

made it his capital.

It is twenty-three miles (thirty-seven kilometers) west of Agra. His palace is a big complex of buildings employing many different cultures of the times. Akbar had buildings dedicated to each of what he saw as the four major religions: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. He took a Hindu wife, a Muslim wife, and a Christian wife. Mark said, "I suspect he also had a Jewish wife, but rather than consummating the marriage, she probably redecorated the palace=(I think we'll re-do the harem quarters in mauve. Akbar, what do you think about window treatments?)." Akbar, incidentally, tried to unify all four religions into a single religion that would end all conflict over religion. It was a failure because he didn't recognize the religious significance of doughnuts and coffee the way Unitarians do. He started the city in 1571. It was the capital of India from 1571 to 1586. Then it is thought that water problems caused the capital to be abandoned. The capital is constructed mostly of sandstone mostly in the Muslim-Indian style that featured things like geometrical filigreed screens on the windows.

The Diwani-Khas has four bell-shaped towers on the roof at the four corners, each held up by four pillars. The courtyard sports a huge backgammon board with squares big enough that the emperor and empress used servant girls as pieces. There was a house for an astrologer. And to keep the whole thing cool, an artificial lake was built. And there were flocks of birds kept for communications also. In fact, it was a tremendously expensive set-up so Akbar could live in comfort, communicate with people, play backgammon with his wife--assuming she was interested at the time. And for the emperor to have that much comfort, a lot of people had to slave and live in less comfort. Mark says, "If Akbar really wanted to be impressed, he could visit the Leeper Palace in Old Bridge, New Jersey. No artificial lake for the Leepers. They tell a dial on the wall exactly what they want the temperature to be. They communicate with their friends hundreds of miles away virtually instantly, and with two-way communication at that. If Emperor Mark wakes up in the middle of the night, he can tiptoe into the other room and have a servant who will play him chess or backgammon. The servant is ten miles away but can play as if he is in the same room. Fine actors will perform their most famous plays for his entertainment without waking the Empress. Some of the actors may already be dead but they will still perform for him his choice of a thousand or so of his favorite plays. Or great musicians will play for him. They stand ready to perform almost every opera Puccini ever wrote, or any of Beethoven's symphonies, and that is only about one percent of what the Emperor has there. So who impresses whom, Akbar? God, technology's great! Yeah, this is a recurrent in my trip logs, but so is the splendor of ages past a recurrent theme in my tours. It is interesting but cannot match the splendor of the present. What pre-1950 monarch lived any better than I do?"

By the way, if you're looking for a historical "handle" on when Akbar ruled India, it was during the Elizabethan period. Sometimes it helps to connect to things you know.

There is a large courtyard for what is effectively a mosque. You have to leave your shoes outside. Evelyn wondered if she should stay out also due to a theoretical restriction against blood, but you would expect that at least one in five women would have to stay out for the same reason, and since nobody else was staying out, it appeared that either the rule is sort of ignored, or that the courtyard did not count as part of the mosque itself. Again, more splendor and scale.

Of course, it was very hot. So we were extremely thirsty. Outside of Fatehpur Sikri we got cold drinks for Rs8 and they were very good. Then we got back on the bus for the ride back to Agra and the Taj Mahal.

One of our companions on the day tour pointed out that two of the Indians on the tour must have been on their honeymoon. The woman was dressed in bright green trimmed in a sort of silver tinsel. This was apparently wedding clothing.

The bus stopped very near the Taj at the Taj Kheema Hotel for a quick lunch. We could see the dome above the trees. We found out that masaladar is not so useful a word. Mark ordered a vegetable curry masaladar and they added an order of dhal masala (masala dhal?). There were two power failures during lunch.

One reason to take a city tour like this when traveling on your own is that it is an opportunity to meet other people and hear other voices. One reason *not* to is that you're almost always sitting around after each stop waiting for the latecomers. We weren't sure when the return train to Delhi was, so we weren't sure how much time we had left for the Fort and the Taj. Evelyn particularly started to worry when we did the Taj next, as she was afraid they were skipping the Fort altogether for lack of time.

Getting into the Taj was a bit of a mess. They do not allow food, transistor radios, etc. We figured that they probably did not allow palmtop computers either. Generally anything new not specifically allowed you can assume is prohibited. We are sure there is no rule saying that computers are prohibited, but we would be willing to bet if the palmtop came into question, that would be how the rules were interpreted. Evelyn was checking her whole backpack, so Mark gave her the palmtop. He watched as she went to the checkroom and she just disappeared inside. The guide herded the rest of the group into line to enter so Mark decided to hold a place for her. Still she did not come out. Mark went through the line and was forced into the grounds. Still no Evelyn. Four or five minutes later Evelyn came through the gate. There were something like eight people in line ahead of her and each had to fill out forms for what they were leaving.

