

The Devniad, Book 13

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First Things.

What are the first words of the great SF novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*?

If you know your classics, you just now closed your eyes and chanted smugly, “Once upon a time there was a Martian named Valentine Michael Smith.” Congratulations.

Of course, though it pains me to say this, you’re wrong. Strictly speaking, the first words of *Stranger in a Strange Land* are ... *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Don’t quibble by saying that in *your* copy the first words are the name of the publisher on the top of the spine, or the advertising blurb at the tippy-top of the cover. You know what I mean.

The title comes first.

What does a title do? It intrigues. Informs. Categorizes. Gives editors something to do. Plays word association. Sells or repels.

Let’s analyze a snapshot of the state of the titular art in science fiction. Specifically, titles nominated in four categories of written fiction for this year’s Hugo Awards. (For some unknown reason, Michael Burstein — who earned a nomination for his FIRST PUBLISHED SHORT STORY, PLUS was nominated for the Campbell Award as BEST NEW WRITER — happened to e-mail me a copy the minute the nominations came out.)

And the nominees are:

The Time Ships ... Brightness Reef ... The Terminal Experiment ... The Diamond Age ... Remake ... Fault Lines ... A Man of the People ... A Woman’s Liberation ... Bibi ... The Death of Captain Future ... Luminous ... TAP ... Think Like a Dinosaur ... When The Old Gods Die ... The Good Rat ... Must and Shall ... TeleAbsence ... Life on the Moon ... A Birthday ... The Lincoln Train ... Walking Out.

The Time Ships

Not the most scintillating title in the bunch. But it bears a hint of classic stateliness appropriate for a sequel to *The Time Machine*. And I personally hear distant Viking thunder from an old adventure saga title, *The Long Ships*. That’s a vital element of the way we experience titles: a good one often has resonance with another title or phrase, for an effect that goes beyond the bare meaning of its component words.

Brightness Reef

From a marketing viewpoint, the word “reef” performs the important function of suggesting to prospects that they’re going to get more of David Brin’s cool dolphins here. So it helps indicate the work is part of a series (his popular Uplift books) without resorting to crude expedients like calling this *G Is For Galactics*. And even if you don’t get that, the words themselves conjure a pleasant, lyrical image of tropical vacation spots far far away from one’s messy stressy freaking WORK ... oh sorry, I was drifting there.

The Terminal Experiment

What's more important for marketing a novel, the title or the cover art? Wish the cover art here was better, because for my money this is clearly the worst title in the bunch. Heavy overtones of a cheesy 50s sci-fi flick. Or maybe something to do with train stations. It's actually an interesting thought-experiment novel by Robert J. Sawyer [WARNING: SPOILER AHEAD; SKIP TO NEXT ITEM TO AVOID PLOT SURPRISE] exploring a place where technology and spirituality intersect, about a machine that detects souls departing the dying. Maybe Sawyer wanted to call it something interesting, like *Psyche Logical* or *Soul Survivor* or *On Wings of Science*, but the editor had a wetter idea.

The Diamond Age

Again, this Neal Stephenson masterpiece is my favorite SF novel of the year. The title perhaps harks back to Twain's *The Gilded Age*, and certainly more specifically to the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Neo-Victorians and nanoproducted construction materials of artificial diamond both play a part in the story. Plus something about "age" tells you it's going to be a sweeping portrait of an entire society, which promise Stephenson certainly pays off. Good solid title here for a spectacular novel.

Remake

It's hard to argue with a one-word title if it's got any resonance at all, and this one for a Connie Willis novel about the movies has plenty. It's the short sharp shock theory of titling. Many fine examples come quickly to mind: *Eon*. *Raft*. *Deerskin*. *Beauty*. *Drakon*. *Swordspoint*. *Synners*. *Nova*. And how about *Dune*?

Bibi

I often like fiction with a character's name in the title. Viva eponymos! That way you know something important about the character before you even open the book. But there's often something interesting about the name itself. Here, not so. Let's face it, "Bibi" isn't *Ridley Walker* or *Titus Groan* or *Arslan* or even *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Think Like A Dinosaur

I've actually read this James Patrick Kelly short novella, collected in David Hartwell's new *Year's Best SF* anthology. The imperative tense is always good, gets us moving. Good intrigue factor here, too. What does it mean to think like a dinosaur? Read the story to find out. A recent association here might to the Bangles girl-group hit "Walk Like An Egyptian" — or is that just me?

Must and Shall

Somehow what occurs to me first is that if Heinlein had written this, it would have been called something like "Needn't and Won't." Not big on coercion, our RAH. Still, this Harry Turtledove title feels fairly unusual, so it's got some appeal. Reminds me a little of some Jane Austen title, where you name the story after *qualities*. That kind of retro is certainly cool this year.

