

MT VOID 02/05/21 -- Vol. 39, No. 32, Whole Number 2157



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society
02/05/21 -- Vol. 39, No. 32, Whole Number 2157

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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.

Crawford Hill (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

For those old Bell Labbers: The Bell Labs Crawford Hill site has been sold by Nokia. The Asbury Park Press reports, "Nokia has sold its historic Bell Labs building for about \$3.6 million to [Rakesh Antala,] a local executive who once worked for the research and development company when it was operated by Lucent Technologies Inc." His representative said of the property, "It's not going to be industrial. It's not going to be retail," but did indicate that they will keep the horn antenna. [-ecl]

Mini Reviews, Part 6 (THE ELEPHANT QUEEN, SPACESHIP EARTH, FIREBALL--VISITORS FROM DARKER WORLDS, SCREAM, QUEEN!: MY NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET) (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper):

Here is the sixth batch of mini-reviews, documentaries connected with horror, science, and science fiction.

THE ELEPHANT QUEEN: A rising tide lifts all boats. Up to a few years ago a pseudo-documentary this good would be an event. But nature photography has advanced very quickly with technology producing better and better documentaries. Even so, this is still well above average. The narration is well-written and enjoyable, even if full of anthropomorphizing. All in all, this is a story told with great wit and technology. Released 09/08/18; available on Apple TV+. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4)

SPACESHIP EARTH: This is a documentary about Biosphere 2 and the story of the eight people who chose to live in its completely isolated environment. The project oddly evolved out of hippies from the 1960s, and the film follows the history of the sustainable environment experiment from that time. SPOILER(?): For once the good guys lose, mostly through errors found in the experiment process. Released 05/05/20. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

FIREBALL--VISITORS FROM DARKER WORLDS: Co-directed by Werner Herzog and Clive Oppenheimer, this documentary about meteors covers a surprising breadth of discussion about the topic, from science to tribal mysticism. The film meanders quite a bit, and while Herzog displays a broad scientific knowledge, his voice is at times a little wearing. (Since this review is written primarily for a science fiction audience, I will mention that well-known science fiction fan (and Director of the Vatican Observatory) Brother Guy Consolmagno is interviewed in it (at about the one-hour point). Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

[-mrl]

And one guest mini-review by Evelyn:

SCREAM, QUEEN!: MY NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET: This documentary about Mark Patton, the main actor in *A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 2*, focuses on his difficulties as a gay man and a gay actor in the 1980s. In particular, it looks at Patton's role in *A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 2*, which was seen then and now as a "gay role" in a "gay film", though how it got that way seems to have been a matter of dispute. Patton ended up leaving Hollywood and acting when he was asked to conceal his homosexuality during the AIDS crisis even though the character he would be playing was gay. He only returned a few years ago, and talks about how things have changed. Released on DVD 03/20/20; available on Amazon Prime. Rating: high 0 [-ec1]

M. C. ESCHER: JOURNEY TO INFINITY (film review by Mark R. Leeper):

M. C. Escher is best known for his tessellations and for his "Impossible" structures. Strangely, he did not think of himself as an artist, but as a mathematician, not realizing one can be more of the one if one is also the other. There is no narrator per se; this documentary is told entirely in the words of Escher himself (from letters and diaries) along with comments by family, friends, and admirers. One of the latter is Graham Nash, of Crosby, Stills & Nash. Escher's own words are voiced by Stephen Fry.

The film covers Escher's entire career, from early "realistic" works through his branching out into more mathematical and surreal art, always in woodcuts, lithographs, or drawings rather than paintings. Later in his career we see the complexities when some of these geometric patterns meet Nazi politics.

Escher's work was (adopted by hippies in the 1960s, done as posters in fluorescent colors intended to be seen under black light. Escher himself couldn't understand what they saw in his work, since he saw his work as supremely rational and structured, and the hippies as being opposed to all this.

One example of Escher's influence on popular culture is shown as the "Penrose Stairs" sequence in the film *INCEPTION*. (In the credits, Sir Roger Penrose is listed as the patron of the documentary.) The Escher portrayal is titled "Ascending and Descending", though it is often called just "Penrose Stairs". Another Escher reference is the sequence from *LABYRINTH* copied from Escher's "Relativity", a lithograph showing staircases at various angles with contradictory gravities. A hint is also seen in *THE NAME OF THE ROSE*, though without the impossible physics. ("Relativity" seems to be a much more structured variant on his earlier "High and Low" and "house of Stairs" and used later in "Convex and Concave".)

Escher himself summed up his work by saying, "[Other artists] they pursue beauty, I pursue wonder." Oh, and you will definitely want to sit through the credits.

(*THE GRAPHIC WORK OF M. C. ESCHER* divides Escher's major works into nine categories: "Regular Division of a Plane", "Unlimited Spaces", "Spatial Rings and Spirals", "Mirror Images", "Inversion", "Polyhedrons", "Relativities", "Conflict Flat-Spatial", and "Impossible Buildings".)

Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8297550/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/mc_escher_journey_to_infinity

[-mrl]

"To Be Taught, If Fortunate" by Becky Chambers (copyright 2019, HarperAudio, 4 hours and 30 minutes, ASIN: B07V5WYHWL, narrated by Brittany Pressly) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

Becky Chambers steps away from her Wayfarer series with the standalone novella "To Be Taught, If Fortunate". The story was a 2020 Hugo finalist for Best Novella, and while I've questioned the award worthiness of the novels of the Wayfarer series, I think the accolade was well deserved. I never got around to reading--or listening to--the 2020 Hugo novella finalists for a number of reasons. Now I've read three of them, and I'm tempted to read the other three to see how much my final list differs from the list the voters gave us.

On the surface, "To Be Taught, If Fortunate" is a story of space exploration in the not horribly distant future. Space travel to distant worlds is made possible by a couple of new technologies: somaforming, which allows the explorers to modify their bodies to survive in the various extreme environments they could encounter; and torpor, Chambers' version of suspended animation or cryosleep or stasis. The story covers the exploration of 4 different planets, each with its own set of challenges, not only for the mission but for the character themselves.

The story is told in the form of a communication from the expedition to the people of Earth. The reader might think at first that the "letter" is to the mission control back home, but as the story progresses, we learn that the missive is sent to the people of Earth. Ariadne, the protagonist of the story, is writing to relate her and her team's experiences with space travel and with the mission in general, but also to ask the folks back home listening a question.

The tale that Chambers tells--through Ariadne--is one of change. The four characters--the others being Jack, Elena, and Chikondi--experience the mission differently, react to the events on each planet in a way that makes them change and just maybe reconsider who

they are. Meanwhile, there's a change going on back home on Earth, a change that is causing Ariadne pen the message.

As may be obvious, the story can be read--and I'm sure it was intended to be--read on multiple levels. Chambers squeezes a lot in to the novella length story, and yet none of it is forced. The book is as long as it needs to be to say what Chambers wants to say, and the novella length is perfect for it.

I enjoyed Brittany Pressley's narration. Her style, voice, and tone all worked well with the story and didn't intrude on the narrative. In fact, her tone lent the appropriate feel to the gravity of the story. Once I realized that gravity, I discovered that Pressley's narration was all that much more appropriate for what the explorers were going through. I would be happy in listening to her narrate other stories.

So, "To Be Taught, If Fortunate" is finally a Becky Chamber story that I can really get behind. Now maybe it's time to dig into those other three novellas on the 2020 shortlist. [-jak]

LEAP OF FAITH--WILLIAM FRIEDKIN ON THE EXORCIST, THE ROOK, SLAY THE DRAGON, TOTALLY UNDER CONTROL (letter of comment by Jim Susky):

In response to [Mark's review of LEAP OF FAITH--WILLIAM FRIEDKIN ON THE EXORCIST](#) in the 12/18/20 issue of the MT VOID, Jim Susky writes:

I remain very interested in your and Evelyn's continuing work at MT VOID.

[That means a lot to us. -mrl]

I offer some short notes on recent topics:

I recall as a teen, when that film [THE EXORCIST] was in first release, of overt reactions--puking in the aisles, and general unease. None of that "fascinated me"--especially not now in my tender sixties.

The documentary is another thing altogether--thanks for the notice.

In response to [Dale Skran's review of THE ROOK](#) in the same issue, Jim writes:

"Superheroes on the sly with minimal powers" sounds like a compelling premise.

(and spoiler avoided)

In response to [Mark's review of SLAY THE DRAGON](#) (about gerrymandering) in the 01/15/21 issue, Jim writes:

For a long time I've deplored various state (and city?) GOP legislators' naked, strenuous, and corrupt efforts to bar the disenfranchised from voting booths. Let me add: "shameful" all while giving disingenuous "reasons" for so doing.

Perhaps more under the radar--and practiced by Dems and R's alike-- gerrymandering--which may have even more impact.

After all, the "barred" may often still "jump through hoops" and vote the b@\$t@rds out.

In response to [Mark's review of TOTALLY UNDER CONTROL](#) in the same issue, Jim writes:

[Mark writes,] "a comprehensive and convincing look at COVID-19 ... controversies covered in detail (with a) strong political dimension in the narrative (this film came right to the point)."

Unlike the daily (sometimes hourly) unbalanced, and often irrelevant focus on the most horrible aspects of COVID, this may offer something "completely different"??

I'll check it out. [-js]

Monoliths, Stelae, Precision, and Heroes (letter of comment by Jim Susky):

In response to [Joy Beeson's comments on monoliths](#) in the 12/04/20 issue of the MT VOID, Jim Susky writes:

I have at hand a 1976 Webster's New World and a 1999 Oxford American dictionary.

"Congratulations" you might ironically say--but I also have a purpose for mentioning these, since I also have belated citations from these tomes related to a recent MT VOID.

In that VOID a writer recently objected that the mysterious upright, unnatural, desert object (which "made the news" late last year) was uniformly called "a monolith"--more specifically the writer confessed annoyance to the use of the term and instead called it "the stela".

(Objection explained thus: "There is no lith in it, and I've not seen any suggestion that (it's) mono, rather than pieces welded together."

