

The Devniad, Book 19

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Going Out with Friends and Getting Blasted.

The group that lases together stays together.

That seems to be the reasoning behind my sister Darcy's recent surprise party for her husband Bob Kuhn's 40th birthday. She invited 25 or 30 of Bob's friends and family to gather for a night of virtual violence at the LaserTron room in the Good Time Billiards gaming complex, Assembly Square (behind Home Depot), Somerville, MA.

(Last month, a rant on *Quake*. This month, LaserTron. Note to myself: consider changing banner from *The Devniad* to *GameBoy Gazette*.)

As Darcy explained it, "Bob played it in Toronto once. You all run around in a maze with laser guns and blast each other. The computer keeps score. Bob loved it."

Fearing that frenetic running, jumping, and performing FBI-agent spring-roll-and-shoot maneuvers might prove a little challenging for me — absent a total-body transplant — I pressed Darcy further.

"Can you just kind of *walk* around and shoot people?"

She'd already covered this with the staff. Most clients were repeat-customer teenage boys. But she was assured that the rules technically forbade running and physical contact, so we'd be fine.

Hah!

We had the whole place to ourselves, with 24 or 25 people — the maximum — playing a total of 5 games. Darcy paid the whole tab for all of us. Truly, she is a river to her people.

If you're ever in a mood to follow in our (slightly scorched) footsteps, be warned that the charge is \$4 per player for a standard 8-minute game. But with a large group, Darcy tells me, the cost plummets to \$2 per. (Note: Friday and Saturday nights, rates are higher.)

We were a motley crew. Gender mix maybe 60-40 male to female. Ages from 27 to over 50, and physiques from Tinkerbell to Falstaff.

Occupations ranged from every flavor of computer geek to master carpenter to divinity school student to ace adman (ahem) to shadowy state law enforcement figure to former Republican fundraiser. (Could be a lot more of those around real soon. Sorry, Joe . . .) At least four Ph.D.s ditched their dignity, including the bouncing birthday boy himself.

Oh, and one very interested child psychologist. Talk about a buswoman's holiday . . .

So we all got together on Columbus Day evening and discovered a whole new world of high-tech gamesmanship. Some of my zap-happy impressions:

Once your session is announced, you all follow an attendant, piling into a small briefing room. Huddling together shoulder to shoulder as the attendant requests you separate into roughly equal Red and Green teams.

As with the gameroom to come, the dim light in the briefing room is tinged with the purple glow of ultraviolet. So at this point, people clown around, discovering that teeth and nails shine whiter than white. Also that individuals wearing contact lenses suddenly have weird pale eyes that make them look like vampires. Or malamutes.

Also at this point, my brother Michael discovers that the new autodarkening-lens glasses he bought a few months back have gone into emergency UV overload and think he's on some beach that's brighter than a thousand suns. Within seconds, his lenses grow darker than Piers Anthony's heart. Leaving Michael reduced to perfecting his Zatoichi the Blind Samurai Swordsman impression for much of the remainder of the night.

Anyway, the attendant takes out a vest-and-lasergun set, shows us (well, all of us except Michael) how it works, and tells us about scoring and rules.

I wonder about the placard reminding us to OBEY THE FIVE FOOT RULE. But the guy says no, it doesn't mean be sure to keep five feet on the ground at all times. (I think he's beginning to catch on what kind of crowd he's dealing with tonight.) It's just a reminder to keep your distance from other players. Doubtless meant to cut down on casual oculodectomies.

By the way, the Laser Port could have used a little more creative spark in the language spoken in their spiffy skiffy gameworld. The matte-black, 14-inch-long laser zapper thingy is your "GUN." The garment to which it's attached, a sideless chest-shoulders-and-back plastic affair with a backpack antenna, sensors, and blinking lights, is your "VEST." You shoot at the lights on the other guy's

vest. You get 40 shots and 10 lives, then you have to recharge. Take a wild guess what they call your team's BASE and your RECHARGE station. Right.

