

MT VOID 08/07/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 6, Whole Number 2131



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
08/07/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 6, Whole Number 2131

Table of Contents

[Fear and Loathing](#) (comments by Mark R. Leeper)
[DISPERSION by Greg Egan](#) (book review by Joe Karpierz)
[DARK](#) (television review by Dale Skran)
[Dog Expressions and Opera](#) (letter of comment by Kip Williams)
[Hugo and Retro Hugo Awards Winners](#)
[This Week's Reading](#) (Hugo and Retro Hugo Award winners)
(book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, mleeper@optonline.net
Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, eleeper@optonline.net
Sending Address: evelynchimisleep@gmail.com
All material is copyrighted by author unless otherwise noted.
All comments sent or posted will be assumed authorized for
inclusion unless otherwise noted.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send mail to eleeper@optonline.net
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.

Fear and Loathing (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

Based on Mark Leeper's Journal, October 16, 1992 (with updates):

I have been talking to a friend about how so much of the world so quick reacted over a virus. One day (March 15--the Ides of March, incidentally) only a very small of number of people had even heard of Covid-19 and the next day just about everyone was terrified of it. That name was more terrifying than Godzilla. And it was not without some justification. But I can get a little scared just by having to pack a suitcase. I should be fair to luggage. A lot of my discomfort is what I do to myself. I am a sort of masochist I guess. I am one of those people who sucks on a sore tooth.

When I pack I have a checklist to be sure systematically that I don't forget to bring something on a trip. Then on the way to the airport Evelyn will ask me something like, "Do you have your toothpaste?" and inside I will panic. Now it doesn't matter that I know it was on my list and that I remember packing it; I still have to double-check. Evelyn knows I have never in my life forgotten my toothpaste; I think she asks just to see me go into a panic frenzy and see me dive through my luggage to double-check on the toothpaste. And it doesn't matter how absurd the question is--it will panic me. She could ask me, "Did you blow out the candles?" and through the whole trip I will be white-knuckled just knowing for sure we are going to come home to a house burned to the ground and our precious collection of books will have all gone for tinder. There will be nothing but ashes. I just cannot sit down and logically tell myself, "Look, Ponty, the last time you had a lit candle in the house was on your birthday two-and-a-half years ago." No, logic doesn't help the situation. Is everyone like that? If the Pope is traveling someplace like the Dominican Republic, what happens if you ask him, "Hey, Ponty, did you remember the notes for your speech?" Will he start yelling to land his jet so he can tear apart his luggage or does he have the presence of mind to say to himself, "Look, dummy, you can't have forgotten your notes. You're infallible! Remember?"

Lauren Bacall commented on her policy for fighting fear. She said, "You can't start worrying about what's going to happen. You get crazy enough worrying about what's happening." [-mrl]

DISPERSION by Greg Egan (copyright 2020, Subterranean Press, 160pp, hardcover, ISBN-10: 1596069899, ISBN-13: 978-1596069893) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

It would be an understatement to say that 2020 has been a year unlike any other in our memory. Readers have had, I think, three reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic: those that don't want to read anything pandemic related, those that will read more pandemic fiction now than they ever have in the past--maybe trying to get a handle on what our genre has to say about pandemics--and those that keep right on going reading whatever it is they normally read, as their fiction reading is not affected by everything that's happening in the world around us.

Then there are the writers, who in all fairness are readers themselves and generally fall into the same categories as the rest of us. While it is true that the job of SF writers is not to predict the future, an oddly high number of them have released books in 2020 that deal with pandemics and the like. Heck, even Kameron Hurley's *THE LIGHT BRIGADE*, a Hugo finalist in 2020, mentions a worldwide pandemic, and that book was published in 2019. And in reality, most books that are being published in 2020 have been in the pipeline since late last year or early this year, before COVID-19 hit. What did they know that the rest of us didn't?