TeleAbsence

This of course is Michael Burstein's excellent short story, and a fine title it has too. The slamming-two-words together bit, especially with a technological prefix like "tele-," gives you a nice slick tekky trademark feel. But the meaning's uncertain enough to foster some intriguing guesses. Is it about telecommuters playing hooky? Taking away teenagers' phone

privileges? Let's read and find out. Knowing your audience and laying out the right bait is an important titular function. This one's perfect for attracting the elusive *Analog* reader. Ditto we hope the slippery Hugo voter.

Well, I'm running out of time and space here, with so many matters titular left to discuss. The role played by editors. The deceptive title. The phenomenon of good title, bad book. Or of course bad book, good title. Variant titles, in British vs. American editions. My brother-in-law Bob Kuhn's favorite SF title, "Call me Conrad" (original magazine title of Zelazny's *This Immortal*). The sad decline of splashy 60s titles such as two of my favorites, Ellison's "Repent, Harlequin, Said the Ticktock Man" and Delany's "Time Considered as a Helix of Semiprecious Stones." Or the Kim Newman title that beautifully evokes the full horror of his concept in two words, *Anno Dracula*.

But let's leave all that for another time. I'll just remind you that the British poet Wendy Cope named an entire collection after her verse entitled "Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis."

As the poem explains, "It was a dream I had last week/And some kind of record seemed vital./I knew it wouldn't be much of a poem/But I love the title."

And I love a woman who puts first things first.

Backchat
on APA:NESFA #310, March 1996

To all

Movies seen in the past month or so: *The Birdcage*, *Rasputin* (on HBO), *Sgt.*

Bilko, *Diabolique*, *A Family Thing*, *Flirting with Disaster*, *Primal Fear*, *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*.

My favorite: *Flirting with Disaster*. Neurotic twentysomething (Ben Stiller) married to warm, gorgeous young earthmother (Patricia Arquette) with new baby takes off with her on cross-country quest to meet his bio parents, also accompanied by quirky, incompetent, gorgeous adoption agency counselor (the hilarious Tea Leoni from TV's *The Naked Truth*.) Mistakes are made, so he caroms through several putative parents. Providing other fine performances (plus marketing bait for the older generation) are Mary Tyler Moore, George Segal, Alan Alda, Lily Tomlin, and Trinity Rep's own Richard Jenkins in a scene-stealing role as an ATF official who starts out tightly wrapped, then unravels just about all the way. Directed by David O. Russell of *Spanking the Monkey* fame. A fine, quick-cut comedy about sex, society, maturity and the lack thereof, and the mess you make when you dig up roots.

To Tony Lewis

Your genealogical stuff is always fascinating. Congratulations on last month's breakthroughs.

Keep waiting, though, for your personal overview. Broad impressions. What's surprised you? How does this all make you feel?

Just reading your adventures with microfilm and bad 19th century Prussian handwriting and burial societies, I start thinking about the transitoriness of individual human life. The durability of families. The immortality of DNA. The role of chance in any individual's history. The incredible courage of the immigrant. The fact that many immigrants to the U.S. didn't find streets of gold, didn't enjoy restful old ages, but

instead died as poor as they started and with the added burdens of linguistic and cultural alienation. Yet their children went on....

I had forgotten, if I ever knew, that Isaac Asimov was once a NESFA member. Hhmmm. Good thing for your amazing APA contribution record that Asimov didn't compete in that arena.

To Paul Giguere

I like your Aruba weather report: "wind chill" of 85-90°F indeed.

A new love interest in your life? Well, you've got a scanner: next issue, we want pictures. Also, is she a fan? As part of a mixed marriage myself (SF reader/nonreader), I tell you from experience that's a hard and bitter road. She won't want to spend her honeymoon and all subsequent vacations visiting distant bookstores and libraries. She won't understand your devoting even 30 or 40 hours a week to NESFA collations and indexing. She may even balk at playing Tarnsman and Slave Woman of Gor in bed.

On another subject: your Welcome To The Devney Family dowry payment is now officially overdue. Be warned.

Thanks also for your kind words about my Arisia and Boskone pieces. Although it's not supposed to be high praise for a collection of quotations to call it "very original." You must have noticed how much I value creativity over accuracy....

I note that the APA issue in which you announce your new love interest is also the one in which you shed your heretofore modest APA persona and commence a rodomontade about your "big hard drive" and "large, virile, potent FOURTEEN INCH monitor." Dare we speculate whence this new-found confidence, Gigabyte Boy?

By the way, just got a new Pentium. Oh, the monitor? Seventeen inches.

