

# MT VOID 11/20/20 -- Vol. 39, No. 21, Whole Number 2146



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### **THEM! (1954)** (film retrospective by Mark R. Leeper):

THE BEAST FROM 20,000 FATHOMS did well enough for Warner Brothers that they followed it up with another monster film, THEM! In fact, THEM! was one of the better Fifties science fiction films and one of only a handful that are still fairly effective forty years after it was made due in large part to some very intelligent script choices. The style of the film begins as a straightforward police procedural in which the killer turns out to be giant mutated ants. The feel of the drama is no less than one would find in "Dragnet." The terrible poster used in the ad campaign gives away that this is a monster movie. But with the exception of the comic scientist, the parts are all played with grim realism.

Certainly the opening does not immediately give a clue of what is to come. A girl is found wandering in the desert of New Mexico. The police investigate as they would a human crime and besides some odd clues there is no evidence that the police are not dealing with human criminals. Investigating is Police Sergeant Ben Peterson (played by James Whitmore) and his partner. As the police investigated keep finding apparent crime scenes and odd clues. The partner is killed after having been left at a crime scene. One of the first victims was an FBI agent, so another agent is assigned to the case, Robert Graham played by James Arness. Arness had been in two previous science fiction films: TWO LOST WORLDS and more notably in the title role of THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD. The plot unfolds tensely, but has time to have several comic vignettes. Some of the comedy involves Edmund Gwenn as an entomologist brought in to when somebody discovers that the clues point to giant ants. Joan Weldon appears as his daughter, also a scientist. Reportedly one of the minor players built an entire career on this film. Walt Disney--who reportedly was a fan of THEM!--saw Fess Parker and decided he would be a good Davy Crockett.

Some of the touches have their problems. Multiple times ant footprints are found, but always singly. Do ants hop on one foot? In the ant colony, Whitmore's and Arness's voices are muffled by their breathing gear, but Joan Weldon's voice seems to be clear and unmuffled. The ant props are surprisingly well-handled to give the impression of many more ants were than props than there actually were. In fact, there is only one and a half adult ant mock-up built for the film and half of another that were used in the films. The audience never sees more than one ant and a half ant in any one scene. The film was made in color, by the way, and the ants were purple. THEM! was released in black and white and that probably helps the tension of the film.

**BEST TOUCH:** The combination of realism with the science fictional plot.

**WORST TOUCH:** The usual expository lectures about ant natural history seem particularly awkward.

This film stands up very well today because it was taken seriously by the filmmakers. I rate it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Turner Classic Movies is running this on December 3, 4:15 PM. [-mrl]

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**THE LORD OF THE RINGS Life Lessons** (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

I just watched THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS and discovered it had valuable life lessons for the viewer--things like "Don't build your evil fortress downstream from a dam" and "Don't piss off the ents." These are surely lessons we can all live by. [-ecl]

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**NUCLEATION by Kimberly Unger** (copyright 2020, Tachyon Publications, ASIN: B084ZZM6YJ, Print length: 288 pages) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

First contact stories have been a part of science fiction for decades. Humans are fascinated by the concept of there being other races out there, other beings for us to communicate with. Underlying that fascination is the simple question: are we alone?

Kimberly Unger's debut novel, NUCLEATION, doesn't start out as a first contact novel. Helen Vectorovich is one member of a two-person team which is on a very high profile project: the construction of a wormhole gate that would connect earth to, well, "out there"--interstellar space. She is connected via quantum entanglement to a waldo, a robot hundreds of light years away. She and her partner Ted are amongst the best in the business, and thus they have been assigned to this very high profile mission. All is going well, and the team is going through the standard system checklists checklists when something goes very wrong--that can't be much of a surprise, of course - and Ted is killed.

The mission is put on hold, of course. This kind of thing \*never\* happens; if anyone is in danger, it is the pilot, not the navigator. And so, an investigation ensues. There are all sorts of possibilities, of course. Industrial espionage is the number one suspect, of course. Any number of companies and hot shot young teams would like to take over the project and make a name for themselves. But what if it's not that? What if what killed Ted was a new life form that humans haven't encountered previously? Another team is sent out to investigate, and more problems occur. As the person with the most experience, Helen is part of the team leading the investigation, but as one of the top suspects in the accident, her job is difficult, with many roadblocks thrown up in front of her.

It shouldn't be much of a surprise that the answer to the problem is a combination of espionage and alien life forms. But who is leading the sabotage, and how are they working with what appears to be a new life form that is essentially destroying Helen's team's corporate equipment?

NUCLEATION is a well-written, fun, fast paced, and interesting debut novel. It's a whodunnit, a "whydunnit", and a "what's gonna happen next?" kind of story. This is an idea novel, the kind of novel that many of us used to read as kids when we were starting to get our feet wet in science fiction. This is really not a character driven novel, other than the fact that the characters are there to move the plot along. And that's okay, as plot and idea are among the core tenets of science fiction. If you're looking for deep dives into the backgrounds of the characters in NUCLEATION, you won't find them, as those deep dives aren't necessary. Unger tells us just enough of what we need to know to move the story along. There isn't massive world building and character development, but it's not necessary for the story; I find this a benefit, not a detriment. The story works because of it.

