

was just plain roasted chicken. Well, what did I expect? Did I expect a spicy foreign dish would get a fair day in court with an American jury? Well, let's look at the record.

Time and time again in places like Chinese restaurants I have heard some American Jerk, someone who doesn't like things more piquant than farina, at the next table complaining loudly about how hot the dish he has gotten was. I suppose he bit into one of the red peppers that I occasionally eat straight as a snack. This farina fan gets a taste of it and has to make a scene. Now I don't know a single Chinese restaurant that ever refused to cook a dish mild, if a customer asked for it that way. And almost all have a little red asterisk to a dish to warn the faint-hearted farina fan that a dish is spicy. But American Jerks don't take the time to read. And one thing that a restaurant owner wants to avoid at all costs is angry customers yelling about the shortcomings of the food. Most capitulate by assuming that if someone is not of the same ethnicity of the restaurant, the food should be pallid. This is blatant racism, but it is understandable. They have stereotyped all Americans as farina fans because we have so many.

Then there are Indian restaurants. I have considered dying my skin before going to Indian Restaurants or ordering over the phone with an Indian accent so they think I am Indian. Now Indian cuisine tends not to be a really spicy cuisine on the real scale of things- - at least not compared to the way I like food!--but it is much better than standard American porridge-level cuisine. It's mild compared to, say, what I would create at home if it did not gross out Evelyn. Indian food is comparatively mild. But again you have the rule that if you are not of the particular ethnic group, they have been burned too many times by vociferous Americans. The Indian restaurant near where I live has a list in the kitchen. If you are neither Indian or on the list, they assume you can't take it.

The capper is that there are now north of the border Jalapeño peppers. Americans (a word I am abusing, I admit, by saying Americans as opposed to Mexicans) like Nachos, but don't like the fiery, burning, and generally terrific taste of Jalapeños. So now there are new mild Jalapeño peppers. Isn't that a bear! You can't even trust a Jalapeño pepper anymore. Cyril Kornbluth's "Marching Morons" is not just on schedule, it is actually ahead of schedule. If you don't know the story it is about a world in which rather than make a car that will go faster, they modify speedometers to just say the cars are going faster. The car must be fast if it says it is, right? And these Nachos must be authentic if they have all those peppers.

I tell you it gets harder and harder to burn out your mouth and destroy your system these days. [-mrl]

No, the End of the World Is Not Next Week (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Or at least not according to the Mayan calendar.

A few less than reliable web sites have the story that "scientist Paolo Tagaloguin" claims that according to the Mayan calendar, that December 21, 2012, world-ending date is really June 21, 2020.

Sample:

<https://nypost.com/2020/06/13/reading-of-mayan-calendar-suggests-end-of-the-world-is-next-week/>

"Following the Julian Calendar, we are technically in 2012... The number of days lost in a year due to the shift into Gregorian Calendar is 11 days... For 268 years using the Gregorian Calendar (1752-2020) times 11 days = 2,948 days. 2,948 days / 365 days (per year) = 8 years," scientist Paolo Tagaloguin tweeted.

Except the 11 days lost was a one-time event in the British Empire in 1752 to catch up with the changes made in the Catholic world in 1582 (hence cumulative over 170 years), not 11 days every year, as Tagaloguin suggests. (The Catholic world lost 10 days when they switched in 1582; why not use that number? Or the 13 days the Russians lost when they switched in 1918?)

Tagaloguin's tweets have since been deleted, but the news stories live on. [-ecl]

STARGIRL (television review by Dale Skran):

With so much great SF, fantasy, and superhero TV these days, it is easy to miss out on an interesting new show. This brings us to STARGIRL, appearing both on DC UNIVERSE (a web channel) and the CW Wednesday evenings. You can see back episodes for free from the CW web site--with ads, of course. FYI--the CW has a lot of good stuff available on-line for the price of watching the ads, including, for example, the complete first and only season of THE SECRET CIRCLE, and the entire first season of the new "Buffy-ized" NANCY DREW, which turns out to be a lot of fun.

In these troubled times, sometimes a bit of escape is called for, and STARGIRL delivers. The genius of STARGIRL lies in the connection of the little-known "Justice Society of America" [not to be confused with the much better known "Justice League"!!] to modern times and a new generation of heroes.

