

MT VOID 07/31/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 5, Whole Number 2130

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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
07/31/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 5, Whole Number 2130

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The latest issue is at <http://www.leepers.us/mtvoid/latest.htm>.
An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at
http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

Dog Talk (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

I thank Evelyn for pointing out this guide to the body language of dogs from the Animal Channel. A few of these postures I was aware of, but I did not know there were known postures of dogs.

<https://tinyurl.com/y35275qx>

[-mrl]

Science Fiction (and Other) Discussion Groups, Films, Lectures, etc. (NJ):

Needless to say, everything here is tentative. The Old Bridge group did hold a socially distanced meeting at one of the members' homes on July 23 to discuss ROBUR THE CONQUEROR.

All Middletown meetings cancelled/postponed until further notice

September 24, 2020: THE DARK FOREST by Cixin Liu,
Old Bridge Public Library or member's home TBD,
6PM or 7PM (depending on whether the library is open,
whether members are commuting to work, etc.)

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>
Old Bridge Public Library, 7PM

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

Well, we are back to late summer and this living is easy. Well, perhaps not as easy as it was late summer last year. Actually I think the planet will not have a whole lot of easy living for a long, long time. I think we should all do what we can for the unemployed and the hungry.

One of my favorite kinds of mystery story the is not the who-dun-it but the what-is-going-on? MY NAME IS JULIA ROSS is a good example. Perhaps one reason this film is not better known is the lackluster title. The viewer asks themselves, "Why should I care what this unknown fictional person's name is?" But identity becomes the center of the mystery.

Julia Ross is a working woman in London: no husband; no family. She just lost her second career. Work is very hard to get, but she has to eat. Then she sees in the newspaper a help wanted ad and it looks like something that might work for her. She goes to the employment agency and unexpectedly is simply charmed by the loving manners of her interviewing supervisor. When she is told that she will be caring for an elderly woman and may have to drop her work with the old woman she has no objections. This is especially true because the old woman is so likable. Julia goes to sleep that night happy that she has found such a nice job and so pleasant a set of new friends. She sleeps for two days and wakes up in a very wealthy estate in Cornwall. All her possessions are gone, and everybody tells her previous life is a fantasy and her real name is and has always been Marion Hughes.

[MY NAME IS JULIA ROSS, Saturday, August, 15 2020 @ 10:15 PM]

BEST OF AUGUST

In this monochrome historical epic, Charlie Chaplin combines believable historical detail with his own brand of comedy. This is a film comparable to Buster Keaton's THE GENERAL.

[THE GOLD RUSH. Saturday, August 8 @ 09:30 AM]

[-mrl]

THE CITY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT by **Charlie Jane Anders** (copyright 2019, TOR, 366pp, \$26.99 hardcover, ISBN978-0-7653-7996-2) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

THE CITY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT is Charlie Jane Anders' successful debut novel, 2016's ALL THE BIRDS IN THE SKY. That novel won the Best Novel Nebula Award and Best Fantasy Novel Locus Award in 2017, as well as being a Best Novel Hugo finalist in 2017. CITY (because I could be typing all night long), has already won the Best Science Fiction Novel Locus Award in 2020 and is a finalist for Best Novel Hugo in 2020. However, these two novels are not at all like each other, and are in many ways completely opposite of each other. BIRDS felt bright and optimistic, while CITY is much more dark, gritty, and while not necessarily pessimistic, the reader doesn't feel like there's a light at the end of the tunnel for the characters.

The setting is classically science-fictional. The planet January is a long way from Earth and is tidally locked. Settlers from Earth came here to start again after some catastrophe on the home planet caused them to abandon it. It may puzzle the reader as to why humanity chose this hostile planet to settle, given that there is only a narrow band of the surface that life can actually survive on, but that is not the focus of the book and thus is never explained. The ship that brought the settlers to January, which they dub "the mother ship", is still up in orbit. There are two cities built by the settlers, and these two cities are where most of the story takes place (yes, there is a third, because otherwise you couldn't have the titular city, but we'll get to that later).

The two cities are Xiosphant, a rigidly run society that lives by the tick of the clock, where even talking after sleep time has begun is against the law, and where everyone wakes up at the same time, goes to work at the same time, and even takes

breaks at the same time; and Argelo, where anarchy reigns, residents can do anything they want, and which is run by several criminal warring factions. Our two lead characters are Sophie and Bianca, and they are friends who live in Xiosphant.

