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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
10/09/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 15, Whole Number 2140

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An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at
http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

Cruel and Unusual (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

From Mark Leeper's Diary June 26, 1982:

Somehow I seem to hear news stories and pick up facts that nobody else seems to be aware of. I don't know why that is. When I was growing up I used to pop some strange fact I had heard at the dinner table, like that somebody had created a musical tone that sounded as if it was always descending but when it was done it sounded higher than when it started. That was how it was described on the radio. I brought that sort of thing up at the table and nobody particularly commented on it. Years later I found out that my father, at least, thought I had made them all up. Well, ... maybe one in five I did make up but what can you expect--I was just a kid and was not really worried about high standards of truth of the sort that I have today, but still nobody believes me. Incidentally, I eventually heard this tone played on the radio and it didn't really sound to me as if it were descending.

Anyway, I was listening to the radio this morning, and in among the stories of people squabbling over how to spend the "Peace Dividend," which high Pentagon officials now estimate to be over \$3.17, was one of those stories such as I would bring up at the dinner table. A very important person in New York (sorry, I would have listened closer if I had known what was coming up) has said that inmates in the state's prison system should not be allowed to watch cable television and should have to read instead. People on the street would be less likely to commit crimes if they knew they would be going someplace where they would have to read. That's what she said. I wouldn't have thought it possible. How can one person make a statement about a controversy I didn't know existed and at the same time make both sides sound as if they have a total IQ of 87?

What I learn from this is that our prison system considers a fitting punishment for violent crime that people be forced to watch movies such as RAMBO and DEATH WISH III and some crusader is popping up and saying, "No, it is a worse punishment to make hardened criminals read." I guess if I were to take sides (and I feel like a jerk for doing it), I agree with our crusader. This could start a whole revolution in our penal system. I think hardened criminals should be forced to read Dickens and Shakespeare and then be tested on what they have read. Parole hearings can change from asking stupid questions such as "Have you rehabilitated yourself?"--and what criminal ever says "No" to that one?--and ask instead that the prisoner explain the symbolism of the whale in MOBY DICK.

I personally think that Manuel Noriega should be punished by ten years of wearing thick glasses with paper clips in the hinges, a pocket protector full of pens, and white socks, and carrying a Depression-era briefcase full of books. Let's see if it will scare lawbreakers to know that if caught they will be sentenced to long terms of being nerds. [-mrl]

BIOHACKERS (television review by Dale Skran):

BIOHACKERS follows the arrival of first-year medical student Mia Akerlund at the University of Freiburg [an actual German university]. She moves into a house shared by Chen-Lu, a somewhat Asbergerish girl whose hobby is the genetic engineering of musical plants, Lotta, a rich girl who likes to party, and Ole, a fame obsessed nerd who bio-hacks himself. The time seems to be just bit over the horizon, with student raves fueled by eye drops that enhance night vision and pills that allow you to absorb more oxygen so you can double the time you spend underwater.

Mia, however, is mostly interested in meeting Professor Tanja Lorenz, a brilliant genetic engineer, and becoming her prize pupil. The atmospherics are good, and I especially liked the "glowing mouse chase" where Mia meets Jasper, Lorenz's chief lab assistant. BIOHACKERS shines in the creation of a plausible group of nerds who might actually exist somewhere very soon.

It should come as no surprise the Mia has a mission, and soon proves herself both inventive and manipulative in accomplishing it. Mia seems really smart--smarter than everyone else in a class of 100s of students--practices medicine as though she already was a doctor--and has the lab technique of genetic technology Phd--all while still a first year medical school student. As a TV shows goes, the science is mostly plausible, although sometimes things happen faster than is realistic in the lab. The fundamental plot, however, is taken straight out of HIGH PLANS DRIFTER--a stranger rolls into town seeking revenge for a horrible wrong. And that stranger proves to be something more than meets the eye.

I enjoyed BIOHACKERS, but the spy plot came over more as teen drama than realistic some of the time, and the "ethical dilemmas" contrived. Having said all this, I'm rating BIOHACKERS +1 ON THE -4 TO +4 scale, and recommending it to SF fans. Compare to ORPHAN BLACK and HANNAH.

