make it stylistically interesting. A film reviewer or critic has to remember that she or he is writing what should be egoless text that should improve or at least not damage the experience of the reader. Do that reader no harm. That is the primary rule.

That is my major rule. I have a few more minor rules.

-- See a lot of films. If that sounds to you like just a responsibility and not a pleasure you should not be a film reviewer. Little kids come out of movies saying "Wow, that was the best film ever made." What they mean is that it is among the best they have seen. If they have seen only a handful of films that means little. To appreciate a film you have to have seen similar films so you can compare. If the reader knows the film you are praising does not nearly come up to most films the reader has seen you have blown your credibility. Speaking of credibility...

-- Review a lot of films. If your reader has read a lot of your reviews he/she will know, say, to trust you on comedies but not on science fiction films that is much better than not knowing you at all. Remember...

-- Your goal is to help your reader to make intelligent film selection decisions. That is a very different goal from getting the reader to agree with your assessment of the film. But the reviewer should get a feel for why some people disagree with you. So...

-- Read some film reviews of that disagree with your point of view. You have little to learn from someone who agrees with you about a film. You have much more to learn from reviews you disagree with.

-- Know your reading audience. If someone has been watching film for only five years they won't care that an idea was used before in a 1950s film. A knowledgeable reader might find of more interest in where the idea was used before.

-- Express your true opinion, not what you think you should think about a film. I find a lot of Michelangelo Antonioni films boring. I can accept that some people think that Antonioni was a very good director. I will acknowledge that in my review, but I will not pretend I like Antonioni films. I cannot review the film as an Antonioni fan if I am not really one. To thine own self be true. An extension of this idea is...

-- Don't have guilty pleasures. You find reviewers who say something like "I know the old Flash Gordon serials are bad, but I still really enjoy them." If you enjoy a film it did what it was supposed to do. It is hypocritical to say you enjoy a film and still call it a bad film.

Those are my rules for myself when I write film reviews. I probably have more, but none currently come to mind. [-mrl]

BINTI: HOME by Nnedi Okorafor (copyright 2017, Tor.com, 176pp, ISBN 9780765393104) (book review by Joe

Karpierz):

BINTI: HOME is the followup to Nnedi Okorafor's multiple award winning novella Binti. While the original was short, compact, and told what was essentially an adventure space opera with some intriguing character and cultural elements seamlessly added into the story, BINTI: HOME is a much longer story. The expanded narrative gives all the characters room to breathe and not only have their story told, but but have the backstory of the culture and history of Binti's people presented to the reader in a way that deepens appreciation for what Binti is going through and what is to come.

It is a year after the events of BINTI. Binti comes back to Earth and is accompanied by her friend, the Meduse Okwu. Binti has come home to make a pilgrimage that is customary for Himba women, a sort of rite of passage into adulthood. Binti has been struggling with life at the university. She has no friends other than Okwu--who along with other Meduse killed everyone on the ship transporting Binti to Oomza (so already things are a little out of the ordinary)--and is having to deal with the after effects of the massacre that happened on the ship.

But as there are problems offworld at school, there are even more problems at home. Binti has a very complicated relationship with her friends and family back on Earth. Her family feels betrayed by her leaving home to go to the university, and both her friends and family feel that now she will never be able to settle down and marry. The Himba are both technologically advanced and provincial, both in the way they live their lives and their attitudes toward Binti, Okwu, and anything that is other. What Binti has done is nearly unforgivable. What Binti is about to go through will make things even worse.

BINTI: HOME is a much richer story than the original BINTI. As Binti discovers her lineage and heritage--and how that lineage and heritage has affected her parents' behavior and attitude--she comes to understand so much more about herself and her people, while at the same realizing there is so much more to know, and that frightens her.

BINTI: HOME, while the second story in a trilogy, with BINTI: THE NIGHT MASQUERADE being the third book in the Binti trilogy, does not suffer from "second book in the trilogy" syndrome. BINTI: HOME is a better book than its predecessor, made so by the fact that it is longer, giving Okorafor room to breathe and delve into the backstory and characters in a much deeper fashion, and in a way that was not possible in BINTI.