Having been introduced to the term by the first release of the Kubrick/Clarke collaboration, which needs no introduction at MT VOID,

I grabbed first one, then the other dictionary within reach. Sure enough, the primary definitions in both refer to rock or stone. However, secondary definitions include objects that are monolith-**IK** (like a monolith). Of course this was the sense used by K and C in their epic story + novel.

What's more, I looked up "stela". In the Webster an inscription is required. So too, in the Oxford--where the spelling is "stela" (not to be confused with Brando's love interest in his famous mid-50s film).

We "STEM-kids" know that language is notoriously imprecise--an adjective loosely associated with 'precision'--which is itself improperly conflated with 'accuracy'. Even the Oxford defines accuracy as "exactness or precision"--though a secondary definition of precision refers to "refinement of measurement". The Webster offers similar definitions. Both are an improvement on my likely- to-be imprecise/inaccurate recollection of an earlier appeal to the lexicographer's art, which circularly had each pointed to the other.

(And now I wish I had access to either of my compact OED's--to find the relevant claims for first-use-in-print)

(And a magnifier)

Sometime in the last century I was awakened (annoyed, actually) by the use of "hero" to refer to a nice lady who assiduously operated a soup kitchen. Annoyed, since this usage devalues the term, which has been long used to mean one who risks life and limb in the service of others.

Thinking further, I soon realized that sportswriters have also so devalued the term--though perhaps not as much as using it to elevate garden-variety charity-work.

This may go back to the origins of baseball in America--and now I wonder if Dickson has included "hero" among the 15,000 entries in his latest eponymous Baseball Dictionary. [-js]

Mark replies:

I am reliably informed (by a song) that we don't need another hero. [-mrl]

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

Our (Zoomed) discussion book for January was I, ROBOT by Isaac Asimov (Del Rey, 978-0-553-38256-3). It's an interesting book, and the stories were extremely influential, but oh! does it show its age.

First, although the character of Susan Calvin has become famous in science fiction, there's no hope of it passing the Bechdel Test: I don't think there is even a single other female character. And Calvin is hardly a feminist role model. She is described as plain, cold, etc., implying that is a necessary part of her being a scientist.

"She was a frosty girl, plain and colorless, who protected herself against a world she disliked by a mask-like expression and a hypertrophy of intellect."

"She didn't smile at me. I don't think she ever smiles."

"... the little lines about her thin, pale lips deepened..."

"... every line of her plain, middle-aged face..."

"Her cold, thin-lipped face and her flat, even voice were becoming accentuated with the years."

I am not saying Calvin has to be a bombshell--that would be (rightly) considered as "lookism"--but Asimov seems to go out of his way to make her unattractive, while not seeming to care at all what the men look like. (Well, except for Ashe in "Liar!", of whom Asimov writes, "His pleasantly youthful face crinkled in a grin.")

And when she falls in love, it's even worse. First, Asimov implies that this is incompatible with being a scientist:

"Some of the woman peered through the layer of doctorhood."

And then she starts acting "out of character":

"Her eyes fixed themselves upon Ashe in an oddly intent manner."

"Her eyes followed him out of sight..." (This one sounds like something from Thog's Masterclass!)

"She's using lipstick, if that's what you mean." "Hell, I know that. Rouge, powder and eye shadow, too. She's a sight."

On another topic, I realize that science fiction authors are not predictors of the future, but projecting a population of three billion for the entire solar system in the future seems as if it will be way off the mark. Nor is a manually operated "pocket-recorder", and even now no one talks about "slide-rule geniuses."

On the other hand, some ideas are still currently considered: "Perhaps ... our entire technical civilization has created more unhappiness

and misery than it has removed. Perhaps an agrarian or pastoral civilization, with less culture and less people would be better." Nowadays, the discussion is extended to whether even agriculture was a good idea, and whether we should have remained hunter-gatherers.

(And one can never predict language trends. In the 1950s, "cripple" as a noun was acceptable; these days its use by a character--as here--is likely to make the reader form a negative opinion of the character. Its use by the narrator--which Asimov does *not* do--would cause a re-evaluation of the author. See my last week's comments on THE GREAT GATSBY.)

In short, as I said at the beginning, these are stories that were very influential, but have not aged well. As such, they are somewhat of a test of whether it is important for readers of current science fiction to have read "the classics". Do readers of Martha Wells's "Murderbot" series need to have read I, ROBOT, or even know it exists? One might look back fifty years and note that a lot of people read alien invasion novels and time travel novels without ever having read THE WAR OF THE WORLDS or THE TIME MACHINE, and this is even more true now.

I remember commenting to someone in the 1970s that Niven and Pournelle's INFERNO was good, but I liked the original better--and they asked if I mean some earlier magazine version. The fact is that at some point, the "classics" that seemed so crucial have faded into the general background. The Coen Brother based O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU? on Homer's "Odyssey" without ever having read the latter. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I love to shop after a bad relationship. I don't know.
I buy a new outfit and it makes me feel better.
It just does. Sometimes I see a really great outfit,
I'll break up with someone on purpose.
--Rita Rudner

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