



Here is the second batch of mini-reviews, African-American dramas, including a guest review by Evelyn.

**DA 5 BLOODS:** This Spike Lee action and adventure film of four Vietnam vets returning to Vietnam in a sort of "Treasure Island" story seems to drag on a long time for a two-and-a-half hour film. It does have many clever film allusions. Overall, a large-scale production with gritty views of Vietnam people and countryside. Released 06/12/20; available on Netflix streaming.. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)

**THE BANKER:** This story of African-American men in the South in the 1950s and 1960s being successful financiers is probably one of the best films of the season. The details about the finances are enjoyable and the characters interesting until the film's complexities damage some of the fun. Released 03/20/20; available on AppleTV+. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4)

**ANTEBELLUM:** This is yet another plot with a modern African- American returned to pre-Civil War days. (The best-known of these is probably Octavia Butler's book KINDRED.) But as the film progresses, the twists and turns of plot will become harder to guess. This is from the same company (QC Entertainment) that produced GET OUT, BLACKKLANSMAN, and US. Released 09/18/20; available on DVD (including Netflix) and Amazon Prime. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4)

[-mrl]

**MISS JUNETEENTH:** This story of an African-American beauty pageant has a nice small town setting. The Juneteenth Pageant is apparently the high point of the year for the high school girls. But I find myself asking, why is it so expensive for these girls, many of whom are from working-class homes that cannot even pay the electric bill, and who need the full scholarship to go to college, to enter a beauty pageant? Released 01/24/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) [-ecl]

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**Year of the Animals** (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

We started the year with locusts, funnel spiders, invasive hippopotamuses, and iguanas falling from trees. We continued with murder hornets. We close with feral Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs wreaking havoc in Puerto Rico (which has had its own set of disasters this year):

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/feral-pigs-flumox-puerto-rico-invading-communities-reproducing-rapidly-n1252338>

[-ecl]

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**ROBOT ARTISTS & BLACK SWANS: THE ITALIAN FANTASCIENZA STORIES** by **Bruce Sterling** (copyright 2021, Tachyon Publications, \$25.95 hardcover, ISBN 978-1-61696-329-3, \$9.99 digital format, ISBN 978-1-61696-330-9) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

I will have to admit that I've not read much of Bruce Sterling's work. I read THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE, of course; as much I was not a fan of cyberpunk back in the day (and to this day I don't know how I feel about it--after all, I still haven't read the most influential of all cyberpunk novels, NEUROMANCER, a book that changed the field of SF forever and made William Gibson a household name), I couldn't resist checking out the pairing of two of the most famous writers of cyberpunk back then. I also read Hugo nominee ISLANDS IN THE NET, but that really was about it. So yeah, it's been 30 years since I've read any Bruce Sterling, at least that I know of.

Robot Artists (I'm going to shorten the title because typing the full title multiple times just gets in the way) is a collection of Sterling's Italian themed science fiction. In order to tie the stories together, the reader is introduced to Sterling's alter ego, Bruno Argento, Italy's famed writer of "fantascienza". (Yes, I did look it up, as I was unfamiliar with the term, even though one can figure out what it means just by looking at it.) ROBOT ARTISTS, then, is a collection of stories by Bruno Argento.

Several of the stories were indeed published in the Italian market, which surprised me at first. There are introductions by both Neal Stephenson (speaking of cyberpunk royalty) and Bruno Argento himself. As of this writing I'm still not sure whether Sterling actually publishes in Italy under the Bruno Argento name or if this is a marketing tactic--and I guess that's the point, isn't it?

I have a couple of favorite stories in the collection. "Black Swan", the story of a technology blogger who encounters a hacker who may have discovered the existence of a Black Swan, something that could affect the balance of world governmental powers. But is it just that, or is it something more involved, something more complex? The blogger and the hacker travel to different versions of Italy, while Luca (the blogger) has to determine if he wants to write about what Massimo (the hacker) has shown him. It's something of an ethical decision, and something of a, well, moral decision.

