

by Cixin Liu, Old Bridge Public Library, 7PM]
 July 23, 2020: CLIPPER OF THE CLOUDS by Jules Verne (a.k.a. ROBUR THE CONQUEROR, [Fr. title ROBUR LE CONQUERANT], published by Ace in 1961 in an omnibus titled MASTER OF THE WORLD, which is the title of the sequel), Old Bridge Public Library, 7PM
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3808>
 September 24, 2020: TBD from Europe/Latin America, Old Bridge Public Library, 7PM
 November 19, 2020: Rudyard Kipling:
 "A Matter of Fact" (1892)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16578>
 "The Ship That Found Herself" (1895)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2569>
 ".007" (1897)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2569>
 "Wireless" (1902)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9790>
 "With the Night Mail [Aerial Board of Control 1]" (1905)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/29135>
 "As Easy as A.B.C. [Aerial Board of Control 2]" (1912)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13085>
 "In the Same Boat" (1911)
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13085>
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Northern New Jersey events are listed at:
<http://www.sfsnnj.com/news.html>

My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for May (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Actually I am composing and writing this in late March. My world has changed a lot since the beginning of March and the odds suggest that you might be in a very different world from the world I am living in. How about a film that is about a dramatic world change. In this case it is the third film in Andrzej Wajda's war trilogy, the film ASHES AND DIAMONDS.

The setting is Poland, May 1945. Germans had very recently given up the country to the control of the Communists. Andrzej and Maciek, two soldiers from the Homeguard, botch an attempt to assassinate a certain Communist functionary. Their superior orders them to complete their mission.

Wajda is an artist at creating claustrophobic settings. This is his third film. His directly previous film was KANAL whose compatriots are hiding the Nazis hiding in sewers.

[ASHES AND DIAMONDS, Monday, May 11, 3:45 AM]

There are also a couple of "festivals":

Friday, May 1:

8:00 PM Cocoon (1985)
 10:15 PM It Came From Outer Space (1953)
 11:45 PM Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)
 2:15 AM Maniac (1963)
 3:45 AM Stop Me Before I Kill (1961)

Monday, May 18:

6:00 AM Devil Bat, The (1940)
 7:15 AM Doctor X (1932)
 8:45 AM Murder Of Dr. Harrigan, The (1936)
 10:00 AM Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1932)
 12:00 PM Brain That Wouldn't Die, The (1962)
 2:00 PM Hands of a Stranger (1962)
 4:15 PM Omega Man, The (1971)
 6:00 PM Terminal Man, The (1974)

Friday, May 22:

8:00 PM Mad Monster Party (1967)
 10:00 PM Daydreamer, The (1966)
 12:00 AM Wacky World of Mother Goose, The (1967)
 1:30 AM Nursery Rhyme Mysteries (1943)
 4:00 AM Eraserhead (1977)

[-mrl]

DRIFTWOOD by Marie Brennan (copyright 2020, Tachyon Publications, \$15.95 trade paperback (ISBN: 978-1-61696-346-0), \$9.99 digital formats (ISBN: 978-1-61696-347-7), 224pp) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

Marie Brennan is an award-winning author whose work first garnered award attention back in 2003. To me, however, she was unknown until I read DRIFTWOOD. Driftwood is a setting, a set of short fiction, and a novel. Driftwood a place is where worlds go to die, described as a "post-apocalyptic realm where the apocalypse has not ended". Worlds, towns, villages enter Driftwood at the mist, and slowly but surely migrate inwards, fragment, shrinking, and dying until they fall into the Crush, never to be seen or heard from again (If science fiction is your thing, think of the Crush as the center of a black hole and the shreds, mist, and everything else around it the event horizon of the black hole. It might be a quite accurate analogy, but it worked for me while I was reading it). Brennan over the years has written several short works set in Driftwood, and in the novel DRIFTWOOD brings them together with a linking story to tell the tale not only of Driftwood itself, but of one man, Last, who seems to be immortal. Yes, DRIFTWOOD is what we would call a fix-up novel, and it's only fitting that a series of stories about a fragmented world that is brought together by a mythical man should be tied together by a storyline that investigates whether that man is a hero or something else entirely.