SPOILER ALERT

When the main character casually mentions that she is not sick, and in fact, has never been sick, the experienced SF fan knows what is going on. Mia, it evolves, it not actually Mia, but Emma, the last survivor of an earlier genetic project of Dr. Lorenz's, "Homo Deus." It's a bit vague exactly what Homo Deus was working toward, but Emma came out of it with apparent immunity to all disease. Although this may not have been the focus of Homo Deus, Emma is surely genius level smart, and really well trained in biotech. She is also an inventive, daring, ruthless, and manipulative operative, somewhat warmer than the icy HANNAH, but way beyond other people her age in social engineering. For a less than movie-star beauty, her skills at seduction are excellent, leading one to suspect a bit of pheromone help. Emma also has high motivation, as she blames Lorenz for the death of both her brother and her parents.

BIOHACKERS has been renewed for a second season, and I'll be watching it. The main flaw is that the ethical sins of Dr. Lorenz are contrived and unbelievable. We are asked to believe she inserted genetic flaws into over 250 fetuses so she could test cures. The cures didn't work on any of the kids but Emma. This makes Lorenz not a doctor who failed to cure sick kids, but a Dr. Mengele who created the sick kids in the first place. Why, one wonders? Don't we have enough kids with birth defects? This might have been fixed with better scripting, but as presented it makes the story potted and biased against Lorenz, who has no strong motivations. Lorenz is helping Jasper, her main henchperson, cure his own Huntington's disease, and we are led to believe that the government won't sanction any genetic cures of this disease. The German government is very restrictive on genetic research, but this seems difficult to fathom. Again, this might have been fixed with a stronger script. [-dls]

[BIOHACKERS is available on Netflix.]

THE MEN WHO UNITED THE STATES: AMERICA'S EXPLORERS, INVENTORS, ECCENTRICS, AND MAVERICKS, AND THE CREATION OF ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE by Simon Winchester (book review by Gregory Fredrick):

This is a history book that looks at the individuals who helped to unite this vast and diverse country. When Jefferson purchased the 820,000 square miles of France's possessions in North America in 1803 he needed to know a lot about what he just bought. So, he sent Lewis and Clark to survey it. They only lost one man in their journey which otherwise was very successful. The explorers kept notes about the environment, people, plants and animals they encountered. Sacagawea, a female Native American, who joined their mission was valuable as a guide and interpreter. Before the railroads were built; canal building was seen as a way to ship goods and people across the country. Even George Washington realized the importance of this method of transportation but not much came of this during his time. Eventually as Americans learned of canal building technology from the English we started to build our own canals. The Erie Canal is one of the most famous and most successful canals; it sent goods from the Midwest down to New York city and made New York a wealthy port city. Theodore Judah was the main driving force to start a railroad that traveled across the country. He planned the rail line route thru the Donner Pass which is a mountain pass in the northern Sierra Nevada mountains this was a missing link in the plan to run a railroad across the country. Later Lincoln signed into law the Pacific Railroad Act that appropriated the money for this construction. Inventors like Samuel Morse, Alexander Bell, Edison, and Tesla, are mentioned in the book as others who also contributed to the uniting of the country with new inventions, like the telegraph, the telephone and electric power. The author is very good at detailing these seminal events in American history. This book is a good read if you like history. [-gf]

Plastic-Eating Bugs (letter of comment by Tom Russell):

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/28/new-super-enzyme-eats-plastic-bottles-six-times-faster>:

"A super-enzyme that degrades plastic bottles six times faster than before has been created by scientists and could be used for recycling within a year or two."

Tom notes: The plastic-eating bugs will not know the difference between what has been thrown away and what has not. Long before the oceans are clean all the vinyl siding will have fallen off houses, cell phones will have dissolved and everyone will be wearing hand-woven natural cotton clothes. [-tr]

Mark notes:

This sounds like the plot of MUTANT 59: THE PLASTIC EATERS by Kit Pedlar. [-mrl]

Tom replies:

I didn't recall any story about plastic eaters but not surprised that you recall one.

