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Mini Reviews, Part 5 (THE TRIP TO GREECE, THE GRIZZLIES, MADE IN ITALY, TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH) (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

Here is the fifth batch of mini-reviews, dramas with memorable settings and a real sense of mise-en-scene, including a guest review by Evelyn.

THE TRIP TO GREECE: This supposed documentary of two British comedians' trip to Greece is too much "comedy" and eating--but without letting us really see the food, as they would on a foodie show--and not enough Greece. Steve Coogan seems a bit more committed to the idea than Rob Brydon. At one point, Brydon talks about Hercules and asks, "Can you imagine Christianity forgiving someone who killed his wife and children?" He clearly doesn't know his history; the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine the Great, killed his wife and eldest son and the Church made him a saint. Released 07/31/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) [-mrl]

[I was mildly curious how they managed to film both ends of the telephone conversations about Coogan's father, and from multiple angles. It turns out Coogan's father died before the film was made, and those scenes were staged (shades of BROADCAST NEWS), which clearly takes this out of the realm of documentary even if it appears to be a pure travelogue. -ecl]

THE GRIZZLIES: Set in Kugluktuk, Nunavut, this is a fact-based but overly familiar plot. A teacher is sent to an Inuit town that has the highest suicide rate in the world. He mixes in the lives of his students and their families, but often runs into cultural conflicts, or just misunderstandings. Eventually he finds the key to reaching the people by championing a lacrosse team and using it to make the students feel that they are winners and have a future. Released 07/31/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: low +2 (-4 to +4) [-mrl]

MADE IN ITALY: This is a very predictable movie. The main character and his estranged father are making an old house in Tuscany look sellable but they discover it is full of wonders unexpected. The many "Enchanted April" vistas spread the love of the Tuscan atmosphere. Released 08/07/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4) [-mrl]

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH: Director Kiyoshi Kurosawa (no relation to Akira Kurosawa) started out making some very good horror and genre pieces (CURE, SEANCE, KAIRO [PULSE]) but moved on to more mainstream films. In this film a female Japanese variety show star goes to Uzbekistan to film a mythical fish. But she has no control over anything--the production crew makes all the decisions, and all the traditional Uzbeks look down on her as a woman. She ends up being a typical confused tourist, holding out a random handful of money to pay for things, unable to read signs or communicate without an interpreter, etc. (To give the viewer a

Ethnicity in THE WAR OF THE WORLDS (1953) (film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

In the 1953 version of THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, there are three locals near the beginning who are left to guard the cylinder, one Mexican (who appears to be at least partially of indigenous ancestry) and two Anglos (the names given them in the script are Salvador, Wash Perry, and Alonzo Hogue--note that the Anglos get full names, while the Mexican is given only a first name). When the hatch to the cylinder unscrews, the Anglos want to welcome the visitors, but Salvador thinks it's a bad idea. When Hogue says, "Men from Mars--whaddya think?" Salvador replies, "Maybe these are not men--not like us." Perry says, "Everything human don't have to look like you and me..." and Hogue suggests, "If it's men from Mars, we ought to let 'em know we're friendly." Salvador warns, "Don't fool around with something when we don't know what it is!"

Salvador also asks, "How they gonna understand us?" but the Anglos seem to think that even aliens would understand a white flag. (And the Anglo pastor seems to think they'll recognize the Bible and/or the cross--although his last comments to Sylvia about Forrester appear to indicate that he thinks there is a very real chance they will not, and that he will die.) The bottom line, though, is that the Mexican character is a whole lot smarter than the Anglos. Maybe he remembers what happened last time his people welcomed alien visitors who showed up unexpectedly.

(The IMDB gives the ethnic character the name "Salvatore" which would be Italian. Not only is that less likely in California, the shooting script I found lists him as "Salvador", and his line about selling tamales and enchiladas is highly unlikely to have been spoken by an Italian.) [-ecl]

THE SAINTS OF SALVATION by Peter F. Hamilton (copyright 2020, Del Rey, ASIN: B082S391KF, print edition 516pp, ISBN 1-509-84464-3, Tantor Audio, 17 hours and 27 minutes, ASIN: B08HSRT4XG, narrated by John Lee) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

THE SAINTS OF SALVATION is the concluding volume in Peter F. Hamilton's "Salvation Sequence", which began with SALVATION (2018) and continued with SALVATION LOST (2019). Each book is better than the previous one, and I find it astounding that these mammoth books, while not as long as his "Commonwealth" books, for example, have been published in three consecutive years. Like all the rest of Hamilton's novels, SAINTS is packed with adventure, action, multitudes of characters, aliens ... you know, the kind of space opera that we all grew up with, but updated for modern times. I could read this kind of stuff for the rest of my life and be completely happy.

