

truck than he can legally control. So why should trucks be allowed to intimidate other drivers to give them a wide berth? Some trucks have signs that say, "This truck pays \$9,867,532 in road taxes each year," my first question is what the heck is he hauling that he can afford to pay that much? Must be funny white powder from Columbia. But even so, is it fair to ask this guy to bear so much of the burden of road taxes? Damn straight it is as if they are driving the Interstate. That truck has 38 wheels on it, give or take a couple (not counting the two little wheels that don't reach the ground and evolution is in the process of eliminating; they used to serve a function in prehistoric trucks, but these days they just seem to go along for the ride). The reason for all the wheels is that those suckers are heavy. You watch an ant walk across a cookie leaving it not visibly changed. Then you step on the cookie. Then you can tell me why you think a really heavy truck pays so much in road tax. [-mrl]

Some Random Comments on THE WIZARD OF OZ (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Plants in Munchkinland look very artificial--very plastic, though I am not sure plastic was what was used. It might have been some sort of paper or wood with a shiny glaze.

This is a very "lookist" movie ("only bad witches are ugly").

The Munchkins seem under the rule of both Glinda and the Wizard, without having much autonomy.

Munchkinland seems to be about four square blocks (unless Dorothy just happened to land very close to one edge).

To where do the other two roads at the scarecrow's intersection lead?

Mark asks, "Have you ever won a fight by ripping pieces off yourself and throwing them at people?"

Who sent the snow to wake Dorothy and the others up?

How does the gatekeeper know about the ruby slippers?

Doesn't it bother the Wizard even a little that he sent Dorothy (supposedly a young child) and her friends on what was basically a suicide mission? He claims he is a good man, but his behavior doesn't seem to support that.

The Scarecrow says, "The sum of the square roots of any two sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side." He needs to return his new brain as defective. This sound vaguely like Pythagoras's Theorem, but that is, "The sum of the *squares* of the two sides adjacent to the right angle in a *right* triangle is equal to the *square* of the remaining side."

The "Emeraldites" seemed to have picked their ruler for foolish reasons, and now they are stuck with the Triumvirate he has picked to succeed him. Why does this sound like how the Roman Empire went bad (see my book column below)? [-ecl]

Books (letters of comment by Fred Lerner and Jay E. Morris):

In response to [Mark's comments on books](#) in the 06/05/20 issue of the MT VOID, Fred Lerner writes:

Have you ever seen "Benjamin Bagley's Beowulf"? He declaims an abridged version of the poem in the original Anglo-Saxon, accompanying himself on a replica of a thousand-year-old lute. Sheryl and I saw his performance at Dartmouth College several years ago. I've studied Anglo-Saxon, and after a few beers I can (and all too often will) recite the last twelve lines of "Beowulf" from memory, so naturally I enjoyed the Bagley version. Sheryl had never read "Beowulf" in either Old or Modern English. She had seen many more live drama performances than I ever have, and she said that "Benjamin Bagley's Beowulf" was one of the best evenings of theater that she had ever experienced. Bagley also performs other Northern material. If you ever get the chance to see him, don't miss it! [-fl]

Evelyn responds:

At last, someone who uses the term "Old English" correctly! I flogged the "Classical Stuff You Should Know" guys so often on it that they now automatically correct themselves after they mis-refer to Old English, which I suppose is a victory of sorts. [-ecl]

Jay E. Morris writes:

[Mark wrote,] "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.

Well, sometimes two. On the rare occasion, the same. [-jem]

Books, "The Changeling", and "Trog" (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky:

In response to [Mark's comments on books](#) in the 06/05/20 issue of the MT VOID, Taras Wolansky writes:

When I read Mark's disquisition on the danger so-called "books" pose to society, my immediate thought was, "True Wisdom. True."

It certainly puts a different light on the burning of Uncle Hugo's bookstore in Minneapolis. [-tw[]

In response to [Evelyn's comments on the Retro Hugo Award novella finalists](#) in the 05/29/20 issue of the MT VOID, Taras writes:

The trick to reading those two Retro Hugo-nominated novellas that you skipped is to invert the colors, giving white letters on a blue background, and then stretching the text until the type is a good size to read.

