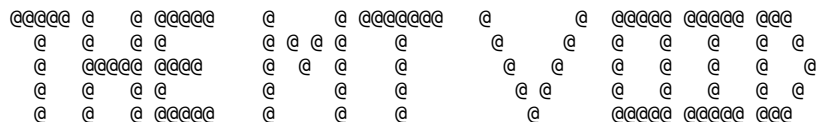


# MT VOID 05/28/21 -- Vol. 39, No. 48, Whole Number 2173



Mt. Holz Science Fiction Society  
05/28/21 -- Vol. 39, No. 48, Whole Number 2173

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### Science Fiction (and Other) Discussion Groups, Films, Lectures, etc. (NJ):

While the last year's meetings have all been Zoomed, we are hoping to resume in-person meetings in Old Bridge this month (albeit outdoors). People who are "officially" part of the group will receive details as to time and place.

I'm not sure about the Middletown meetings, but I'm reasonably sure that participants need to watch the film on their own ahead of time as well as reading the book.

June 2 (MTPL), 7:00PM: SECONDS (1966) & novel by David Ely (1962)

<https://fsharetv.co/movie/seconds-episode-1-tt0060955>

<https://archive.org/details/secondsnovel00elyd>

<https://openlibrary.org/works/OL4127707W/Seconds>

July 1 (MTPL), 7:30PM: A SCANNER DARKLY (2006) & novel by Philip K. Dick (1977)

movie: DVD MTPL; rent on PrimeVideo, Vudu, YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKtyfjFcv5A>

book: <https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/12325569>

### My Picks for Turner Classic Movies for June (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

The 1950s could be thought of as the Golden Age of giant arthropod films and frequently giant arthropod films are mis-categorized as science fiction.

Some of the Fifties science fiction films are not as good as they once seemed. THE BLACK SCORPION, on the other hand is actually a better monster movie than I had remembered. True, there are a few embarrassing touches that leave a bad impression. But there are also some subtle touches in the script. It boasts the effects work of Willis O'Brien, best known for creating KING KONG. In fact, in that film when Kong shakes the men from the log, they were originally supposed to fall into a spider web. The decision was made not

to use the spiders in that film and they finally get used here.

One of the bad touches accounts for why the scorpion had to be black. The film ran out of money in production so no image of the scorpion could be super-imposed over the matte silhouette of the scorpion in many of the later scenes. The producers assumed the imagination of the audience would fill in just a very dark scorpion so the eye cannot find the details. In these scenes the monsters are shown in silhouette.

The plot of **THE BLACK SCORPION** borrows a lot from **THEM!** The film starts with an apparent news announcement of a huge volcano, the largest in modern times, striking Mexico and bringing with it a powerful earthquake. Two main characters, geologists (played by Richard Denning and Carlos Rivas), are studying a volcano in Mexico when they get involved first with a beautiful rancher and then some mysterious disappearances. It seems a number of people including a police officer have disappeared. Also, the scientists hear some mysterious sounds that are a lot like the ant calls from **THEM!** The locals think that the cause is a demon bull. It takes a long time to establish that the real menace is a breed of twenty-foot scorpions released by the volcano from being sealed in rocks. Uh, that is the premise of this film, that arthropods sealed in rocks for millions of years can remain alive. The idea was used in many Fifties science fiction films and is probably based on the fact that some animal embryos can remain viable for long periods of time, but the idea that you could break a scorpion out of obsidian and it would be alive as is portrayed in one scene is complete balderdash. But in this case we are led to believe that this particular volcano and quake released a pocket of prehistoric monsters who had been sealed in rock. If that were true, why hadn't it happened with any previous quakes anywhere in the world? Our heroes find the cavern and enter it to use poison gas on the scorpions, a plan that fails but they do get to see a variety of giant insects, spiders, and some thing that looks like an unknown worm-like relative of a scorpion. The humans have to struggle to get out of the cavern. They seal it with dynamite only to have the creatures escape to cause more havoc with an attack on Mexico City.

Richard Denning (who played an over-ambitious scientist in **THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON**) plays Dr. Hank Scott, and Carlos Rivas (of **THE BEAST OF HOLLOW MOUNTAIN**) is Dr. Artur Ramos. Mara Corday (of **TARANTULA**) provides love interest as a local rancher. The acting is not great, but sufficient.

The film shows the signs of a quick production and a bit of sloppy script construction. The worst faults of the film are use of mattes and the silly face of the scorpions. The face is not at all scorpion-like and is made even less so by its teeth and the fact that it is drooling. At one point early on we and the scientists hear a rattle that frightens the scientists but turns out to be a baby with a rattle. When we see the baby it seems too small and quiet to have been doing the loud rattling. The occasional use of under-cranked camera to speed up the action is too transparent and unconvincing. Generally, however, money-saving corner-cutting is cleverly concealed. In a scene of a line of scorpions leaving a cave, footage is repeated, but it takes a really close examination to notice. The scene is used once again when the scorpions attack a train and here it is more noticeable. A helicopter rendered in stop-motion looks wrong because of the difficulty of showing its fast-spinning blades by using a motionless model repositioned between frames. Ray Harryhausen had the same problem when he tried to represent fast-spinning flying saucers. A familiar voice-over voice is heard too often in the film. The same voice narrates the opening footage, is heard on the police radio, and is heard again toward the end of the film. We see a swarm of scorpions attack a train, but are told shortly thereafter that only one is left alive and are left wondering what killed all the others.

