

MT VOID 06/05/20 -- Vol. 38, No. 49, Whole Number 2122



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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Nebula Award Winners:

- Best Novel: A SONG FOR A NEW DAY by Sarah Pinsker
- Best Novella: "This Is How You Lose the Time War" by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone
- Best Novelette: "Carpe Glitter" by Cat Rambo
- Best Short Story: "Give the Family My Love" by A. T. Greenblatt
- Ray Bradbury Nebula Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation: GOOD OMENS: "Hard Times" written by Neil Gaiman
- Andre Norton Nebula Award for Middle Grade and Young Adult Fiction: "Riverland" by Fran Wilde
- Best Game Writing: The Outer Worlds by Leonard Boyarsky, Kate Dollarhyde, Paul Kirsch, Chris L'Etoile, Daniel McPhee, Carrie Patel, Nitai Poddar, Marc Soskin, and Megan Starks
- Grand Master: Lois McMaster Bujold

Will Books Spoil Human Thought? (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I think we have to take a look at how technology is spoiling our very existence. Technology and time seem to destroy all of the great arts. And I can tell you when it started to happen. I think it was the printing press that did us all in. There was a time when we could appreciate great works of art like the Iliad. Nowadays who really listens to the Iliad any more? Nobody. And I'll tell you why. It's that damn printing press.

When the Iliad was first told, that was really something. People used to wait for weeks, looking forward to hearing it presented. And what a show it was. The poet would sing it and play the lyre. You never got tired of it because it was different every time. Different singers would tell it differently, stressing this aspect or that. You could really feel you were taking a voyage on that wine-dark sea. The story really lived for you. Then what happened? That German guy found a way to take a press and squash this living thing onto a piece of paper like a bug. Now anybody can get it smashed onto paper and read it any time. But what have they got? Is there lyre music to go along with the story? No! Can the teller read his audience and tailor the telling to the audience? NO! Are there even any differences from one telling to the repeat? No way, Jose!

But it just takes one printing press to make hundreds, or thousands of copies. The power of big money just lets the presses roll. And there are always chuckleheads who are willing to shell out good money for this printed abomination. And they get what they deserve, a lifeless thing on paper.

Look what books are doing to family values. When the poet came to retell the story of the Iliad, whole families got together to hear it. It was something the family could do together, to enjoy together. Now as soon as dinner is over you have the kids going off to read some book by themselves. You do not even know whThey are in their own little world, cut off from everybody else. Parents these days are lucky if they even remember what their children look like. And who knows what they are reading? Who knows what ideas are being put in their heads? Oh, we all know that parents should monitor what books their children are reading, but how many really do? Let me tell you, some of the things written in these books shouldn't be shown to a dog, much less an impressionable child.

Now I want you to try a little experiment. Take your favorite book, if you have one. Take a funny passage and cut out an "r". Take a sad passage and cut out an "r". Don't worry about damaging the book. You cannot damage so worthless a thing; you can only make it harder to read. Now mix up those two letters "r". Which was which? You can't tell can you? Your book was printed with movable type. On the printing press it may even be the same piece of metal that printed those two letters "r". I can tell you if a singer sang you the story he would not pronounce those two letters exactly alike. But the two letters were put on the paper by a dead piece of metal. Probably it was a piece of lead. The stupid senseless piece of metal does not know that one of these portions is so sad and the other is joyously happy. It just knows how to stamp one letter "r" just like every other letter it has ever stamped it its whole, long, senseless life.

And what about plays? It is just such a small part of a play that is what the actors say. There are a hundred different ways to say a line, but they all write the same way on paper. Try saying "Hello" as if to your lover. Try saying "Hello" as if to your worst enemy. Try saying "Hello" as if to your boss. They are almost three different words. I say almost because once they are applied to paper they are all identical. "Hello" is "Hello" is "Hello." That is how the printing press treats them. But you and I know they are almost entirely different.

