

back with a new stabilizer and proceeded to install it. This took about another five minutes. As he left, the air conditioner ran. Of course, at the next brown-out which was just a few minutes later, it started acting flaky again. It seems to go out and come back for no apparent reason, though at least partly connected to when Agra has brown-outs, which is two or three times a night.

Hotel rules here are different from the United States as well. Apparently you can be evicted at any time for any reason (or no reason!). And of course, there are interminable forms with passport numbers, visa numbers, etc.

But the strangest thing may be Agra's version of "trickle-down" economics--Mother less complimentary descriptions would also be accurate. Evelyn thinks it's worse here than in Varanasi, but that may be just her impression. Moona arranges an auto-rickshaw for a certain amount. He keeps some (30%?--Evelyn thinks that's what one driver said) and gives the driver the rest. The driver then takes us around and suggests a store to shop in. If we go in, he gets Rs20. Somehow everyone is paying everyone else.

Unfortunately, India doesn't seem as "accessible" at night as Southeast Asia was. There, we could walk out our hotel door at 8 PM and people were walking around, stores were open, etc. Here the hotels are all isolated from the street, surrounded by fences and guards, and you can't just stroll. (Even during the day, it's hard just to stroll.) Then again, we're getting old and probably need our evenings to rest up. [-mrl]

WONDER WOMAN (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: Zach Snyder directs the film adaptation of the comic book superhero Diana, played by Gal Gadot. As introspective as we could expect from a superhero film, **WONDER WOMAN** takes place in the closing days of WWI when Diana follows American flyer Steve Trevor to the trenches of the French Army where the Germans are brewing a super- weapon. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

The Amazons of Themyscira are a tribe of women who live on an island shrouded in invisibility. Their task, given them by Greek gods, is to guard peace and to protect the world from war. Since we begin the story in the midst of World War I we know that they have been falling down just a bit. We focus on young Diana (played by Gal Gadot) who is committed to Peace, but who also harbors an urge to get into combat and to fight for Peace. She is trained to fight, and collects some magical weapons. Her life changes when she runs across a downed American pilot (Chris Pine), the first man she has ever seen, and she decides to go with him back to his world. There she becomes part of the struggle against the Germans who are developing a super-weapon. This weapon may bring an end to Diana's world and to Steve's.

Allan Heinber's script takes its time getting to the major conflict, then really goes overboard. The script by is unusually introspective as characters discuss questions of morality. On a lighter note there is a sequence with the explanation of sex to Amazons who have never seen a male. The film also has a strong anti-war message going with more realistic carnage in its battle scenes and perhaps goes a bit far when the French army commanders refuse to make an effort to save innocent soldiers. At least the script was written to not require the viewer to have seen previous films or be familiar with the Marvel universe. It is interesting that the DC universe has chosen Greek myth as a basis for their film after Marvel built theirs on Norse folklore. We have competing systems of lore. I rate **WONDER WOMAN** a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0451279/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wonder_woman_2017

[-mrl]

THE NINE by Tracy Townsend (copyright 2017, Pyr, \$18.00, trade paperback, 367 pp, ISBN 978-1-63388-341-3) (excerpt from the *Duel Fish Codices*: a book review by Joe Karpierz):

Finding new writers is not a really difficult thing to do these days. Like Starbucks in downtown Chicago (where I worked for a year and a half), you can't go too far without encountering another one (I was going to say you can't go two blocks without tripping over the next one, but I don't think that discovering new writers by tripping over them is the recommended method). But finding a good new writer is something else again.

As I've written before, I usually find new writers, or at least writers I've not heard of or read before, in the Hugo finalists lists. Whether it be novels or short fiction, there doesn't seem to be a shortage of new writers challenging for the coveted Hugo. However, I often hear of new writers on podcasts that I listen to. In particular, The Functional Nerds podcast, hosted by Hugo Award winning Patrick Hester and John Anealio frequently host new writers eager to talk about their books. It was here that I learned of Tracy Townsend, author of *The Nine*, her first novel. In the interest of full disclosure, I met Tracy at Capricon 38, a convention that I attend regularly (and a convention for which I have managed to find my way on to the committee, but that's

another story).

The setting is the city of Corma, a steampunkish city ... somewhere. The somewhere, and somewhen, are not important. What is important is the world in which it exists. It is a world in which religion and science have been melded together. There are believers in the old ways, of course--the old religion, if you will--but the premise that God, the Creator, whoever or whatever he, she, or it might be is a great scientific experimenter is a fascinating one. More on that later.

