



destination, but in *THE CONSPIRATORS* it is front and center. (Heinreich enters from Spain, rather than from Casablanca, probably because between the time *CASABLANCA* was made and the filming of *THE CONSPIRATORS*, the Germans occupied the gateway to Casablanca, Marseille.) But there is a cafe, a casino, and a man stopped by the police and asked for papers who first lies, then attempts to flee. There is a love triangle with a "secret" marriage, and the hero convinces the "neutral" policeman to help him against Nazis after all.

Alas, although it starts out trying to be *CASABLANCA*, it turns into a film six feet wide and a quarter of an inch deep, and seems as episodic as an "Indiana Jones" film. It is good to see familiar actors, but there are problems with the acting. (In particular, Hedy Lamarr proves herself a better inventor than an actress.) There are also a bushel basket full of character names of several nationalities you are asked to remember.

And a comment not on the film itself, but on TCM's subtitled: When in a World War II, "Quisling" is subtitled "Quisny" and "Field Marshall Goering" is subtitled "Field Marshall Gurin", you realize the company was hiring people who had no knowledge of the period whatsoever. (This extends to general vocabulary as well: a reference to a plan for someone to "avenge your family" is subtitled "revenge your family.") That TCM accepts such sloppy work is a real black eye for them. [-mrl/ecl]

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**THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE** by **Kim Stanley Robinson** (copyright 2020, Orbit, \$28.00, hardcover, 563pp, ISBN 978-0-316-30013-1, \$26.94. audio book, 20 hours and 41 minutes, ASIN B08K1YZBYN, narrated by Jennifer Fitzgerald, Fajer Al-Kaisi, Ramon de Ocampo, Gary Bennett, Raphael Corkhill, Barrie Kreinik, Natasha Soudek, Nikki Massoud, Joniece Abbott Pratt, Ines del Castillo, Vikas Adam) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

Kim Stanley Robinson's latest novel, *THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE*, joins many of his other works in the climate fiction genre, most recently *NEW YORK 2140*. As usual, Robinson comes at the topic from a different angle than one would expect. The focus of *NEW YORK 2140* is not the catastrophe that got the world to where it was at (although some of that topic is explored) but how civilization in 2140, particularly in New York, is dealing with the aftermath--how we would live, work, travel, and get along (or not) with each other. *THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE* realizes that climate change is here and affecting us right now, and tries to bridge the gap between the mess we're in and, hopefully, a good place that we'll be in somewhere down the line.

The title of the book comes from the name of a fictionally subsidiary body of the Paris Climate Agreement. The organization's goal, in a very broad sense, is to define and develop ways that humanity can correct the wrongs it has done to the environment, with a focus on reducing carbon admissions. It certainly deals with a lot more than that, of course, as the main characters, Mary Murphy--head of the Ministry--and Frank May--a survivor of a brutal and devastating Indian heat wave that is described in gruesome detail in the first chapter of the book--and the rest of humanity come to realize that the problem of climate change and how to reverse it is not just a scientific problem, but a societal problem.

While the plot--and to be honest, what there is of a plot--centers around Murphy, Mays, and the ways the Ministry tries to influence world behavior to positively change the way we live our lives so that the earth can sustain humanity for the years to come, the novel really is an exploration of the things that can be done to make those changes. From the introduction of carbon coins, to pumping water from underneath the glaciers in Antarctica, ways of preserving wildlife, to influencing the world population to no longer use airplanes, and so many others, Robinson gives us his thoughts on how we can do better now so that the world can be better in the future.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention a couple of things about the structure of the book. Robinson does not tell a straightforward narrative. Rather, he uses a myriad of methods to present his story to us: eyewitness accounts, essays from non-living entities, encyclopedia entries, interviews, and poetry, just to name a few, are all used in individual chapters. The other, of course, is the famous Robinson infodumps. Many do not like infodumps. Robinson has gone on record as supporting and actually reveling in infodumps in his stories. He feels they are necessary to tell the story, and he's not shy about it. And to be clear, he is in fine form when it comes to infodumps in *THE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE*. But I tend to agree with him in this case. The amount of information the reader needs to understand in order to comprehend the mess we are in and try to get out of the mess is necessary for the book to work. I was fascinated by the way the infodumps were handled in this book. The point here is not to discuss the overall merits of infodumps and how various authors present them. The point is that they can be useful, and I believe they are in this case.

The book is narrated by what seems to be a cast of thousands, although it's really only eleven. I've listened to a few of Robinson's novels that use an ensemble cast to do the narration, and I enjoy that kind of presentation. It keeps me interested and focused on the story. The use of narrators for particular types of chapters was a good choice, and as soon as I heard a particular voice I knew what we were going to be talking about.

One of the themes that emerges is that the fight against climate change is ongoing. The last sentence of the book says it in a nutshell: "Because we never really come to the end." It took a long time to get in the mess we are in, and it's going to take a long time and a lot of work to get out of it, if we ever really can. Maybe a Ministry for the Future is one place to start. [-jak]

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

Normally at this point in the year, I would have been able to write at least one column about spring book sales, but as with last year, that is a no-go. Bryn Mawr says they may have a sale in the fall, and plan to return to their normal schedule ("we hope," as they say) in 2022.

In the interim, I will comment on their current donation guidelines. Well, they're not actually \*taking\* donations now, but if you want to hold your items for them, they are saying what they will \*not\* accept.

Among these are encyclopedias--with one exception: the Britannica 11th edition. We have the 14th edition, which we got for \$35 many

years ago at the old Cranbury Bookworm. It's still pretty good for history--it was after WWII that the Britannica decided to cut out tons of history and replace it with science and technology. However, the 11th is considered the particular classic.

They don't want business, science, and technical books that are 10-50 years old. Apparently anything older than 50 years may have historical interest (though they do say to enquire first.) Also they don't take travel books older than a couple of years.

And of course the usual cruff: textbooks, self-help books, magazines and journals (except art magazines), Reader's Digest Condensed Books (check with your local nursing home as a possible destination), Life and Time Life sets, Harlequin and Silhouette romances, damaged and heavily underlined books (duh!), and VHS and audiocassette tapes.

Oh, and they add: "Books that haven't sold at other sales. If they couldn't sell them, we can't either."

As you can tell, I am suffering book sale withdrawal. I think one of my "bucket list after vaccination" will be a trip to Second Time Books. In the mean time, I have been ordering a few books online, but it's not the same.

I did finally finish WHAT TO THINK ABOUT MACHINES THAT THINK edited by John Brockman (ISBN 978-0-06-242565-2), a collection of almost 200 short essays on the title topic. Towards the end it was a bit of a slog--a writer is limited in what they can say in a short essay (two to four pages), so there is more repetition and less depth than one might want.

One final comment on an essay, though: Thomas G. Dietterich writes, "... it's essential that we humans understand this knowledge and these capabilities [that we give AIs] before we devote large amounts of resources to their use. We mustn't grant autonomy to systems we don't understand and cannot control." For some definitions of "understand" and "control", isn't this just what we do with other people? We grant autonomy at age eighteen (or twenty-one, depending), but we don't really understand other people, and we can't really control them. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Men like to barbecue. Men will cook if danger  
is involved.

--Rita Rudner

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