The center of the story--that man named Last--has been around since anyone can remember. His world fell into the Crush many years ago, and by all rights he should be dead. But he isn't, and he has spent his extended lifetime being guide, taking people to many and various parts of the Shreds (the name for worlds that are splintered and fragmented and heading toward the Crush) to help with their hopes and dreams. But one question he cannot answer is how to save a particular world from dying. He doesn't know why he's still around, but since he is, he's doing the best he can to make life better for people heading toward the Crush. Or is he? The linking story, the bit that ties all the short pieces together, is that there is a rumor that he has died. People come from all over to pay respects, honor, and commemorate him, but the question arises of what kind of man was he really?

The stories approach the topic from multiple angles. The title story introduces the reader to the character of Last and the concept of Driftwood. Last is a guide, a helper of people, but there are some things he will not do, and some questions he does not want to answer. Last is a "one-blood", not of mixed Drifter ancestry. He is tracked down by Alsanit, also a one-blood who is looking for a way to save her world. Last has fielded this question before; his supplicants, if you will, believe that he must know the answer because he's lived forever. He answers them, but is always melancholy when all is said and done.

"A Heretic by Degrees" see a priest trying to save his dying king anyway he can. He enlists the aid of Last, and they travel the shreds far and wide looking for an answer. They don't save the king, but that's not the point of the story; the solution that Last provides is one that saves the priest's people, but makes those listening to the story wonder what ramifications his solution really had and what it meant about the kind of man Last was.

"Into the Wind" is a story of a Drifter trying to get something that she left behind in her home. If she could only get it, there may be a chance of saving the world, or so she thinks. The story is not about saving the world, the story is about making a keeping a promise. Last helps with that endeavor, although his ultimate solution may be a bit different than what was expected.

"The Ascent of Unreason" is one of my favorite stories of the book. The concept is simple. Tolyat wants to make a map of Driftwood, and he wants Last to help him. Once again, the point of the story isn't whether the map is actually made or not. For me the joy was reading how Last, normally a very stoic and serious man, really got caught up in the process, and the joy he experienced while helping Tolyat.

"Remembering the Light" is probably the most poignant and touching tale, as while Last is helping Noirin with her quest of remembering, we finally see him considering forgetting what he remembers about his own world. As he is the last of his people, if he forgets, his world will be forgotten as well. His decision, while the right one for him, is also a tough one.

"The God of Driftwood" is a new story for the novel. A mysterious man saves a young man, Ctarl, from committing suicide by jumping into the Crush. Ctarl is regularly beaten by his father, and he wants out, he wants it to end. But he survives and ends up a long way away from home, having been saved by the mysterious man, who he believes is a god, but who in reality is last. Ctarl builds up a cult around his belief of this god, and like most cults, things don't go well and end up somewhere else entirely. It is another of my favorites in the book.

"Smiling at the End of the World" is a piece of flash fiction that really doesn't fit with the story of Last but certainly is a piece of Driftwood myth and folklore.

I came into the novel not knowing what to expect other than what I read in the summary for the book. I was pleasantly surprised at what I got and am glad that I decided to give this one a go. Driftwood is an interesting and fractured place, and the stories in the novel DRIFTWOOD may be just the stories we need to get us through these fractured and difficult times. [-jak]

Non-Fantasy "Twilight Zone" Episodes (letters of comment by Daniel Kimmel and Steve Milton):

In response to [Mark's comments on non-fantasy "Twilight Zone" episodes](#) in the 04/17/20 issue of the MT VOID, Daniel

Kimmel writes:

"The Old Man in the Cave" comes to mind, as does "Time Enough at Last." Of course, both are set in a post-apocalyptic world.