(What do you expect from an organization whose name its literature insists is "Laser Port," while its score sheet says "LaserTron"?)

These terms aside, the vocab is a snap. You probably already know how to say "Look out!" and "Over there!" and "Gotcha!" and "Which the hell way is Recharge," right?

If you feel you MUST drill these essential phrases before your game, I'd mostly work on your volume. Turns out it's pretty noisy in there.

Briefing over, attendants take each team into separate vesting rooms, wherein you — well — put on your vests. At least two cornballs make jokes about 401K plans and being fully vested. (That is, one other cornball besides me.)

The rigs hang on numbered pegs — already "live," blinking and beckoning. Bleating excitedly, we suit up.

The moment has the look and feel of a scene in the spacesuit airlock of some *Starship Troopers* movie. (Which Hollywood keeps announcing without ever making — don't get me started. I did hear recently, AGAIN, that filming may actually have begun.) Granted, the real movie would presumably have huge step-in powered combat suits, not just these plastic vests.

We're all suited and ready. The attendant takes us out into the gameroom and leads us through the maze, pointing out our two Recharge stations and our Base. Then he leaves us alone in this labyrinth of plastic partitions, and THE GAMES BEGIN!!!!

Bob Kuhn, whom we elected Red Team Captain for the first round, had mentioned strategy in the vesting room. I think it had something to do with deploying in tactical teams, with a strong reserve to picket the base and flanking parties to probe, followed by an advance in force against the enemy's right and free maneuvering to screen a classic pincers attack, evolving into a lightning strike at Green Force command-and-control units and a sweep up the center to envelop their Base and Recharge positions and deny them vital logistical support.

Or whatever.

However, lacking adequate G2 about battlefield conditions, Bob hadn't realized what's it like once they start up the game.

The feeling is akin to being inside a giant pinball game. Frenetic dance mixmaster music blasts over the loudspeakers. The battleground is a daunting smoky maze, dimly lit by purple lights. (Purple HAZE, all IN your BRAIN . . .)

And adrenaline is doing the fizzy hokey-pokey throughout every cell in your body.

So from an inspired generalship perspective, LaserTron is always going to resemble not so much Desert Storm as F Troop Goes Disco.

With one accord, we all pretty much decide to forget strategy and go mess around big time in this really cool place.

I hustle up a corridor, take a few lefts and rights, drifting vaguely toward where I imagine enemy territory begins. Then — a shape flits across the corridor ahead, crossing from door to door.

Contact!

Like a great jungle cat, I spring forward.

Reflexes finely honed by seconds of training and practice, I bring my weapon up, centering, centering, centering on the target —

I FIRE!

A beam of crimson light slices through the smoke and coruscates down the hall like — like — well, about like an incredibly long, thin, neon-illuminated sculpture of a red-licorice whip. Yeah, that's it, except this is a totally lethal licorice whip, dude.

Although not actually, of course.

Which is just as well, since now that I think of it the beam seemed to issue from my opponent's gun, not mine.

Mind you, I don't think it hit me. Dumb greenhorn couldn't even aim straight. Don't they teach these people anything?

Still, why didn't my own gun fire?

Oh. Forgot about the safeties.

There's one on each side of the muzzle, which you have to hold down when pulling the trigger. Makes it harder for clumsy rookies to wave their guns around and give somebody a concussion.

Disturbed at this forgetting-the-safeties incident, which even I must admit betrays a momentary lapse of my famously laser-like concentration, I stop short and give myself a stern little talking to.

LaserTron combat is no place for daydreaming, I silently tell myself. Save that for the office, or high-speed highway driving.

You've got to focus, man! I tell myself, waving the gun around forcefully and almost giving myself a concussion.

Suddenly I become aware that another figure has appeared at a door to my left.

With even more blinding speed this time, I lurch around and blaze away. Fingers mash and hold every button and trigger I can find in an orgy of automatic fire. Laserbeams flick like red-licorice lightning down the corridor.

From my end too this time, so there.

And I'm filled with savage joy as the other guy breaks first, turning and plunging from sight with a despairing shout. Or maybe curse.