Some "superhero" shows struggle to show dramatic action, and in particular the CW cross-overs involving ARROW, FLASH, SUPERGIRL, and LEGENDS often fall more than a bit flat. STARGIRL opens with a kick-ass battle in which the Injustice Society wipes out the JSA. This sets the table for Courtney Whitmore, a high school sophomore gymnast (who may--or may not--be Starman's daughter), to take up the mantle of the murdered Starman when she finds the cosmic staff in her basement. It turns out that her foster dad, Pat Dugan, was the old sidekick of the original Starman, and has kept the staff around in the hopes that it would someday be wielded by someone worthy of the great power it offers. The staff has strong views on such matters.

The action all takes place in an obscure rural town, and has a delightfully old-fashioned feel. At the same time, Courtney's efforts to recruit new members of the JSA allow for the creation of a substantially more diverse JSA in natural way that is respectful of the original comics versions of the characters. The teen-angst is workman-like, but the super-hero stuff bold and exciting. The second episode features a throw-down between Brainwave and Stargirl/STRIPE (a giant robot piloted by Dugan). The third introduces the new Wildcat. There is a lot of teenagers learning to use their super-powers fun along the way.

It looks like the main restored members of the JSA in the first season are going to be Stargirl, Wildcat, Dr. Midnite, and Hourman. This is a fantastic direction since--with the exception of Stargirl--these are among the weakest members of the original JSA, and a weak super-team makes for the best stories.

I've only seen three episodes so far, but I'm finding STARGIRL more interesting than the other still running CW superhero shows. ARROW--which was mostly great--is over. FLASH has developed a fair amount of inconsistency in terms of how--and when--the Flash is fast. SUPERGIRL has always struggled with the writers not having a firm grip on what her powers actually are, making the action wildly inconsistent. LEGENDS is fun to watch, but more comedy than drama. The first season of BATWOMAN was fun, but with the exit of the lead actress, it remains to be seen if it will retain its charm.

It's too early to rate STARGIRL, but if you like teen superhero action and the JSA characters, check it out! [-dls]

RECEPTOR by Alan Glynn (book review by Dale Skran):

Alan Glynn is best known for his book THE DARK FIELDS, which has been made into both a movie and a TV show sharing the same name-- LIMITLESS. This new name has become so well known that THE DARK FIELDS has been re-issued under the title LIMITLESS.

I'm a fan of both the movie and the TV show, sadly canceled after a single season. I noticed that Glynn had written a sequel to the first book and decided to check it out. I found the book professional but oddly slight, as though I was reading a short story or novelette rather than a 258-page novel. The plot is not that complex, and the "big secret" about why nobody seems to do much with a drug that makes you super-smart is that due to poorly run experiments, those who first worked with it concluded that it was most effective as an anti-smoking agent. "Big Tobacco" then suppressed knowledge of the drug, called MDT-48 here rather than NZT as on the silver screen. I find this general idea only vaguely plausible.

There are two threads to the book. One follows an executive Ned Sweeny in 1953 as he first discovers MDT-48, goes on a sort of adult wanderjahr, and eventually ends up an apparent suicide. The second follows his grandson Ray as he attempts to understand the mysterious Mr. Proctor and how he might relate to his deceased grandfather. There is a conceit of sort as Ned encounters a variety of historic figures ranging from Marilyn Monroe to Lyndon Johnson to John von Neuman, and fairly quickly finds their limits and weaknesses.

Glynn's main contribution to the literature of super-intelligence is a particular vision of what it might be, as expressed in prose. I found that the movie, and especially the TV series do a better job of conveying what super-intelligence might be like. Glynn's super-intelligence feels like a writer's idea of being smarter. Under the influence of MDT-48, the senses are sharpened, sex is amazing, people are drawn to you, you remember everything you've ever read or done, and you begin to seek out more information to absorb. When you come down off the drug you are exhausted and dull. It should surprise no one that Sweeny's big act under the influence of MDT-48 is to write a book!!!!