BINTI: THE NIGHT MASQUERADE was published earlier this year. Given the promise of the second book--and the cliffhanger upon which it ends--I'm looking forward to reading the final book in the trilogy. If the first two books are any indication, I'm expecting a spectacular conclusion to the story. [-jak]

THE FORGIVEN (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: This film has two plotlines involving Archbishop Desmond Tutu (played by Forest Whitaker). One has him chairing the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the dismantling of the apartheid state. At the same time he counsels a rabid and unrepentant racist, Piet Blomfeld (Eric Bana) in an attempt to understand Blomfeld's point of view. The film is based on a play as is rather obvious from the long conversations between them that are more dramatic than believable. This confrontation is really the core of the film, but leads to a conclusion this is a little pat. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) or 5/10

Roland Joffe made the very powerful and moving THE KILLING FIELDS back in 1985. More currently he has co-authored and directed THE FORGIVEN. The topic is an emotional one and his film should have been, but what is missing is the emotional punch and epic feel of the earlier film. Joffe has intertwined two stories involving Archbishop Desmond Tutu, here played by Forest Whitaker. One story is about Tutu chairing the Commission on truth and reconciliation. The other is about his relationship with a virulent racist bigot interned at Pollsmore Prison, Piet Blomfeld (Eric Bana), whose world fell apart at the same time that apartheid fell apart.

Whitaker, whose story should be the emotional center of the film, usually just looks mild and walks around in Archbishop clothes and smiles. When confronted with an account of a horrendous incident his part really needs an indignant response. It needs some fury. The film gives the viewer ample reason to make Tutu a saint, but little reason to make him a dramatic screen hero. It leaves the viewer dramatically unfulfilled. But there is little clout to Whitaker's performance. Most of the force is reserved for Bana and his performance is the one that will be remembered.

Some of the dialog is in local languages with subtitles, and some of the dialog is spoken in English with a thick South African accent which could well use subtitling. The accent perhaps is too accurate. It sounds about right but is close to impenetrable to decipher. Whitaker does not really resemble Tutu much at all, but it is enough not to be a big distraction for the viewer. He looks more a caricature of Tutu, but we never feel we are inside the man and understanding him. The discussions perhaps slow the pacing of the film. Piet Blomfeld (Eric Bana) has an unusual character. He is a rabid hater of blacks but seems to have educated himself in the classics, an unusual combination. Thandi Makhubele gives a short but very strong performance as a mother looking for a daughter who disappeared.

Joffe's THE FORGIVEN has moments of great tragedy, but they lead just to shock rather than a sustained anger. I rate it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 5/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2249081/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_forgiven_2018

[-mrl]

Stephen Hawking (letters of comment by Kip Williams and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to the obituary of Stephen Hawking in the 03/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

He also performed the Galaxy Song in the 2014 Python sort-of-farewell tour. Python is genre, right? (Also THE SIMPSONS and FUTURAMA.) [-kw]

And Keith Lynch also notes these other appearances.

Shotgun Marriages (letter of comment by Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Mark's comments on shotgun marriages](#) in the 03/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, Keith Lynch writes:

I can't find any mention of whether it undoes established marriages. Marriage has always been a defense against statutory rape. Does this new law make people retroactively guilty of that crime, and retroactively turn their children into bastards? [-kfl]

Evelyn responds:

My impression is that these sorts of laws do not undo existing marriages (although there have certainly been attempts to undo same-sex marriages and void the ones that had been performed). [-ecl]

City Names (letters of comment by Charles S. Harris and Dale Speirs):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on cities named for fictional characters](#) in the 03/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, Charles Harris writes:

Heraklion (capital of Crete)? [-csh]

Evelyn responds:

Well, I wouldn't include cities named for mythical figures thought real at the time. [-ecl]

Dale Speirs writes:

You mentioned towns named after fictional characters. One of the oldest such places is Flin Flon, Manitoba.

Wikipedia extract: "The town's name is taken from the lead character in a paperback novel, THE SUNLESS CITY by J. E. Preston Muddock. Josiah Flintabatey Flonatin piloted a submarine through a bottomless lake where he passed into a strange underground world through a hole lined with gold. A copy of the book was allegedly found and read by prospector Tom Creighton."