Steve Milton suggests:

"Time Enough at Last"

Mark replies:

I would say that post-apocalypse stories are in the world of fantasy. Given another month or so that question may have to be re-thought. [-mrl]

THE WIND ON THE MOON and the "Prix Hugo" Speech (letters of comment by Paul Dormer, Kevin R, and John Hertz):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on the Hugo and Retro Hugo finalists](#) in the 04/17/20 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

[Evelyn writes,] "One of the novels, Eric Linklater's THE WIND ON THE MOON), is difficult/expensive to find."

Seems to have been republished--in the UK at least--in 2013 and is available from Amazon UK as a paperback. Also available for Kindle and from Kobo.

I remember reading that at primary school (ages 7-11). I found it fun. My first thought on reading that title was, that's the one where the two kids turn themselves into kangaroos. And I was right. I wonder how it'll hold up after nearly sixty years. [-pd]

John Hertz writes:

Someone told me E had trouble finding THE WIND ON THE MOON (E. Linklater, 1944), a fine book which reached this year's Retro-Hugo ballot.

There is a 2017 reprint which Penguin Random House offers at its Website <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/101832/the-wind-on-the-moon-by-eric-linklater-illustrated-by-nicolas-bentley>, Hudson Booksellers, IndieBound, Powell's, Target, Wal-Mart, Amazon.

There are various E-Book, Kindle, and Nook versions.

The 1951 reprint is variously available. I found it at the L.A. Public Library, see <http://file770.com/thanks-hampus>; that library has an E-book in its catalog; I don't know what public libraries are convenient for E. [-jh]

Evelyn responds:

Yes, it turns out that one can get it in the US for about \$6 total from Amazon. However, since I'm not actually voting, I may pass on ordering it. At this point, I'm trying to buy fewer books. And it is not available either hard-copy or electronically from my library consortium. (I remember checking earlier, but right now, the catalog is down and hard copies are unavailable anyway.) [-ecl]

Kevin R writes:

If one hasn't read it, the "Prix Hugo" speech is on Kim Newman's site.

<https://preview.tinyurl.com/PrixHugo2005>

<https://tinyurl.com/PrixHugo2005>

<https://johnnyalucard.com/fiction/online-fiction/2005-hugo-award-ceremony-script/>

That has brightened my day! [-kr]

Paul notes:

I was backstage for that and I couldn't hear a word. Had to read it afterwards. [-pd]

Social Distancing, the Zombie Apocalypse, and OUTBREAK (letter of comment by John Purcell):

Good morning, Evelyn and Mark. I trust you are both well and safely ensconced in your hidey-hole in New Jersey.

We are taking things a day at a time. Some times we try taking it two days at a time. We accomplish while we can and keeping an eye out for revenants.

Your survival experiences

All this reminds me of another movie besides CONTAGION (2011), one that could have been a lot better, OUTBREAK.

Not a good film. It started by showing you how threatening the situation was, but then made the villain Donald Sutherland. It was like TITANIC was dramatic enough that it did not need a gunfight.

For some reason this reminds me of all sorts of "menace from outer space" movies that use a viral infection or some malevolent alien spore that lands on planet Earth that begins wreaking havoc before the good guys win out over this "How can we do this? We're all gonna die!" situation. Some year in the future, a Ron Howard clone will direct a made-for-streaming digital movie of this year's viral apocalypse. Then again, Howard's my age, so in ten years he'd only be 76 and quite likely still be making movies, which means he could very well do this one. Let's see how accurate my prognostication works out, provided we are still around at that time.

