

## The Devniad, Book 22

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### **Fave Flix of Ninety-Six.**

*Out of the 75 or so feature films I saw in 1996, these were the movies I enjoyed most.*

*So I'm weird. If you're reading this, you already knew that.*

*OK, and I like Jane Austen movies. Listen, that just means I'm very comfortable with my masculinity.*

#### **1. Fargo**

It's a black comedy about murder, marriage, Minnesota, and Marge Gunderson. Played by the vastly underrated Frances McDormand, Marge is a vastly pregnant small-town police chief who's a blend of Pollyanna and Popeye Doyle and stands for all that's good in the world. One of the four delicious bad guys is the inimitable Steve Buscemi, who confirms his status as the Peter Lorre for our times. *Fargo* is a very intelligent film mostly about very stupid people, and simply more sheer fun than any other movie this year. You might say it leaves you feeling chipper, yah yah, you betcha.

#### **2. Lone Star**

As usual, great indie writer/director John Sayles takes his time, showing you a modern-day Texas sheriff facing a murder mystery that goes back a generation and involves every single interesting character in a bordertown (great name: Frontera) that's full of them. In flashback, Kris Kristofferson plays the meanest sheriff in recent memory, and Chris Cooper the modern lawman who must solve the crime. Elizabeth Pena (who if she weren't Hispanic would be taking roles away from Meryl Streep) is a teacher who's strong, sexy, resourceful, and maybe ready to heat up an old romance with the sheriff. This movie is a great big dish of chili: rich, thick, with spice and bite; best savored slowly for maximum satisfaction.

#### **3. Sense and Sensibility**

This (narrowly) wins my own private little Jane Austen filmfest for 1996. (More entrants below.) It's probably the screenplay: Emma Thompson keeps the spirit of the novel while opening things up and adding bits of business — yanking up a treehouse ladder, hiding in a library — that both advance the story and build our fondness for the characters in a beautifully visual, cinematic way. Kate Winslet, as the less sensible sister, Marianne Dashwood, is a real find. Emma Thompson is also fine as leading lady Elinor Dashwood, although she reports that one early performance note from director Ang Lee was somewhat disheartening: "Try not look so old." He could also have told her movie suitor Hugh Grant, playing Edward Ferrars, "Try not look so charming," but what would have been the use?

#### **4. Emma**

Like its heroine uncommonly warm, pretty, and high-spirited, *Emma* glows, thanks to beautiful cinematography and the luminescent Gwyneth Paltrow. It's not easy to play silly without casting into doubt for a moment your character's high intelligence. Yet Gwyneth manages this effortlessly, in period costume and with an English accent yet. She's also the most vulnerable (and at one point quite deeply hurt) Austen heroine to beset me recently. Which may be helped by her being 23 playing 20, not 36 playing 19, as with Emma Thompson for instance.

#### **5. Big Night**

Two immigrant brothers, trying to keep their authentic Italian restaurant afloat in a sea of checked-tablecloth meatball joints lapping at our shores in the 1950s, prepare a supreme feast for friends and a promised big shot. Stanley Tucci (the film's co-creator), *Cheers*' Tony Shalhoub, and *Alien*'s Ian Holm shine in this funny, sad, smart little movie, which serves no scene before its time and prepares every perfect detail

al dente.

### **6. *Pride and Prejudice* (A&E)**

This English TV miniseries is quieter than the moviehouse Austenfeasts, but no less excellent and with perhaps more of a "period" feel than any of its big-screen sisters except *Persuasion*. The longer running time allows full scope for such deliriously wonderful character parts as the cynical Mr. Bennet and the oleaginous Mr. Collins (my wife Maureen's personal favorite). Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy are spared none of the exquisitely enjoyable (for us, I mean) Austenian agonies of their several meetings and partings.

### **7. *Secrets and Lies***

Working-class woman is contacted by the grown daughter whom she gave up for adoption at birth, sight unseen. They meet; the daughter turns out to be black. But this is only the first of many secrets, lies, laughs, cries, and surprises in this treasure by working-class English filmmaker Mike Leigh. All shared by a rich cast of characters whom we meet, initially laugh at, and finally find ourselves empathizing with to the point of tears. Certainly I cried. Don't you cry at movies? What kind of unfeeling brute are you then, mate?

