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Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
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Mini Reviews, Part 1 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

It is that time of year again when I vote on awards for films. This is one very nice perq of my hobby of writing film reviews and being a member of the Online Film Critic Society. Filmmakers and publicists *want* me to see their films in the hopes that they (the films, not the people) will be considered for awards. I get to see new films either on-line or I get discs.

I have not yet worked out if the makers of films like last year's ABOMINABLE really expect the critics to fall in love with their films. They offer me a chance to see their output and there always will be a few really good films. Films like SAUSAGE PARTY, well, the title tells it all.

I cannot write my usual format for every film I see, but I can write brief reviews for many. I do not know where these films will play. These films may play in local theaters or in Manhattan art houses. But I can let people know what to look for on Amazon Prime and/or NetFlix.

This year will undoubtedly be a bit different. Far fewer films were released to theaters, and the Academy Awards (the focus of the awards season) have been moved from their usual date at the end of February to the end of April. So there will not be as many reviews as in previous years.

But here is the first batch, all documentaries.

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH--A LIFE ON OUR PLANET: Sir David Attenborough is 94 years old and has been traveling--and exploring--for 66 years. This "witness statement" (his term) has a lot of beautiful and familiar nature photography--familiar because it uses archival footage from his films from those 66 years. Attenborough fits his whole career into this framework, tracing the disappearance of wilderness (and species) over that time. It has essentially a very downbeat message; even his suggestions at the end fail to provide much uplift. Released 10/04/20; available on Netflix streaming. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)

LEAP OF FAITH--WILLIAM FRIEDKIN ON THE EXORCIST: This is a good commentary and companion piece for the original film with many ideas coming together. It has its own philosophical line and its own gravitas, having as much profundity as the film itself. But unlike with most films, see this commentary before seeing THE EXORCIST, not after. (Okay, everyone interested in this

documentary will probably have seen THE EXORCIST but do not re-watch it until *after* you watch this.) The film is basically Friedkin talking and as such is long and a bit pedantic, but contains much information. Released 11/19/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)

CAMP CRIP: "Camp Crip" is the nickname given to Camp Jened, a summer camp in upstate New York in the 1960s for handicapped (*) children that grew into a national movement. The film covers many people from their time as children at the camp (through the use of home movies and some archival documentary footage) to their emergence as leaders of the national disabled rights movement. Released 03/25/20, available on Netflix streaming. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4)

[(*) The terms "disabled" and "handicapped" are both widely used throughout this film, and the choice is not necessarily as a function of when the speaker is talking. -ecl]

[-mrl]

THE ROOK (television review by Dale Skran):

I have observed in the past that if one person has a powered suit that flies you get IRON MAN, a superhero story, while if one thousand people have powered suits you get Heinlein's STARSHIP TROOPERS, a war story. But in both cases, the general public is aware that such a thing as powered suits really exist. There is a third kind of story, perhaps more popular in the pages of Analog in the 1950s, where people with super-powers exist in secret, and either are affiliated with spy agencies, big corporations, organized crime, or a resistance movement. In that case you get THE ROOK, originally running for one season only on STARZ, and now available for pay via Amazon Prime or Starz.

THE ROOK clearly did not find an audience, which is a shame. There was a time when THE ROOK would have won the Hugo and been considered a tremendous SF achievement. Now it is lost in the clutter of a vast array of SF shows, a few of which are, in fact, better TV. Recently my wife and I binged TIME-TUNNEL, a '60s SF show that also did not make it to a second season. There is simply no comparison--THE ROOK beats TIME TUNNEL in every regard--acting, scripting, ideas, direction, etc.--and not by a small amount either. Any yet, THE ROOK is lost in the fog of other shows.

Three things seem to have doomed THE ROOK. First, it is a super-hero show that is tied to a little-known fantasy series by Daniel O'Malley (THE ROOK, STILETTO) rather than Marvel or DC. Second, it is populated by British actors who are unknown to a global audience. Third, it is susceptible to the criticism that the plot, although an interesting pastiche, is derivative of THE BOURNE IDENTITY and AGENTS OF SHIELD.