Next week I will cover our visit to the Tqj Mahal. [-mrl]

DOWNSIZING (film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I just watched **DOWNSIZING** and it really looks like the creators were channeling Fred Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth. Miniaturization started out in films with **DR. CYCLOPS**, which was basically an adventure story. Then there was **THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN**, a horror story with philosophical overtones. **FANTASTIC VOYAGE** went back to straight adventure, and **HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS** turned it into comedy. **DOWNSIZING** moves it into the realm of social commentary.

Of course, the science is laughable (how can the downsized breathe normal air and drink normal water? what do they do about rain and snow?), but as with works such as **GULLIVER'S TRAVELS**, the science is not the point. A similar film is **THE INVENTION OF LYING**--the world it postulates is clear a fable rather than any semblance of our world, or even a possible parallel world, but the underlying message is what counts.

Not surprisingly, the downbeat aspects of the film meant it did not do well at the box office. **DOWNSIZING** considers the effects that essentially removing a substantial percentage of the consumer population would have, what undesirable uses might be found for miniaturization, how the small society is maintained, and so on.

(As far as the latter goes, I will point out that when an early twentieth century economist said that no one would have to work more than a few hours a week, he was not including the servant classes.) [-ecl]

IN OTHER LANDS by Sarah Rees Brennan (copyright 2017, Big Mouth House Printing, \$19.95 hardcover, 437pp, ISBN 978-161873-120-351995) (excerpt from the *Duel Fish Codices*: a book review by Gwendolyn Karpierz):

The trouble with deconstructions of fantasy tropes is that, often, they are mocking genres that we grew up with. (I imagine that most of the people reading this are not my contemporaries, but I will maintain 'we'--I am sure not all the tropes have changed). Though I generally love fairy tale retellings, this is my general disappointment with regard to fairy tale reconstructions: They are tired and dull. 'Oh, we are ever so clever,' the writers seem to say, 'making fun of this fairy tale rule that we have taken completely out of cultural context and derided for being nonsensical. We are so completely witty for intentionally missing the point of this story in order to break it down to questions of why is the number three randomly important and isn't it silly that one should not recognize a needy old woman on the road as a witch.' I can't bear it anymore. They are rarely ever innovative. They are *intentionally missing the point*.

I hated this book at first.

IN OTHER LANDS, by Sarah Rees Brennan, starts out with a run-of-the-mill fantasy concept: a wall between our world and another world, where there are elves and dwarves and mermaids and technology doesn't work at all. It starts with a thirteen-year-old boy being one of the chosen few who can see and thus cross the wall. It starts with these things, I think, with the sole intention of being able to use them to turn a number of similar run-of-the-mill fantasy tropes on its head. Which--which is just so *exhausting*. Although I recognize that many staples of the genre have been overdone, and while I like a good inverted stereotype as much as the next person, watching someone believe they are clever to point out all the flaws in a genre that has sustained so many is just--there's no need to tear down the foundations like that.

I have tried to read Sarah Rees Brennan's work before, and I have never gotten even a full chapter in. I've always wanted to love her work--her plots always sound so intriguing, her writing style offering up beauty in cupped hands. But I have always found something so inutterably *pretentious* about her work in those first few pages. Some underlying thing that says, like those deconstructors of fairy tales, 'Aren't I just the cleverest and most special of snowflakes.' In venturing into this book, I felt the same; I did not want to read it, only picking it up out of determination to reading the Not-A-Hugo YA award finalists, and I came very close to putting it right back down after the first several pages.

The thirteen-year-old boy mentioned above, Elliot, is, no bones about it, vastly annoying. He was meant to be, and that was clear. He took it upon himself to be that oh-so-intelligent voice who questions all those fantasy tropes in fiction, making that deconstructive tendency *extra* tedious. He fell very instantly in love with the beautiful and stoic elven warrior-girl, and hated on sight the blond and beautiful jock-type knight-in-shining-armor. It all promised to be excruciating. On top of all that, Brennan proposed an elvish society which has the exact opposite toxic gender roles as human society: the men are seen as modest fragile flowers set to embroidery, with the only proper temperament for raising children, unbearable at a certain time of the month, etc. Obviously Brennan was making a point about problematic gender stereotypes, but... there's a reason that if you go to submit fiction to a 'zine, almost every one will have a guideline that says, 'We do not want stories that take the oppressive culture and make them the oppressed.' It is not subversive. It's annoying. I wanted to stop reading this book.