In an early sequence, Sweeny takes a fairly large dose, and has difficulty controlling himself, suffering from odd time gaps. Later he cuts the dosage for a more uniform experience, but ups it a bit to keep up with a group of nuclear physicists. Much as is explored in depth in the TV show, MDT-48 does not make you omniscient--you can be surprised. This eventually is Sweeny's undoing. In fact, it is hard to see how Sweeny lasted as long as he did--he fails to take more than the most obvious precautions-- and is appears much less interested in his personal survival than seems plausible.

For a more plausible and multi-faceted vision of super- intelligence, I suggest Turner's BRAIN CHILD, which shows us the A- group (scientific and engineering talents), B-group (artistic talents), C-group (the slow developing truly superior intellects) and D-group (intellects so powerful that they analyzed their situation and committed group suicide as babies).

I'd suggest RECEPTOR only for those who are Glynn fans and/or completists, or, who, like myself, have a special interest in tales of super-intelligence. Overall, the book is fine for teens and up with some gauzy sex and the one murder. Make sure the kids know that there is no real drug like MDT-48/NZT. [-dls]

TRUCKS (letter of comment by David Leeper):

In response to [Mark's comments on trucks](#) in the 06/12/20 issue of the MT VOID, David Leeper writes:

I enjoyed Mark's comments on sharing a road with truckers (MT VOID 06/12/20)

I hadn't thought about it until reading his comments, but most of my unspoken contacts with truckers have been benign and positive. I'm thinking mainly of driving on curvy two-lane state roads at night in upstate NY.

By watching truckers' behavior with others, I gradually learned the protocol for driving those dark, windy roads. Truckers driving behind me would never run their bright lights because they knew it could blind me. On the other hand, I could tell they wanted to pass me, but without their brights they could not get a clear view of how much 'straightaway' lay on the road ahead.

So the protocol was that I would run my brights when I thought there was a long enough straightaway for him/her to get past me, and I slowed a bit to encourage him to pass. The moment his cab passed me on my left, I dropped my brights, and he would usually raise his. When the rear of his trailer passed my car comfortably, I would flash my brights, encouraging him to move right. Once back in the right lane, he would flash his trailer lights on & off.

All in all, those were pleasant and courteous interactions, and I liked to flatter myself in thinking that the driver might think I was an experienced trucker in a '4-wheeler'. No way of knowing of course.

On a 4-lane divided highway, trucks could briefly take the left lane to pass me without my help, but even then I would flash my brights to tell him it was clear to return to the right lane, hoping to see a little 'thank you' with the flash of his trailer lights. I think I usually did see him do that.

I'm Mark's (older) brother, so I do in fact remember Burma Shave, but these little 'hat tips' with professional truck drivers were a nice alternative.

Of course, if anyone wants to see an entirely different kind of interaction between a trucker and car driver, see "Duel", a 1971 Steven Spielberg movie. If you've not seen it, I can guarantee you won't want to walk away from it until it ends(!). [-dgl]

Mark replies:

I never knew my brother ever had connections with truck drivers. I personally never communicated much with other drivers on the Interstate. I have no problems with them but if you put three trailers on a cab and then drove at night that could change really quickly. [-mrl]

THE WIZARD OF OZ (letters of comment by Dan Cox, Scott Dorsey, Dorothy J. Heydt, Gary R. Schmidt, and Art Stadlin):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE WIZARD OF OZ](#) in the 06/12/20 issue of the MT VOID, Dan Cox writes:

I had assumed the Scarecrow misquoting the Pythagorean Theorem was deliberate on the part of the writers. [-dte]

Scott Dorsey agrees:

This is the whole point. The Scarecrow did not actually get a new brain at all, he only got a diploma. This statement is an indication that giving someone a diploma does not necessarily mean they have a brain. [-sd]

Dorothy Heydt writes:

[Regarding Mark's question about the trees: "Have you ever won a fight by ripping pieces off yourself and throwing them at people?"]

There's some marine animal (sea hare???) that defends itself by vomiting up its own innards (ISTR they're sticky) to trap the predator, and then regrows said innards at its leisure.

[Regarding who sent the snow to wake Dorothy and the others up.]