Well, before I sign off I will just say that I have been doing a lot of reading in addition to my online classes, which means I'm keeping relatively current on the science fiction magazine scene. There are some good stories being published, and I might write about these in the next issue of my personalzine ASKEW. We shall see. [-jp]

MOBY-DICK and Great American Novels (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to [Kevin R.'s comments on MOBY-DICK](#) in the 01/17/20 issue of the MT VOID and [John Purcell's](#) in the 01/24/20 issue, John Hertz writes:

Gosh, Kevin R. quotes me to prove he hasn't read what he quoted (MT VOID 2102, vol. 38 no. 29, 17 Jan 20). I thank John Purcell (MT VOID 2103, vol. 38 no. 30, 24 Jan) for applauding the language of MOBY-DICK, and the details, which are vital; and for acknowledging it as an astonishing literary achievement. The same issue quotes James I of England and VI of Scotland, "Dr Donne's verses are like the peace of God, they pass all understanding" (John Donne 1572-1631). If this weren't so obviously meant as a witticism it might recall the joke whose punch line is "Sir, Mozart is not on trial here; you are."

Speaking of MOBY-DICK, people talk--and quarrel--about what might be great American novels. Now and then some SF is included. What about A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ (Miller, 1960)? A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT (Twain, 1889--a much misread book; have you electronic people seen my note, which you can find at ? THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ (Baum, 1900)? ALAS, BABYLON (Frank, 1959)? THE END OF ETERNITY (Asimov, 1955--see my note on it too)? SPACE CADET (Heinlein, 1948)? [-jh]

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

THE DECAMERON by Giovanni Boccaccio (translated by John Payne [*]) (Project Gutenberg) was written in 1353 and set during the Black Death, the premise being that ten people take refuge in a villa outside Florence, Italy, and entertain themselves by each telling one story a day for ten days.

[*] Note: all the spellings and translations are from Payne's translation, which is from 1886. I hope that those reading other translations will be able to at least recognize the characters' names. For example, "Jehannot" is "Giannotto" and "Melchizedek" is "Melchisedech: in the translation "Classical Stuff You Should Know" is using.

The "Classical Stuff You Should Know" (a.k.a. "Quarantine Stuff You Should Know", a.k.a. QSYSK) is (was) an hour-long weekly podcast by three teachers at a Classical Christian academy in Texas. However, social distancing being what it is, they have switched to a new format: one single podcaster, doing a twenty-minute (or so) daily podcast on THE DECAMERON, one story per day. I had originally thought that this column would not show up until mid-July, when the book was done. But it would be ludicrously long by then, so I will probably run it in sections (e.g., ten stories, or ten days' story-telling, at a time). Actually, even this results in really long columns--at least this first one! I realize this may also conflict with the columns about the Retro Hugo nominees, which should finish before the Hugo voting deadline, which is currently unknown, but I'm guessing late June or early July. I may end up with two columns in some issues.

The Introduction: Boccaccio writes, "On the following morning, Wednesday to wit, ... departing Florence, [they] set out upon their way; nor had they gone more than two short miles from the city, when they came to the place fore-appointed of them..."

Think about that--they were fleeing the city because of the plague, and their idea of how far they should travel was ... two miles! It turns out that medieval villages tended to be only two or three miles apart (cities were more distant from each other), so I guess two miles was considered a safe distance.

"Master Ciappelletto (I-1)": Boccaccio works at making sure Ciappelletto has broken all ten of the commandments and displayed all seven of the deadly sins, and then some. He particularly notes, "Of women he was as fond as dogs of the stick, but in the contrary he delighted more than any filthy fellow alive." The contrary to women being men, this is Boccaccio's roundabout way of saying that Ciappelletto was a homosexual. But I find this most interesting as having the seeds of some of what I see as part of Protestantism and the Reformation, namely, the idea that a human being (the priest) has the power to forgive all one's sins, and indeed, promote the sainthood of someone who conceals their sins. It is true that the Catholic Church says that intentionally concealing (mortal) sins makes the absolution null and void, but then one has to ask, why confess to a fallible human being at all?

