

peppers the size of blueberries. The fact that they are so small is the best argument I know for a merciful God.

Then there is another whole breed of hot. This is the mustard and horseradish sort of hot. These don't burn your tongue. The good ones just give you three hours of cluster headaches in about five seconds. A really good, freshly ground horseradish is quite nice. Then there is Japanese wasabi. That is a sort of green horseradish that you get with sushi. Less than the amount to cover the tip of a chopstick is a "wasab." (I have defined a wasab as a unit of strength equivalent to dropping one volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica on your nose from one foot up.) As a way of estimating, one standard slice of Grossinger's rye bread, generously spread with Frank's Mr. Mustard--the best mustard in the world--and diluted with one-eighth in thick slices of a good kosher salami will total about four or five wasabs. Divide that by the number of bites you'd get out of it and you get an estimate of the effect of each bite. [-mrl]

THE VERY BEST OF CAITLIN R. KIERNAN by **Caitlin R. Kiernan** (copyright 2019, Tachyon Publications, 432pp, trade paperback, ISBN 9781616963026) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

One of the things I've tried to do in recent years is expand my reading horizons. Yes, the bulk of my reading is science fiction, but even within that genre I've been branching out to works that in the past I would not have had an interest in reading. Many of these works are much more literary in nature, and while I don't necessarily seek them out, I don't shy away from them either (It could be argued that science fiction has been heading in a literary direction for years, and I don't disagree).

And while I prefer science fiction, I've discovered that every now and again I like to stick my toes in the water of horror and dark fiction. A few years ago one of the stories in this collection, "Interstate Love Song (Murder Ballad No. 8)" appears in one of Jonathan Strahan's "Best of the Year" anthologies, so when I was presented with the opportunity to read this collection of Kiernan's work I decided it was time to dive in (rather than just stick my toes in the water).

Kiernan's work is ... stunning. It is dark and disturbing. It is horrifying and frightening. The characters are at once both repulsive and fascinating. And the stories are unconventional, in the sense that there isn't always a traditional story structure. Some of the stories are just scenes out of people's lives, a snapshot if you will. And they are all beautifully written and intensely compelling. And they *all* make you want to know just what it is that is going on inside Kiernan's head.

It took a while for the book to percolate within me before I wrote this review. I can tell you that I knew only that one story, so I didn't know what I was getting myself into. Once I finished, I wasn't sure what I'd just read, or whether I liked it or not. So it took a week or so to gestate. And after all that, I realized that I had been blown away.

"The Prayer of Ninety Cats" tells the tale of a movie critic watching an art house movie about the infamous Elizabeth Bathory, the Blood Countess. I was completely unaware, until I'd read the story, that Bathory was an actual historical figure, the infamous Blood Countess. Apparently the movie told us things about her that aren't in any of the official accounts of Bathory's life. The previously mentioned "Interstate Love Song (Murder Ballad No. 8)" follows a pair of twins as they travel the country, leaving butchered people in their wake. And yet, there is a sadness to it that makes the reader almost want to feel for the characters. "One Tree Hill (The World as Cataclysm)" follows a science journalist to a remote section of New Hampshire (as with "The Prayer of Ninety Cats", there is an element of realism with this story, as Kiernan provides latitude and longitude coordinates that actually exist in New Hampshire - I checked) who is investigating a weird occurrence of a lightning strike on a cloudless night up on a hill. What she finds is unsettling.

Those are three of the last four stories in the book, and they're all terrific. But outstanding stories are scattered throughout the rest of the book as well. "The Mermaid of the Concrete Ocean", one of the non-horror stories in the book, follows an art critic as he interviews an elderly woman who was a model for a series of mermaid paintings. "A Season of Broken Dolls" is one of the most disturbing stories (to me, anyway) in the collection. A reporter, at the urging of her girlfriend, goes to an "art" display of disturbing and grotesque pieces made of living humans. "The Ammonite Violin (Murder Ballad No. 4)" (which leads me to wonder if Murder Ballads 1 through 3 and 5 through 7 have been written as well) is a fascinating look at a demented serial killer who creates violins from the remains of his victims. The collection leads off with "Andromeda Among the Stones", a Lovecraftian tale of what can best be described as a dysfunctional family. And "The Ape's Wife" just possibly gives you the answer to "whatever happened to Fay Wray?" "Galapagos" is a science fiction tale of a woman sent to investigate what happened to the ship Pilgrimage after it abandoned its mission and stopped responding to communications efforts. It is a combination of ALIEN and THE EXPANSE that I found fascinating.

As I go through the collection I find that I want to summarize all the stories. "The Maltese Unicorn", "Fairy Tale of Wood Street", and "Hydrarguros" are fascinating tales--and quite frankly, I just love the titles. There are 20 stories here, and each one of them has something has something different to offer the reader. One thing that's true is that every last one of them is compelling and thought provoking.