I... didn't. And then I didn't. And then I... really didn't want to. And then I read three-quarters (plus) of it in one day, crying almost straight through the last, oh, two hundred pages.

I found it distressingly easy to express my despair over the *idea* of this book, but I'm finding it increasingly difficult to put

into words the true beauty of it, the way it cut me right down to the heart. I imagine that's because some of my reasons are extremely personal. But also it's in the way that... Elliot doesn't stop being annoying, but over the four years this book covers, he experiences a level of character growth that... It doesn't change who he is. It makes him... self-aware. It doesn't change who he is, it *shows him* who he is, and he takes conscious, painful steps to make himself better, even though he is deeply, agonizingly aware that *better* will still never be good enough. And he doesn't stop being annoying, but his annoyingness transitions into a tool that he can use, and restrain, and that is no longer unbearable, but the trait of an old friend that you cannot help but love because he is trying so very hard. And the book stops being about subverting tropes and starts being about people, deep down, what it means to be who you are and what it means to love and be loved, and the difficulties that everyone faces no matter how easy their situation may seem. In her acknowledgments, Brennan says that this started out as a short story published serially on her blog, and I wonder at what point it stopped being sarcastic and pleased with itself and started being *real*. Maybe at the same point where I realized I was going to get nothing done today except for reading the entire rest of this book.

I've read three of the WSFS Award for Best Young Adult Book finalists now (this is the only one that has inspired such an intense reaction that I had to immediately write a review before doing literally anything else, others to follow), and while I would recommend the other two to others seeking solid works in the genre, I would pick IN OTHER LANDS instantly over both of them. I, hesitantly, predict I will end up picking it over the following three as well. It *does* have important messages about the dangers of stereotypes and prejudiced roles in society, messages I believe any young adult should have access to, and once it settles down from smugly patting itself on the back about them, it delivers them in very human (and elven, and dwarven, and harpy...) ways. It stops being... an agenda, it stops preaching, and becomes just a really incredibly beautiful book about... well, it sounds cheesy, but about friendship and love and peace. I mean... the relationships in this book are stunningly, painfully written. The way the families and friends and allies slot together... it defies description. I just... I'm incoherent over this book. I am so... fulfilled, by having read all of it, and not put it down when I felt the urge. (I am also, admittedly, very, very sad. But that's a side effect of really good books for me.) If you have a young adult in your life who needs some fantasy, get this into their hands, please. Also, if you have someone older than young adult in your life who doesn't scorn the genre on principal--more on that in a different review, probably--it's a really worthwhile tale. I know the trials in it will ultimately appeal to some more than others, I know the character progressions and struggles will not resonate with everyone the way they resonated with me. But, as I discovered, it's worth giving it a chance. [-gmk]

STUFF MATTERS by Mark Miodownik (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This science book is about material science so it delves into the world of stuff. The stuff that makes up the world we live in. The history, use, atomic structure, and properties of materials is discussed. The author covers metals, concrete, foams, gels, glass, ceramics, paper and even chocolate. Concrete contains calcium silicates and when water is added to this power fibrils grow and entrap the water. It is typically called cement until you add small pebbles to it and then as the fibrils grow entrapping more water this cement sticks to the pebbles creating concrete. The Romans used a slightly different form of concrete thousands of years ago. Researchers have developed a self-healing form of concrete. There is a type of bacteria that creates calcite a constituent of concrete; the bacteria are very tough and can remain dormant in rocks or concrete for decades. This bacterium can be embedded in concrete with a form of starch which is its food source. If the concrete cracks and water gets into the cracks the dormant bacteria will awake and starts growing creating calcite which bonds to the concrete and builds up a mineral structure that covers the crack sealing it and preventing further crack growth. Another very common material is glass. Although the Egyptians and Greeks made some advances in glass manufacturing, it was the Romans who really made glass more common and part of everyday life. The Romans invented the first glass windows; this was not a large pane of glass but small pieces of glass fused together by lead. The Romans did not have the technology to make larger panes of glass. Glass consists of silicon and oxygen atoms. It is transparent to visible light because the electrons in these atoms require a very specific amount of energy to allow them to move to a higher energy level. And visible light does not provide enough energy for these electrons to absorb it and jump to a higher energy level so the light energy is not absorbed and light passes thru. This book provides a very different viewpoint on material science and is a good read for the curious among us. [-gf]

