

unusual species that are said to be "three times larger" than the usual mosquito variety that the locals are used to seeing and hosting.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLiqq_Y8Gn8

This came from just a few minutes reading the news. I am not even looking at the many disasters from hurricanes, earthquake, and Tsunamis. These likely have their origin in human activity.

None of these seem to be changing the world very fast, but they are harbingers that larger changes are coming. And most of the changes coming have not been seen yet. These may look like small changes. How much is your world affected by a population explosion of spiders in a Greek island? Not a lot, you may think. But it is probably a tiny and human-generated change in the environment that caused the giant spider invasion. Think how many changes there will be or are to the environment every day. Nobody knows what will be the cumulative effect of the environmental changes. You do not have to read science fiction any more. You can just read a newspaper. [-mrl]

STRANGE NATURE (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

CAPSULE: In the rural wetlands of Minnesota near Duluth, Nature appears to be changing in some most unnatural ways. People living near the water are disappearing and thought to be kidnapped. Other children are deforming and the as yet unborn are becoming deformed and monstrous. Particularly susceptible are the frogs born with extra limbs and misshapen bodies. Nature has become most twisted. Director: James Ojala; Writer: James Ojala; Stars: Stephen Tobolowsky, John Hennigan, Lisa Sheridan. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

In the mid-1960s a new kind of horror film was in vogue. It was the ecological horror film. With attention of many people, particularly students, was on how neglect and apathy had allowed the destruction of nature. A popular subgenre of the horror field suggested that nature would fight back or worse be destroyed by the people ravaging nature. Films like NO BLADE OF GRASS, THE SWARM, and (perhaps) THE BIRDS were made on the premise that nature was no longer the happy welcoming place it once was considered. A generation of frogs has been born with growths on their bodies and extra limbs. A dog gives birth to a litter of puppies and mother and puppies have inside organs sticking out. The mother dog is popping out of her flesh. Disturbing animals have come a long way since THE FLY (1958) or even THE FLY (1986). Besides nobody likes to see a dog die in a movie. Dogs are usually a symbol of innocence.

Lisa Sheridan plays Kim Sweet, a rock star who once was high on the charts for the life of one song, but was never able to repeat the trick. Her father is now dying and Kim want to do what she can to ease his pain. She brings along her eleven-year-old son. The town has seen much better days, even without mutant puppies. And with realistic-looking five-legged frogs and other suddenly blood-sucking frogs Kim suspects that the local American Patriot Chemicals could be connected. Kim finds the town in denial about its very serious ecological problems. Particularly defensive is town mayor played by (Stephen Tobolowsky, who may be best known by the film reference "Phil...? PHIL...!" He is the mayor of the town by reason of being in the greatest denial.

STRANGE NATURE is very much the kind of horror film that could have been made in the late 60s or early 70s. One difference is that the characters, foreground or background are really better fleshed out. That is important in a low budget horror film. Ojala recognizes that his viewer will not identify with a character who is poorly fleshed out. In fact, as a bonus much of the town seems believable. Ojala does a good job of making his characters believable, and he gives them some weight.

The plot may be familiar, but the characters are not and the characters are always watchable, for those of strong stomach. I rate it a low +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 7/10.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3113836/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/strange_nature < P> [-mrl]

HEAD ON by **John Scalzi** (copyright 2018, Tor, \$25.99, 335pp, ISBN 978-0-7653-8891-9) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

I'm not really sure what to make of John Scalzi's writing these days. He has won three Hugos--Best Fan Writer, Best Related Book, and Best Novel. He won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. He has won other awards and been finalists for many others. His most recent appearance on the Hugo ballot was this year in San Jose at Worldcon 76 for THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE. He continues to be popular. So why am I getting this nagging feeling that he's starting to go through the motions?

HEAD ON is a standalone sequel to 2014's LOCK IN. Just before I wrote that last sentence I reread my review of that book.