It just so happens that at the time of the novel, a convention is in town of all the, how shall I put it, religious scientists (or maybe it's scientific clergy). Two of those intending to attend the convention, Phillip Chalmers and Nora Pierce, are to present a paper that will shake the Order (or order, if you will--you'll understand that in a bit) to its foundations.

Meanwhile, a black market courier named Rowena Downshire is making a not-so-routine delivery to a man known simply as The Alchemist. She is robbed of the item she is to deliver by dark, horrifying creature. Figuring that it's better to tell the truth and ask forgiveness from the person she was supposed to deliver the items to rather than go back and face the rather of her master, she approaches The Alchemist with her story. And thus begins, in earnest, the tale of THE NINE. Or The Nine.

Yeah, about that. So, without giving too much more away than I already have, let's just say that the paper that is to be presented by Pierce and Chalmers, the item that was stolen--a book, that it seems everybody desperately wants, including the bad guys (of course)--and The Nine are all related. It seems that God is conducting an experiment, and will make His decision whether to allow humanity to keep living or to terminate it completely based totally upon how a particularly nine human beings conduct their lives.

So, let's summarize, shall we? Science and religion reconciled, a book with important information in it, and a God who just may be a mad scientist experimenting with the human race? Okay, I'm in.

It's no secret that I prefer science fiction over fantasy. It's not that I dislike fantasy; I have made a conscious choice to read science fiction because that is what I grew up with and what I like more. After all, I have a Bachelor of *Science* degree, although some may argue that Computer Science is more mystic mumbo jumbo than a *real* science, like quantum physics (now *there's* mystic mumbo jumbo if I've ever seen it). I've read any number of fantasy novels and short fiction by choice--and liked them. What I like about THE NINE is that it nicely merges both science and fantasy in a story that is intriguing, engaging, and interesting.

I need to briefly talk about the characters. Some stories are not designed to be character pieces; they are showcases for ideas, where the characters are there simply as a vehicle to move the stories along. That's perfectly okay. Those stories have their place and I enjoy those stories very much (see my recent review of Alastair Reynolds' THE PREFECT). THE NINE, however, gives us mysterious and interesting characters. The Alchemist and his partner in this story, Anselm Meteron, are deeper than we know so far (yes, THE NINE is the first book of the Thieves of Fate series) and definitely have some stuff lurking underneath. Rowena has some stuff going on too, and I think we're going to find out a lot more about her as well. Even the big bad monsters are interesting, although I'm still having a bit of a tough time with a creature who's eyes are in its feet.

I've said this before about any number of books I've picked up that aren't in my wheelhouse: this is not a book I would have normally picked up to read, but it suprised me and as a result I'm glad I did. I think you will be too. [-jak]

THE GREATEST SHOWMAN (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: This is a largely fictionalized and very glitzy account of the life of Phineas T. Barnum who went from suffering severe poverty to being one of the richest men in the world as the inventor of a new art form, the American circus. It dramatizes several of the more familiar incidents of his life and career, including his introductions of General Tom Thumb, his bearded lady and the tour of opera singer Jenny Lind. Fanciful in its production, this is a "spiced-up" version of the life of P. T. Barnum. Barnum builds his empire on imagination and dream. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

THE GREATEST SHOWMAN was written by Jenny Bicks and directed by Michael Gracey. Their hands turns the story into a musical imaginative extravaganza with 21st Century Broadway singing and pyrotechnic dancing. The story centers, of course, on Barnum and his ever-faithful wife and his dealings with his so-called oddities" who would have been called by the less pleasant name of "freaks." Barnum, played by Hugh Jackman, seems to make every effort to make his circus a bigotry-free environment for his oddities, but in the end he may have prejudice of his own.

There is not as much attention given to Barnum's American Museum as there is to his circus. In an alchemy not really explained by what we see onscreen, the screen Barnum just happens to run into perfect oddities for the real-life Barnum's exhibitions, a circumstance Barnum would have envied. They appear perfect without them being developed *and* made up and he can immediately see them as they will appear on-stage. At his first glance at his future bearded lady she looks exactly

how she will look on their stage.