Glinda. I'm not going to get out the DVD at this hour of the morning, but there's a brief overlay of her conjuring up the snow. [-djh]

Gary Schmidt responds:

[The marine animal is the] Sea Cucumber, a.k.a. Beche de Mer, and a few others as well. [-grs]

And Art Stadlin writes:

Love these reflections on THE WIZARD OF OZ! All these years I've never questioned these things. [-as]

Beowulf (letter of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt)

In response to [Fred Lerner's comments on "Beowulf"](#) in the 06/12/20 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy Heydt writes:

[Fred asks, "Have you ever seen 'Benjamin Bagley's Beowulf?"]

Yes, several times, and it's BAGBY. No 'l'.

There's a DVD; here's a clip:

<https://bagbybeowulf.com/video/index.html>

And here's an online version:

<https://vimeo.com/40671018>

[Fred writes, "He declaims an abridged version of the poem in the original Anglo-Saxon, accompanying himself on a replica of a thousand-year-old lute.]

Lyre, or rotta. A lute is a much later instrument, like a guitar with a fat belly. From Arabic 'al-oud.

The first time I saw him perform was in a small church auditorium. At least half the audience had brought their brown-covered Klaeber edition along. We were all chattering excitedly in anticipation, and he strode down the aisle to the stage and shouted, "HWAET!!" and we all shut up instantly. That's why it begins like that. [-djh]

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

The "Decameron" series of podcasts seemed to have petered out only halfway through Day Two, but I will continue, at least for a while.

The numbering indicates the day and story number, e.g. "II-3" would be Day 2, Story 3.)

Marcellino Is Healed (II-1): The whole "fake healing" reminds me of Lon Chaney's film THE MIRACLE MAN, although in that Chaney is a confidence trickster, rather than just a tourist trying to get in to see the saint's relics. (THE MIRACLE MAN is a lost film, but the excerpt in which Chaney is healed still exists and is on YouTube. In the Chaney biopic MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES, James Cagney re-creates the scene brilliantly.) When Marcellino is described (in the original Italian and in the Payne translation) as being "carded without a comb", that is Italian slang of the time for being beaten up. Rigg avoids the obscure term. It is depressing to realize that so many people are willing to lie about Marcellino having stolen their purses, but even more depressing to realize that everyone seems to be having a good laugh while Marcellino is being tortured.

Rinaldo Is Robbed (II-2): The most notable aspect of this story, at least in Payne's translation, is the excessive use of words formed around "seem"; we have not only "seemed" and "seemly", but also "meseemeth", "himseemed", "herseemed", and "meseeming". What is worth noting is that there is no form "meseem"--"meseems" means "it seems to me that ..." and so is always in the third person singular (i.e., with the terminal 's'). The attachment of the objective pronoun to the beginning of the verb is what one sees as a regular occurrence in (for example) Spanish, but rarely in English. A close second are "there" words, with one stretch of 32 words containing *three* versions: "he determined to go bide thereunder till day. Accordingly, betaking himself thither, he found there a door, albeit it was shut, and gathering at foot thereof somewhat of straw that was thereenigh..."

None of this has anything to do with Boccaccio's story, of course, but it does provide an example of why many people feel a more modern translation of THE DECAMERON is desirable. The story seems to imply that praying to God and the saints will get you laid, not to mention seeing that the people who robbed you get hanged.

Allessandro and the Abbot (II-3): Internal evidence indicates this story takes place in 1173 or 1174, when Henry the Young King was in rebellion against his father, King Henry II. (Henry II seemed to have problems getting along with people. He had a falling out with his friend Thomas Becket, locked his wife up for the last sixteen years of his life, and was threatened with excommunication by the Pope.) However, although Henry II had three daughters, none were promised to the King of Scotland (or North Wales, in Florio's translation) or married a Florentine, and no Florentine became King of Scotland. (This was well before usury was made illegal in England.)

One can argue that Pampinea is an unreliable narrator, since her telling of the tale uses male pronouns to refer to the abbot, knowing the abbot is a woman in disguise. (No real spoiler here, as the story precis at the beginning says this.) Clearly Lauretta is trying to tell the story in such a way as to make it sound totally outrageous, but turn out to be, well, not exactly innocent, but at least normative for the time.

By the way, when the abbot says (in Payne's translation), "I was on my way to the Pope, that he might marry me," she means for the Pope to officiate at her wedding, not to marry with her.