"The Changeling" by A. E. Van Vogt really brings out what many critics have noted: his influence on Philip K. Dick. As the story opens, a self-satisfied businessman suddenly realizes there is no way his memories can possibly be real. For one thing, he should be 50 years old, but looks only 30. And what's this about losing a limb in the war ...

The story offers yet another one of those trippy, dreamlike Van Vogtian plots that made young critic Damon Knight pull out his hair. A sinister American President plots to make himself President for Life, except he intends that life to be eternal.

When the story was written, FDR was running for an unprecedented fourth term, which Van Vogt may have found concerning, even as a Canadian.

As a sort of throw-away, the sinister President's henchmen are, well, henchwomen: "equalized" women, who have undergone a treatment to make them as strong as men, but without messing them up like steroids. A plausible extrapolation, even 75 years later.

"Trog" by Murray Leinster has its moments. Its visions of a partly burned and largely abandoned Manhattan are particularly evocative at the present moment. And as the heroes lay a trap for an enemy they don't understand and can't see, it's genuinely suspenseful.

However, when they finally do understand that enemy, well, let's just say it's of its time. The solution the story offers, on the other hand, is well after its time; that is, it's something Leinster might have come up with in 1934 or even 1924.

The only significant female character has no role in the story but to ooh and aah as the engineer heroes save the day. I can't quite shake the sneaking suspicion that the character was intended as a parody, like the dumb blonde in Monty Python's sci-fi episode a quarter of a century later, but I may be giving Leinster too much credit. [-tw]

Books (letter of comment by Peter Trei):

In response to [Mark's comments on books](#) in the 06/05/20 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

This brings back memories of an essay I wrote back in 2002, when the entertainment industry was trying to force into being mandatory hardware IP protection into all electronic devices...

The bill being lampooned: <https://www.wired.com/2001/09/new-copyright-bill-heading-to-dc/>

[At the time, I wrote,] I've been trying to think of an analogy to show just how awful the idea of the SSSCA [The Security Systems Standards and Certification Act] is. I've had to go back a way. A long way.

The Original SSSCA.

Statement of Yakval Enti, spokesman of the MPAA (Mnemonists, Praise-singers, and Anthemists Association) to His Highness Hammurabi, King of Sumeria:

Your Majesty: I wish to call you attention to a severe threat to the security of your kingdom, and the livelihoods of thousands of your subjects.

After Shamash sets and the people kick back after a long day of growing millet, they desire entertainment. Their favorite

forms are stories, tales, and sagas, told by the members of the MPAA. Talented boys spend up to twelve years learning the tales by heart at the feet of the masters. Any evening MPAA members can be found in the taverns singing the old tales, praising the praiseworthy, and creating new tales from the old.

This system has worked well since the beginning of time--there were storytellers at your coronation, there were storytellers at your father's coronation, and there were storytellers in the caves of our ancestors.

This natural arrangement is now threatened from an unexpected direction - the scribes and accountants. The geeks' system of recording numbers and quantities has been perverted to freeze speech onto clay.

Understand the threat to our business model. At the moment, if someone wants to hear 'The Tale of the Ox, the Ass and the Sumerian', they find an MPAA member, pay him, and sit back to listen to the whole four hour saga. While anyone could recall and tell others the general outline, only MPAA members know every detail and can give the listener the whole story. If you want to hear it again, you pay again. Thousands of MPAA members rely on this fact for their livelihoods.

With the recent invention of "writing" the system is in danger of collapse. We've found that some scribes are actually "recording" entire sagas onto clay. Any scribe can "read" these out to people for free or for money, complete and word-for-word, without being a member of or paying the MPAA! A scribe who has obtained a set of tablets of an story can even read it an unlimited number of times, or (worst of all) make copies. This is starting to have an economic impact on our membership. Consider Rimat-Ninsun, whose masterwork "The Epic of Gilgamesh" took him three years to create, and who looked to it to put bread on his table into his old age, as he told it for money, or let others tell it under paid license after learning it from him. 'Gilgamesh' is now circulating on 12 clay tablets, and Rimat is starving. Who will bother to create new tales if they are just going to be written down?