There was an amateur(?) video documentary in our county library called "Blue Vinyl" that exposed the problems with that plastic. It's the only video on the subject that I have seen. [-tr]

Translation (letters of comment by Daniel Cox, Arthur Kaletsky, Paul Dormer, and Dorothy J. Heydt):

In response to [Gary Labowitz's comments on translation](#) in the 10/02/20 issue of the MT VOID, Daniel Cox writes:

"We eat what we can and what we can't, we can" and its British translation appear in an episode of "Duffy's Tavern". "Duffy's Tavern" is an "old time radio" comedy set in what we might call "a dive". I believe the Englishman who translates the remark was played by Arthur Treacher. [-dte]

Arthur Kaletsky writes:

The other nice English-Russian-English roundtrip is "out of sight, out of mind" which returns as "invisible lunatic".

Paul Dormer writes:

There are lots of stories like that [about being accurate but missing the flavor]. There's that line in Pratchett where one of the witches tells her favourite joke, "Give me an alligator sandwich as fast as possible." (For those that don't know the line, they can work out what it was supposed to be.)

And I'm also reminded of the street clown interviewed in Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor. His favourite joke:

Why is Rome like a candle wick?

For it is in the middle of Greece/grease.

Despite prompting by Mayhew, he insisted that was the correct line.

I remember a friend of my sister's back in the seventies saying she was trying to tell a joke when she was on holiday. It was a joke to do with the Last Supper and Chinese take-away food. The punch line was Judas's carryout, a carryout being a take-away food place and in her northern accent it did sound like Judas Iscariot.

Trouble was, she was trying to tell the joke in French. [-pd]

Evelyn supplies the original line (which Granny mangles) in the Pratchett joke in WITCHES ABROAD: "Give me an alligator sandwich-- and make it snappy!"

Dorothy J. Heydt responds:

Hm. In Rome's heyday, Greece was in the middle of the Roman Empire.

So what was the correct line (vide supra, Yank)?

Traduttore, traditore.

(Italian proverb: a translator is a traitor.) [-djh]

Paul responds:

Well, I guess it was something like, "Why is Athens like a candle wick?".

I must admit I've never read MAYHEM, although I have an abridged version sitting on my to-be-read pile (purchased at the Museum of London), but I saw a TV documentary about it a few years ago introduced by Jonathan Miller, with dramatised extracts, including the street clown, a most melancholy fellow, apparently.

And there was the pure collector, a sixty-something widow who collected buckets of dog shit to sell to the tanneries in London. Sixpence a bucket, she could most days get enough to buy a crust of bread. It was better than going to the workhouse. [-pd]

Dorothy answers:

Yes. I've just finished reading THE GHOST MAP by Steven Johnson, about the great cholera epidemic of London in 1854. It begins by describing the horribly insanitary situation, including the hordes of people who made their livings by collecting various kinds of garbage, including "pure" (what cynic gave it that name, I've no idea). Well worth reading. [-djh]

And Evelyn adds:

I was watching SHIP OF FOOLS the other day, and found the closed captioning at times less than stellar. Lee Marvin plays an uncouth racist, yet when he says "I wanna go home" the caption says "I want to go home," and when he talks about a dark-skinned Mexican, the caption says "negro" (at the time of the film the accepted term)-- but that is not what Marvin's character said. The result is that those relying on the captioning will get an incorrect view of Marvin's character. [-ecl]

The Speckled Band (and Translation) (letters of comment by Radovan Garabik, Gary McGath, and Paul Dormer):

In response to [Mark's comments on "The Speckled Band"](#) in the 10/09/20 issue of the MT VOID, Radovan Garabik writes:

It was (and still is) widely believed that snakes like milk. Was it already known to be a myth at that time?