The other story that is a favorite is the last story in the collection, "Robot in Roses". On the surface, the story is about one Wolfgang of Nuremburg, who is charged with following around the world a Japanese robotic wheelchair named Winkler, which is an artist. Wolfgang catalogs every place Winkler goes and every piece of art it creates. Things get complicated when he encounters Dr. Jetta Kriehn, who wants to destroy Winkler. The story rapidly turns into a dialog about art and science and everything in between. It's really a lot of fun. I enjoyed it quite a bit.

Another story I enjoyed is "Esoteric City", in which time is up for Achille Occhietti. As a result of his dark arts, he is sentenced to Hell, which just happens to be conveniently located beneath Turin. Before he meets with Satan--in Occhietti's back yard, because he had to leave Hell to at least attend his wife birthday party--he retrieves the Holy Grail for his final encounter with Satan. Enjoyable stuff.

Other stories include "The Parthenopean Scalpel", wherein an assassin falls in love with a two headed woman, and bombs are involved; "Kill the Moon", a short and silly tale of an Italian bemoaning the fact that his country is the only one going to the moon, and doesn't everyone see the silliness of it all? In "Elephant On Table", Tullio and Irma are caretakers of a Shadow House, whose owner, the Chief, pops in every once in a while for cards and games and such. Of course, there is much more to it than that, including the usual elephant on the table; and "Pilgrims of the Round World", a story of the closing of the Inn of Saint Cleopha (who herself is kept in a jar) in Turin. Along the way we have royalty, armies, wars, inept queens, and all sorts of unusual elements.

A lot of punch is packed into these seven stories. I didn't know what to expect out of this collection, but in the end I was thoroughly entertained. If Bruno Argento does indeed exist, then the residents of Italy are lucky to have him. [-jak]

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#### **THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN** (letters of comment by Fred Lerner and Paul Dormer):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN](#) in the 12/25/20 issue of the MT VOID, Fred Lerner writes:

I'm having trouble with this paragraph from today's MT VOID:

"And Murray also helped, merely by thinking about the process. The editor had volunteers reading from a list of books, sending in quotations for whatever words they thought worthwhile. Copying the quotations in a standard format took a long time, and often words were skipped that would have been useful. Murray took a two-step approach. He \*indexed\* each book in a booklet, jotting down all the words that might be of use, along with the page number, and did this in such a way that it was in alphabetical order. When he had a few of these, he wrote Murray, explaining his method, and asking what words Murray could use quotations for right away. Then he needed merely to look them up and copy those quotations. This meant he was not wasting his time copying quotations for words that would not be worked on for years, while Murray struggled with other words than he could help out with." [-ecl]

Evelyn responds:

That's because I completely mucked it up. Let me try again:

"And Minor [the Madman] also helped, merely by thinking about the process. Murray [the Professor and editor] had volunteers reading from a list of books, sending in quotations for whatever words they thought worthwhile. Copying the quotations in a standard format took a long time, and often words were skipped that would have been useful. Minor took a two-step approach. He \*indexed\* each book in a booklet, jotting down all the words that might be of use, along with the page number, and did this in such a way that it was in alphabetical order. When he had a few of these, he wrote Murray, explaining his method, and asking what words Murray could use quotations for right away. Then he needed merely to look them up and copy those quotations. This meant he was not wasting his time copying quotations for words that would not be worked on for years, while Murray struggled with other words than he could help out with." [-ecl]

And Paul Dormer writes:

That book was published in the UK as THE SURGEON OF CROWTHORNE. Haven't read it, but Winchester did a follow-up called THE MEANING OF EVERYTHING, which I have read, a history of the dictionary including a chapter or two on the ongoing effort to keep the dictionary up to date.

I see the film is available on Amazon Prime in the UK. Might look it up. (I might have less problem with accents.)