I seriously consider roaring the magnificent victory yowl of the alpha feline. Then it occurs to me that my target's vest this time seemed to have more of a reddish than a greenish hue.

Which would mean that I've just shot and driven off one of my own teammates. Someone who's not, strictly speaking, supposed to be an ingredient in my great jungle cat meow mix . . .

And that was pretty much how my LaserTron adventure proceeded over the course of the night. I had never before realized how tardy on the uptake I could be in a new, confusing environment. Once again, it confirmed the wisdom of my decision not to join the Marines at age 16.

For instance, after the games, someone mentioned there were markings in red and green on various structural elements of the maze to give you a hint which half of the complex you were in.

I never noticed them.

Which may explain why at one point, I run into a Recharge station and stand in front of the screen, only to have it make a curious shooting noise instead of the reassuring squeal that means you are ammo'd up. Then I notice the flood of Greenies crowding in after me, and realize I am at an enemy station.

In a classic case of insult to injury, not only don't I get a recharge but the station itself shoots me and adds the score to the Green team's total. I stumble off to hoots of vile green laughter.

Not that I don't have my moments of soldierly triumph on the field of glory (well, plastic).

Once I spend an entire game hogging a great spot: a shoulder-high opening commanding an unusually long, straight sightline down a corridor. Between quick visits to my handy nearby Recharge station, I happily wedge myself into a protected corner and send beam after beam into Greenies passing by way down the other end of the corridor.

Half the time they don't even know they're under fire. There's no movement anywhere near them, unless they happen to see the shot itself.

Heigh ho, heigh hee, it's the sniper's life for me!

Another time — it isn't easy to make out faces, what with my poor eyesight, the place's poor visibility, and people shooting at poor me. At one point, however, I do recognize Green Force stalwart David Shera, an old friend of my brother Michael's.

David and I meet, exchange hasty zaps, then retire on opposite sides of a barrier. However, I notice there is a small seam where two barrier sections came together. Through it, I can make out David's glowing green plastic vest.

Sportingly, I put my gun to the gap and pour shot after shot into David's unsuspecting back. My fun only ceases when his buzzing sensor pack alerts the poor dweeb to his death(s) and he lurches off into the gloom.

My only regret is that, having recharged, I could never find that seam again . . .

In retrospect, Bob Kuhn supports my sportsmanlike tactics. “The best way to score high is to get lots of shots into their backs,” he affirms cheerfully. You know, like in real life.

So how did you do in overall scoring, Birthday Bob?
“Pitifully.”

I guess most of us had learned even before the game never to turn our backs on an Australian.

A few final notes. I told people that anyone who went home and keyed all their scores into a spreadsheet would be taking the game way too seriously and should seek help. From this you may infer that I didn’t do too well.

My feeling is that, as with any sport, it’s not how you win or lose . . . it’s whether **I** win or lose. And although by judicious back-sniping I did manage to place fourth on my team in one game, I was more usually in the sixth-to-twelfth region. On the team that lost four out of five.

Less bitter observers report that insurance company computer expert Cally Perry took overall scoring honors for the night, in a brazen display of utter viciousness, total disregard for the niceties of civilized society, and disheartening accuracy. Brava, Cally.

And if you’re interested in playing LaserTron yourself, let me reassure you again that physical conditioning plays almost no role. Swift analysis and correct grasp of hidden incentives in the scoring system, allied with flat-out aggressiveness and decent hand-eye coordination, are much more important than Schwarzeneggeran athleticism. (Not

that I would know on any of these counts.)

For instance, one top scorer had only a single complaint: the vest chafed his stitches from heart surgery . . .

Probably the strongest commercial endorsement LaserTron will ever receive came from Winston Churchill in 1898, when he observed:

“Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be laserbeamed at without result.”

FlimFan

Noteworthy movies seen since last time include *To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday*, *Two Days in the Valley*, *The Chamber*, *The Ghost and the Darkness*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *Sleepers*.

