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Say What? Mark Leeper's Journal, June 24, 1994 (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

[Note Bene: This column was originally written in earlier days. These days nobody has a fighting chance to understand and keep up with the tech on things like 5G (or is it 7W?) -mrl]

It is time to at least talk about the last great taboo of our society. The words that everybody thinks but that few people have the courage to say. I must think these words thirty times a day and yet dare not speak them aloud. I hear what you are saying. "He must be going to talk about something sexual. I better hide this from the kids." Well, first of all, no it is nothing like that. (Besides, these days the kids could probably teach you a thing or two.) But even today I am talking about the words that nobody dares say, but that everybody thinks. Even kids in school think it but dare not say it. And experts say that people will be thinking this more and more in the future and may be all the more terrified to say it aloud. What are the dreaded words that we all think but only few have the courage to say out loud. The words are "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't understand."

Certainly in school you are taught from the first that you should study very hard and always be sure you will understand every pearl of wisdom the teacher utters. Your parents expect that when your math teacher says the hyperbolic tangent asymptotically approaches zero you will think to yourself "Of course it does." When your history teacher talks about the Diet of Worms you are expected to know what he is talking about and not stop to ask yourself, "What do worms eat, anyway?" (Actually, I wonder if anybody even teaches about the Diet of Worms anymore.)

As you get older it gets even worse with contractors asking you about rabbiting joists, and car ads talking about dual cam engines. Here at AT&T (this is 1994 remember) we take it a step further with the liberal use of acronyms. "Shall we connect the TSGs to the smart hubs via NFS or TCP/IP?" People who teach clarity of writing usually say to keep acronyms to a

minimum, but have your read a Bell Labs Technical Journal lately. It looks like alphabet soup. Even when people talk about TV these days everything is going technical. When I was growing up I used to talk to my friends about the latest episode of THE OUTER LIMITS. I knew what they were talking about and they knew what I was talking about. These days people talk about STAR TREK or BABYLON 5 you have to keep straight the names of seven or eight different alien races and forty or so different character and actor names. Conversation gets more and more technical and harder and harder to follow, even talking about TV shows. These days talking about science fiction TV shows comes down to conversations like "Didn't the Tragleump have hyperwarp drive in their war against the Plargut?" It is the hardest thing in the world to admit you don't understand. But deep down most of you are like that, going through life afraid to admit that you don't understand something. Now me, I am not like that. I have admitted it the few times I didn't follow a conversation. And you can believe that today I understand everything I hear. Please. [-mrl]

THE ACCURSED TOWER: THE FALL OF ACRE AND THE END OF THE CRUSADES by Roger Crowley (book review by Gregory Frederick):

This history book chronicles the events leading up to and the actual battle for the last major crusader castle in the Middle East in 1291. Acre was a well-fortified and fully manned castle on the East Coast of the Mediterranean Sea. For years before 1291 the Muslims from Egypt were capturing and destroying other crusader castles along the coast near the present day country of Israel. But what lead to the demise of Acre was a belief common to people which has occurred many times in history. They did not think that they would become a target. They thought their location made them valuable as a trading center between the Europeans and the Egyptians. And there was no unified command leading the defense of this castle. These factors and others meant that Arce would fall in a matter of days. The latest in siege methods also helped to bring about a quick end to the battle. Huge trebuchets and many smaller catapults were built by the attackers and transported to the siege site and additionally mining operations were undertaken to undermine towers along the castle wall. There was a double wall of towers around the castle at Arce. When a tower would collapse the attackers could advance to the next wall of towers. But the failings of the defenders would bring about the eventual loss of this castle. Roger Crowley is a great author and this book like many others he has written is a very good read. You feel like you are there during the events he writes about. [-gf]

LA TRAVIATA and Other Operas (letters of comment by Paul Dormer, Gary McGath, Dorothy J. Heydt, Scott Dorsey, and Keith F. Lynch):

In response to [Mark's comments on LA TRAVIATA](#) in the 07/17/20 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

[Mark wrote,] "... when Alfredo's father visits Violetta and says that she has to call the affair off because Alfredo's sister's fiance's family objects to the name Violetta is giving the family. Violetta agrees to leave her lover and return to her life of partying. She writes him a note and leaves." [-mrl]

Alfredo's father's big aria in that act is one of my all-time favourites.

Incidentally, I'm reminded of the opera house's sudden request for a replacement singer:

"Our Mimi's sick."