Tarzan (letters of comment by Kip Williams and John Purcell):

In response to [Mark's comments on Tarzan](#) in the 04/27/18 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

I have a definite favorite in the series: TARZAN'S NEW YORK ADVENTURE (1942) gives us the Ape Man in the Big Apple, climbing around in the concrete jungle, mostly wearing a business suit. And I'm pretty sure other stuff happens as well. There's a circus involved. I'm glad I have a recording of it that I can (theoretically) find and watch, since we don't have cable any more.

Other than that, I have preferences. The ones where he fights Nazis are always good, and TARZAN AND HIS MATE will always be watchable for me, for a reason I probably need not mention. [-kw]

Mark responds:

It is fun though I consider the Cheeta sequences damage the film and distract the viewer. There are only four sequences tied together by a weak plot. [-mrl]

Kip replies:

I used to love the Cheeta bits when I was a kid. Now I know too much about animal training and what the facial expressions and attitudes are really indicating. (Hint: It's not "golly gee, what fun I'm having right now!") I hadn't really thought about the plot at all, and I'm not sure when I last watched the whole movie together instead of just dropping in and out of it as time permitted. [-kw]

Evelyn adds:

What I find obnoxious in TARZAN'S NEW YORK ADVENTURE (well, one of the things, anyway) is that all the tricks Boy has the elephants do are stereotypical circus tricks (lie down in a row, etc.). I would expect someone in the jungle to teach them something more suited to that environment, or at least more imaginative. [-ecl]

John Purcell writes:

I am impressed that TCM will be broadcasting nineteen Tarzan movies during the month of May. Good heavens, I remember watching these on television when I was a lad, and at one point I had 24 paperbacks of Tarzan novels. Of those, perhaps a handful remain, but I fondly remember the movies. I think my favorite scene is when Tarzan dives off the Brooklyn Bridge during the 1942 movie "Tarzan's New York Adventure." That's a hell of a stunt, one that threw my childhood imagination into a tizzy. Imagine my surprise when years later I read that Johnny Weissmuller never really make such a dive, but a dummy did, and even then it was into a tank on a Hollywood set. Even knowing the truth, it was still a thrilling scene. Ah, sweet youth, we miss you. I may have to watch some of these flicks when they air. [-jp]

BEYOND THIS HORIZON and ISLANDIA (letter of comment by Joseph T. Major): In response to [Evelyn's comments on BEYOND THIS HORIZON and ISLANDIA](#) in the 04/27/18 issue of the MT VOID, Joseph Major writes:

BEYOND THIS HORIZON is based on Heinlein's unpublished first novel, FOR US, THE LIVING. He couldn't sell the book, so he mined it for items to use in other works. Nehemiah Scudder of the Future History is recycled from FOR US, THE LIVING, for example.

Which is why I think it wasn't a good idea to publish VARIABLE STAR. This was based on an outline which Heinlein composed, then decided not to use, and he mined it for plot elements of other juveniles. Also, the summary given to the writer who did write it seems to have been missing the last file card.

"Anson MacDonald" was only in ASTOUNDING. People like "John Riverside" and "Lyle Monroe" were for other markets. Heinlein had a ranking of works. "Anson MacDonald" was for non-Future History works in ASTOUNDING. He wanted to preserve his trademark, so to speak.

I read ISLANDIA, many years ago. It's set on a (fictional) Pacific island. The monarchy there has achieved utopia by banning all technology past a certain point in history. (Erewhon, anyone?) The protagonist only hobnobs with the upper class so doesn't notice any trouble. The protagonist falls in love with an Islandian woman, but she's betrothed to the king. The monarchy is kept in check by the nobles through the pretext of pretending that the last absolute monarch, who charged into the enemy ranks during a battle and was never seen again, isn't proven dead, so his successors rule "by courtesy".

To be fair, Wright had the country conquered by the Japanese during WWII. [-jtm]

Tablets and Retro Hugo Finalists (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on palmtops and tablets](#) in the 04/27/18 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Unlike Evelyn, I do not like to use laptops or computer tablets. They may be convenient, but I find them awkward to use when I'm traveling. I'd rather use my iPhone 7+ (current cell phone) while on the road to stay in touch with family, friends, and the world. Other than that, I much prefer desktop computers. Yes, I know; that makes me a fuddy-duddy, but I'm good with that. [-jp]

Evelyn replies:

I also prefer desktops, but it's hard to carry our 21.5" iMac around in my purse, or even in my suitcase. [-ecl]

John also writes:

Thank you for the Retro Hugo Award nominees for 1942. Some tough choices there. At some point during May I will make my decisions regarding this year's award slate. [-jp]

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

As promised, here is my review of DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT, and my rankings for the Retro Hugo "Best Novel" finalists.

DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT by Olaf Stapledon (Methuen / S.J.R. Saunders): This is not one of Stapledon's "Big Four" (LAST AND FIRST MAN, STAR MAKER, ODD JOHN, SIRIUS). However, Stapledon is one of my favorite authors, so for me, even lesser Stapledon is a treat. This follows the tradition of LAST AND FIRST MEN of not having (major) individual characters, but rather of looking at the sweep of history. There are occasional individuals who are mentioned in passing, but Stapledon is clearly an adherent to the "Tide of History" theory rather than the "Great Man" theory. In spite of this, Stapledon postulates two futures, and describes this situation in what we now recognize as the "Many Worlds" hypothesis. One would think the lack of key individuals would mean that you could now have two diverging streams, but apparently random chance plays a role as well.

Just as LAST AND FIRST MEN, this book maps out a huge span of Earth's history (all of it actually, since it goes up to the point when the sun goes nova). (Actually, we now know that our sun is not of a type to go nova.) Unlike LAST AND FIRST MEN, though, it does not postulate a succession of intelligent species of humanity, nor does it give any sort of timeline. Some of the near-future events seem amazingly prescient; others are way off. (For example, he sees a totalitarian Europe which certainly has its parallels in the Soviet control of Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989, but he also has a future for China that fails to take into account the Chinese Revolution of the late 1940s.)

He seems to have been somewhat influenced by James Hilton's LOST HORIZON, centering the refuge of human wisdom and sanity in Tibet. It is interesting also to compare Stapledon's view of the flow (and predictability) of history with Isaac Asimov's "psychohistory" in the "Foundation" series, the first episodes of which were also published in 1942. (See my reviews of "Foundation" and "Bridle and Saddle", to be published in the next few weeks.)

Stapledon does show many of the prejudices of his time, in his descriptions of what he sees as ingrained characteristics of various "races": kindness and mysticism in the Russians, fastidiousness and cruelty in the Chinese, a lower intelligence in "bushmen" (the San, I assume), and so on. He observes, correctly, that "non-resistance was doomed to fail against invaders schooled to despise gentleness." (Harry Turtledove wrote an alternate history story, "The Last Article", on just this idea.)

Stapledon's scientific inventions are often bizarre: a "land-battleship" with a crew of a thousand, a speed of a hundred miles an hour, and arms and legs for climbing mountains; a "legged aeroplane"; a virus that causes (temporary) infantilism which can be resisted with the proper mental training; and so on.

And I have to say that his description of "the future of light" assumes major changes in human nature, which Stapledon describes as being brought about by apparently perfect understanding of human psychology and how to apply it to education to make everyone into (basically) socialists, willing to make do with a middle-class existence for all without anyone accumulating extreme wealth, with everyone able to find jobs that they are content with (because evidently all menial and unpleasant jobs will be done by machines), and so on. The problem is that while in some ways it sounds delightful, in others it seems as though people are no less brain-washed than in the "future of darkness." For example, while the carrot rather than the stick was used, the "Ministry of Parenthood" did all it could to encourage parenthood, including "'heavy subsidies" (i.e., bribes)--but only for the intelligent; "defectives and certain types prone to criminality were sterilized." (And we know where that leads, which Stapledon should have recognized in 1942. But I am sure he would fall back on the superior psychology of that future society, just as he does for other problems.) And while "with the aid of communal meals, communal nurseries and labour-saving devices within the home the mothers were freed," still "all girls were trained in mothercraft." Apparently the notion of men actually doing half the parenting was not even considered.

Towards to end we get an almost Lovecraftian sequence, followed by something that harkens back to the sort of bridging episode one might find in LAST AND FIRST MEN. I have to say that the "future of darkness", with all the flaws one finds in its writing, is probably better than the "future of light."

Rankings: DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT, THE UNINVITED, no award, DONOVAN'S BRAIN, BEYOND THIS HORIZON, SECOND STAGE LENSMAN [ISLANDIA is unrated]

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The truth is rarely pure, and never simple.
--Oscar Wilde

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