Sleepers had the most sheer quality, *Ghost* the most satisfying story, and *Two Days* the most appealing quirkiness. But the most entertaining movie of the lot this month was most definitely *The Long Kiss Goodnight*.

Geena Davis is a nice schoolteacher with amnesia about her former life, who’s hired a lowlife private detective (the ever-excellent Samuel L. Jackson) to probe that past. Turns out she was a lethally proficient government assassin — with former targets and colleagues who all want her dead again. Luckily, stuff is coming back to her . . .

Jackson’s character sums up her character’s and the film’s appeal in a couple of exasperatedly awe-struck lines. Something like:

“When I met you,” he says, “you were like, ‘Oh, phooey, I burned the muffins.’ Now you walk into a bar and a coupla minutes later, *sailors* run out.”

We science fiction fans above all understand the attraction of a meek underdog who discovers hidden

superpowers and kicks butt. It's the genius of movies such as this and Bridget Fonda's *Point of No Return* to realize that beautiful women make terrific underdogs — who also look good in underwear.

It was great, really. I loved it. Davis shows her dark side and confirms she's got major star power. Jackson more than holds his own. Director Renny Harlin (*Cliffhanger*, *Die Hard 2*) shows again what a solid action director he is. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* is certainly the best summer movie of the fall, as someone said. But —

More than any of the other movies this month, it will show America's face to the world. (I know Fonda's killer-chick flick was remade from the French, and Renny Harlin is Finnish. Both films are still stamped MADE IN AMERICA.) I'm not sure they'll even show it in India, with that title — is it still verboten to show kissing in movies there?

But from Helsinki to Harare, Montevideo to Manila, it's not the top-flight smartass dialog, or the implicit feminist or racial equality messages that will make the lasting impression. It's our astonishing craft at SFX.

The world will agree that American explosions are the best in the world.

These may be our most influential exports: slick surfaces, beautiful women, classic blues on the soundtrack, profoundly astounding stunts, things that blow up.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #316, September 1996

To George Flynn

Welcome back to the APA! I understand you were an iron-thewed

stalwart here back in the Hyperborean Age. Or before me, anyway.

Thanks for the hardworking-SMOF's-eye-view of L.A.con III. Appreciated your dry wit and willingness to name names. Including mine; thanks again for mentioning my gossamer brush with fanwriter fame. Only 13 assassinations of more worthy notables and the Hugo could have been mine all mine.

To Joe Ross

Interesting reprise of the A.N. Wilson book *The Rise and Fall of the House of Windsor*. You pulled out a lot of fascinating facts. When I hear these endgame discussions of the British royals, always think back to an old Nevil Shute book, *In the Wet* (1953). A look at a constitutional crisis in a future time — say the 1980s — where World War II rationing and fanatically leveler-minded trade unionism had never let up; the royals get disgusted and threaten to quit in the face of undignified budget cuts. Shute's technology may be moldy, his politics ditto, but the guy didn't sell all those millions of copies worldwide because he didn't know how to tell a story.

Also, **two** nice, rich collections of quotes this month. Thanks, Joe.

To Ray Bowie

Looks like I spoke too soon last month in praising even the name of your wheelchair. OK, so it has a cool tradename and is otherwise completely worthless. Proving once more that marketing is completely detached from reality.

You alluded to my taping people at conventions. I don't tape those con quotes, you know — just scrawl notes at the time or write them down afterwards.

If actual tapes existed, I might be obliged to quote people accurately.

Thanks also for your open mind about us dangerous liberals.

To Tony Lewis

Re The Ubiquitous Burstein's inserting you as a character in his latest story: I always thought you *were* a character in a story.

Will we see Suford's newly established Napoleonic connection reflected in her next Regency gown?

I predict *Last Dangerous Visions* will eventually see print — after Harlan Ellison's death, as the title of a collection of writers' and fans' remembrances of assorted Harlan sightings. You read it here first.

To Paul Giguere

Thanks for the con report. But such brevity did leave out some details I'm curious about. Was John Ford there? What did you discuss? I like big cons best for seeing established writers and finally putting a face to the work; plus for catching hot new writers whose work I should seek out. Any additions to your Life List on either score?