However, I would state that it is clear from reading this book that Caitlin R. Kiernan's work is not for every one. It's very different in tone, style, and substance. Readers looking for traditional horror or dark fiction probably won't find what they're looking for here. However, if you're willing to stay with this stuff (and it isn't necessarily easy to do so), I'm pretty sure you'll

come out the other side as a changed reader, a reader who will never be the same. [-jak]

Rotten Tomatoes (letter of comment by Daniel Kimmel):

In response to [Mark's comments on Rotten Tomatoes](#) in the 01/04/19 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Kimmel writes:

You know I side with you about Rotten Tomatoes. If all one looks at is the "Tomato Meter" then you're not making the best use of what RT offers. I've always suggested that people read some reviews of films they've already seen. When you find some critic with whom you tend to agree (or offers insights that expand your understanding of a film) then that's a person whose reviews you should seek out on a new movie. Only half tongue in cheek I add that if you find someone with whom you usually disagree, that can be useful too. Back in my civilian days (I've been reviewing for more than three decades) there was one critic that if we agreed more than once or twice a year I knew one of us must be ill.

Rotten Tomatoes provides links to many critics, with blurbs indicating what sort of review it is. Click on some links and see the reasons for those "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." [-dmk]

MORTAL ENGINES and AQUAMAN (letters of comment by Peter Trei and Kevin R):

In response to [Dale Skran's comments on MORTAL ENGINES and AQUAMAN](#) in the 01/04/19 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

I'll have to reconsider seeing [MORTAL ENGINES]. Sometimes I rely too heavily on the Rotten Tomatoes' number.

I'm even less familiar with the DCU than I am with the MCU, but found the movie OK--the visuals were stunning, but I detest paper-chase plots (the location of the cave where the trident was kept seems to be well-known, if the large number of failed questers therein is anything to go by), and there was a lot more fighting than I prefer.

I tend to go into nitpick mode with a lot of these movies, looking for inconsistencies in the world building. For example, it seems established early on that Aquaman's skin can't be penetrated by non-Atlantean steel. Given that, how did he get his tattoos? [-pt]

Mark responds:

It is tempting to rely too heavily on the Rotten Tomatoes' number. It is better to find a set of critics whom you tend to agree with. Rotten Tomatoes is a useful tool as an aggregator, but it is far from being a tool that grinds out a rating that can predict if a user will like the a film without knowing anything about the user. [-mrl]

Kevin R responds:

I haven't seen the AQUAMAN film yet, but one thing bugs me. I would have wanted to see a PRINCE NAMOR, THE SUB-MARINER film first, as Marvel's version has seniority by a few years.

That "hunt for the trident" plot is very familiar, also: <https://tinyurl.com/mtv-sub>.

Please note: "Adam Austin" was a nom de crayon of Gene Colan, known for long stints on IRON MAN, DR STRANGE and TOMB OF DRACULA.

I would have also preferred to see a film starring the original CAPTAIN MARVEL before the one the House of (Nicked) Ideas will be debuting soon. The SHAZAM! film featuring Billy Batson hits local screens April 5. I hope Dick Lupoff likes it!

<https://www.sdcomicfest.org/pat-and-richard-lupoff/>

Note also: Gene Colan was the first artist to depict tales of Mar-Vell of the Kree, from whose background the Danvers version was derived, and also those of the original GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY. [-kr]

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

I've fallen behind in writing about the authors and works covered in the Great Courses course on American Classics. Of WALDEN by Henry David Thoreau (ISBN 978-0-451-53216-9), I have little to say, except that his rural idyll was not quite the hermit's life people envision. He was half a mile from the railroad station, and close enough to town that he walked in every day or two, often having dinner with family and friends. And when he totes up his annual expenses for food, it very

conveniently comes to exactly the amount given in a housewives' book of the time, indicating that just maybe he was cooking not only the food, but the books as well.

Next was Edgar Allan Poe, of whom much has already been written, to which I have nothing to add to this time.

For Nathaniel Hawthorne, the book was THE SCARLET LETTER (ISBN 978-1-512-09056-7). This is Hawthorne's classic, so why did we have to read THE HOUSE OF SEVEN GABLES in high school? I suppose for the same reason that someone in sophomore English class got sent to the principal's office for saying Shakespeare had to marry his wife because she was pregnant. In any case, the short stories were of more interest, "The Minister's Black Veil", "Young Goodman Brown", and (particularly) "Wakefield". The latter may have inspired Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Enoch Arden", though there are clearly some major differences. (And the latter in turn inspired an Agatha Christie novel (TAKEN AT THE FLOOD) and an Agatha Christie ("While the Light Lasts").)

And then we get to Herman Melville. Obviously Professor Hammond spent most of his time on MOBY-DICK, but rather than attempt to write more here, I will just point you to my annotations and comments at . Instead, I will comment on "Benito Cereno" (ISBN 978-1-536-86417-5), a far more compact work (novelette-length by Hugo standards). I do not want to say too much about the plot, since it is best discovered by reading it. I will say that the narrative point of view is critical to the story, and while I would on one hand love to see a film of it, I have no idea how a film would manage to convey the third person limited point of view. (There has been a stage adaptation; I would be curious to see it.)

I will say that Melville manages to convey the stereotypical racial attitudes of his time. Captain Amaso Delano sees the Africans on the ship at best as loyal and fawning servants and at worst as animals. He compares them to does and fawns, to wolves, to Newfoundland dogs. He describes them as having "the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors." As the reader will discover, Melville does not write of these attitudes as someone who shares in them. If you have not read "Benito Cereno", go do so.

(I suppose I should also mention that "Benito Cereno" is based on the experience of real-life Captain Amaso Delano, which is available in several on-line archives.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

We have overcome the notion that mathematical truths have an existence independent and apart from our own minds. It is even strange to us that such a notion could ever have existed.

--James Newman

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