[Mark writes,] "And people in the story think the words mean a speckled band of gypsies." [-mrl]

That's quite untranslatable, because "band" as the "group of people" and "band" as the "thin long piece of cloth" are usually two different words. In the Slovak translation, the "cloth" meaning has been selected by the translator, and people in the story considered multicolor headbands the gypsies usually wear to point out to the gypsies.

ObSF: While flipping through TV channels yesterday, I watched a few minutes of Golden Eye, dubbed into Slovak. They talked about an Electromagnetic pulse, and something to the effect that "in its path it destroys everything by the mean of electronic equipment". Now, in Slovak, it is a matter of putting the noun phrase into instrumental, so the intended sentence is not *that* syntactically different, but still ... another example of glaring incompetence in translation. [-rg]

Gary McGath suggests:

Surely at some time or other, a musically inclined group of mystery writers must have dubbed themselves "the Speckled

Band." [-gmg]

Paul Dormer responds:

Reminds me of a skit on a radio comedy show back in the Seventies. There was a big band, a sort of Glenn Miller tribute act as we'd now say, led by Syd Lawrence.

Watson: Syd Lawrence has phoned to say that someone has splatter his orchestra with paint.

Holmes: It's the speckled band again.

(Why I remember this stuff after nearly fifty years, I don't know.) [-pd]

[More at <https://groups.google.com/g/rec.arts.sf.fandom/c/hnF6HgGaWpQ>.]

NOSFERATU (letter of comment by Andre Kuzniarek):

In response to [Mark's comments on NOSFERATU](#) in the 10/02/20 issue of the MT VOID, Andre Kuzniarek writes:

[Mark writes,] "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."

Older films, made before production techniques became more sophisticated, almost have a cinema verite feel to them. Their crudity aligns with old newsreels and documentaries. They are so removed from modern film making that their alienness adds to the atmosphere of strangeness, which only reinforces supernatural subjects. But even the earliest DeMille "historical" epics like King of Kings are so old that you might think you're watching a documentary from the period--I'm sure kids would think so. Flash Gordon serials used to freak me out as a little kid seeing them on Sunday mornings in the 60s. They were so crude (compared to "Star Trek") that they seemed like they must be more real somehow. And being raised Catholic, Ming the Merciless looked like the Devil and Mongo like raw documentary footage of Hell itself! [-ak]

Mark replies:

I can see how it might feel that way. But the rat-face did not really make it more effective. [-mrl]

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

In DEEP TIME: HOW HUMANITY COMMUNICATES ACROSS MILLENNIA (Harper Perennial, ISBN 978-0-380-79346-4), Gregory Benford writes about a panel trying to put up warning signs where radioactive wastes are buried--warning signs that will remain effective for tens of thousands of years. They eliminate words and simple symbols, and eventually discuss "mythic" symbols:

"The favorite of many panel members was fifty-foot-high Menacing Earthworks, all radiating outward from the bare site center. These are lightning-shaped, jagged, crowding in on the tiny traveler, cutting off views of the horizon, chaotic. At the open center is the existing Pilot Project concrete hot cell, going to ruin. Beside it, a vast walk-on world map of all repositories of waste. Added on, a map of New Mexico showing this site. The map is of granite and domed, so sand blows off. A room buried beneath holds details about what lies in the salt bed below, as do four smaller buried rooms beneath the largest earthworks. Inscribed 'reading walls' of granite appear throughout the site.

"The common ideas here are irregular geometries and anti-craftsmanship. This contradicts human archetypes of perfection in our imperfect world, which circles, squares, pyramids and spires echo. Using crooked forms when plainly the designers knew 'better' suggests a deliberate shunning of the ideal, a lack of value here."

This sounded good until I saw photographs of Balkan war memorials:

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/spomenik-memorials-yugoslavia-balkans.amp>

and the Treblinka Memorial:

<https://cdn.britannica.com/67/67867-004-144CDACE/memorial-site-concentration-Treblinka-Poland-extermination-camp.jpg>

Admittedly these are not of the scale Benford describes, but they do tell me that the message that "Menacing Earthworks:

sends thousands of years in the future may not be what was intended. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

One man's folly is another man's wife.
--Helen Rowland

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