There are two fundamental divisions in super-hero land: (1) the hero with no or minimal powers [Batman] and (2) the hero with god-like powers [Superman]. Among current TV series, HANNAH is more on the Batman side, and THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY more the Superman side. One problem with the god-like powers story is that the humans are largely irrelevant; the story is mostly about the characters with the god-like powers. This is much less true in THE ROOK where the characters are just not powerful enough to ignore the world around them the way Dr. Manhattan does in WATCHMEN. But, as I have oft pointed out, a weak super team makes the best stories, i.e. when the Avengers consisted of Captain America, Hawkeye, Quicksilver, and the Scarlet Witch.

To discuss the plot of THE ROOK even in outline gives away a lot, so I'm not going to go there. If you have any interest in super-heroes, spy fiction, British spy fiction, or psionic powers THE ROOK is a must see. I'm not going to claim THE ROOK is as good as THE AMERICANS, CONTINUUM, or ORPHAN BLACK, but it is better than lots and lots of other SF/fantasy TV shows. I'm rating THE ROOK a +2 on the -4 to +4 scale, and suitable for teens and up. There is violence, sex, and some terrifying situations of imprisonment. The plot is complicated enough most kids wouldn't be able to follow it, and there are some speculative sexual scenes involving characters who are extremely different in complex ways that some might find disturbing.

SPOILER WARNING--STOP NOW

In the opening scene of THE ROOK a young woman awakens in a heavy rain on a bridge in central London. She is surrounded by eight horribly mangled bodies. She does not remember who she is, what is happening, or anything else. She runs. Soon she discovers that her name is Myfanwy Thomas, a Rook in the Checquy, a secret agency using superhumans to defend Britain, and that she appears to be able to kill people in horrible ways without touching them. She is offered a choice by her pre-memory wipe self--to seek a new life of safety, or return to her dangerous life at the Checquy to find out who did this to her. She decides to return and fight. Then things get interesting.

One of the more interesting aspects of THE ROOK is the character Gestalt, the other Rook in the Checquy. Gestalt is a single mind spread over four bodies, two male identical twins, and a male/female set of fraternal twins. They have been raised from a young age to be the ultimate fighting squad, with perfect coordination due to the apparently quantum level connection between the four bodies. Although similar to the DC Character Triplicate Girl, and Marvel Comics' Multiple Man, Gestalt is an original addition to the super-hero pantheon. And did I mention Myfanwy and Gestalt are exploring a sexual relationship?

A major difference from the books, wherein the powers are magical in nature, is that THE ROOK presents a scientific-sounding explanation for each power, and none of the powers shown are "god-like". Myfanwy, in her post-wipe state may be one of the most powerful characters, although another character's ability to memory wipe an opponent is a close second, as is the "Queen's" ability to manipulate air on a small scale. On the low end we see a little girl with the ability to see in the dark and on the higher end an American agent with Buffy-level super-strength. The "King's" power is a kind of sonic blast, although not as strong as that displayed by the Marvel character Banshee. [-dls]

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY: TERRAFORMING MARS, INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL, IMMORTALITY, AND OUR DESTINY BEYOND EARTH by **Michio Kaku** (book review by Gregory Frederick): Michio Kaku is a famous physicist and author who has also been on many science TV shows. Kaku in this book describes how we can travel to Mars and terraform it plus he also delves into topics as diverse as interstellar travel, self-aware AI, self replicating robotics, immortality, and other future concepts. NASA's plan to travel to Mars, as detailed in the book, includes the Deep Space Gateway which is a proposed space station orbiting the Moon, the SLS rocket, the Orion capsule and the Deep Space Transport. The Deep Space Transport is an assembled in space station which would initially orbit the Moon then would be used to transport astronauts to Mars. Terraforming Mars is a huge task but as discussed by the author it could be done by injecting methane, and water vapor which are greenhouse gases into Mars' atmosphere. Additionally, satellites orbiting Mars could direct concentrated Sunlight to the poles of Mars. These satellites would unfurl very large sheets of either mirrors or solar panels. If solar panels are used the collected energy could be converted to microwaves and then beamed down to Mars' polar regions. Heating the poles would release water vapor to again create a greenhouse effect.