And so we come to Greg Egan's new novella, "Dispersion". Dispersion is both the title of the book and the name of the affliction that is affecting the world in which the story is set. Egan does not tell us where this planet is, how its population got there (if that is even relevant) or much else about the people in the story. What we do know is that there are six "fractions" (nations if you want to put a label on it, but I don't think that's even correct) who are incompatible and in many cases invisible to each other. The Dispersion appears--never explained, but I don't think it much matters in the larger context of the story--and infects members of each of the six fractions. Dispersion manifests itself by dragging detritus (for lack of a better term, I think) from foreign fractions into people and dragging parts of the infected people into the foreign fractions. People die a rather horrible death as a result.

The basic solution? Each fraction self-isolates (now where have we heard that before?) while a cure is sought. Alice Pemberthy is the scientist who is working on trying to figure this all out and come up with a cure. The odd thing about Alice is that her parents are from two different fractions--something which is never really explained, and I'm not sure has any relevance to the story (and if it truly doesn't have any relevance, why is the fact introduced at all?).

The story, then, is about the search for the cure and how the various fractions act toward each other during the course of the story. One fraction or another brings fires and floods to another fraction, in an effort to destroy those fractions they deem responsible for the problem. There is basically no trust between fractions, even as scientists from all fractions try to work out a solution to the problem.

Egan weaves a tale that in many respects is eerily like our own today. The world building is not expansive, nor does it need to be. Egan tells us what we need to know in order to understand what is going on, and not more. Alice, like the scientists of our day today, is doing what she can in order to come up with a cure to the Dispersion. As is usual with a Greg Egan story, the science is meticulously laid out; it's clear that, as with his other books, he's given a lot of thought to the situation. And the ending sure isn't what I was expecting, and I'm still trying to work it through in my mind.

While I liked Egan's previous story, "Perihelion Summer", better than this one, it's still a good read. And I really do want to know what writers knew that we didn't when they gave us stories like this that so eerily predict the situation we're in. I'll never know, and it really doesn't matter. What matters is the story, and it's a good one. [-jak]

DARK (television review by Dale Skran):

The third and final season of *DARK* recently appeared on Netflix, so this seems like a good time to review the entire series. *DARK* is only for those who have a high toleration for super-complex science fiction plots, and a basically tragic tale. *DARK* does make a reasonable attempt to wind up all the various plot threads while not letting the viewer down, and the end, although not Hollywood, was fitting.

There is a lot of good stuff in *DARK*--atmospheric music, excellent acting, camerawork, effects, and location shooting--along with about 10,000 interesting ideas--that draw you deeper and deeper into a labyrinthian plot. This is also a story that plays fair with the viewer--it is not "all a dream", or more aptly, "all a nightmare."

For quite a while I thought *DARK* was going to conclude as an anti-nuclear screed, but the nuclear power plant near the isolated German town of Winden is more atmosphere than anything else. At the core, *DARK* is the classic Frankenstein tale--smart, brave, good people seek their heart's desires, and create an endless nightmare using a technology that, in the end, is too powerful for humans to use. But those same smart, brave, and good people who commit horrific atrocities in pursuit of their goals, finally relinquish both the technology that created them and their very existence.

There is a lot of wonderful SF craziness in DARK, including Victorian super-science, a post apocalypse world, competing conspiracies of time travelers, beautiful laboratories and impressive secret lodges. In many ways similar to COUNTERPART, DARK focuses on how events can evolve differently in parallel timelines, but in a much more complex and twisted fashion than COUNTERPART.

The great failure of DARK is that it is almost certainly too hard to follow for most viewers, even die-hard SF fans. Toward the end of the series the directors start to use a year clock to help the audience better understand the flow of time, and side-by-side views of parallel dimensions, but it is too little, too late. I suspect 99% of the viewers have long since given up.

In the first season, there is good reason to follow key characters as they discover for the first time just how crazy the world of DARK really is, but once it is clear that time travel is involved, the viewing experience would have been greatly enhanced by clear transitions between different time periods. After the idea of parallel worlds was introduced, it would again have been much better if there was a visual way to understand which world the characters were currently in.