Bicks' screenplay returns repeatedly to issues of prejudice, lookism, sexism, snobbism, bullying, and racism. It is a surprising volume for a single film. While Barnum defends his oddities from the bigots and bullies, we see him later in a different light. Barnum himself is not free from similar prejudice on a higher level. Jackman as the famous Master of Ceremonies adds a lot of class to the performers on the stages. Jackman does not look at all like Barnum, but he will do until a better one comes along.

The American musical has been foundering since the 1960s. We are not getting more musical plays like THE KING AND I or MY FAIR LADY. MOULIN ROUGE is not much of a substitute, much less LA LA LAND. Occasionally a new musical comes along giving us a successful musical and there may be a few more as a film comes along to test the waters. THE GREATEST SHOWMAN would probably not have been released but for the successful recent LA LA LAND. The irony is that while LA LA LAND probably enabled THE GREATEST SHOWMAN to be made, THE GREATEST SHOWMAN is by far the better musical. I rate the film a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. The proper name for the film should have been BARNUM! but there has already been a successful Broadway musical of that name. THE GREATEST SHOWMAN is available on streaming and disk.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1485796/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_greatest_showman_2017

[-mrl]

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

Here are my comments and ranking for "Best Novelette" for the Retro Hugo Awards for works published in 1942:

"Bridle and Saddle", by Isaac Asimov (Astounding Science Fiction, June 1942): This was rewritten somewhat and renamed "The Mayors" and was the third section of the novel FOUNDATION. At least "Foundation" (see below) was able to give some back story; "Bridle and Saddle" assumes (not unreasonably for the time) a familiarity with the earlier story, and no real ending. (Then again, one can claim that "The Foundation Trilogy" has the same problem, and all the later books Asimov wrote did not really solve it--nor the books by Greg Bear, Greg Benford, David Brin, or Donald Kingsbury.)

I am bothered by Asimov's notion (expressed through his characters) that Hari Seldon's predictions are basically inviolate, that what they should do is take no action at all until they have no choice in what action to take. I am not a trained diplomat, but this seems like a *terrible* plan. (And why if later on the secrecy of the existence of the Second Foundation is so important, does Seldon go out of his way to point it out during his appearance?)

"Foundation", by Isaac Asimov (Astounding Science Fiction, May 1942): This was rewritten slightly and renamed "The Encyclopedists" and was the second section of the novel FOUNDATION. Even though it ran as a stand-alone story, it really had no ending. In ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS THE GREAT SF STORIES 4 (1942), Asimov says that was deliberately left open-ended, to make Campbell ask for more stories, but I mean more than this: Asimov just tells you the immediate problem was solved, without telling you how. (He does reveal the answer in the next story, "Bridle and Saddle" (see above).)

"Goldfish Bowl", by Anson MacDonald (Robert A. Heinlein): (Astounding Science Fiction, March 1942): Alexei Panshin describes this as "lacking in significance and importance." Robert Wilfred Franson says that it is "a philosophical or theological story, told in a clear style and straightforward treatment to present its awesome subject matter in full force." Clearly, there is disagreement over this story. My feeling is that it is based on an intriguing idea but that parts of it seem to have been padded out and the delivery is not subtle. Still, Eisenberg's final message has become one of the classic lines of science fiction.

"The Star Mouse", by Fredric Brown (Planet Stories, Spring 1942): I guess back in 1942 the scientist's accent was supposed to be funny, but now it just seems annoying. The phonetic representation means it is harder to read; then again, maybe Brown *wanted* to have the reader pay more attention, though the fact that the rest of the story is ordinary English means that it only slightly accomplishes that. Without the "funny" accent, the story is really just its "surprise" ending. "There Shall Be Darkness", by C. L. Moore (Astounding Science Fiction, February 1942): This combination of science fiction, primitive race, and barbarians was quite popular 75 years ago. It doesn't read so well now, but the main female character is interesting in being strong while still not alienating the male readers of the time.

"The Weapon Shop", by A. E. van Vogt (Astounding Science Fiction, December 1942): This is yet another story about how arming civilians is important (I guess this may have been in response to the war in Europe). But Van Vogt was never an author to have just one idea, so he has portals to other planets and a scheme to defraud the main character as well. It later became part of the fix-up novel THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER.

Rankings: "Goldfish Bowl", "The Weapon Shop", "There Shall Be Darkness", no award, "Foundation", "The Star Mouse", "Bridle and Saddle"

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I hate to be near the sea, and to hear it raging and roaring like a wild beast in its den. It puts me in mind of the everlasting efforts of the human mind, struggling to be free and ending just where it began.
--William Hazlitt

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