"Well, she's supposed to be." [-pd]

Gary McGath replies:

One of the strangest opera deaths is Desdemona's in Verdi's OTELLO. The title character suffocates her. Then Emilia comes in and explains that Otello's accusations were unfounded. Desdemona declares her innocence, and only then does she die. I thought that if someone stopped choking you and you were still able to speak (or sing), you weren't very likely to die. [-gmg]

Dorothy J. Heydt responds:

Well, in Shakespeare's play, somebody comes in and asks Desdemona who killed her, and she says, IIRC:

"Nobody, I myself, farewell."

I don't think it's physiologically accurate either, but maybe both Shakespeare and Verdi's librettist [Arrigo Boito] wanted to emphasize that Desdemona forgave her husband for being violent and credulous, a terrible combination. [djh]

Paul adds:

Conversely, UN BALLO IN MASCHERA is based on the real-life assassination of Gustav III of Sweden, who really was assassinated at a masked ball in 1792. (Italian censors forbade the depiction of a monarch being assassinated so for early

productions, the action was transposed to colonial Boston and the king becomes the governor.)

In the opera, if you think the king is taking a long time to die, in real life it took two weeks. [-pd]

Scott Dorsey observes:

Sure, but in real life he didn't sing F two octaves above middle C while doing it. [-sd]

Gary notes: In real life, Gustav III was shot, and in the opera he (or the governor) is stabbed. Either way, taking a long time to die is plausible. What strains credulity for me is a masked ball in Puritan Boston. [-gmg]

Keith F. Lynch provides the following:

"Several balls took place at the hall in the 1770s. For instance, 'the fourth Subscription Ball will be held at Concert Hall on Thursday, the 29th instant [of January], 1776.' Also: 'on Monday, the 11th of March, will be given at Concert Hall, a Subscription Masked Ball. By the fifth of March, a number of different masks will be prepared & sold by almost all the milliners and mantua makers in Town.'"

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concert_Hall_\(Boston,_Massachusetts\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concert_Hall_(Boston,_Massachusetts))

[-kfl]

Fanac Fan History Project, LA TRAVIATA and Other Operas, QUATERMASS AND THE PIT, and THE DECAMERON (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [the comments on LAN'S LANTERN](#) in the 07/17/20 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Another week, another VOID. Life goes on, tra-la! Well, such as it does in this day and age. We are still here, and that's a good thing; at least, that is how I am going to look at things.

The Fanac Fan History project is a splendid and wonderful service. Mark Olson scanned in a raft of old fanzines during Corflu Heatwave this past March, and the site is truly a treasure trove of old zines and photos of SF fandom's history, people, events, and publications. I remember LAN'S LANTERN from back in the day-- George Laskowski, Jr., was a fun person to hang out with at conventions, and I remember a lot of good times at Minicons, Windycons, and elsewhere from those years-- and the zine always contained fine articles and artwork. His many tribute issues to writers were huge and fun reading; the Clifford D. Simak issue featured cover art by Minneapolis fan Kathy Marschall, if I recall correctly. Sadly, George ('Lan') died of cancer in July 1999 at the age of 50. [-jp]

In response to [Mark's comments on LA TRAVIATA](#) in the same issue, John writes:

I find it interesting that you saw LA TRAVIATA and LA BOHEME in Estonia in 1994. Am I correct in assuming they were in their original languages? While I do enjoy listening to the music and appreciate the skill of the vocalists, I am a non-fan of operas. The same goes for watching ballets. Just can't do it. I would much rather just listen and enjoy the music. This does not disparage the skills and performances of opera singers and ballet dancers, nor the extravagant stage settings and performances, it is simply that I don't like "watching" either medium. Chalk it up to personal preference.

Mark responds:

I did not see LA BOHEME in Estonia, but I have seen it numerous times. TRAVIATA was probably done in Italian, but I think the producer decides the language of the production. I am not a particular fan of opera but a lot of the most beautiful music I know comes from operas. [-mrl]

Evelyn responds:

LA TRAVIATA (in Estonia) was sung in Italian (though with a strong Estonian accent, making it difficult to understand even the words we knew). We did not see LA BOHEME; I presume it would have been the same. We also saw RIGOLETTO in Lithuania, of which I wrote, "For one litas [about 25 cents] they have a program that explains the action in three languages: English, Lithuanian, and Russian. There were three reasons this was useful: 1) Mark wasn't sure he remembered the plot, 2) there were no super-titles, and 3) it was sung in Lithuanian, not Italian. We suppose if it were sung in Italian, any super-titles would have been in Lithuanian, but at least Italian has some cognates with English and we would have had some chance of picking up the plot from the words."