Ruffolo Becomes a Corsair (II-4): A corsair is not an ordinary pirate. A privateer is a pirate with some sort of authority from a government to harass its enemies, and a corsair is specifically a privateer in the Mediterranean either on the Christian or the Muslim side, authorized to attack the other. By making Ruffolo a corsair rather than a plain old pirate, Boccaccio makes him almost noble (at least to his contemporary audience), fighting the Muslims, rather than an ordinary bandit.

Andreuccio, the Horse-Trader (II-5): Lauretta, on the other hand, apparently doesn't think people will mind that her "hero" is a grave-robbler. The whole story sounds like the sort of plot Roger Corman would put in one of his 1960s AIP flicks. At least the con artist's ploy is not the usual one of seduction. And Andreuccio reminds me of Michael York's D'Artagnan in the 1973 version of *THE THREE MUSKETEERS*.

Madam Beritola Is Shipwrecked (II-6): Manfred was crowned King of Sicily in 1258. Boccaccio seems to like placing his stories in definite times and places to make them seem more real, as opposed to setting them in indefinite times and places. (Think of the Universal 1930s horror movies, set in some vague Middle European area where there are cars and such, but no Nazis, and all the villagers dress in colorful 19th century costumes.)

In this story, we have a widow of sixteen, and a girl given as a wife at the age of eleven. In England in the Middle Ages, the minimum age for marriage for girls was twelve, but even then, marriage at such a young age was only seen in the nobility. One presumes most of Europe was similar, so eleven seems really out of the ordinary, unless this was just a betrothal. (In Connie Willis's *DOOMSDAY BOOK*, Rosemund is betrothed at age twelve at Christmas, and the wedding is planned for Easter.)

The notes on the Gutenberg Project's edition say that what Payne translates as "tierce" is 9AM and that "Boccaccio's habit of measuring time by the canonical hours has been a sore stumbling-block to the ordinary English and French translator, who is generally terribly at sea as to his meaning, inclining to render tierce three, sexte six o'clock and none noon and making shots of the same wild kind at the other hours. The monasterial rule (which before the general introduction of clocks was commonly followed by the medieval public in the computation of time) divided the twenty-four hours of the day and night into seven parts (six of three hours each and one of six), the inception of which was denoted by the sound of the bells that summoned the clergy to the performance of the seven canonical offices i.e. Matins at 3 a.m., Prime at 6 a.m., Tierce at 9 a.m., Sexte or Noonsong at noon, None at 3 p.m., Vespers or Evensong at 6 p.m. and Complines or Nightsong at 9 p.m., and at the same time served the laity as a clock."

When Payne says "tierce", he is avoiding this common mistake; Florio gets it more or less right, speaking the passing of nine hours ("with the expence of nine hours and more"), which is closer to the true meaning.

The Sultan's Daughter (II-7): The chronology geek in me points out that this story apparently takes place between 1313 and 1328 when both Andronikos II Palaiologos was Byzantine Emperor and Og Beg Khan ruled the Turks. Andronikos had a son named Constantine and also a brother named Manuel (so it is likely that he had a nephew of that name as well). (Spellings vary wildly on these names; live with it.)

The basic story itself seems to have re-surfaced in Daniel Defoe's *MOLL FLANDERS* and Voltaire's *CANDIDE*. Moll goes through voluntary relationships with seven men (one twice, and one her half-brother), but she does not attempt to pass herself off as a maid at the end of it all. In *CANDIDE* (at least in Leonard Bernstein's operetta of it), Cunegonde also has relationships with several men and while her words (in the aria "Glitter and Be Gay") bemoan her fate, they are clearly insincere. In Boccaccio's story, Alatiel seems to be a willing participant, although at the end still wishes to return with everyone believing she is a virtuous maid.

Florio changes many of the names, e.g., Pericone to Bajazeth, and Marato to Amurath. He also omits any mention of "Saint Waxeth-in-the-hand", which is a fairly direct translation from the Italian ("santo cresci in man che").

The Exiled Count (II-8): This takes place in 912 with the death of the last of the Carolingians. Was there a plague in Wales in the tenth century that killed half the people?