As a bit of a recap, humanity is under the grip of the Olyix, a race which came to Earth ostensibly to get supplies they needed to continue on with their mission (in exchange for k-cells, among other things), but we eventually find out that the Olyix are the bad guys in this story. They are on a mission to meet the god at the end of time, and they are taking as many different races with them as they can. Humanity joins other races as cocoons in the Olyix arkships, heading toward the end of time to meet the god that has the Olyix so enthralled.

The story follows three groups of characters (which follows the pattern of other Hamilton novels, in which multiple threads of the story involving a large number of characters which eventually merge at the end) which all have a role to play in the grand scheme of saving humanity. While one of these groups is left behind early in the book as the Olyix return to Earth to destroy humanity after leaving due to a grueling defeat at the hands of the humans, we do return to them at the end of the novel, thousands of years later, after the main storyline runs its course and humanity is on the mend. The other two groups--one from roughly the main timeline which stows away on an Olyix ship in an effort to cause as much havoc as possible (and which turn out to be the titular Saints of Salvation, and one from the far future which has advanced enough to take on the Olyix--eventually find each other at the Olyix Enclave after a spectacular space battle that would challenge the best of today's film special effects groups.

To be sure, there is a lot of hand-wavium going on here, especially with regard to how time flows within the Olyix ships--thus allowing the group from the main timeline to end up meeting the group from the far future after the spectacular space battle that I have already mentioned--but when you're dealing with the far future there really is no way of predicting what science and technology will actually exist at the time you're writing about. It seems to me that writing about the far future can give the author as much freedom as they need to tell the story they want to tell. Sure, at that point is it really science fiction, or is it science fantasy? I'm not too sure that I care, to be honest.

Hamilton packs a lot into the novel. After all, he is talking about religious fanaticism--the Olyix cocooning all the space-faring races it can find to have them share in the wonders of meeting the god at the end of time--and a plague (if you want to look at it that way), where in the k-cells are supposed to be a boon for humanity but really aren't, but in the end this is a superb space opera complete with all the trappings--the grand scope of galactic space, aliens hell bent on destroying humanity, and space battles that would defy current cinematic techniques to depict said battles--and I think that no one does it better than Hamilton does.

John Lee has been narrating Hamilton novels for years, and with good reason. His voice, tone, and inflection are absolutely perfect for the grand space opera stories that Hamilton tells. He does a terrific job with this novel too.

All around, this is a great novel, and a terrific completion to the "Salvation Sequence". And given that there is clearly an opening to write more stories in this universe, I'm looking forward to what comes next. [-jak]

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

And now comments on the rest of W. Somerset Maugham's COLLECTED STORIES (VOLUME 2) (Penguin, ISBN 978-0-14-001872-7).

Maugham's humor shines in "The Creative Impulse", with passages such as:

"Mrs Albert Forrester wrote of the valley of the Loire with its memories of du Bellay, of Chartres and the jewelled windows of its cathedral, of the sun-swept cities of Provence, with a sympathy all the more remarkable since she had never penetrated further into France than Boulogne, which she visited shortly after her marriage on an excursion steamer from Margate. But the physical mortification of being extremely seasick and the intellectual humiliation of discovering that the inhabitants of that popular seaside resort could not understand her fluent and idiomatic French made her determine not to expose herself a second time to experiences that were at once undignified and unpleasant; and she never again embarked on the treacherous element which she, however, sang (Pax Maris) in numbers both grave and sweet."

and

"She admitted herself that it was her style, sonorous yet racy, polished yet eloquent, that was her strong point; and it was only in her prose that she had occasion to exhibit the delicious, but restrained, humour that her readers found so irresistible. It was not a humour of ideas, nor even a humour of words; it was much more subtle than that, it was a humour of punctuation: in a flash of inspiration she had discovered the comic possibilities of the semi-colon, and of this she had made abundant and exquisite use. She was able to place it in such a way that if you were a person of culture with a keen sense of humour, you did not exactly laugh through a horse-collar, but you giggled delightedly, and the greater your culture the more delightedly you giggled. Her friends said that it made every other form of humour coarse and exaggerated. Several writers had tried to imitate her; but in vain: whatever else you might say about Mrs Albert Forrester you were bound to admit that she was able to get every ounce of humour out of the semi-colon and no one else could get within a mile of her."