On the other hand, the script is at least reasonable, making the film watchable by adults, and it never seems overly silly or juvenile. Corday plays a rancher woman who is quite capable and repeatedly impresses the men, somewhat against the stereotypes that were common in the Fifties. One nice touch is that the scientists make mistakes. Most notable is that they accidentally electrocute a soldier helping them fight the largest scorpion.

The screenplay was written by David Duncan, a sometimes writer of science fiction novels. He also wrote the screenplays of **THE CURSE OF THE FACELESS MAN**, **THE MONSTER THAT CHALLENGED THE WORLD**, and (best known) **THE TIME MACHINE**. The Willis O'Brien scorpions are fairly nicely done and have motion like the kind Ray Harryhausen gave his creatures. O'Brien apparently used the scene of the attack on the phone linemen to sell the film to Warner Brothers. That was then used in the film and for a scene shot later in which we see the linemen, doubles were used and kept in shadow. Overall it is not too shabby for an enlarged creature film.

[**THE BLACK SCORPION**, June 18, 2:00 PM]

[-mrl]

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### **A Nancy Drew--Tom Swift Teamup** (television review by Dale Skran):

I've been thinking of doing a review of **NANCY DREW**, a relatively new CW show, for a while, and now I've found the perfect excuse at last. The most recently aired episode [May 13, 2021, of Season 3], titled "The Celestial Visitor" is the perfect hook since it introduces Tom Swift into the Nancy Drew CW universe. This is a really big deal if you're a fan of Tom, and I am. The various printed versions of Tom Swift, but mainly the original series (1910-1941) and the Tom Swift Jr. series (1954-1971), are the foundational texts for countless SF fans, scientists, and engineers--the books that made science and engineering both really exciting and tangibly real. In retrospect, they are mostly hack pulp adventures, but when you are 10, they open a door to a new world.

There have been a lot of attempts to create live action Tom Swifts, but all of these have been unsuccessful, almost as though a curse was in operation. By unsuccessful I mean that either nothing was ever made, or a pilot was filmed and then lost. So, when Tom Swift walked into the Bayside Claw to meet Nancy, I just about fell out of my chair.

First, a word about **NANCY DREW**, now in its 3rd season on the CW. **NANCY** has been "Buffy-ized" in a variety of ways. In the original books, **NANCY** has friends, but mostly operates on her own. In this modern version she has her own version of a super-team, the "Drew Crew." The basic idea is that this Nancy is the same Nancy from the kid's books, but now over 18 (allowing for \*sex\* in the

show), and with the addition of various supernatural entities. She does catch a variety of ordinary criminals, and in some cases the stories are "Scoobie Doos" where the criminals are pretending to be ghosts. But there really are ghosts in the fictional town of Horseshoe Bay, Maine, which is more along the lines of Lovecraft's Arkham. Not every supernatural entity is a ghost--in one episode the Drew Crew is pitted against a rogue Viking god--but mostly they are ghosts. Horseshoe Bay has a long history of the supernatural, with secret societies, covens of witches, and all manner of things, including the powerful and terrifying Agleaca, a kind of ocean-based "Crossroads Daemon" that you really don't want to make a deal with. Of course, Nancy does. There is also a town historical society that turns out to be a storehouse of magic objects with a caretaker who is sometimes helpful to Nancy and her friends.

Nancy is well played by Kennedy McMann, who manages to look the wholesome Nancy Drew, while portraying well someone growing into adulthood and confronting some difficult facts about who she really is. This Nancy is the ultimate girl detective, brave to a fault, a puzzle solver, code-breaker, lock-picker, safe-cracker, burglar, social engineer, and skulker in dark corners. Her powers of observation are stunning, and she at least equals Patrick Jane (THE MENTALIST) as an escape artist. In one episode she is arrested, handcuffed, and brought to the police station. When the action gets going, the cop who arrested her notices the cuffs are missing. She replies, "I'll put them back on if it makes you feel better."