"Writing" presents insidious dangers to your kingdom as well. It can be anonymous. Before writing, any message arrived with a person to speak it, who could be held accountable for their speech. With writing, it is impossible to tell what scribe "wrote" a message. Anonymous threats, kidnap notes, and untraceable sedition are now possible. Clearly "writing" carries with it far greater problems for our civilization than it does advantages.

However, scribes, accountants, and their skills are essential to business, contracts, laws, and the collection of taxes. We just need to make sure that they are controlled properly.

I therefore propose the Scribal Stylus Safety Control Act. (SSSCA). This requires every scribe to have an MPAA approved, "literate" slave with him at all times, peering over his shoulder. If a scribe is seen to be "writing" something other than accounting information, for example a story (stories are the province of MPAA bards), or a message (which should have been given to a paid mnemomist for delivery), or anything seditious, then the slave will take away the scribe's stylus and call the authorities. I ask you to have this Act "written" into your Code of Law.

Is this difficult? Yes. Is it expensive? Yes. However, it is clear that without strict controls, widespread "writing" will not only destroy the entertainment industry, it will threaten civilisation itself!

[-pt]

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

ARE WE ROME? THE FALL OF AN EMPIRE AND THE FATE OF AMERICA by Cullen Murphy (Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 978-0-618-74222-6) was published in 2007, and Murphy saw parallels between the current condition of America and the end of the Western Roman Empire. Nowadays people are more likely to see a parallel with the fall of the Roman Republic, five hundred years earlier, with its introduction of violence as a means to a political end, its debates about citizenship, its movement towards rule of the few and eventually the one, and its growing wealth inequality. The main book in this regard is THE STORM BEFORE THE STORM: THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC by Mike Duncan (PublicAffairs, ISBN 978-1-610-39721-6). One can argue that both have aspects of truth. We still have a lot of the characteristics of the Republic, but we also have the equivalent of the size and the bureaucracy of the Empire. Read them both and you can get really depressed. (Even though ARE WE ROME? was written in 2007, it has a reference to Donald Trump: it mentions "the vulgarity of Donald Trump".)

Duncan's book is more of a straight history book; the parallels are left for the reader to draw. On the other hand, Murphy's parallels are explicit, and the point of the book.

I am also re-listening to Duncan's "History of Rome" podcasts and have to say that Murphy is certainly on to something in parallels to the Empire. For example, Duncan points out that Valentinian began the custom of emperors sending generals to fight invaders rather than taking command personally. Valentinian realized that if the general won, the emperor could still take the credit, but if the general lost, the general would take all the blame. Now we see politicians who want to take credit

for everything good, but blame someone else for everything bad.

And refugees? The Goths showed up at the border of the Roman Empire in 376, fleeing from the Huns and asking for sanctuary. In the past, Rome would accept "barbarians" and settle them in the Empire, assimilating them in the process. These "barbarians" also helped keep the numbers of the army up. In this case, officials let them in, but held them in refugee camps, refused to let them settle, and charged them for food until the Goths had no money, at which point the officials took the Goths' children as slaves as payment. Eventually (after the Roman officials treacherously killed a Gothic leader), the Goths broke out and pillaged the countryside for two years, and when they finally met the Romans in battle, they wiped the Roman legions out and killed the emperor in the process.

Let's see: people fleeing death squads, coming to a country that formerly welcomed refugees, thrown into camps, having their children taken away from them, ... Sound familiar?

[A few days before this was due to run, I heard on the radio a review of a new book, ALARIC THE GOTH: AN OUTSIDER'S HISTORY OF THE FALL OF ROME by Douglas Boin, which seems to cover a lot of the same ideas. If my library ever re-opens, and if one of the books in its consortium gets a copy, I will definitely read this.]

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

My Father had a profound influence on me. He was a lunatic.

--Spike Milligan

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