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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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The Theory and Origins of Piquant Food (Part 2) (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

[Last week](#) I was talking about how I like (some, I'm not crazy) really spicy food.

But in any case, what started me thinking is that I started looking at a jar of peppers in my refrigerator and I concluded that in a world of perversity there is no such thing as a reliable defense. Huh? Well, you see, way back somewhere there was a family of peppers with a problem. What was eating them? I don't know-- insects or something. Anyway, a couple of the kids were different. They had developed some sort of irritant. Insects that tried to take a bite out of them would fly off doing whatever the insect equivalent of cussing was. So these peppers had a good thing going and lived to reproduce with each other. First thing you know, they have established themselves and have big families. An insect bites one of them and starts singing, "Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This."

So the peppers start feeling really smug. They build their own country clubs, that sort of thing. Then, whammo! Along come humans. The first few see the peppers. "Hmmm, pretty colors. Like nice fruit. Me bite.... Hmmm! Mama said there'd be days like this." And eventually little humans come along and say to littler humans still, "Here, have something nice to eat from the tree." The next ten seconds gave man the idea for the air-raid siren.

But eventually that little human got tricked so many times that he got used to the taste. Then started putting the peppers in stews and things. Invited the older brothers and sisters and their families over for dinner. The Borgias used to use the same principle. Now things have gotten to the state that the pepper would be left alone by the humans if it didn't have the defense mechanism. After all, it isn't very big. Humans only eat the little peppers so they can enjoy having the pepper fight back. The worse a pepper defends itself against me, the more I like it. Rotten defense if you have so many masochists who look forward to the counter-attack. So go figure! [-mrl]

MARY POPPINS RETURNS (film review by Jim Susky):

An early memory for me is of seeing MARY POPPINS on the 4th-of-July at an Anchorage drive-in complete with post-

Midnight fireworks. Except for "The Wonderful World of Disney" (Sunday nights) and pretty much *all* the songs in grade school, that was it--until viewing on VHS circa 1989. My persistent reaction at that second viewing was how very comely Julie Andrews was at age 28.

Last night I saw MARY POPPINS RETURNS, starring an even more attractive Emily Blunt with a slightly more saucy and suggestive reading of the character. Except for last night I only recall seeing Blunt as a shotgun-toting babe with a flat Midwestern accent in LOOPER.

Still, Ms Blunt must have some kind of "bankability"--at least since I planned to see MARY POPPINS RETURNS after seeing her only once in a trailer some months ago.

It seems I am not alone--in his review, THE NEW YORKER's Anthony Lane provisionally stated:

"If Blunt is my favorite living actress..."

(and see <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/mary-poppins-returns-with-a-spoonful-less-sugar> for his alleged reasons)

Mere lead actress's looks cannot sustain a two-hour musical--I was utterly charmed by the film. It helps that I've always been a soft touch when it comes to musicals, but in general I thought the whole venture was well-conceived, casted, and sound-tracked from beginning to end. Hence, today I have dutifully reported to parents of young children that theirs will like the film and that they probably will as well. [-js]

THE CONSUMING FIRE by **John Scalzi** (copyright 2018, Tor, 320pp, ASIN: B078X255Y1, Audible Studios, 8 hours 19 minutes, ASIN: B07HN95TMY, narrated by Wil Wheaton) (audiobook review by Joe Karpierz):

THE CONSUMING FIRE is the second book of John Scalzi's "Interdependency" series. It's the follow-up to THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE. As a quick recap, the Interdependency is a galactic empire of sorts that is connected by the Flow, Scalzi's way of getting around the FTL problem. The Interdependency is a collapsing empire because the Flow stream itself is collapsing. There's certainly a lot that happened in the first book, but the point of it all is that the Flow stream is collapsing and thus the Interdependency will be collapsing right along with it.

So, what happens now? Clearly, an attempt must be made to salvage what can be salvaged, and to plan for the aftermath of the collapse of the Flow stream. As a reminder, all the planets in the Interdependency do not actually have a breathable atmosphere. All except End, that is, which at this point is cut off from the rest of the Interdependency because the Flow stream between End and the rest of civilization has collapsed. Anyway, people living on the rest of the planets are either in a dome or in a space station around the planets. They are not self sufficient, and thus there is a threat to all of the people of the Interdependency.

The story, then, revolves around Emperox (a gender neutral title) Grayland II trying to plan to save civilization while every one around her is trying to subvert her and get her out of office because they don't trust her. They don't believe she is competent to begin with, and now she is claiming to have visions. The first, last, and only Emperox to have visions was the very first one a thousand years prior (there is a whole sub plot behind those visions that I won't reveal, but let's just say they were convenient).