That's about all they have in common. Sophie is a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks in Xiosphant, and Bianca is a rich kid with all the privileges and (potential) problems that come along with wealth. Without it being said early on, Sophie loves Bianca, and wants to be what Bianca is. But what Bianca is is a girl that both wants to be a revolutionary and have her cake and eat it too by going to fancy parties and living the high life. Sophie admires this, and when Bianca steals some petty cash to buy drinks for her friends, Sophie takes the blame so Bianca can live her life the way she wants without it being ruined. Sophie's punishment is death, and Bianca's punishment is nothing more than grief for her lost friend.

Except she is not lost, as she is saved by what the settlers call crocodiles, and what Sophie calls Gelet. The Gelet are the intelligent native species on January. The Gelet communicate using telepathy, and are a kind of gestalt when it comes to memory; every Gelet knows everything every one else has ever known, and can relay those memories to anyone they want. The Gelet are hunted by humans, which of course is entirely consistent with the way humans typically act around things they don't understand.

There is certainly a lot going on in this novel, a lot to get your hooks into. There is of course a lot of conflict, but really since most of the folks in this story are flawed in one form or another--aside from Sophie and Bianca (who is the worst of the lot), the character called Mouth leaves a lot to be desired, although she does try to be better than she is--it's not really good versus evil in the traditional sense. And of course the settlers turn out to be fairly rotten too, when it comes right down to it, as we discover via the Gelet and Mouth's story.

But is there any good in here? In the end, sure there is. Because I think the lesson that Anders is trying to impart--a lesson that is obvious, of course--is that we really all need to get along. We all need to be one people, whether we come from Xiosphant, Argelo, or the titular city in the middle of the night where the Gelet live.

While, in my opinion, not as good a novel as *ALL THE BIRDS IN THE SKY*, this is still a strong work, and one that is worthy of the accolades it is receiving and will continue to receive. [-jak]

BRIEF ANSWERS TO THE BIG QUESTIONS by Stephen Hawking (book review by Gregory Frederick):

A great scientist died in 2018 and that scientist was Stephen Hawking. This review is about his last book. In this science book Hawking tries to give his answers to ten of the big questions that people can have, questions that include topics such as: is there a God, how did it all begin, is there intelligent life in the universe, is time travel possible and some other very interesting subjects. His answers can be rather open ended for some subjects, indicating that future discoveries will provide more complete answers. But Hawking does think that the structures in the Universe (galaxies, stars and us) began as quantum fluctuations due to the uncertainty principle. This occurred during the inflationary period of the Big Bang. I have now read four of Hawking's books; all are great reads if you like science. [-gf]

Opera Languages (letters of comment by Paul Dormer and Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [comments on what languages in which operas are sung](#) in the 07/24/20 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

In London, the Royal Opera usually performs operas in the original language, English National Opera usually in English.

I remember going to a performance of Tchaikovsky's *EUGENE ONEGIN* at the Royal Opera House in the eighties and it claimed it was the first time it had been sung there in Russian. The previous post-war stagings had been in English, but earlier, it was sung in Italian!

A couple of years ago I went to see Berlioz's *BENVENUTO CELLINI* at the Bastille Opera in Paris. (The staging was by Terry Gilliam of Monty Python fame and had originally been done at English National Opera in English.)

The production was in French but, curiously, the surtitles were both in French and English. And I knew enough French to realise the translations were not always literal. (Fun production, by the way. Another staging of the production, I think it was in the Netherlands, came out on DVD.)

Which reminds me of a story some friends of mine keep telling me. They went to see *PARSIFAL* at English National Opera and when they got there, they found that the singer in the role of *PARSIFAL* was ill and the replacement was the great Wagnerian tenor Siegfried Jerusalem. He only knew the role in German, the rest of the cast were singing in English. A great performance, from what I've heard.

However, another friend found out this was about to take place when she was on the ferry on a trip to Bayreuth. She almost demanded they turn the boat round. [-pd]

Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

Sometimes you don't *want* to understand the words. Shaw, in "Man And Superman", quotes Beaumarchais(?) as "Whatever is too silly to be said can be sung," and I'm thinking particularly of Handel's Italian operas, whose plots do not border on the ridiculous, they fall right into it and sink. I also have an everlasting hate for Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde", where the two mooncalves go into a tender romantic duet about the sweet little word "und".