Bernabo Wrongly Condemns His Wife to Death (II-9): Elements of this seem to have shown up in OTHELLO and MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, though whether the idea of falsely convincing a man that his wife/fiancee is unfaithful may be a common trope in general. It is not clear that Ambrogiuolo has any particular motive in defaming Ginevra other than a refusal to back down from his claims, or possibly a financial gain. Iago and Beatrice are both looking for revenge of one sort or another, but Ambrogiuolo seems particularly amoral in his persistence.

Ginevra is established early on as knowing how to ride a horse, fly a hawk, read, write, and calculate, setting up how she can pass for a man. And it is interesting that the pronoun used to refer to Sicurano is "he", where most authors would use "she", because the reader is fully aware that Sicurano is really Ginevra. So using pronouns based on presentation rather than on biology is not a new thing, dating back at least to the 14th century.

Apparently the Soldan (Sultan) considered Ambrogiuolo's crime as even worse than ordinary murder, based on the punishment he prescribed.

Paganino Steals Ricciardo's Wife (II-10): One can understand why the "Classical/Quarantine Stuff You Should Know" folks might have given up on THE DECAMERON; this is a story that glorifies not just sexuality, but adultery. A young and beautiful woman (never named) is given by her father in marriage to old Ricciardo. But Ricciardo, though he wanted a young beautiful wife, had not the energy for her, and since he can "perform" only about once a month, he tells her almost every day that it is some sort of saint's day when sex is prohibited. The wife gets abducted at some point by a young, energetic corsair, and in no time at all they are paying no attention to saints' days at all. When Ricciardo shows up to ransom his wife, she pretends not to know him, and stays with Paganino, where they continue ignoring saints' days *and* the fact they are not only not married, but that she is married to someone else, until Ricciardo dies, at which point they do actually marry. No one repents, or confesses for absolution, or does anything that might give this any sort of moral, other than perhaps Aleister Crowley's, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." Since "Classical Stuff You Should Know" originates at a Christian academy, the fact that the Decameron is actually fairly racy (without being overly explicit) may have given them second thoughts about spending a hundred podcasts on it.

This has some of the most sarcastic writing so far; some examples:

"The thing came to pass according to his wish, for Messer Lotto Gualandi gave him to wife a daughter of his, Bartolomea by name, one of the fairest and handsomest young ladies of Pisa, albeit there be few there that are not very lizards to look upon."

"The judge accordingly brought her home with the utmost pomp and having held a magnificent wedding, made shift the first night to hand her one venue for the consummation of the marriage, but came within an ace of making a stalemate of it, whereafter, lean and dry and scant of wind as he was, it behoved him on the morrow bring himself back to life with malmsey and restorative confections and other remedies."

"Thenceforward, ... he feigned to her, there was no day in the year but was sacred not to one saint only, but to many, in reverence of whom he showed by divers reasons that man and wife should abstain from carnal conversation; and to these be added, to boot, fast days and Emberdays and the vigils of the Apostles and of a thousand other saints and Fridays and Saturdays and Lord's Day and all Lent and certain seasons of the moon and store of other exceptions, conceiving belike that it behoved to keep holiday with women in bed like as he did bytimes whilst pleading in the courts of civil law. This fashion (to the no small chagrin of the lady, whom he handled maybe once a month, ...

"[Paganino] studied to comfort her with soft words till nightfall, when, his calendar having dropped from his girdle and saints' days and holidays gone clean out of his head, he fell to comforting her with deeds, himseeming that words had availed little by day; and after such a fashion did he console her that, ere they came to Monaco, the judge and his ordinances had altogether escaped her mind and she began to lead the merriest of lives with Paganino."

"[The wife says to her husband,] 'If the study of the laws was more agreeable to you than your wife, you should not have taken her, albeit it never appeared to me that you were a judge; nay, you seemed to me rather a common crier of saints' days and sacraments and fasts and vigils, so well you knew them. And I tell you this, that, had you suffered the husbandmen who till your lands keep as many holidays as you allowed him who had the tilling of my poor little field, you would never have reaped the least grain of corn.'"

[-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

A team of particle physicists ran an experiment for the entire year, and the detector reported exactly fifty two events which they were looking for. They published a research paper called "Weekly interacting particles".

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