The Drew Crew includes:

- Georgia "George" Fan, the manager of the Bayside Claw, a local diner. George is a minor medium with some knowledge of Chinese spiritualism, and a mother who is a powerful medium that drinks to drown out the voices. At some point in the 2nd season George is possessed by Oddette Lamar, a lesbian ghost, and they end up sharing her body at least up to the current episode. This sounds trashy but is very well motivated in the plot.
- Bess Marvin, a fashionista city girl who also works at the Bayside Claw, and conceals a mysterious past. She eventually turns out to be an excellent thief who had a previous life as the partner of a con man. Her "super powers" are fashion and expertise in social media. She likes girls, and has a relationship with Oddette for a while. This later situation is, to say the least, complex.
- Ned "Nick" Nickerson, is a former football player and Nancy's ex who served time for killing a man in a fight unintentionally. He is a skilled mechanic. As one of the few blacks in Horseshoe Bay, he is often viewed by the police with suspicion.
- Ace, the dishwasher at the Claw, is an expert hacker who was blackmailed into spying on the Drew Crew, but eventually joins them

There are a lot more characters, but you get the idea. The structure is very similar to that of BUFFY, except that the characters are not in school and there is more of a blue-collar vibe. Also, the plots are very local. The world is not at stake, but the future of Horseshoe Bay is often in doubt. The mythos is rich and complex, allowing for a wide range of crime, suspense, and supernatural adventures.

In this already entertaining mix throw a new version of Tom Swift, with Tian Richards playing a black, gay, and super-rich version of Tom. This is in sharp contrast to Nancy Drew, who in spite of having a diverse, modern set of friends, looks and acts like she stepped right out the original books. These kind of character inversions do not sound that auspicious, but Richards creates a credible version of Tom Swift, and reminds us that what makes the Tom Swift series exciting and entertaining has nothing to do with Tom being white or straight.

Together, Tom, Nancy, and the Drew Crew battle ancient magic, dangerous technology, and a gang of robed ghosts using Tom's super-science, and Nancy's detective skills and growing knowledge of magic. To some old Tom Swift and Nancy Drew fans, this may sound like the woke take-over of their favorite characters, but at least for me, it worked. It's my understanding that the CW will be bringing to the small screen a full-on TOM SWIFT series built around Richards, with LeVar Burton voicing his AI side-kick. This may or may not work as well as NANCY DREW, but I'm certainly going to give it a chance.

NANCY DREW is the most interesting fantasy/SF show the CW has running these days. To me, it's respectful of the original series (and by the original series, I mean the initial set of books where Nancy was very independent and strong willed, not the later revised versions where she is re-written to be "nice") while allowing Nancy to function as an adult character. I'm not rating it right now, but if you liked BUFFY, SABRINA, or TEEN WOLF, you'll probably like NANCY DREW. Although there is sex (very discreet sex) in the show, I find it less violent/scary than the other three, especially TEEN WOLF, which is heavy on the violent horror. Fine for kids 12 and up. It should also be noted that NANCY DREW is not an "action" show--there are no martial arts scenes, little gun violence, and any violence that occurs is brief. There are scary scenes and "adult" situations. [-dls]

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**PIRANESI** (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Joe Karpierz's review of PIRANESI](#) in the 05/21/21 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

For anyone interested in a second opinion, here's mine:

<https://garymcgath.com/wp/piranesi/>

I agree it's an excellent book. [-gmg]

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**Plague of Mice** (letter of comment by Scott Dorsey):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on the Australian plague of mice](#) in the 05/14/21 issue of the MT VOID, Scott Dorsey writes:

If you think the plague of mice is bad, just imagine the plague of cats that will come next. [-sd]

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

THE STEPFORD WIVES by Ira Levin (William Morrow, ISBN 978-0-060-08084-6) was the choice for our book-and-film club this month. (The film was the 1975 version, not the 2004 remake.) The novel-- well, not a novel really; at 35,000 words, it's really only a novella--was written in 1972, just as the women's movement was taking off in a big way, and it's fairly obvious. From a perspective fifty years later, there is nothing very compelling about it. Indeed, it seems to owe a lot to BRAVE NEW WORLD in the sense of conditioning or brainwashing people to be content in the position \*someone\* has chosen for them.

**SPOILERS AHEAD**

The book is not clear on how this conditioning is done, although I suppose that the speech recording and sketching imply a replacement rather than a modification. The film is more specific about using replacement by robots/androids (which is similar to INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, but with robots instead of biological entities). So the film loses that "Brave New World" connection, but I guess the producers thought that robots were more topical than some sort of chemical conditioning.

Of course, one problem is that in INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS the children realized their parents had been replaced, and reported this. They were also eventually replaced, which solved the problem, but in THE STEPFORD WIVES there is apparently no plan to replace the children, which would seem to leave a major loose end. (A 1987 television sequel/remake had the children replaced as well, though that makes little sense either. There were also REVENGE OF THE STEPFORD WIVES in 1980 and THE STEPFORD HUSBANDS in 1996.)

Also, one of the men talks as though the change is merely a modification to her. While one can argue that he is purposely deceiving her to minimize her resistance, seeing her "double" almost immediately after would disabuse her of this.

The film adds some backstory about Joanna and an old boyfriend, which is totally unnecessary. William Goldman, the original screenwriter, points out that if the men were given free rein in designing their "new" wives, they would be dressed more like hookers than Southern belles, and they would be spending a lot less time cooking and cleaning, and a lot more on other activities (not named here because this is a family publication). [-ecl]

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**Quote of the Week:**

You think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you,  
they will be there long before any of us.  
--Robert Louis Stevenson

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