Maugham also ventures into the fantastical. In "The Dream" a man keeps dreaming about his own death. "Lord Mountdrago" has a man who has disturbing dreams about a political enemy--and that the enemy seems to know about. "The Taipan" has everything, but one day he sees two coolies digging a grave in the British cemetery. He spends the rest of the day trying to find out who died, but no one seems to have passed away. But what about the grave? These sound like "Twilight Zone" stories, and "A Friend in Need" (about a successful businessman agreeing to help an impoverished friend, but only with what is basically a bet), while not fantasy, is also extremely reminiscent of a "Twilight Zone" episode.

"Virtue" visits a common theme in Maugham's work, marital infidelity. Here it is a happily married woman who leaves her husband, but in his fiction Maugham looks at all the variations: happy couples, bored couples, unhappy couples, infidelity by the husband, infidelity by the wife, even infidelity in bigamous or "common-law" marriages.

Other stories are in this same vein. "The Colonel's Lady" seems like a completely boring woman to her husband, and then she writes a volume of poetry that takes the literary world by storm--and then he slowly realizes it is about a bored wife who has a passionate love affair. "Jane" is similar in the sense of the sudden emergence and blossoming of a woman from dullness and obscurity. "The Social Sense" is yet another story about a marriage going downhill and a wife having an affair. In "The Consul", the eponymous character tries to advise an Englishwoman who married her Chinese lodger in England, only to discover when she got to China that he wasn't rich, and they would have to live in a hut not only with his mother, but with his (first) Chinese wife. And "The Round Dozen" is about a "bigamist" who has married eleven women and wishes he could make it a round dozen. ("Bigamist" seems the wrong term for someone with eleven wives, but I don't think "hendecamist" is a real word.) "The Human Element" and "In a Strange Land" are other stories about the strange directions (and objects) of love.

Even "The Closed Shop" is in this group. It was written in 1926, by which point Reno was already a divorce destination, so Maugham may have been inspired by that town. In any case, in this story, a Latin American country decides to cater to "divorce tourism", but the large number of unattached women causes problems in the prostitution industry.

"The Man with the Scar" is a beggar in Guatemala. When the narrator asks an acquaintance about him, he gets a quite dramatic and romantic (in the sense of the 18th century literary movement) story, and also the details of how he got his scar. This is similar to "The Bum", in which the narrator keeps trying to remember why the bum he sees looks familiar, and then remembers he knew him years before in Rome.

"The Treasure" that Richard Harenger finds is the perfect house- parlourmaid, perfect in everything he expects, but ultimately perfect in unexpected ways as well.

"The Verger" may be the most famous of the tales in this book. A verger loses his job when the new vicar discovers that he is illiterate. Despondent, he starts walking home, looking for a tobacconist where he could get a cigarette. But he doesn't pass one, and this leads him on a surprising path, with a classic ending.

"Footprints in the Jungle" is a long mystery story, though more mysterious to the characters within the story than to the reader. One problem, of course, is basically the result of the "Chekhov's Gun" situation. There is no point in introducing a fact, or even telling a story, unless there is something interesting about it. If I start a story telling you how proud Wilson Garfield was of his new bicycle, the bicycle better play an important role in the story. If it doesn't, the reader will feel deceived. (Actually, Maugham violates this rule in "The Man with the Scar", but the violation is what makes the story memorable.

In "The Door of Opportunity" Anne and Alban are living in Malaya and happily married, until one day a murder and rebellion on a nearby plantation exposes the lie on which their marriage was built.

All in all, well worth the reading. Up next: Volume 3, devoted to stories about Ashenden, a British agent during World War I. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

If I were a medical man, I should prescribe a holiday
to any patient who considered his work important.
--Bertrand Russell

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