"Abraham the Jew" (I-2): If the persistence of Christianity, even with its leaders and clerics apparently trying their hardest to destroy it, is enough reason for Abraham to believe in it and to convert, why isn't the persistence of Judaism, even with everyone trying their hardest to destroy it, enough reason for Jehannot to believe in it and to convert? As we are reminded every year at Passover in the Haggadah, "In each and every generation they rise up against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hands." And indeed, though in 1353 Boccaccio might write that Jehannot "fell to beseeching [Abraham] on friendly wise leave the errors of the Jewish faith and turn to the Christian verity, which he might see still wax and prosper, as being holy and good, whereas his own faith, on the contrary, was manifestly on the wane and dwindling to nought," yet now, 650 years later, Abraham's faith has not dwindled to nought. But I have to say that it is delightful to read a story of this period in which the Jew is not a villain, and in fact is an honorable and good man--this is certainly better than Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale" of Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln.

"Melchizedek and the Three Rings" (I-3): Not only a story in which the Jew is the hero, but a story of religious tolerance as well. It is worth noting that the Pope at the time of the Black Death and the writing of THE DECAMERON issued a papal bull condemning violence against the Jews over the Plague, said it was the Devil who convinced people that the Jews had caused the Plague, and directed the clergy to protect the Jews. This may have affected Boccaccio's favorable portrayal. Conversely, not Chaucer nor anyone else in Chaucer's England had seen a Jew in a hundred years, as they had been expelled by Edward I in 1290 and had been massacred in York a hundred years before that, in 1190.

The idea of giving the ring (and his inheritance) to all three sons seems to indicate that while the sons may have been worthy, the father clearly was not the sharpest tool in the shed (as you noted). It brings to mind Alexander saying he left his kingdom "to the strongest"--yeah, no risk of problems there.

"The Monk and the Abbot" (I-4): There is not much to comment on here--it's one of the standard tropes of the time, with a lustful monk who manages to get what he wants without punishment because the abbot is just as sinful. What seems to be noteworthy are the variations in translation.

In the original Italian, for example, the abbot is concerned about his weight and so has the girl on top and himself on the bottom. (Thanks, Google Translate!) John Payne (1886) and J. M. Rigg (1903) both refer to this, as does the translation used by QSYSK, but John Florio's 1620 translation (the first one into English) does not. However, Payne drops the pay-off, which is in the other versions (even Florio's): the monk says that he had not realized how monks were supposed to use women (i.e., which position to use), but having seen the abbot, he now knows and will always follow that example. Rigg is the only one to have both the set-up *and* the pay-off, and hence the only one to really translate the whole joke as a joke.

[At this point, I will comment that I would switch to Rigg, but it's readable only on my desktop (individual HTML pages at https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb, while Payne is downloadable from Project Gutenberg. Florio is much harder to read; it's Jacobean English without the modernized spelling one finds in most works from then.]

"The Marchioness and the King of France" (I-5): The podcaster seemed a bit confused by what the marchioness was trying to say when she said, "... women, albeit in apparel and dignities they may differ somewhat from others, are natheless all of the same fashion here as elsewhere."

I think the meaning of the marchioness's statement is expressed by the proverb "in the dark all cats are gray". Or as Benjamin Franklin elaborated in his "Advice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistress", (1745 June 25): "And as in the dark all Cats are grey, the Pleasure of corporal Enjoyment with an old Woman is at least equal, and frequently superior, every Knack being by Practice capable of Improvement."

In other words, the marchioness is saying that just as no matter how you "dress up" a hen (or as we would call it, a chicken), it will still seem like chicken, and a lot like any other chicken, so when it actually comes to physical love, the appearance of the person will not make any difference.

("Chicken" refers to the species, composed of hens and roosters. But my grandmother used to talk about how one made

chicken soup from a hen, which in the butcher shop parlance of her time meant an older chicken. These are now called stewing chickens. The bottom line of all this is when I read "hen", I think of someone/something older, which actually ties in well with Franklin's statement.)

