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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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Table of Contents

[PBS Summer of Space and "Universe of Stories" Library Summer Reading Program](#)
(comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Canine Perception \(Part 1\)](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)
[Some Thoughts on TOY STORY 4](#) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[FRAU IM MOND](#) (letter of comment by Gary McGath)
[This Week's Reading](#) (SETTING THE EAST ABLAZE, BABEL, LINGO, and "Heroides")
(book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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PBS Summer of Space and "Universe of Stories" Library Summer Reading Program (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Art Stadlin put a copy of the PBS guide to the July programming for their "Summer of Space" in Dropbox at <https://tinyurl.com/void-pbs-summer-of-space>.

I'll note that this year's summer reading program at libraries is "Universe of Stories", and our local library's display as you walk in is filled with Alastair Reynolds, David Weber, and all sorts of other authors that one doesn't usually see in a featured library display. As part of their kick-off, they had someone demonstrating to younger kids a scale model of the solar system, and I will agree that it's a lot easier if one doesn't have to include Pluto. [-ecl]

Canine Perception (Part 1) (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Some articles about the intelligence of dogs got me thinking.

I want to ask the reader to consider how a dog sees the world. Now when you are a dog--and that is a situation I suspect the reader will never have to face. Or perhaps you have already mastered. Then as a dog your language skills are probably not as well- developed as they would be if you were a human. But I am sure that when a human talks to you as a dog, the dog is thinking, "Now what the HECK does this all mean? I am supposed to understand it or he wouldn't be saying it to me. Now what does it mean?" And with a dog putting himself under that sort of pressure you can bet that if the intelligence is there, the dog will pick up many human language skills.

I suspect that barking is really a dog's attempts at the verbal language he hears humans using, or as close to it as the dog can make with his throat. I should have mentioned that this idea of dogs trying to imitate humans is not so fanciful as it might sound. There is a canine behavior that animal behaviorists have said is an imitation of humans. When dogs are around humans sometimes they will pull back the corners of their mouths. I believe that they do it for the sake of humans and not for

dogs. Dogs do sometimes smile as a greeting to humans.

I would like to think that dogs are happy with the pact they have made living with humans. I doubt it because so much of their lives have become boredom. That has to be part of the reason a dog sleeps so much of the time. The figure I heard is that an American dog sleeps on the average 75% of its life. That means there is much less continuity in how long the day is. A dog wakes up several times a day and probably has a hard time of getting the concept of whether it is morning or afternoon. That would depend on how long he has slept.

About the nastiest punishment you can give a human is to put him in solitary confinement so he has nobody to talk to. Dogs do communicate with humans, mostly collecting information, but it cannot be as interesting as a human conversation. There dogs in the wild have the edge. Writers like Farley Mowat think that wild dogs have much more complex conversation than we imagine when they are talking with other dogs. And dogs talk on very large networks. In NEVER CRY WOLF, Mowat is out in the northern wilderness and an Inuit tells him that a stranger was coming and would arrive the following day. The prediction proves to be true and when Mowat asks how the old Inuit knew, he finds out he heard it in the howling of the wolves. Mowat does a sort of double take on the implications of that idea, but wolves network complex information with wolves at what must be great distances. (I may have wrong some of the details of the anecdote, but the conclusion is the one Mowat drew.)

More on this next week. [-mrl]

Some Thoughts on TOY STORY 4 (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

We recently saw TOY STORY 4, and while I am not going to write a full review, I do have a few thoughts on the film.

WARNING; SPOILERS AHEAD

If you have not seen the movie, I will be discussing important plot points, including the ending.

One aspect that everyone seems to have commented on is the switch to strong female characters. Not the humans--Bonnie may learn to cope with kindergarten, but is hardly a strong character. No, it's the female toys. In the previous films, Woody is the main character, and the leader of the toys. In TOY STORY 4, he may still be the main character, but as often as not, Bo Peep is the leader: coming up with plans, convincing other toys (including Woody) to do things that are necessary but that they may not be comfortable doing, etc. Gabby Gabby is also strong, and apparently the leader of her own gang of toys. Even Jessie gets a role of power when Bonnie puts the sheriff's badge on her.