### **8. *Flirting with Disaster***

Mel (Ben Stiller) sets off across America to find his biological parents. It's a touching reunion, until he discovers there's been some mistake. Well, make that a whole lot of mistakes, as he ping-pongs across the land in this really slick, hip, funny road picture. Along for the ride are his wife, Patricia Arquette, and his adoption counselor, Tea Leoni. (Right there it becomes a really slick, hip, funny, *sexy* road picture.) Back home and bitter about the whole thing are his adoptive parents, Mary Tyler Moore and George Segal. And you haven't even met Allen Alda yet, in the most hilarious sendup of an entertainment legend by that selfsame legend since Marlon Brando in

*The Freshman*.

### **9. *Trainspotting***

*Trainspotting* is about twenty-something heroin addicts leading lives of crime, physical and emotional violence, and total effing heedlessness in modern Glasgow and London. But for the most part these waster kids show you a surprising amount of energy, as does the film. Be sure not to consume mass quantities of movie food until **after** the scene featuring the worst toilet in Scotland. Directed with grit and loud music by Danny Boyle, whose *Shallow Grave* was one of my favorites last year.

### **10. *The English Patient***

*Lawrence of Arabia* meets *Brief Encounter* via *Johnny Got His Gun*. You can predict some plot points, but are eternally surprised by how beautifully written, shot, and acted each scene is in this World War II drama. It's lush yet modern, and romantic as a sunset in the desert or a dance in an Italian fountain.

Also excellent: *Michael Collins*, *That Thing You Do*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, *12 Monkeys*, *Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud*, *The Rock*, *Tank Girl*, *Kansas City*, *I'll Fly Away*, *Antonia's Line*.

As a public service and not I hope for the sake of invidious comparisons, here also are the "best of 1996" lists of Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert.

By the way, in my opinion these guys are national treasures I'm not sure we really appreciate. Think of it: these are TV CRITICS . . . yet they take their art seriously and discuss it with clarity, passion, and intelligence.

Of course, they're really newspaper critics who happen to go on TV once a week. Maybe that helps keep them pure and good. In any case, they make my list of the best movie critics writing in America. (Besides Janet Maslin, David Denby, Peter Travers, David Ansen, and Joe Queenan.)

Did you know that Roger Ebert is the only movie critic ever to win a Pulitzer Prize?

Roger Ebert's list for 1996: 1. *Fargo*,

2. *Breaking the Waves*, 3. *Secrets and Lies*, 4. *Lone Star*, 5. *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, 6. *Bound*, 7. Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, 8. *Everyone Says I Love You*, 9. *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, 10. *Big Night*.

Gene Siskel's list for 1996: 1. *Fargo*,

2. *Secrets and Lies*, 3. *Breaking the Waves*, 4. *The English Patient*, 5. *Lone Star*,

6. *Looking for Richard*, 7. *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (on HBO), 8. *Welcome to the Dollhouse*,

9. *Kingpin*, 10. *Bound*.

## FlimFan

What the heck, let's make it an all-movie issue.

Noteworthy films seen since last time include *The Crucible*, *One Fine Day*, *Evita*, *The People vs. Larry Flynt*.

The one that may very well show up on my "best" list next year is *The Crucible*. Always one of my favorite stories — about the madness and malice of the Salem witch trials — it's made an excellent translation to the screen in Arthur Miller's adaptation of his own classic stage play.

Daniel Day Lewis is a properly tormented John Procter, the prosperous farmer tempted by the (perhaps literally) bewitching Abigail Williams. She's played with snaky smolder by Winona Ryder. And great to see Paul Scofield again, as the great and terrible Judge Danforth.

Some critics thought this movie was a little stagy. I say, to the stake with them! The director, Nicholas Hytner of *The Madness of King George*, finds a way to keep certain trial set-pieces very dramatic still in the context of a naturalistic film look. One small point: shot on Hog Island off the Massachusetts coast, the film actually *looks* like Massachusetts, not Malibu. Hey, a real salt marsh! This assuredly helps take you back to that little Puritan settlement of 1692 — which certainly was haunted by demons, if of the townfolks' own making.

Much of the play's language is also maintained; for me, that's a great plus. I don't think it was just the period phrases that kept reminding me of Shakespeare. Miller's talent may just be that great.

In particular, he traps his characters in a sequence of actions and reactions, each firmly grounded in their individual characters, each reasonably the only choices the characters could make at each juncture — yet all leading irrevocably to their individual dooms. Lest we forget, that's what tragedy is all about.

When first staged in 1953, the tightening gyre of accusation and hysteria that is *The Crucible* was taken as a metaphor for McCarthyism. This time, we read it in light of current issues such as several mass child-abuse trials where the evidence is troublingly thin.

Next generation, who knows?