My third-year Spanish teacher gave us an entire dittoed sheet of deceptive cognates and other things not to say. "Caramba, caray, caracoles, are all right, but beware of other words beginning in ca-." This was in the mid-1950s, Orange County, California, where hardened conservatives went to retire and eventually die, and the teacher was not allowed just to say, "Don't say 'caca'." [-djh]

Understanding and Doctor Who (letter of comment by Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [Mark's comments on understanding](#) in the 07/24/20 issue of the MT VOID, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

[Mark writes,] "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.'" [-mrl]

Oh, my grandson says that all the time. He has no fear. Hal is doing his math instruction, hoping he will catch up by the time that school re-starts (entirely online; Hal is taking care of that), and if Vincent is in a contrary mood, to every question he howls, I DON'T KNOOOOOOOOW!!!!"

[Mark writes,] "But deep down most of you are like that, going through life afraid to admit that you don't understand something." [-mrl]

Well, I don't. I am married to a programmer/engineer who tells me what he's doing with the latest wrinkle on [one of] his Pi[s], And I am not ashamed to say something like "that noise you just heard was all that whooshing over my head," or "you are giving me more information about penguins than I care to have." It gets interesting when our son-in-law comes downstairs and they talk computer stuff. SIL is not an engineer; he spent his time in the Air Force as a plumber; but he understands what Hal tells him. I don't even try. [-djh]

In response to Mark's comments on Doctor Who in this regard, Dorothy J. Heydt writes:

Heh. DOCTOR WHO would be in its fifty-seventh year if there hadn't been a hiatus if there hadn't been a hiatus (of eighteen years, if my math is right) which was filled in with radio dramas, paperbacks, and comic books. I am now watching the Third Doctor on Britbox, trying to fill in the gaps. [-djh]

Jalapeñ Peppers and Hot Food (letter of comment by Jim Susky):

In response to Mark's comments on jalapeñ peppers in the 06/19/20 issue of the MT VOID, Jim Susky writes:

It's my fervent hope that, by Mid-March, some semblance of normalcy will return and I will meet up with my friends in Scottsdale for Cactus League exhibition games.

Now that Mark has recycled part of his restaurant journal...

(more, please)

... and has "cursed" American Jerks with the farina label, I will use that label.

One of my friends, in particular, is notably unadventurous at the table. I plan not to address him directly, but to mention "Farina" with appropriate context generally, without "pointing a finger" (let him squirm). I have seven months to figure this out.

Best Regards

Jim Susky

P.S. Mark might try doctoring a selfie before "dying (his) skin before going to Indian Restaurants"--somehow, I don't believe

he would pass as an Indian national without prosthetics.

P.P.S. Your occasional treatises regarding the "Scoville factor" in food begs for some form of calibration. And an update. For the latter, perhaps a field report on the state of the Jalapeñ in America would be useful--both fresh and marinated. Marinated peppers would have the advantage of being somewhat standard--consistent in New Jersey and Alaska. For instance Costco's constant inventory includes sliced, pickled Jalapeños. Do those qualify as "mild" (not so "new" after 26 years)?

Finally, I would suggest another "calibration". Publish a favorite spicy recipe. Use a "standard" pepper--perhaps Cayenne powder--easy to measure and consistent in "heat".

(Wikipedia states: "Most varieties are generally rated at 30,000 to 50,000 Scoville units".) [-js]

BITTEN Meets WOLFBLOOD Meets HANNAH Meets DAREDEVIL (television review by Dale Skran):

The "Call of the Wild" theme represented by superheroes like Wolverine and the Hulk has long held a fascination for fans. Many find a deep attraction to a character who can throw off the strictures of civilization in a wild burst of animalistic rage. This same desire underlies the enduring appeal of the werewolf.

Just as the vampire has evolved, we have seen new depictions of "werewolf-like" species. Two moderately recent examples are BITTEN, which I have previously in the MTVOID, and the British teen series WOLFBLOOD. In this series although the "wolves" are of a supernatural, or at least have a supernatural connection to the Moon, there are many naturalistic touches, including the idea that the "Wolfbloods" are a species, with a genetic basis. WOLFBLOOD lacks the violence and sex of BITTEN, but is surprisingly smart and thoughtful within the limitations of the teen format.