It turns out I feel the same way about HEAD ON as I did about LOCK IN.

There's a violent new sport in town played by Haden's controlling threeps called Hilketa. Hilketa is a team sport, the object of which is to score more goals than your opponent. Sounds pretty normal and boring, right? I mean, we've seen it before. Well, to score a goal a player must rip the head off of an opponent and carry it through a set of goal posts. Okay, that's a lot more interesting than the run of the mill goal scoring game, as long as you're into that whole ripping off the head thing. Anyway, this "sport" gives the Haden population something of their own they can do. The sport's popularity is on the rise, and the league is looking not only to expand within the U.S., it's looking to start leagues overseas.

The book starts out at a preseason game that is being used as a showcase for wealthy investors who the league is trying to convince to become owners of new franchises in the U.S. All is going swimmingly well. The crowd is loving the game, and the wealthy investors are being courted by league officials. Then the worst possible thing that could happen did happen: a player by the name of Duane Chapman dies on the field during the game. And thus we have the event that starts this novel rolling.

FBI agents Chris Shane, a Haden and the main character of the previous novel, and his partner Leslie Vann are assigned to the case. The obvious question is whether the death is murder or simply an accident.

What, you actually thought this was an accident? It wouldn't be much of a novel if it wasn't a murder, now would it?

There are some interesting things and ideas in play here, and that's not really unusual for a Scalzi novel. Scalzi is using the idea of the marginalization of minorities here. Threep technology is advancing such that "normal" humans will be able to ride in threep just like Hadens can, thus giving them the ability to take over the sport that was meant to be played by Hadens. There is a technology that allows fans of the sport to read the biometric data of any of the players they want during a match, as long as they pay an extra fee (Here we get two ideas for the price of one, where a consumer can pay an extra fee to get content that other consumers cannot--think premium cable channels--as well as the spectators can see what is going on with their favorite players in gory detail--think (and maybe it's a bit of a stretch) bloodthirsty spectators watching battles in ancient Rome. All good stuff.

The rest of it? Well, it becomes a police procedural detailing a murder investigation. There's infidelity, jealousy, doping, drug dealing, conspiracies, and twists. Scalzi uses the ideas and world that he built in LOCK IN to help move the story along, which of course you would expect him to do. But it feels like he thought "How can I use the LOCK IN universe stuff in another novel? Right, I'll do a murder mystery!"

There's really nothing wrong with that. But he's not really exploring anything that hasn't been explored before by him or anyone else. The technology may be a bit different, but the ideas are not. And given today's society, the ideas aren't even that old.

Within the last day or two of me writing this review, Scalzi said on Twitter that he writes for the money. And that's okay. He has to feed his family, pay for his daughter's college tuition, and make sure the cats are happy. And if the best way to do that is to write what he does, good for him. A lot of people can't do that. But he's done better than this, with novels like OLD MAN'S WAR and REDSHIRTS. I'd like to see him get back to that level of quality.

Then again he's popular. Who am I to judge, since I like him too? [-jak]

RUBICON: THE LAST YEARS OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC by Tom Holland (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This history book looks at the last years of the Roman Republic and how it became a dictatorship. It is a very detailed and absorbing account of that period. The end of the Roman Republic begins approximately around 100 B.C. This was the time when the generation that would end the Republic was born. Holland describes the rise to power of such leaders as Sulla, Pompey, Cicero and Julius Caesar. Leaders, such as Pompey, appealed to the masses by expanding the Republic through military conquest; others, like Cicero worked to reinforce class distinctions thru the senate. During the final years of the Republic the first ruling triumvirate was created, and it consisted of Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus. Crassus dies in the east after a battle with the Parthians. Caesar precipitated a civil war between himself and Pompey by crossing the Rubicon River and taking his army out of his province and into the Italian boot. Eventually Caesar would become the winner by defeating Pompey and obtaining a dictatorship of Rome. Caesar is appointed dictator for life and this becomes too much for those who wished for the Republic to be reestablished and therefore Caesar is assassinated. Another ruling triumvirate is established with Anthony, Octavian, and Lepidus after Caesar's death. Octavian defeats the others to gain the title of Augustus Caesar and become a long-term dictator of Rome. After this, Rome would never become a Republic again. This is a well-written and compelling narrative which anyone who has an interest in ancient history would enjoy. [-gf]