"When Tom Creighton discovered a high-grade exposure of copper, he thought of the book and called it Flin Flon's mine, and the town that developed around the mine adopted the name."

Flin Flon is directly on the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border. Most inhabitants live on the Manitoba side; the mine straddles both sides. [-ds]

Kate Wilhelm and BLACK PANTHER (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [the 03/16/18 issue of the MT VOID](#), John Purcell writes:

Good morning, Mark and Evelyn! I hope you are well, hale and hearty, and have had your fill of coffee for the day.

The last couple weeks have been bad for losing two of the more important people in our lives: first it was Stephen Hawking, then Kate Wilhelm, both people I greatly admired. Back in 1986, the year I was living in Los Angeles, Minicon (back then, that was the major SF convention in the year in the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota area) had Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm as its professional guests of honor. Since I was not living there, I did not attend, so I missed out on the chance to meet either of them.

However, I was in the audience at a panel they were on during the world convention in Kansas City in 1976, I think. It might have been 1978's Phoenix Worldcon. Dang, but memory blurs when you're trying to remember what you did or saw at a con 40-plus years ago. Oh, well. Either way, I do remember they were wonderful people. Kate will be greatly missed.

I saw BLACK PANTHER last month and enjoyed it a great deal, and can understand why it has made such a huge impact on the box office. Like WONDER WOMAN, its main appeal is to a specific market, but both movies employ kick-ass effects and the classic good vs. evil battle for the world. I never read the comic book, but can still see the ironic symbolism in Wakonda much as Dale Skran suggests. This is definitely a good, solid movie with a lot more emotional and spiritual depth than most other action hero movies. [-jp]

Squid (letters of comment by John Purcell, Paul Dormer, Keith F. Lynch, Lowell Gilbert, and Tim Merrigan):

In response to [Mark's comments on squid](#) in the 03/16/18 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Okay, I have to sink my teeth into the squid/calamari discussion. I have eaten curried squid and also fried calamari, but not at the same time. Prepared correctly, these are tasty, protein and omega oil filled foods. Hmm. Sounds like a squid pro quo deal. [-jp]

Paul Dormer writes:

I seem to recall a scene in the film Shirley Valentine--it's a long time since I've seen it--where she is eating in a restaurant on a Greek island with a group of English tourist. They all order boring English food but she orders the calamari. After tucking in, she turns to her companions and says, "This squid is delicious." just to watch them squirm. [-pd]

Mark notes:

A friend of ours used to make fun of our (Evelyn's and my) love of squid. She claimed that we were always looking for a restaurant called "Tentacles Are Us". Others of her friends got her to try calamari in Barcelona. That she loved. [-mrl]

Keith Lynch writes:

That's no stranger than "beef" vs. "cow" or "pork" vs. "pig."

I've never eaten it by either name, and I never intend to.

[Mark writes,] "I know the food industry is very careful about their use of words that might sound somehow "off" to their customers."

Yes. "Sugar" has been replaced by "cane juice," "rapeseed oil" with "canola oil," and "slimehead" by "orange roughy." The name changes were of course accompanied by price increases. Similarly with non-food items such as "rowhouses," which were replaced by "luxury townhomes." [-kfl]

Lowell Gilbert replies:

I think of 'calamari' in terms of an Italian dish (much as Mark mentions--lightly batter-fried, with marinara sauce), although I knew that the word was simply Italian for 'squid'. I had not realized that Greek also used the same word (among others, apparently).

Greeks seem to prepare calamari in something similar to the dish with which I'm familiar, but also in stews, often with tomato sauces. Portuguese has a different word for squid, but has similar dishes for it. Rhode Island added hot peppers to the fried dish; it has large populations of people of both Italian and Portuguese ancestry. [-lg]

Tim Merrigan writes:

I've never heard of "cane juice". What if it's beet sugar? Also, that crystalline substance in my sugar bowl I don't think of as any kind of juice. [-tm]

Evelyn notes:

Crystallized sugar starts out as cane juice and is crystallized as part of the refining process. And prunes are now "dried plums." (I'm waiting for raisins to become "dried grapes.") [-ecl]

Squirrels (letters of comment by Tim Bateman and Dorothy Heydt):

In response to [Mark's comments on squirrels](#) in the 03/09/18 issue of the MT VOID, Tim Bateman writes:

[Mark writes,] "And the squirrel, whose name is being withheld, had world wide fame for his five minutes."