This all reminds me of seeing MALEVIL at the Worldcon in The Hague, of which I wrote, "This was a post-holocaust film none of us had seen, so Mark, Dale, Kate, Kate's friend, and I all went to see it. Unluckily, it was in French. Luckily, it was

subtitled. Unluckily, it was subtitled in Dutch. Luckily, it had very little dialogue. Only Dale and I stayed for the whole film. He could pick up some of the Dutch because it was like German, which he knew, and I could recognize some of the French and some of the Dutch, and he remembered the story from the book fairly well, so between us I think we pieced together what was going on. But we did agree that we didn't remember a train in a tunnel from the book and suspect that was added for dramatic effect." [-ecl]

On the comments on QUATERMASS AND THE PIT and other BBC series/serials, John writes:

QUATERMASS AND THE PIT is one of my personal favorite all-time SF movies. Fred Hoyle's A FOR ANDROMEDA is on my bookshelves somewhere, so it's interesting to note that there was BBC serialization of it. The email exchange between Paul Dormer, Scott Dorsey, Keith F. Lynch, Kevin R, Peter Trei, DorothyJ. Heydt, and Tim Merrigan is interesting reading. Thank you for sharing it in this week's VOID. [-jp]

And finally, John writes:

Any comments I could make on THE DECAMERON will have to wait until I have read it. In the meantime, I once again thank you for pubbing your ish. This was fun reading, and is greatly appreciated. [-jp]

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

Addendum on THE DECAMERON (Day 3): I discovered that Florio's translation of THE DECAMERON has a completely different story for the tenth story of the third day. I guess "putting the Devil in Hell" was too racy even for him, and so he made another one up. The original Italian has the story that I had described last week.

BRIGHT IDEAS: THE BRILLIANT IDEAS OF NIKOLA TESLA by Tracy Dockray (Capstone, ISBN 978-1-684-46141-7) is described as being at a reading level for 8- to 11-year-olds. It is possible that 8- to 11-year-olds are more knowledgeable than when I was growing up, but words like "imbalance" and "incandescent" seem a bit too advanced, particularly for the low end of that range. What I do find interesting is that Dockray emphasizes how Thomas Edison and others cheated Tesla of the rewards for his work. Most authors have concentrated more on Tesla's achievements and glossed over this aspect. (She does soften it a bit with the information that even when he had money, Tesla spent it all on experiments, so he might have ended up broke anyway.)

Okay, this is not exactly what 8- to 11-year-olds want to read, and most of the book is more about Tesla's technical achievements. So it is of interest to the scientifically-minded tween.

I first commented on WHAT TO THINK ABOUT MACHINES THAT THINK edited by John Brockman (Harper Perennial, ISBN 978-0-06-242565-2) in the 02/14/20 issue of the MT VOID, and at the time said I was reading it one or two essays at a time. There being a couple of hundred essays, this is a long-term project, and I have a comments on a couple of essays I have just read.

In "AI/AL", Esther Dyson writes, "If you're alive, you must face the possibility of being dead. But if you're AI/AL [artificial intelligence/artificial life] in a machine, perhaps not." Later, she refers to AI/AL being immortal, alive forever, and apparently aware of this. There are a couple of problems with this. First of all, if an AI/AL has no concept of its own possible death, how would that be any different than thinking itself immortal. One could claim that current AI thinks it is immortal in that it does not think it could die. But more importantly, the AI/AL is not immortal. The sun will eventually go dark, and even if it escapes, the heat death of the universe will overtake it (Isaac Asimov's "The Last Question" to the contrary notwithstanding). Or is Dyson saying that the AI/AL will *falsely* believe in its immortality?

In "Brains and Other Thinking Machines", Tom Griffith makes a dichotomy in learning I don't recall seeing explicated before between structure and flexibility. Structure attempts to fit new data in an existing framework; flexibility attempts to build a constantly evolving structure from new data. Both have their place, but both can lead to problems. Structure, for example, is what leads to errors from false cognates--as we had to be told in Spanish class, "Sopa isn't soap, and ropa isn't ropa." Flexibility leads to finding patterns in what is actually pure chance (or misinterpreted data). [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

One dog barks at something, the rest bark at him.
--Chinese Proverb

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