It seems clear that both DARK and COUNTERPART express the modern German obsession with a "divided world" [West and East Germany], their divergent paths, and their inevitable conflict/dissolution. They remind me of much British fiction and theatre from the 50s/60s that was, one way or another, about the fall of the British Empire.

Read no further if you wish to avoid major spoilers.

The central conceit of DARK is the conflict between the two main characters, Jonas and Martha, who are variously friends, lovers, allies, and enemies. Both of them kill some version of each other at some point. Both of them believe they are trying to variously perpetuate or terminate the endless Mobius strip that imprisons them, while in fact both are trapped in an infinite loop of death and resurrection. Both switch sides, in effect becoming an evil version of their earlier selves. This dance is just about the most complex plot ever. In time, the young and naive Jonas becomes Adam, the horrifically scarred, ruthless mastermind of one time- cult, Sic Mundus, and the similarly young and naive Martha, becomes Eva, the equally ruthless although somewhat less scarred leader of an opposing time-cult, Erit Lux.

DARK uses the "river" theory of time, with the idea that time wants to not change. Thus, as long as a future version of yourself exists, you can't be killed. In one scene, a major character first tries to hang himself, but someone appears and cuts him down. He grabs their gun, and tries to shoot himself, but the gun jams over and over. His rescuer picks up the gun and fires it at the wall to demonstrate that as long as the character's future self exists, he cannot be killed--or kill himself. This gives the two main adversaries, Adam and Eva, a highly useful invulnerability, which although not often displayed in DARK, must have come in handy at times.

Eva/Martha and Adam/Jonas wage a cosmic war that stretches over hundreds of years and multiple dimensions as they both learn ways to use time travel as a weapon. Eva discovers a trick that allows her to have multiple versions of herself or her agents active at the same time and place. Adam believes he has found a way to use the "god particle" to destroy the person that links two of the dimensions. And so it goes with all the characters dancing to the tune of Adam and Eva, until finally, one of them [and I'm not saying which one] figures out a way out of the maze. That escape route, however, requires a great sacrifice by Martha and Jonas--not just their lives, but both of their entire timelines/dimensions must be destroyed. This sacrifice seems fitting give the insane cycle of death Jonas/Adam and Martha/Eva perpetuate.

Rating: DARK is +4 in ambition but perhaps +2 in execution. It is violent and, well, dark, with numerous suicides, murders, and other tragedies, suitable only for adults. There are sex scenes and lots of adult themes. Just one final question: what company built that convenient bunker? It served the needs of various conspirators over many decades, and survived the apocalypse in two dimensions--it must have been made of strong stuff!! [-dls]

Dog Expressions and Opera (letter of comment by Kip Williams):

In response to [Mark's comments on dog expression](#) in the 07/31/20 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

I always thought that dogs did certain things--tilting their head to one side, for instance--because they worked. That when they're puppies, they simply try everything as part of exploring their world. When a particular move gets the "aww, let's pet it" reaction from people, it stays in their repertory and perhaps gets experimented with.

One thing that gets my goat, though, is cartoons and comics where the animals wear human expressions, instead of the storytellers bothering to learn how they really convey things. There was an uncanny valley western about a horse called Spirit (if memory still haunts) who smiled ("I AM HAPPY!") and frowned ("AM SAD NOW!") and made the Standard Disney-style All-Purpose Earnest Expression (mouth down, head forward, eyes narrowed from below, eyebrows elegant esses) and so on, and if I ever got even a quarter inch into the story, I could count on being yanked out fully by yet them pulling another inappropriate face. It's one thing when Horace Horsecollar does it, quite another when they've rotoscoped horse movements and stuck a ham actor on the front end. [-kw]

And in response to Paul Dormer's comments on opera in the 07/31/20 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

Opera at the Bastille! Well, it figures. Twenty or so years ago, when I was in 'Man of La Mancha', I always imagined the audience for this impromptu presentation whipped up by Cervantes in the Inquisition holding room, standing up afterwards: "That was great! What do you want to do tomorrow?" "Well, I hear they're doing 'My Fair Lady' over at the Bastille."