The parameter known as specific impulse is introduced to the reader to allow us to understand which form of rocket propulsion is the most efficient. Specific impulse is the thrust of the rocket multiplied by the time over which it fires. Ion engines, plasma engines and nuclear fusion engines have increasing better impulse in the order listed. NASA plans to use ion engines on the Deep Space Transport to Mars. Plasma and nuclear fusion engines are still ideas on the drawing board but NASA has been using and improving the performance of ion engines for years. Interstellar travel would use the solar sail Star-shot project design which has been supported by Stephen Hawking. Gigawatt-powered lasers would propel hundreds of solar sails each with a silicon chip filled with sensors attached to it on a journey to our nearest Star system. Many more ideas that seem more like science fiction but could possibly become reality are also presented in this book. This author usually writes a very enjoyable book and this one does not disappoint. [-gf]

Rudyard Kipling's Science Fiction (letters of comment by Fred Lerner and Gary McGath):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on Rudyard Kipling's science fiction](#) in the 12/11/20 issue of the MT VOID, Fred Lerner writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "One thing about all the technical detail in these--they would have been perfect for ASTOUNDING if ASTOUNDING had existed then." [-ecl]

John Campbell made the same point during my 1962 interview with him (which can be heard on the fanac.org website). [-fl]

Gary McGath writes:

"The Ship That Found Herself" is basically an allegory. The ship is initially its separate parts, each thinking of itself as an entity. Then, by some Borg-like process, they merge and become The Ship. I think it's intended to represent recruits in a military organization who become a unit.

It could be called fantasy. It's not intended to be plausible on a literal level, even with suspension of disbelief, and that puts it outside science fiction.

I don't remember ".007" well enough to comment on it. [-gmg]

Alan Dean Foster (and Rudyard Kipling) (letter of comment by John Purcell):

In response to [Mark's comments on Alan Dean Foster and STAR WARS](#) in the 12/11/20 issue of the MT VOID, John Purcell writes:

Alan Dean Foster is a good writer who deserves the royalties due to him from Disney Corporation, an entity that I thoroughly no longer appreciate. Foster is a fine writer--I enjoy his Flinx books--and hey, if he's under contract for those books, then by crikey, he is owed those royalties. As for Lucas' writing of the STAR WARS mythos, Lucas may have control of the SW franchise, but it is so obvious that he borrowed his story-line from so many sources that Lucas could arguably be accused of plagiarism. I haven't read Foster's THE TAR-AYIM KRANG since it first came out, so a re-reading of it might be a good idea to see the parallels between that book and STAR WARS. Your forty-three-year-old article still holds up very well.

I need to do some more re-reading of old stories; in particular, the Kipling stories you reference. It has been way too long. [-jp]

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

I've been binge-reading "Solar Pons" lately, with everything else on hold. August Derleth made no bones about the fact he was copying Sherlock Holmes, even to the extent of using many of the cases mentioned in passing in the Conan Doyle stories (and even a retelling of one of the "Sherlock Holmes apocrypha"). Even when the stories are original, Derleth uses some of the striking aspects from Doyle--the use of phosphorus, for example.

Derleth does a good job of it. He brings the time forward to the 1920s and 1930s, so things are less Victorian/Edwardian, and he make Parker (the Watson character) a bit more observant and perceptive--not as much as Pons, of course, but able to deduce quite a bit from the appearance of a client, the type of writing paper used, and so on. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality,
they are not certain; as far as they are certain,
they do not refer to reality. --Albert Einstein

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