More recently, Amazon has produced a serial version of HANNAH based on the 2011 movie. Amazon's HANNAH is now in its second season, which to my taste is a good bit better than the first. Season 1 retold the tale of the movie version, but lacking most of the charm of the movie. Season 2 moves into new territory, and is both better put together and more satisfying. The titular Hannah was genetically engineered to be a super-soldier via the addition of wolf DNA. Rather than succumb to animalistic rage, she fights with a detached coolness no human could maintain for any length of time and remain sane. In the film, Saoirse Ronan captured this kind of infra-human detachment very well. She is interested in what it means to be human, but somehow distant from it as well. In the Amazon version, star Esme Creed-Miles struggles to capture this vibe in season one, but has mastered it by season two.

To give a flavor of the difference between these three species of "werewolves" I thought it would be fun to compare their abilities between them, and also with Marvel's Daredevil.

Area of comparison	BITTEN	WOLFBLOOD	HANNAH	Daredevil
Transformation	At will, with some capable of partial transformation	Involuntary at full Moon, but can transform at other times as well	None; her powers are genetically engineered	Puts on costume anytime
Hearing	Superhuman	Superhuman	Superhuman	Superhuman, probably better than the "wolves"
Touch	Not discussed	Not discussed	Not discussed	Great ability to absorb knowledge via touch alone; superhuman
Smell	Superhuman but stronger in females	Superhuman	Superhuman; similar to a wolf	Superhuman
Sight	Great night vision	Presumably excellent, but not featured	Apparently excellent, but not featured	Blind
Speed/Endurance	Superhuman	Superhuman; superb long-distance broken-field runners in human form	Superhuman	Olympic level
Strength	Mildly superhuman	Superhuman; strong and fast enough they appear to have no need for martial arts skills	Superhuman	Olympic level
Agility	Excellent but not obviously superhuman	Superhuman	Superhuman	Superhuman
Aim	Excellent especially with training	Superhuman with no training	Excellent; with extensive training probably better than any human	Superhuman; defeated Bullseye

Lie detection	Not discussed	Superhuman; based on heartbeat, smell, etc. but not perfect	To some degree	Superhuman, based on heart beat; can be fooled with pacemaker
Fighting skills	Extensive martial arts training; every pack member is a very good hand to hand combatant; Elena Michaels is a better fighter than most.	No training visible; strong natural fighters; no need for training when fighting humans; Wolfbloods fight each other as wolves.	Extensive martial arts, military, and spy training; raised to be a living weapon. Hannah has been trained from birth by her “father” in survival and fighting skills	Highly trained martial artist; among the best in the world, master of many arts
Other abilities	Precognitive dreams in the case of Elena, a rare female wolf.	Eolas – a supernatural form of remote viewing; blocked by electricity; can be addictive; common among “wild” Wolfbloods, less so among the “tame” Anstion – a higher form of Eolas that can look back in time, even 100s of years.	Mental flexibility and high intelligence allow her to navigate the modern world in spite of having been raised in the wild; disguise and other spy skills. Calm, detached, and lacking empathy when fighting.	“Radar sense” based on echolocation
Role of females	There are virtually no female wolves except for the main character, Elena	Females have major roles and are often pack alphas	For some reason not explained, only females can survive the addition of the wolf DNA, so all “wolf agents” are female.	Male character from an era of mostly male superheroes
Weaknesses	Odd avoidance of firearms; sense of honor can lead to foolish battles	Fear of fire, love of meat can lead to consuming poison or drugs; pack politics; strong smells/sounds	Loyalty to friends can lead to errors, can be tricked or misunderstand what is happening	Overwhelming smells and sounds
Intelligence when transformed	Human level, or nearly so	Smart for a wolf, but not human; can be tricked by humans	Not applicable, but genetically engineered for high intelligence	When wearing costume may undertake heroic but foolish quests; successful lawyer
How ability is gained	Via a bite or by birth; being a wolf is a disease you catch	Via birth or the Wolfblood serum that Kincaid created in Season Three	Genetic engineering; intensive training	Truck dousing you with radioactive waste, extensive training by the Chosen
Leaping/jumping ability	Excellent, but not used much	Superhuman; can jump in human form easily over a tall fence, or land unharmed from a fall that would injure a human	Superhuman; can jump over a high fence	Olympic gymnast; leaps from the structure to structure using his Billy club to help
Science/Supernatural	Except for the precognition, scientific; characters go naked to transform	Feels like science but clearly supernatural; clothes appear and disappear during transformation	All science	Supposedly scientific
Powers as a wolf	The actual powers of a wolf, plus being much bigger than a wolf	Pretty much like a real wolf	She is always a wolf, and always human, since she is a meld.	Not applicable
Healing	Superhuman but not unlimited	Superhuman but not unlimited; includes disease resistance that is superhuman	Superhuman but not unlimited	Normal human level
Exemplar	Elena Michaels, who can partially transform her hands into claws and is the pack’s best tracker and #2 enforcer; skilled but savage fighter; favored move is tearing out an opponent’s heart with one transformed hand.	Jana, a “wild” Wolfblood who eventually becomes a top agent at Segolia, a Wolfblood controlled biotech firm. Jana is a master of Eolas and Anstion, as well as an alpha female; favored technique is to organize her pack against an opponent	Hannah, the last surviving member of the first batch of UTREX super-soldiers. In addition to her wolf-DNA abilities, her life-long training by a top former UTREX agent makes her extremely dangerous with any weapon, or no weapons. Favored fighting	Daredevil, Marvel’s #1 blind superhero. Between Matt Murdock’s extensive Ninja fighting training, years of fighting experience, and super-human senses and agility, Daredevil is not to be discounted easily. Favored fighting technique is a highly modified and engineered club with a curved handled that doubles