And here we are.

Also, I drew a cartoon, years ago, of an opera manager coming onto the stage during an opera to tell the audience that the surtitles [a.k.a. supertitles] are not there so they can sing along. [-kw]

Hugo and Retro Hugo Awards Winners

HUGO AWARDS

- Best Novel: A MEMORY CALLED EMPIRE, by Arkady Martine (Tor; Tor UK)
- Best Novella: THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE THE TIME WAR, by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone (Saga Press; Jo Fletcher Books)
- Best Novelette: "Emergency Skin", by N. K. Jemisin (Forward Collection (Amazon))
- Best Short Story: "As the Last I May Know", by S.L. Huang (Tor.com, 23 Oct 2019)
- Best Series: "The Expanse", by James S. A. Corey (Orbit US; Orbit UK)
- Best Related Work: "2019 John W. Campbell Award Acceptance Speech", by Jeannette Ng
- Best Graphic Story Or Comic: "LaGuardia", written by Nnedi Okorafor, art by Tana Ford, colours by James Devlin (Berger Books; Dark Horse)
- Best Dramatic Presentation, Long Form: GOOD OMENS
- Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form: THE GOOD PLACE: "The Answer"
- Best Editor, Short Form: Ellen Datlow
- Best Editor, Long Form: Navah Wolfe
- Best Professional artist: John PicaciA
- Best Semiprozine: Uncanny Magazine, editors-in-chief Lynne M. Thomas and Michael Damian Thomas, nonfiction/managing editor Michi Trota, managing editor Chimedum Ohaegbu, podcast producers Erika Ensign and Steven Schapansky
- Best Fanzine: The Book Smugglers, editors Ana Grilo and Thea James
- Best Fancast: Our Opinions Are Correct, presented by Annalee Newitz and Charlie Jane Anders
- Best Fan Writer: Bogi Takacs
- Best Fan Artist: Elise Matthesen Lodestar Award for Best Young Adult Book (Not a Hugo): CATFISHING ON CATNET, by Naomi Kritzer (Tor Teen) Astounding Award for Best New Writer, Sponsored by Dell Magazines (Not a Hugo): R.F. Kuang (2nd year of eligibility)

RETRO HUGO AWARDS

- Best Novel: SHADOW OVER MARS (THE NEMESIS FROM TERRA), by Leigh Brackett (Startling Stories, Fall 1944)
- Best Novella: "Killdozer!", by Theodore Sturgeon (Astounding, Nov 1944)
- Best Novelette: "City", by Clifford D. Simak (Astounding, May 1944)
- Best Short Story: "I, Rocket", by Ray Bradbury (Amazing Stories, May 1944)
- Best Series: The Cthulhu Mythos, by H. P. Lovecraft, August Derleth, and others
- Best Related Work: "The Science-Fiction Field", by Leigh Brackett (Writer's Digest, July 1944)
- Best Graphic Story Or Comic: Superman: "The Mysterious Mr. Mxyzptlk", by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (Detective Comics, Inc.)
- Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form (tie): THE CANTERVILLE GHOST and THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE
- Best Editor, Short Form: John W. Campbell, Jr.
- Best Professional Artist: Margaret Brundage
- Best Fanzine: Voice of the Imagi-Nation, edited by Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle R. Douglas
- Best Fan Writer: Fritz Leiber

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

Hugo Awards

The only category that I read here was Short Story. I ranked the winner "As the Last I May Know" by S. L. Huang, fourth, and my first choice, "Ten Excerpts from an Annotated Bibliography on the Cannibal Women of Ratnabar Island" by Nibedita Sen, came in sixth.

While the Retro Hugo Awards ceremony went on fairly well, people seemed to be of two minds about the regular Hugo Awards ceremony: half thought it was a dumpster fire, and half thought it was a train wreck.