To Ken Knabbe

Congratulations on your BASH efforts. Trust your bid was accepted, after all that work. Let me be among the first to call you Mr. Chairperson.

Good luck also on your new job. (Note, everyone: I've already asked Ken if he gets a new Lexus along with the job, and he's already replied that his new company is not **that** Lexus.)

Hope the club lets *Proper Boskonian* go on as before. From my short-timer's perspective, it seems quite a worthwhile endeavor. And as a recent contributor, you strike me as a good editor, Ken. On the acquisitions end, you're not afraid to keep nagging until you get more or better material out of someone. On the line editing end, you cut what you have to and maintain your own firmly held set of editorial standards.

Now that I've started to read other fanzines for my *PB* review column, I'd say we stack up well against the field. We put out a **very good** zine. A few other clubs or individuals may produce **great** zines. But does anybody put out a **great** zine while also producing consistently **great** conventions and running a transcendently **great** book publishing program?

To Joe Ross

Thanks for the coverage of the South Boston St. Patrick's Day political breakfast. I didn't catch it on the tube, maybe because I'm rarely awake at breakfast time on a holiday. Did you write down all those lines and events from memory, or tape it and rerun a couple of times?

Mixed feelings about Billy Bulger. Always seemed like an arrogant SOB — but one with style, for which we must forgive much. Remember when he got an entire fairly admiring personality profile on *60 Minutes* a year or so back? Can't think of a senate president in any of the other 49 states who's matched that particular recognition. Short of an indictment, anyway.

Loved your quotes as usual. You get a terrific mix of sources, subjects, and moods in there. Always one of my favorite sites on the APA. (Oh god, I've let webspeak invade even these sacred paper precincts.) Especially Bill Gates in 1981, "640K ought to be enough for anybody." My new Pentium packs a whopping 32 MB RAM just to stay a tad ahead of the likes of Bill's bloated Microsoft Office software.

Thanks for setting me straight on why we need another convention center. If it means another Boston worldcon, let's get digging.

To Ray Bowie

Not sure Robert Silverberg would appreciate your lumping him in with Jack Williamson as greats that are getting up there and whom we may soon see pass away. My *SF Encyclopedia* says Williamson is about 88, while Silverberg is about 61. Not that the Black Bird is any great respecter of either youth or age, of course.

Immensely flattered by your comparing me to Groucho Marx and Hawkeye Pierce. Certainly better than Karl Marx and Franklin Pierce. You're right, I don't usually quote myself in my *Orbita Dicta* quote con reports. Figure there's enough of my input in the various twisted ways I misquote, add, and pad other people's words.

So David Lean liked William Holden better than he did Alec Guinness. Didn't

know that. Surprising, too, since I'd thought of the young Holden as something of a hellraiser, and Guinness as a model Old Brit Pro.

Love all of Lean's films I've seen, but I'm with your mother: *Dr. Zhivago* holds a special place in my heart. Saw it 4 or 5 times the week it came to my small-town moviehouse, the Orpheum, in Foxboro, MA. I was 13 or 14 years old, already interested in history, and this romance set before and after the Russian Revolution just revolutionized my life. Made me into the fanatic moviegoer I still remain today. The incredibly babeacious Julie Christie may have had quite a bit to do with this, of course. But I also was knocked over by the whole look and storytelling wizardry of Lean's movie, and by the performances of Guinness, Tom Courtenay, Rod Steiger, Ralph Richardson, Omar Sharif (could he be why your mother likes the movie?), and even minor revelations like Klaus Kinski as the wild-eyed forced labor prisoner. Bojemoi, what a movie!

To Mark Hertel

Liked Anna's comet cover, and also caught your comet in the night sky a couple of times. I *think* I also saw some of the tail through my binoculars, although this could be wish fulfillment. Definitely saw the glorious central smudge, though, even with the naked nearsighted eye. You're right; it's a goofily wonderful experience.

Reminded me, though, that Maureen and I are among the worse light polluters in our neighborhood. Maureen likes bright lights in the front and back yard for security (against whom it's hard to say, since any intruder entering some parts of our house in the dark would be crushed within seconds by a pile of falling books). But both lights are open to the sky as well, which is

astronomically unfortunate. The comet certainly looked a lot better once I'd turned them off. Got to do something about that RSN.

About Ernest Lilley

Who put in Ernest Lilley's FREQUENCIES interview Bujold? Nice addition to the zine.

I'd met Ernest just before Boskone through e-mail on the AOL SF boards, and then he found me at the con. Good guy, with lots of knowledge about SF, especially the stuff we both read as boys — Tom Swift, Rick Brant, then E.E. Smith. Oh, and Mr. Bass and his visit to the Mushroom Planet.