technique is two high-caliber semi-automatic handguns. as a cane when he is "acting blind".

And now, drum roll, the ratings:

BITTEN: Going with a +1 here, but only for adults. Violent and sexual, with torture scenes.

WOLFBLOOD: A +1 again here, but fine for pretty much all kids over 5 or so. Some scary scenes, but no real violence at least up through Season 3, and no sex period.

HANNAH: The first season is a 0, but season 2 in the +1/+2 range. Some sex, some drug use, some torture, and lots of violence. Fine for teens and up. You might want to see the movie version first to understand the attraction of the character better, since season 1 just isn't that good. There is something subtle but scary about HANNAH season two that I don't want to give away in this review, but that raises the level of the writing above the original movie.

If you do want to watch DAREDEVIL, I suggest the Netflix version, which appears to still be available there. It's not perfect, Electra is not done right, and the later seasons are stupidly violent, but overall, it is the best live-action Daredevil yet. [-dls]

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

UP IN THE OLD HOTEL by Joseph Mitchell (Pantheon, 978-0-679-41263-2) was listed by Michael Dirda as an essential non-fiction book (in BOOK BY BOOK). But the first thing you need to know about it is that it is not non-fiction. When Dirda wrote BOOK BY BOOK in 2007, he thought Mitchell's essays were just as they were presented, non-fiction. It was only with Thomas Kunkel's 2015 biography of Mitchell, MAN IN PROFILE, that he realized Mitchell dealt in composite characters, stitched-together interviews, and almost definitely quotes that were constructed/created from memory rather than verbatim notes. (Dirda reviewed Kunkel's book for the "Washington Post".)

Even Mitchell himself admitted some of this in this omnibus volume, with an introductory note indicating that at least some of them were fiction, but he was not complete in his admission.

So far as I can tell, Mitchell was not as egregious as Stephen Glass, who made up his stories from whole cloth, or Jayson Blair, who plagiarized as well as fabricated details. And apparently H. L. Mencken is known to have done something similar to Mitchell.

Still, times change, and what was considered perhaps acceptable then (there is some evidence that Mitchell's editors at THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE knew or suspected what was going on) is certainly considered wrong today. In journalism, as in many other aspects of life, the argument "it was a different time then" can go only so far towards excusing people.

(Mitchell's topics--and how he writes about them--will also raise so eyebrows. He writes about "the King of the Gypsies" and "gypsy women" (his term, not mine) describing a lot of the negative stereotypes one would try to avoid these days. (For example, he has his "King of the Gypsies"--one of his composite figures--talking about how of course they all steal and commit fraud and so on.) His writing about circus "freaks" is at the same time insensitive and caring: not always thinking about how his questions might sound, but also including Lady Olga's comments on what terms they prefer to describe them.

The thing to note, though, is that Mitchell's writing is so wonderfully vivid and evocative that even had these been (or were they now) presented as straight fiction, they would be worth reading. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

The nose of a bulldog has been slanted backwards so that
he can breathe without letting go.
--Winston Churchill

Tweet

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