Gender Imbalance (letters of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt and Lowell Gilbert):

In response to [Mark's comments on gender selection](#) in the 10/05/18 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

[Mark wrote.] "Consider a simpler choice than cloning a whole person. What will be the effects when we can choose the gender of a baby? ... It would mean for a start that there would be less of this infanticide. Further, at first the Chinese would have a lot of male children and not many female. That would put girl children in very short supply. ... More likely it would end up in the long run with a 50%-50% split with each gender pretty much equally valued. But in the meantime with shortages of women to have, wouldn't that create a population shortage? In China? Be real." [-mrl]

Actually, we're already seeing this happen in China. I don't suppose it's altered the fertility rate a whole lot, but there are more unmarried men than marriageable women, and they resent it. They're known as "dry branches," IIRC. [-djh]

Mark responds:

As I said, "at first the Chinese would have a lot of male children and not many female. That would put girl children in very short supply."

Lowell Gilbert writes:

[Mark wrote.] "You see Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand" applies to more than just a natural tyranny of the Law of Averages. Those laws say that it is a random chance what the gender of your children are. With a 50%-50% distribution. But if you really could choose market forces would take over and they generally work smarter than pure chance." [-mrl]

So *that* is why women now run most of America's corporations!

Once they made up most of the workforce and got most of the college degrees, it was inevitable! [-lg]

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

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF by Tennessee Williams (1955) (ISBN 978-0-811-21602-9) has an underlying theme in common with DEATH OF A SALESMAN by Arthur Miller (1949) (ISBN 978-0-140-24773-2): mendacity,

In DEATH OF A SALESMAN, Willy Loman is constantly contradicting himself, and hence engaging in mendacity. In one line he says that Biff is lazy, then three lines later he says that one thing about Biff is that he is not lazy. In one place, he says he never taught Biff to steal, but elsewhere he tells him to go get some sand from the supply at the construction site. On page 80, Willy says Howard's father asked him what he thinks of the name "Howard" for his new son, but by page 97, he is saying that he actually named Howard. Most seriously, he is constantly lying to Biff about Biff's position at Bill Oliver's company, and has even convinced Biff that Biff was a sales manager, highly respected by Oliver, when in fact he was a shipping clerk who had to quit just ahead of being fired for stealing some of the stock.

In CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF the mendacity is of a more common and obvious kind: Brick is lying about his relationship with Skipper, Maggie is lying about her relationship with Brick, Gooper and Sister Woman are lying about the love of their children for Bib Daddy, and everyone is lying about Big Daddy's condition. In addition, just as everyone in DEATH OF A SALESMAN tells whatever lies will get them the best immediate result, in CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF, everyone is using their lies to jockey for the best position when Big Daddy dies.

There are other similarities. For example, Big Daddy treats Big Mama with the same high-handedness, rudeness, and cruelty that Willy does Linda. Big Mama refuses to give Big Daddy anything to ease his pain, while Linda refuses to do anything to stop Willie's self-destructive tendencies. Both Biff and Brick are football stars whose life went nowhere after that was over. (Was the name "Brick" inspired by "Biff"?)

One interesting cultural note: When CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF was written the idea of refusing "twilight sleep" (an injection of morphine and scopolamine) for childbirth was fairly radical, and the idea of having the father present in the room during the delivery downright peculiar. Now the latter is common (it began about twenty years after CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF was written), and "twilight sleep" was abandoned in the 1960s. Maybe Sister Woman was onto something. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

My theory is that all of Scottish cuisine is based on
a dare.

--Mike Myers

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