Marce Claremont, a Flow physicist who has accurately predicted the collapse of the Flow stream, works with rival scientist Hatide Roynold to learn that eventually--not now, not soon, but eventually--the Flow stream will reappear in a different configuration, connecting different planets and systems. Meanwhile, Flow shoals, the entry and exit points to the flow streams, will come and go in short intervals. This phenomenon, known as evanescence, provides a shoal to long lost Dalasylla, which was thought to be lost 800 years ago. Claremont, Roynold, and others travel to Dalasylla to discover what happened to life there, and see if what they learn can be useful in saving the Interdependent civilizations.

Like the first book, there's lots of subterfuge, political intrigue, infighting, and just all around nastiness. Kiva Lagos, possibly my favorite character in the series so far, is back and is as profane and irreverent as ever. She is, for me, the Crisjen Avasarala of The Interdependency (if you don't know who I'm talking about, why haven't you read The Expanse novels yet?).

When I reviewed Scalzi's novel prior to this one, HEAD ON, I stated that it felt like he was starting to mail it in. THE CONSUMING FIRE doesn't feel that way. If you follow Scalzi on social media or in his blog, you'll know that he actually wrote this novel in *two weeks*. That is, from the time he started typing until he turned it in, he spent two very crazy, sleepless, nasty weeks trying to get the work done. He admits to having it all in his head, but he apparently had done what a lot of us do, which is mismanage his time, so in order to meet his deadline he typed it out in two weeks. And to me, it doesn't show any signs of being rushed. THE CONSUMING FIRE is actually a pretty good second novel in a trilogy, all things considered.

Wil Wheaton once again does a great job narrating a Scalzi novel. I must be used to him by now, because his narration sounding like Scalzi in my head did not throw me out of the story like it occasionally did for THE COLLAPSING EMPIRE. At this point, if any one other than Wheaton narrates a John Scalzi novel, I'll be disappointed. [-jak]

Around the World in 80 Minutes? (letter of comment by Daniel T. Cox):

In response to [Evelyn's question about orbiting the earth in 80 minutes](#) in the 01/11/19 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Cox writes:

I used this calculator: http://www.calctool.org/CALC/phys/astronomy/earth_orbit

Some experimentation shows that the calculator treats the Earth as a point mass, but its input is in distance above average sea level (which I assume means Mean Sea Level, a.k.a. MSL). It gives geosynchronous orbit at 35870 km above MSL, and a 90-minute orbit at 300km above MSL. At sea level it gives an 84-minute orbit. The calculator gives 80 minutes for the orbital period if -225 km is entered for the altitude (effectively 225km below MSL).

Perhaps an 80-minute trip around the Earth would be possible by going above orbital speed and applying enough inward acceleration to keep the traveler from rising above 100km above MSL. Intuitively it seems beyond the abilities of existing rockets. It would be interesting to do the math and see how far beyond current rockets. [-dte]

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

Listening to a radio adaptation of "The Foundation Trilogy" I noticed for the first time that when Salvor Hardin notes that Anacreon has lost atomic power, he says, "Back to oil and coal, are they?" In 1951, oil and coal may have seemed inexhaustible (much as whales did to Harman Melville in 1851), but now the line seems ridiculous. The Galactic Empire has existed for twelve thousand years. There is no indication of solar, wind, or geothermal power (if so, surely Hardin would have mentioned them). Whatever level of technology Anacreon is at, coal and oil could hardly maintain it for more than a brief period of time.

I recently watched the 1989 TV movie AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS and then re-read the book AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS by Jules Verne (ISBN 978-0-670-86793-6), translator unknown (so it was probably an early, bad translation). This may explain some of the errors, but not the ones I talk about below; they are also errors in the original French.

For example, Verne refers to San Francisco as "the Californian capital" (Chapter 25), although he also refers to Sacramento as "the seat of the State government" (Chapter 26). He is definitely off-base, though, when he writes, "It was in 1862 that, in spite of the Southern Members of Congress, who wished a more southerly route, it was decided to lay the road between the forty-first and forty-second parallels." In 1862, the Civil War was raging, and there *were* no Southern Members of Congress.

More seriously, Verne has had Fogg emphasize that he must be in New York on the 11th. He then writes, "... at a quarter-past eleven in the evening of the 11th, the train stopped in the station... The 'China', for Liverpool, had started three-quarters of an hour before!" SPOILER AHEAD. Now, since the whole point of the book is that Fogg gained a day when he crossed the International Date Line, when he thinks he has arrived in New York on the 11th, it is actually the 10th, and the "China" should not have sailed. There is no explanation for this.

And while we're at it, the 1956 movie, the 1989 TV movie, and the 2004 movie all have a hot air balloon trip across France. This is not in the book. (This is hardly the biggest divergence from the novel of the 2004 film.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Books are like imprisoned souls till someone takes them
down from a shelf and frees them.
--Samuel Butler

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