Well, not if his name is being withheld... [-tmb]

Mark responds:

The Austin bomber had worldwide fame even while his name was being withheld. [-mrl]

Dorothy Heydt suggests:

But its name was withheld because none of the news people know it, nor even speak enough South Korean Squirrel to ask, much less to interview the squirrel. [-dh]

FRANKENSTEIN (letters of comment by Tim Bateman and Tim Merrigan):

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

8 hours 35. I don't have the time to spend listening to something that long. I do have the time to spend reading a 200-page or so book, however.

I do get a bit of a kick from the fact that science fiction was created by a teenage girl.

My introduction was an issue of the Marvel comics series of the early 1970s. Very nice art by Mike Ploog on the first few issues. I have subsequently seen the 1931 film, at least two sequels and one or two of the Hammer films, and read the novel, not necessarily in that order.

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

As with all novels. There are exceptions. *_The Third Man_* comes close... the lead character's name is changed, and an addition made to Harry Lime's dialogue on the Vienna Eye.

[Joe writes,] "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"

Tarzan came to my mind at this point...

I was not expecting this amount of layering when I started reading it, I must say. I found it interesting.

[Joe writes,] "It was somewhat surprising to me how short the novel actually is."

Yes, I seem to recall having a similar reaction.

Particularly in recent years, with novels tending to exceed 300 pages in paperback.

So you, considerably, do not actually refuse to be concerned about spoiling a story that is over 200 years old at this point... :-)

Shelley referred to the creature as 'Adam' when performing the work on stage.

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

Yes. More recent readings appear to see Victor as creating life on his own, without the collaboration of a woman, and this being his hubristic mistake.

[Joe writes,] "Jim Donaldson provided an adequate narration of the novel. As I listened to the book, ... 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.

'You damn kids get off my ice floe!'

[Joe writes,] "If you've never read the book, I suggest you do so."

I second that motion.

[Joe writes,] "It's interesting to contrast the novel and the movie ..."

Yes, as is often the case.

[Joe writes,] "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."

Absolutely. [-tmb]

Mark responds:

How do you know the monster was not a golem?

You can see Ploog's art at <https://tinyurl.com/mtv-ploog>.

There is a *very* accurate feature film adaptation called VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN or TERROR OF FRANKENSTEIN and it is on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iv2NcsESYw>. [-mrl]

Tim Merrigan replies:

[Re: too long to listen to] "I listen to audiobooks while driving." [-tm]

Gender Pay Gaps (letters of comment by Tim Bateman and Dorothy Heydt):

In response to [Mark's comments on the gender pay gaps at Uber](#) in the 03/09/18 issue of the MT VOID, Tim Bateman writes:

The driver strategy is probably gender-influenced, at least. Many male drivers want to be at home on Sunday afternoons watching sport on the box; many female ones want to be doing something other than being in a building where sport is being shown on a TV."

I would suspect that women drive more cautiously than men as they are more risk-averse; men drive faster as they are more riskophilic (they think that it means they have larger willies).

There is no overt gender discrimination. There's discrimination in favour of sport-averse people and against risk-averse people. Is that gender discrimination? [-tmb]

Dorothy Heydt responds:

I once saw a cartoon (online, and I occasionally kick myself for not having bookmarked it) in four panels. In the first panel, a man is in a locker room with other men, who are all pointing at him and laughing. In the second panel, he's in a bedroom with a woman who is pointing and laughing. I forget who's pointing and laughing in the third panel, but in the fourth he's driving a honkin' great SUV much too fast. [-dh]

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

For some people, the first sign of spring is the first robin, or the first crocus, or the first buds on the trees. For others of us, it is the first book sale of the year. In my case, this is the Bryn Mawr book sale held in Princeton in March or April (depending on when the school has its spring break). It now fills the gymnasium and several rooms, designed (it seems) to be the most inconvenient layout, at least for us. The science fiction books are in a room way in the back, with the cookbooks and children's books. The DVDs, mysteries, and general fiction are in a room right by the front door. The math and science, classics, foreign language, and literary criticism are in the gymnasium. Between the quantity and the area, we consistently spend two hours each year.

