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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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Table of Contents

[The Speckled Clue](#) (comments by mark R. Leeper)
[CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON and the MT VOID](#) (letter of comment by Guy Lillian)
[Translation](#) (letter of comment by Gary Labowitz)
[This Week's Reading](#) (THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE)
(book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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The Speckled Clue (comments by mark R. Leeper):

Mark Leeper's Journal. November 19, 1999

Frequently the sacred cows of our society do not bear close scrutiny, particularly in works of art. In art the same criteria we apply to newer works of art if applied to the classics would show them to be flawed in the same way. There are two film versions of NOSFERATU. One is a classic of German cinema directed by F. W. Murnau in 1922, one is a nearly identical remake made almost as a silent film in 1979. The former is one of the most chilling films ever made. The latter is and intentionally close recreation using almost all of the same techniques and style is ponderous and dull. The only major difference is that the remake is in color. But watching it one knows it could have been made with modern techniques so you are less likely to be impressed. When you see a silent film you make allowances for its age. The difference is not that the first is done so much better but that one knows it is not a classic so one can be critical in the way one would not be with the original. (Or one should. I do not know what a young audience would make of the original NOSFERATU.)

I am listening to a radio adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story "The Speckled Band." By the way, SPOILER WARNING: IF YOU HAVE NOT BEEN IN CONTACT WITH THE STORY AND DON'T KNOW THE ENDING AND DO NOT WANT TO KNOW THE END, GO AWAY. I would be spoiling it for you. Anyway this was what Doyle himself considered to be one of his very best Sherlock Holmes stories. One of his best, mind you. And most of his fans agree. If you remember Holmes's client tells him about a woman who had spent a night alone in a particular room. In the middle of the night the woman had screamed, staggered from her room, gasped cryptically "the speckled band," and died. The whole story is about Holmes trying to figure out the meaning of these last words. These days most of us know that the murder weapon is and title refers to a deadly swamp adder.

Now this is a classic, but it occurs to me that this story is really a prime example of what is frequently called "the idiot plot." That is a story where if one person did the logical thing, the whole plot would fall apart. The plot works only because the people are behaving like idiots. They are unrealistically doing it as well. Now I am not going to try to second-guess the great

Sherlock Holmes. I will assume it was a brilliant piece of deduction to figure out that the clues pointed to the murder weapon being a deadly reptile. Even the clue that there was an indiscrete saucer of milk left hanging around. How that points to swamp adder I have no idea, because adders, being reptiles, are not partial to dairy products. There are few swamps where any self-respecting adder would get a taste for milk. But what is really foolish in the plotting is the behavior of the victim. What kind of person would feel herself dying, find a sympathetic sister, and say something stupid like "the speckled band." And people in the story think the words mean a speckled band of gypsies. Her last words are poetic. They are picturesque language. But under the circumstances it really is not the way the woman would express herself. Does it not only seem more natural and at the same time more intelligent for her to yell in the loudest voice she can muster, "SNAKE!!!"? [-mrl]

CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON and the MT VOID (letter of comment by Guy Lillian):

In response to the MT VOID in general and [Mark's comments on CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON](#) in the 09/18/20 issue of the MT VOID in particular, Guy Lillian writes in ZINE DUMP #50:

Every week a new edition of MT Void appears in subscribers' inboxes, and I strongly, strongly recommend readers join their number. The Leepers are excellent writers with broad interests within the field, and fill their zine with entertaining and readable--and varied--content. In this particular issue from late September, for instance, Mark mulls THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON and Evelyn visits Jean Cocteau's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST. Both films strike vivid memories for me. I was terrified of the Black Lagoon trailer as a whelp, awed by its 3-D effects when I finally viewed it in its intended form, amused when it inspired THE SHAPE OF WATER, an Oscar-winning film. I first saw BELLE ET BETE at the 1976 Rivercon/DeepSouthCon, one of fandom's great events for me (I mean, Muhammed Ali was at the hotel). The lettercol looks back at a previous topic, Infomercials, which issue also covered this year's NASFiC and THE AFRICAN QUEEN (the actual boat is on view in the Florida Keys, and can be rented out). A contributor's long review of the TV series DARK graces an issue from August; Mark talked about kosher food earlier that month. What's next? Subscribe and we'll both know! [-gl]

Translation (letter of comment by Gary Labowitz):

In response to [various comments on translation](#) in the 09/25/20 issue of the MT VOID, Gary Labowitz writes:

When I worked the IBM exhibit at the 1964 World's Fair in New York we had a display on "Mechanical Translation" which was a big deal back then. It was computerized to do word (and I think some phrases) lookup in dictionaries and produce a "translation." The reports we got was that a sample translation, from Russian, no less, was an input of "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" came out as "The vodka is good, but the meat is spoiled." I doubt this was true, but we handed it out anyway.

One of my favorite jokes (which my wife will confirm that I have told ad nauseam) goes as follows:

A British man is touring the USA by car. He is going through Nebraska when he sees a local at a fence around a huge farm of corn plants as far as he could see. He pulls over and asks the farmer there, "What on earth do you do with all this corn?" The farmer answers, "Well, we eat what we can, and what we can't, we can." The Brit laughs, with a comment of "very good!" and gets back into his car and drives off. When he returns to England he is telling a group of his friends about his trip. He explains, "At one point I stopped and asked a farmer there, "What do you do with these vast quantities of corn? He gave me a most humorous reply." The groups presses him with, "Oh, do tell us Clarence ... and "Yes, do." and so forth. "Ah," Clarence says, "he replied to my question by saying, "We eat what we're able, and what we're not, we put up in tins." They all chuckle at this.

It's a clear case of mistranslation which in this case is a valid translation but misses the "flavor" of the reply.

I could never figure out why they found any of this exchange amusing. [-gl]

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

THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE by V. E. Schwab (Tor, ISBN 978-0- 765-38756-1) is invisible because Addie has sold her soul for freedom. But she discovers to her dismay that this freedom seems to be more "freedom from" than "freedom to"--she leaves no trace behind, not even memory.

The basic idea seems to be the same as a novel (novella? I seem to think it was half of an Ace Double) in which the main character is so non-descript that people simply don't see him. If he grabs someone by the arm, they will see his hand and follow his arm up to where they do see him, but as soon as he lets go, he fades from their sight (and memory). (I don't think it is A GIFT FROM EARTH by Larry Niven, which has a very similar idea.) Addie has to learn to negotiate her way through

life with this handicap, so though the book is fantasy, it also has some of the feel of science fiction, taking one premise and then examining all the ramifications of it. As such, it has appeal for both fantasy and science fiction fans. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

A saleslady holds up an ugly dress and says,
'This looks much better on.' On what? On fire?
--Rita Rudner

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