Why? Well, for starters, it ran for almost four hours, about *twice* the normal length. (It ran so long that one winner was apparently unable to accept their award because Shabbos started where they were living because of the long running time.) Given that the ceremony started at midnight in Britain and 1AM in continental Europe (if I've calculated correctly), letting it run that long is simply rude to the fans in those regions.

Why did it run so long? Because the two hosts, George R. R. Martin and Robert Silverberg, reminisced at great length about past Worldcons and awards ceremonies they had attended--and Silverberg has attended *all* of the awards ceremonies! Someone posted an edited-down version of the ceremony, cutting out their reminiscences, and it ran about an hour and a half, meaning Martin and Silverberg spent two hours of the time on things of little or no interest to the current finalists (or most of the audience). As many people said, give them a panel of their own to reminisce, but the Hugo Awards ceremony is not the time or place.

That the two of them spent time praising many of the past figures of science fiction who have since been revealed as racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced was also criticized, especially since many of the finalists were people that these figures would have thought unworthy of being nominated. Again, having a panel on reconsidering past figures would have been better. There were also some references to offensive or inappropriate jokes or comments (e.g., something about the crotch area on the Oscar statuette).

And as the icing on the cake, many of the finalists names were mispronounced. This was particularly egregious since ConZealand asked the finalists for the phonetic pronunciation of their names. (Martin says he never received this from the convention.)

Given that all of Silverberg's and Martin's comments and introductions were pre-recorded, the convention could have (and should have) asked them to re-record the mispronounced parts, dropped the inappropriate jokes, and made the whole thing a lot shorter. (As an example, one pre-recorded segment of Martin's ran seventeen minutes by itself!)

Obviously one problem with using pre-recorded segments or even something like Zoom is that the hosts and presenters have no way to "read the room"--to see that the audience is booing their comments, or getting restless, or even getting up and leaving. This is why everyone must err on the side of brevity.

Retro Hugo Awards

As I suspected, it did not take many nominations for something to make the ballot. The finalist for Best Novel with the fewest nominations had 10, Novella 5, Series and Pro Artist 4, and Graphic Story and Fan Writer 3. The number of voters was between 200 and 400 for all the categories, but it clearly was easy to get something on the final ballot.

I ranked the Best Novel winner, SHADOW OVER MARS, fourth (and below No Award).

I ranked the Best Novella winner, "Killdozer" by Theodore Sturgeon,

I ranked the Best Novelette winner, "City" by Clifford D. Simak, last.

I ranked the Best Short Story winner, "I, Rocket" by Ray Bradbury first.

I had commented on the absence of the film THE UNINVITED, which I assume was because it was Long Form and that category did not have enough viable candidates. But apparently ConZealand moved it and its nominating votes (if any) to Short Form and it still missed the final ballot by one vote (it had 6, while THE CANTERVILLE GHOST had 7). That THE INVISIBLE MAN'S REVENGE got 10 nominations and THE UNINVITED only 6 is ludicrous (IMHO). Of the winners, I ranked THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE first and THE CANTERVILLE GHOST third.

As I suggested, Best Series was plagued by nominations for series that did not have enough installments by 1945: both "Foundation" by Isaac Asimov and the "Venus Equilateral" series by George O. Smith were disqualified even though both had enough nominating votes to make the ballot. (Indeed, the "Foundation" series had the most nominating votes in this category.)

Some complaints have been raised about John W. Campbell receiving the Best Editor (Short Form) award and "The Cthulhu Mythos" receiving the Best Series (because it was H. P. Lovecraft's creation). The influence of the latter, and the fact that it had other named contributors make it at least reasonable, but one might argue that Campbell's lasting influence from 1944 in particular is minimal, and if he was so racist in his editorial policy, was he *really* the best editor even at the time?

People also complained in general about the Retro Hugo Awards, which they claimed were there to honor dead white men, but several women did win Retro Hugo Awards this year. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

In high school I was voted the girl most likely to become a nun. That may not be impressive to you, but it was quite an accomplishment at the Hebrew Academy.

--Rita Rudner

Tweet

Go to [our home page](#)