Some years ago, I was sent by work to go on a course in Bracknell, which is near Crowthorne. During the opening session of the course we got the usual details of what to do in an emergency. The building had two different alarms. One was the fire alarm and you had to evacuate. The other alarm meant someone had escaped from Broadmoor and you had to stay inside. [-pd]

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#### **TIME's 100 Best Fantasy Books and Western Porn** (letter of comment by Robert Woodward):

In response to [Taras Wolansky's comments on TIME's 100 best fantasy books](#) in the 12/25/20 issue of the MT VOID, Robert Woodward writes:

[Taras writes,] "#2144: ... Darrell said Neil Gaiman had given the editors an erudite list of suggestions, including Hope Mirrilies' classic LUD-IN-THE-MIST, but they had ignored it." [-tw]

I had wondered about why LUD-IN-THE-MIST didn't show up in that list.

And in another response:

[Taras writes,] "Sheila Williams ... told us prisoners used to be avid readers of porn Westerns." [-tw]

Re IIRC, when I was in college (c. 1970), somebody showed me a paperback that he claimed was gay Western porn (I didn't check the text). [-rw]

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#### **The 50-Foot Woman** (letter of comment by Kevin R):

In response to [Taras Wolansky's comments on the 50 Foot Woman](#) in the 12/25/20 issue of the MT VOID, Kevin R writes:

[Taras writes,] "#2145: The 50-Foot Woman makes another memorable appearance, voiced by Reese Witherspoon in the 2009 animated hit, MONSTERS VS. ALIENS, a ove letter to several classic cinematic monsters. Reduced to normal size by an invading alien overlord, she chooses to become giant again to help defeat the invasion; introducing a poignant subtext the kids didn't get, as she gives up any chance of a normal life." [-tw]

To be fair, Susan is an inch shy of 50 feet. :-)

<https://monstersvsaliens.fandom.com/wiki/Ginormica>

[-kr]

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**This Week's Reading** (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper): I'm still binging Solar Pons, but have progressed to the volumes by Basil Copper. I can't notice any decrease in quality, so I'm chugging along quite happily.

But I am really doing the happy dance over getting Jorge Luis Borges's OBRAS COMPLETAS (Emece, ISBN 9-500-40217-3), an 1161-page tome, for under four dollars! Okay, it's not truly complete, though its omissions are not as egregious as those of THE COLLECTED POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON. In the case of the Borges, the volume is labeled "1923-1972", so anything more recent than 1972 would not be included(\*). But, alas, other works are missing, e.g., the 1950 "Aspectos de la literatura gauchesca", the 1928 "La idioma de los argentinos", and the 1926 "El tamano de mi esperanza". Most distressing is the omission of the 1957 "El libro de los seres imaginarios" ("The Book of Imaginary Beings"), but that is at least justifiable, since it is a collaboration with Margarita Guerrero and is in a later 1989 volume of collaborations. Still, this first volume does include several early books that have been hard to find, at least until the Spanish publisher Alianza's recent series of Borges paperbacks.)

(\*) There is a supplementary volume, OBRAS COMPLETAS 1975-1985. That was published while the first volume covered 1923-1972, so it is indicated as volume two of the set. It looks as though when a volume of collaborations was also published, the first volume was split into two separate books, OBRAS COMPLETAS 1923-1949 and OBRAS COMPLETAS 1952-1972, so as to have volumes of approximately equal size, and OBRAS COMPLETAS 1975-1985 became volume three. And there also seems to be a volume four (ISBN 978-9-500-40848-6) which seems almost identical to the collection MISCELANEA I reviewed a few years ago. At least, I think everything I just said is accurate, but it is not exactly straightforward.

At any rate, there are a lot of pieces I haven't seen before so this should keep me busy for a while. There are fifteen books included in this volume: "Fervor de Buenos Aires", "Luna de enfrente", "Cuaderno San Martin", "Evaristo Carriego", "Discusion", "Historia universal de la infamia", "Ficciones", "El Aleph", "Otras inquisiciones", "El hacedor", "El otro, el mismo", "Para las seis cuerdas", "Elogio de la sombra", "El informe de Brodie", and "El oro de los tigres". If I review this, it will probably be the same way I did MISCELANEA by Borges--one included book at a time. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Who kicks a dog kicks his own soul towards hell.  
--Will Judy

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