Good interview here, too, where he's obviously read all the writer's work and demonstrates an easy familiarity. Exactly the type of interviewer I want standing in for me. Interesting take on Bujold's *Mirror Dance*, with Mark as an analyst type like Jack Ryan and Miles as an action figure like James Bond.

Hope his newsletter does well.

To Michael Burstein

Really enjoyed your Lunacon report, as usual with your con coverage. Sounds a lot like Boskone, with some overlap in the cast of characters.

Believe me, I, too, "wish Bob Devney had been there." But Bob Devney's not the kind of guy that goes to too many cons. People say it's because Bob Devney's getting old. He's an old man. He's soft on cons. Not Bob Devney. Bob Devney's fiscally responsible. That's the kind of conservative Bob Devney is. That's why he deserves your ... whatchamacallit. Vote.

OK, enough political comment. I'm ashamed to say I haven't yet read the copy of *Snow Crash* I bought years ago, so the mistake of "Hero" for Hiro Protagonist — because I'd only heard

the name aloud — serves me right. Tormentingly, I did see the name somewhere else and realize my mistake about 3 days after the issue was printed. But thanks anyway for parading my ignominy before the universe.

Careful about wishing your fiction sales would increase "exponentially." One can only assume poor Isaac Asimov once uttered this plea into the devil's ear -- and got held to it.

Your earlier comment on how many people at the meeting did know John Campbell (answer: almost all of them) was clear for me the first time around.... I was reading *Analog* by the early 60s, when Campbell was still a strong editorial presence with a definite personality. Curmudgeon with a slide rule. As I came to know more about the history of the field, I realized how much larger he loomed in the 40s and 50s. They should probably have named our genre's main award after John Campbell, not Hugo Gernsback.

Except that this might give difficulty in phrases such as "Burstein's Brookline mansion boasts no fewer than five Johns" or "Michael Burstein brought home two Johns from LA" or "A triumphant Burstein held his Johnny high in front of the stunned audience."

Love to Nomi and Eleanor.

Note: the above predates the Hugo nominations. What can I say but CONGRATULATIONS, Michael!

To Leslie Turek

About Part 3 of your Scottish trip report, the longer the better I say. I like all the botany, although I can't tell a fir from a fern myself. But you write clearly and enthusiastically about it and carry the reader right along.

I'd seen the term "ha-ha" in English books, but never looked it up. And there you are in the opening scene, sitting on

one with your feet propped on a defining footnote below. Thanks.

About a full tank of gas costing you \$42.50, the trouble apparently isn't too little North Sea oil. According to an oil industry expert on TV this morning, people in Europe pay \$4 or \$5 per gallon in taxes besides cost and profit on the petrol itself. He also said that gas prices in the U.S. haven't kept up with inflation in the last 30 years, so that we pay comparatively less per gallon in real dollars than we did in the 60s. That's if you believe what you hear on TV. Or in this case, what I hear on TV.

Thanks for the kind word about the con quotes. And for your answers to my queries re desktop production of your high-class trip report. I'm always in awe of anybody who can both write and draw well. My hat's off to you, madam.

Thanks also with the reassurance about English menu selection. My sibs are still going to England in June, but looks like I'll be left sobbing at the dock. Maureen's still had no luck finding a new job, and since I've purchased a monster new PC anyway (the old one was dying, honest), a second extravagance might leave us sleeping in hedges by midsummer.

To Mark Olson

About your precis of John Barnes' new fantasy *One for the Morning Glory*: a young prince's left side disappears due to an evil spell? Sounds sinister.

Far Futures also seems like a must-have collection. My only quibble with far-future stories is that, realistically, the universe would have changed so much in a coupla billion centuries that it's difficult to give me a frame of reference or get me to care about what happens. Notice several of your authors have solved this problem with the hoary expedient of having humans from our

time somehow, however implausibly, get involved in the action.

When I'm reading your reviews and considering whether to buy something you recommend, the question I most often have is: hardcover or softcover? Not saying you need to include price, publisher, date, all that tiresome pub data. But a quick "hc" or "pb" might help make your splendid stuff even more consumer-friendly without turning it into an indexing project.

Your short, glowing review of *Wildside* by Steven Gould certainly makes me long to run out and buy it tonight. Then I get to the part about the young central character's resembling a Heinlein hero "without the obnoxious streak which made all of Heinlein's Heinlein Individuals such bad neighbors." I was about to get indignant on Heinlein's characters' behalf, but instantly a whole parade of the crotchety bastards marched through my brain. Culminating with Hugh Farnham, whose happy ending involves sowing mines around the path to his home. Guess you have a point, Mark.