To Nomi Burstein

Thanks for the worldcon highlights report. So, what's Harry Turtledove really like?

Anent your comment on my family's traveling all the way to Britain only to eat at Pizza Hut, they protest that was just once. And my brother-in-law Bob Kuhn avers that HE wanted to eat English food ALL the time, but was overpowered by the three Devneys with whom he was traveling. I can't imagine why they weren't keen on world-famous Albionic delicacies such as bloaters,

bangers, blood pudding, blancmange, and spotted dick. Mmmm, makes you hungry just reading the words, doesn't it?

To Lisa Hertel

What a huge, informative, witty, insightful con report. I now know a lot more interesting stuff about Vegas, L.A., and the con than anyone else has ever told me. Do you write like this every month for that other APA? No wonder you keep saying you're tired.

So you collect sand from places you've visited. Do you know Steven Wright's joke on a similar topic? "Maybe you've seen my sea-shell collection — I keep it on beaches all over the world." Probably next to his full-size globe of the world.

I like the moment when you all almost turn back once you come over the mountains and see the sudden disgusting cloud of pollution hanging over L.A., but press on because of your duty to work at the con. Hadn't known the pall was quite that discrete and visible.

However, your single most enjoyable sentence has to be, "I discovered enormous snails in the garden outside the Hugo losers party, but couldn't find Michael Burstein." It IS hard to coax the dear shy boy out of his shell.

To Michael Burstein

You mean Kennedy wasn't a Democrat?

On another subject: I won't dignify your comment about it being a "gyp" for me to get APA credit for 20 pages of my sisters' work with a response other than the following. (Pause to remove hands from keyboard for deployment of rude gesture.)

On to a PC Police matter, young man: Isn't the use of the old verb "to gyp," meaning "to cheat or swindle," equivalent to the use of the old verb "to jew," meaning "to bargain sharply with, to negotiate [a price downward]"? Both were derived from offensive stereotypes about supposedly categorical behavior of minority groups, Gypsies and Jews.

With "to jew," I'd say the offense is immediately apparent to a modern reader. Not so with "to gyp" — the derivation from "Gypsy" never dawned on me until I read it recently. However, now I can't get it out of my mind. Nor yours from now on, I suspect.

And I don't even want to get into "to go dutch," "to welsh" — or especially "to french."

To Jim Mann

Interesting report on your vacation in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Read the APA and hear about the world.

Your short review of *The Demolished Man* was a real gem of its kind. Great job putting Bester's career and this book in context, which is the right move when you face the unusual situation wherein most of your readers have already read the work under review.

I agree that Ursula Le Guin is still producing absolutely first-rate work, at least in the shorter forms. As you pointed out for Bester, and could have said about 20 other authors, there's often a decline in a writer's powers after their early masterpieces. Le Guin has just added more wisdom and sadness to her already potent mixture. By the way, you sound as though you share my opinion that that neglected classic *The Dispossessed* may well be her best work.

To Mark Olson

I've got to get back to reading some history books on my own. Looking back

on the last year or so, I realize that way too much of what newly acquired historical information I possess is coming solely from reading your reviews and articles. Trouble is, your writing is so clear, concise, brief, and interesting. It's seducing me from the One True Path of reading all those long, sometimes difficult books myself.

Thanks for the con report on LA. Your insider analysis and gossip were invaluable as always. As someone who couldn't go, I'm deeply disappointed to hear that it was actually very good.

To Mark Hertel

With no name, I'm just guessing the Musings in the issue were yours.

Michael Flynn's *Firestar* seems to be getting unanimous reviews — yours the latest — as a certain Hugo contender and certified good read. Gotta get it.

Again, I agree with you about *Replay* by Ken Grimwood. Good story, but not the best of any year, let alone decade. In fact, so far the memory of *Replay* hasn't yet moved me to the point of purchasing Grimwood's latest and adding it to the toppling towers of "gotta get to" books in my house.