My first observation is that there were definitely fewer books this year. Usually the tables have three rows running along each

side. Many sections in the gymnasium had only one row, or one row and bits of a second. Since we arrived when the doors opened for the general public, I don't think it was because it had been "looted" already, though the previous day was for dealers. On the other hand, the mysteries and some other sections in other rooms had boxes *under* the tables as well.

Mark reported that there were only about a half-dozen math books, and he found nothing there or in the science section of interest. Who knows?--the math books might have been elsewhere. I found several alternate history books in the history section, a modern fantasy collection in the literary criticism section, and an *entire box* of Greek drama in the occult section.

Still, I was able to find some things, and nothing cost me more than \$4. Considering one of the items was the DVD set of the "Alien Quadrilogy", that's not bad. (And who the heck ever thought up that name, anyway?) I also got 6/7 of the Teaching Company course "Classics of American Literature". Why 6/7? Well, it consists of 84 lectures on 14 DVDs, with 2 per case. For reasons passing understanding, the first case and the booklet were missing. Since the rest were well rubber-banded together, I am assuming that the missing pieces were never donated. In any case, 72 lessons are probably more than enough. If I need to learn more about Franklin, Thoreau, Emerson, and Poe, I am sure I can find something somewhere.

Partial Teaching Company courses are becoming ubiquitous. They also had Part 1 of "The Old Testament", the lecture transcripts for "Greek Mythology", and the booklet for "Greek Drama" (or maybe it was the other way around). The last two were tied together as if they were a set, which they weren't. The only complete sets they had were "The History of Hitler's Empire" (hard to break up, short of separating the booklet from the single case) and a seven-case set of audiocassettes for "Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition" which was a bit daunting in both size (the equivalent of about a dozen VHS cassettes) and content.

I also got the BBC's "Planet Earth" (with the Attenborough narration), David Lynch's MULHOLLAND DR., and Mel Brooks's THE TWELVE CHAIRS (a sadly overlooked film).

I did actually get some books as well. Two were on my "want list": Nirad C. Chaudhuri's AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN UNKNOWN INDIAN (which I had just added to the list three days ago!) and Leonard Wolf's annotated edition of DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE. The latter is somewhat marked-up, but at least it's not highlighted, and I can consider them as just more annotations.

I also got the "matched set" (not really) of Harap's THE IMAGE OF THE JEW IN AMERICAN LITERATURE and Liptzin's THE JEW IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. Both have the same previous owner's name and year, so I suspect someone was working on a paper or book or something. I can file it next to my copies of Fiedler's THE JEW IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL, Fisch's DUAL IMAGE: THE FIGURE OF THE JEW IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE, and Medder's THE JEW IN THE LITERATURE OF ENGLAND. (Do you notice a certain trend here?)

A couple of books were ones I already had. Horacio Quiroga was a Uruguayan author who wrote supernatural and fantastical stories in the early 20th century. I had an electronic copy of his collection CUENTOS DE AMOR DE LOCURA Y DE MUERTE, but there was a small paperback of it for only a dollar, and real books are so much better (and it is not every day one finds books like this in Spanish in the United States).

And the other "duplicate" was a copy of MOBY-DICK. Okay, yes, I already had the Norton Critical Edition, the Penguin edition, an electronic edition, and an abridged edition (one of those vintage paperbacks with maps on the inside covers). And Barnes & Noble is not known for their fancy editions. But this had marvelous illustrations, and also a larger font that is so much easier for me to read than the various paperback versions.

With a few other odds and ends (and Mark found a half-dozen books), we still got out for under \$50. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
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Quote of the Week:

Bulldogs are adorable, with faces like toads that have
been sat on.

--Colette

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