There is definitely room for a sequel. The story has really just begun, and I'm interested in finding out what comes next, whether it's in the NUCLEATION universe or something else from Kimberly Unger. I believe she's a writer to watch. [-jak]

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**THE LONG GOODBYE** (letter of comment by Kip Williams):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE LONG GOODBYE](#) in the 11/13/20 issue of the MT VOID, Kip Williams writes:

The biggest change they made in that wretched movie was to make Marlowe into a whining loser, a betrayal of the source material that's on a par with what Disney did to Victor Hugo. They could perhaps have deviated farther from the books by making him a tap-dancing hedgehog, and I'm not entirely sure why they didn't. [-kw]

ObSF: And for this we may have to blame Leigh Brackett, who wrote the screenplay. [-ecl]

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**REPLAY** (letter of comment by Jim Susky):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on Time Magazine's list of "100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time"](#) in the 11/06/20 issue of the MT VOID, Jim Susky writes:

Thank you for the notice on the Time Magazine "top 100 fantasy books".

I quite agree that THE LORD OF THE RINGS is one work along with other famous multipart works.

Clarke and Asimov formed my young fiction tastes well before any of the fantasists so I still tend toward hard SF in the spec-fiction realm. Still, I was surprised to find that I'd read six on the list (four, properly accounted).

I'd like to mention the winner for the 1988 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel--Ken Grimwood's REPLAY.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Replay\\_\(Grimwood\\_novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Replay_(Grimwood_novel))

This was a most satisfying, fully-adult, time-travel yarn set with a plot-device similar to that for GROUNDHOG DAY--albeit with a 25-year cycle.

According to the Wikipedia entry, in 2010 Warner announced a film version--which apparently remains in "development hell". [-js]

Evelyn responds:

REPLAY seems to be the literary equivalent of a cult film--it is not at all well-known, but keeps popping up in discussions of time travel books. There is another difference between Grimwood's time loop and GROUNDHOG DAY's besides the length, but I won't describe it. [-ecl]

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

THE DARK IS RISING by Susan Cooper (Margaret K. McElderry Books, ISBN 978-0-689-82983-3) is another book on Time Magazine's "100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time". It is another juvenile/young adult book, and has what is clearly a common theme in this category: the child or teen of about the age of the target audience who has unsuspected magical powers. (In science fiction, the protagonist has unusual intelligence, calculating skills, or deductive reasoning.)

Towards the beginning of the book, the powers of darkness try to defeat the protagonist in a sequence that is very similar to one in the film THE DEVIL RIDES OUT: a rider appears on a black horse, and the people representing the forces of good form a circle, holding hands but facing outward, to hold it off. Then voices come through the door claiming to be the protagonist's sister and mother, asking him to let them in. All this is very much like the scene in THE DEVIL RIDES OUT where the voice of the daughter of a main character is heard (and indeed, her image is seen) but it is a trick to tempt the mother, and there is a black horse and rider. I assume these are standard tropes, although it is possible Cooper borrowed them from the Dennis Wheatley book THE DEVIL RIDES OUT, which came out in 1934 (the film was in 1968), while THE DARK IS RISING was published in 1973.

And the theme of the child with unexpected magical powers appears again in AKATA WITCH by Nnedi Okorafor (Speak, ISBN 978-0-142-42091-1). This is set in Nigeria, but the protagonist was raised in both Nigeria and the United States, which makes her someone a little less alien to American readers. (This reminded me of THE AMERICAN GIRL magazine published by the Girl Scouts of America in the 1960s. It had an advice column where an American girl would ask for advice and someone from another country would answer. The one I remember was an American girl asking what to wear to a party and getting an answer from a girl in Africa about how to wrap a kanga. I guess this was the 1960s version of promoting diversity, but I was unimpressed.)

Anyway, AKATA WITCH does a much better job of giving American readers a sense of another place in general and of Nigeria in particular. This is particularly tricky since the fantasy element could easily overwhelm the reality of Nigeria. (For example, reading older books, one often gets the impression that zombies are wandering down every street in modern-day Haiti, or that everyone in a shtetl breaks out in song almost every day.) I think I preferred this to THE DARK IS RISING, maybe because the fantasy element was much less familiar to me.

And once more, THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY by Alix E. Harrow (Redhook, ISBN 978-0316421973) has a child with unexpected magical powers--at which point I decided enough was enough. THE TEN THOUSAND DOORS OF JANUARY has gotten a lot of good reviews, what I read was quite good, but I have just had enough of children with unexpected magical powers, at least for now. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Going out to eat is expensive. I was out at one restaurant and they didn't have prices on the menu. Just faces with different expressions of horror.  
--Rita Rudner

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