The venerated Plato did not trust his great arguments to be put on paper. What if someone reading them had a question? What if they wanted to counter argue? They have not a chance. Try arguing with a piece of paper. Try arguing with a book. And these pitiful readers think they are in contact with the great Plato by reading these dead skins, these books.

And still these printing presses roll on and on and on. As long as there is money to be made promising to sell wisdom and instead giving people these dead paper things. And the people who profit from them do not care a bit about how they are affecting the world. It is all merely a question of profit. The people who spend their time not seeing the real world but engrossed in these lifeless paper things, reading these books, they are almost degenerates. They have lost their humanity and what a poor thing they are selling out for! I guess we have to get used to technology taking everything of value from our lives, sucking it dry for profit, and spitting it out in these lifeless things, this printed form. The genie is out of the bottle and there is no way to stop it now. But we don't have to like it.

"Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body." --Ecclesiastes 12:12

[-mrl]

Marco Polo, Bats, and Retro-Hugos (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky):

In response to various comments in the MT VOID, Taras Wolansky writes:

After Coronavirus and, now, the murder hornet, I have but one thing to say: Curse you, Marco Polo!!!

Then a bat got into our house, we have no idea how. We eventually got it to fly out through an open door, without determining whether it was a sinister virus bat sent by the insidious Doctor WuFlu Manchu.

In a more serious vein, Wuhan, China is ground zero not just for COVID-19, but also for an entirely different epidemic. According to ABC, it is the chief source of chemical precursors for the manufacture of the illegal narcotic, fentanyl.

Whenever the Retro-Hugos come around, my first action is always to peruse the relevant year of ISAAC ASIMOV'S GREAT SF STORIES; my second, to check the SCIENCE FICTION HALL OF FAME. It's a way of zeroing in on the generally accepted classics of that year.

Here's what I found, this time.

Best Novella:

"Killdozer" by Theodore Sturgeon (Great SF 1944)

Best Novelette:

"Arena" by Fredric Brown (Great SF 1944 & Hall of Fame)
 "City" by Clifford D. Simak (Great SF 1944)
 "No Woman Born" by C. L. Moore (Great SF 1944)
 "When the Bough Breaks" by Lewis Padgett (Great SF 1944)

Best Short Story:

"Desertion" by Clifford D. Simak (Great SF 1944)
 "Far Centaurus" by A. E. van Vogt (Great SF 1944)
 "Huddling Place" by Clifford D. Simak (Great SF 1944 & Hall of Fame)

I will probably grant first place in their categories to "Far Centaurus" and "No Woman Born", in honor of their astonishing originality--in the context of 1944, of course. Interestingly, these are the first and last stories, respectively, in the Asimov best of 1944 collection.

Van Vogt, probably the most influential SF author of World War II (when Heinlein and DeCamp and the youngster Asimov were doing war research), I honor for recognizing that the future will be a place strange to his readers. In the stories collected as MISSION TO THE STARS, for example, an intergalactic warship with a crew of thirty thousand is commanded by a woman. In "Far Centaurus", the brave astronauts who embark on a five-century voyage in suspended animation wake up to find their descendants regard them as uncouth primitives who don't even use perfume like civilized men.

When I saw James Cameron's AVATAR (2009), Simak's "Desertion", about humans abandoning Earth for a blissful life on Jupiter, immediately came to mind. Judging from Evelyn's description, I see that Poul Anderson's thematically similar 1957 novelette, "Call Me Joe", resembles the movie even more closely.

Speaking of James Cameron, John Purcell writes, "TITANIC was dramatic enough that it did not need a gunfight." Like the movie SAN ANDREAS (2015), Cameron realized TITANIC needed a blue-collar hero and a cowardly, upper-class villain. In real life, during the disaster, the rich people behaved well while the poor people behaved badly--but who wants to see that.