The female toys are also better philosophers than the male toys. Gabby Gabby presents Woody with a watered-down version of the "trolley car problem". This being a PG movie, the question is not who should die, but who should get the working voice box: Woody (who has already twice experienced all the happiness of having a child) or Gabby (who has not had even one). This is similar to who should get an organ transplant: someone old or someone young? The movie has a very utilitarian answer, although the lack of a voice box doesn't seem to have handicapped most of the toys. (Maybe a defective voice box is worse than no voice box at all--but then just removing Gabby Gabby's would solve her problem.)

The real philosophical message is the ending. Throughout the four movies, Woody has defined his purpose in life as serving his child. Everything he does is driven by that motive. It's as if there was a "Brave New World" system where he was genetically created for this task, or worse, the world of the movie is saying that the toys are happy being slaves and serving their masters. But also throughout the four movies, we have seen Woody (and all the toys) as individuals with minds and emotions, as beings in their own right. Immanuel Kant wrote, "Act that you use humanity, whether in your person or in another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means" (And who would have thought an article on the "Toy Story" movies would be quoting Immanuel Kant?) The toys may not be human, but if they are presented as intelligent, feeling beings, then it would seem that one should apply this Kantian principle.

The conclusion of all this is that Woody *has* to go off with Bo Peep to seek his own destiny. For the filmmakers to have had him choose to stay with Bonnie as her servant/slave would be on a level with a film about slavery having the slaves decide to stay with their former master after Emancipation because they felt that was their duty in life, that that was all they were capable of doing or being. [-ecl]

FRAU IM MOND (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Mark's comments on FRAU IM MOND](#) in the 06/28/19 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

The accuracy in FRAU IM MOND is really impressive until the landing. A couple of nitpicks:

The controls were very badly placed, given that they had to be operated under high G-force. This allowed a dramatic effort to reach the controls, of course. They should have been within convenient reach of an acceleration couch. (But points for having acceleration couches!)

The creators didn't get that the astronauts would experience zero-G as soon as thrust was cut off, regardless of where they were in space.

After the landing, the movie turns into pure fantasy. It's an extremely long movie. Here I'm speaking as an accompanist. I never accompanied FRAU IM MOND for an audience; I preferred shorter movies that wouldn't wear me out as much. [-gmg]

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

Just some quick thoughts on a variety of books this week:

SETTING THE EAST ABLAZE by Peter Hopkirk (ISBN 978-0-719-56450-5) is a fairly concise history of the Bolsheviks early attempts to spread Marxism into Central Asia and India. I can't say I could always keep track of everyone and everyplace (my knowledge of the geography of central Asia is not all it should be), but fascinating nonetheless. (This is an example of the sort of random book found on the sale shelf at Second Time Books in Mount Laurel; for \$2 it seemed worth a try, and indeed it was. This sort of serendipity never happens when looking for a book online, which is why brick- and-mortar book stores and book sales are so important.)

For people interested in "popular linguistics writing" (sort of a parallel to "popular science writing", I can recommend Gaston Dorrin's BABEL: AROUND THE WORLD IN TWENTY LANGUAGES (ISBN 978-0- 802-14780-6) and LINGO: AROUND EUROPE IN SIXTY LANGUAGES (ISBN 978- 0-802-12571-2). The former is twenty chapters on the twenty most widely spoken languages, and their individual "foibles" (as Amazon's summary calls them). The latter is a look at sixty European languages, and their histories and foibles. I found them a whole lot of fun, and they pass muster by John McWhorter, who has recommended them on his "Lexicon Valley: podcast, so they are definitely worth your time if you have any interest oin this subject.

The "Classical Stuff You Should Know" podcast recently covered Ovid's "Heroides" (ISBN 978-0-140-42355-6), a collection of fifteen letters presented as having been written by classical Greek and Roman heroines to their husbands and lovers. For example, the first, from Penelope to Odysseus, begins, "This your Penelope sends to you, too-slow Ulysses; A letter in return does me no good; come yourself!" Some of the stories represented are familiar (e.g., Medea and Jason, Briseis and Achilles, or Dido and Aeneas); others will probably be new to most readers (e.g., Oeneone and Paris). My suggestion is to either read the unfamiliar back stories before the corresponding letters, or just read the ones that you know the stories for. In any case, this seems like some sort of proto- feminist literature, or at least an attempt to show these stories from the female point of view--yes, Odysseus was a great hero, but no one seems to talk about how crappy he was to Penelope. Everyone knows about Jason and the Argonauts (thanks to Ray Harryhausen), but few know how he dumped Medea for a trophy wife. And so on. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

That indefatigable and unsavory engine of pollution,
the dog.

--John Sparrow

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