"An Honest Man and Hypocrisy" (I-6): When the inquisitor accuses the good man by saying, "Then hast thou made Christ a wine-bibber and curious in wines of choice, as if he were Cinciglione or what not other of your drunken sots and tavern-haunters; and now thou speakest lowly and wouldst feign this to be a very light matter!" I was reminded of one of the many truly excellent speeches in the play A CASE OF LIBEL by Henry Denker:

"You do not want to be called onto the witness stand to defend your character. A good lawyer could destroy the character of Jesus Christ Himself. 'Mr. Christ, isn't it true that you are frequently seen in the company of known prostitutes and criminals? And haven't you often been seen drinking? Oh, only wine? And only at weddings? And didn't you cause a riot in the Temple, destroying the property of law-abiding merchants?' If He fares that way, how do you think you'll do?"

"Primasso and the Abbot of Cluny" (I-7): I don't have much to say about the story, except the idea that the abbot would suddenly get stingy towards this one person seems very contrived. I will however note that more recent translations probably eschew the word "niggardliness"; see also the next story. (Florio and Payne use it; Rigg uses "avarice". Rigg apparently says "Courtesy" instead of "Liberality" in #8 which strikes me as not the right thing at all.)

"The Niggardliness of Ermino" (I-8): Laretta voices the eternal complaint of older people (even though she is not that old), saying that something is "a sore and shameful reproach to the present age and a manifest proof that the virtues have departed this lower world and left us wretched mortals to wallow in the slough of the vices." In other words, we were all virtuous and noble in the past, but now are degraded and fallen. (And she is not referring to Edenic times, but just a few generations earlier. Ah, for the good old days!)

When Guglielmo offers to tell Ermino of something which he had never yet beheld, and it turns out to be Liberality, it is like the old Henny Youngman joke where he asks his wife where she wants to go for their anniversary. "Somewhere I have never been," she replies. "How about the kitchen?" he suggests.

"The King of Cyprus and a Gascon Lady" (I-9): The stories are getting shorter, and a bit repetitive. In this one at least, the fault that is corrected by a snappy line is not miserliness, but more like sloth: the King refuses to respond to attacks on his character, so a Gascon lady asks him to teach her how to ignore insults as well, which makes him realize his fault. (It is not entirely clear from either the original or any of the translation I have access to whether the lady was actually raped or merely accosted. Florio says "shee was villanously abused by certaine base wretches"; Payne says "she was shamefully abused of certain lewd fellows"; Rigg says "[she] met with brutal outrage at the hands of certain ruffians." The Italian is "da alcuni scellerati uomini villanamente fu oltraggiata", which Google translates as "she was outraged by some villainous men". One can presume she was raped, but the Italian does not use the specific word "violentata".)

The lady was returning from a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is particularly topical, since the closure this March of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was the first such closure since 1349 and the Black Plague.

"Master Alberto and the Lady" (I-10): Boccaccio has Pampinea give us a long speech about how the women of that time have given up clever or intelligent conversation and replaced it with fancy clothes and ornaments. It's quite sexist, and having it delivered by a female character does not make it magically un-sexist--it's clearly Boccaccio speaking. It is not unlike what Robert A. Heinlein does in STARSHIP TROOPERS, in which he has a character defend their political system of flogging for various offenses, allowing only veterans to vote, etc., by pointing out how well it works. Heinlein is hoping you don't notice it works that well because he wrote it that way. Similarly, Boccaccio is hoping you believe this speech about women because it is given by a woman, without remembering that he (a man) wrote it that way.

Someone (I wish I could remember who) said that fiction is really what George Orwell called "doublethink" in 1984: "holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them." We know that Elizabeth Bennett is imaginary, but as we are reading PRIDE AND PREJUDICE we accept (at least at some level) her reality.

After the tenth tale, the Queen for the next day is chosen and she sets a theme for the stories to be told: reversals of fortune (from bad to good).

To be continued (in two weeks or so). [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
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Quote of the Week:

When any organizational entity expands beyond 21 members,
the real power will be in some smaller body.

--C. Northcote Parkinson

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