Finally, Evelyn, I look forward to your continuing explorations of the DECAMERON. [-tw]

Evelyn responds:

The "Decameron" series of podcasts seemed to have petered out only halfway through Day Two, but I will be continuing, at least for a while. I had paused, hoping they would resume, but it's been three weeks, so I will journey on alone... [-ecl]

Scary Movies (letter of comment by Guy Lillian):

In response to the MT VOID in general and Mark's comments on scary movies in the 05/01/20 issue of the MT VOID in particular, Guy Lillian writes in ZINE DUMP #49:

Every week a new issue appears in my inbox, another topic investigated and propounded upon, well-turned and entertaining every time. Check out Vol, 38 No. 44 (whole number 2117)--listing horror films or TV shows that frightened him at certain ages, Mark mentions two I remember: "The Electrified Man" on CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT and "Image of Death", the "face on the wall" episode of ONE STEP BEYOND. Both scared the bejusus out of me when I was a wee tot. (Reminded that I switched off the former as a kid. I looked it up on YouTube and finished the show at last.) I'd add "And When the Sky was Opened", the classic TWILIGHT ZONE with Rod Taylor and Jim Hutton, as another show that thoroughly freaked me out on first, pre-adolescent viewing ("someone ... or some thing ... made a mistake ..."). Poor Ms. Argo--babysitting for me--had to spend an hour calming me down. Anyway, good stuff each and every week, deserving of far more recognition than it receives. [-gl]

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

A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR by Daniel Defoe (ISBN 978-0-140-43785- 0) was written about 1665, but sounds so current. I should start by saying this is fiction, albeit heavily fact-based. (In many ways, it's one long info-dump.) Pepys for reportage, Defoe for fiction. Defoe wrote this in response to a resurgence of the Plague in Marseilles in 1720, because people had forgotten how bad the Plague could be. Defoe himself was born in 1660, and so was only five at the time of the Great Plague, but did have some memories of it, as well as using contemporary reports as a basis of some of his novel.

Even from the very beginning, we see parallels. Defoe talks about the official deaths from the Plague, and then notes that what we now call "excess deaths" were considerably higher, and that probably most or all of those were attributable to the Plague.

He writes about streets being deserted, and even where there were people in the streets, they were in walking in the center to avoid being close to any of the houses.

Unemployment? Servants by the thousands found themselves let go as their masters closed up their town houses and fled to the country. Only public charity saves any of them.

People looked for preventatives and cures and "even poisoned themselves beforehand for fear of the poison of the infection..." Theaters were closed, and serving food at taverns was forbidden. (Taverns could stay open for drinking, but there was a curfew.) People assaulted those in charge of making sure quarantine and other rules were followed. Those who could afford to do so stocked up on food and drink and locked themselves within their homes.

People started doing other things as "social distancing". "When any one bought a joint of meat in the market they would not take it off the butcher's hand, but took it off the hooks themselves. On the other hand, the butcher would not touch the money, but have it put in a pot of vinegar, which he kept for that purpose. The buyer carried always small money to make up any odd sum, that they might take no change.. They carried bottles of scents and perfumes in their hands [their version of hand cleaner], but then the poor could not do even these things, and they went at all hazards." And "My Lord Mayor had a low gallery built on purpose in his hall, where he stood a little removed from the crowd when any complaint came to be heard, that he might appear with as much safety as possible."

Not just domestic servants were unemployed. Defoe lists master- workmen, dock workers, home builders and repairers, merchant sailors, and so on.

As to the spread, Defoe (or rather, his narrator) makes clear that it was often spread by those whom we would call "asymptomatic"--or at least those who had not yet shown symptoms. He also accepted that material goods could spread the Plague. What he did not seem to know was the role that fleas played in the spread.

Unlike our current pandemic, the Plague in London seemed to sweep across the city, starting with the western side. By the time it reached the eastern side, the west had mostly recovered, and Defoe says this saved the town, because it meant there were always people who could perform the essential tasks. However, this has a parallel in our notion of "flattening the curve": not overwhelming the hospitals by having everyone sick at once. Ours may not be geographical in nature, but the concept is the same.

In short, one finds so much of contemporary relevance in A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR that it is truly startling. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

A Higgs boson walks into a church, and the priest says
"I'm so glad you've come--we couldn't have mass without
you."

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