## Backchat

on APA:NESFA #319, December 1996

To all

My sister Darcy just discovered a terrific Jane Chord. (For our newer readers, that's what you get when the first and last words of a literary work are combined into a two-word phrase that appears to have some overall message.) It's from *Addie Pray*, the novel by Joe David Brown that was made into the terrific 1973 movie *Paper Moon*, about a father-and-daughter team (played by Ryan and Tatum O'Neal) of Bible-selling con artists. The book's quite apt Chord: "They . . . fool."

And on another note: apologies for last month including "mitochondria" in a list of singular nouns. (Did manage to correct it in my later e-mail version.) The singular form is, of course, "mitochondrion." Sic semper showoffs.

### **To Tony Lewis**

Since you have been frank in airing your fetishistic regard for a certain adhesive strapping, I'll have to show you a memoir I picked up somewhere years ago. It teats sorry treats life on a Vermont dairy farm. The appetizing title: *Bag Balm and Duct Tape*.

### **To George Flynn**

I'm properly rebuked on my spelling of the first name of the King of Horror. From now on, I'll think of him as Good Old Stephe.

And Michael Burstein flays me on something you may have missed also: that it's not the Horror Writers of America, but simply the Horror Writers Association. To this cumulative evidence of my sloppiness, I can only say, horrors!

Not sure if you're serious about my doing con quotes in the newsletter DURING Boskone. As you point out, the likelihood of revenge from those quoted would rise exponentially . . .

### **To Lisa Hertel**

Agree with you that *Wildside* is quite worthy, and a fine read. I, too, got it because of Mark Olson's review. You didn't like the technical longueurs about flying and airplane mechanical systems; I thought they gave it a solid underpinning and helped with verisimilitude. "Hey, these 18-year-olds sound like they really know all the details of flight check and navigation; maybe they really could do this."

### **To Michael Burstein**

Found your account of visits to the Holocaust and Vietnam memorials interesting and moving. No man is an island, and every man's death diminishes me — fine, but it becomes a lot more personal when suddenly you're talking about FAMILY. Because we're still tribal at heart . . .

For Gypsies, I've seen "Roma," and also "Rom" and "Romany." Wonder if there's much written in their language?

When Lisa first compared you to a giant snail, I'll admit it threw me for a moment. Until I figured out she meant that you (figuratively, of course) leave a glistening trail wherever you go . . .

### **To Joe Ross**

Quite interesting discussion of recent movie treatment on The Sci-Fi Channel of "The Cold Equations." You make a cogent case for how the substantial changes from the original reflect 90s values — to the detriment of the story. Man, this is one short story with LEGS, isn't it? There have been at least five or six lengthy discussions of it over the last year or two in the letter column of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Plus James Patrick Kelly says his Hugo-winning novelette of last year, "Think Like A Dinosaur," is an overt attempt to, let's say, recalculate the original.

Not bad for something that ran in the August 1954 *Astounding*. Wonder what *Analog* piece this year will still be hotly discussed in 2039? (Quiet, Burstein!)

### **To Anna Hillier**

Know what you mean about APA withdrawal. My strategy to avoid its dread pangs is to try to put it out of my mind, forget each issue is even due to arrive. That way, its eventual materialization is a delightful surprise. This trick also works beautifully with birthday parties and paychecks. Not so well with deadlines.

No one else so much as mentioned the APA-group-portrait-at-Boskone idea, so I suppose it's a dead issue. Guess they're all camera-shy. Ah, well, at least we got to glom your fetching likeness with the telescope. This was taken last week, right?

### **To Nomi Burstein**

I like your idea about "this month's featured punctuation mark." But it could be a bad precedent as you get beyond the comma, deeper into the list. Imagine having dieresis for an entire month.

### **To Paul Giguere**

Glad to promote in my APA:NESFA Devniad the John M. Ford book you edited.

What do I intend to charge you for such advertising? Let's be professional and figure a cost-per-1000-reader-impressions tariff rate.

On that basis, adding up APA:NESFA's circulation . . . plus my electronic distribution . . . plus taxes, setup charges, business lunches, movie product placement fees, dealer prep, ullage topoffs, overages, sundries . . .

I owe you 20 cents.

### To Jim Mann

I agree that *Mars Attacks* was, disappointingly, a so-so Tim Burton movie. And that *Batman* was a good Tim Burton movie. But you don't even mention what I feel was a great Tim Burton movie, *Edward Scissorhands*. In fact, I think it's a great movie by anyone's standards. What say you all?

Jim, you make Terry Dowling's *Wormwood* sound quite appetizing. Must try to pick it up at Pandemonium, or Boskone.

### To Mark Olson

Boy, your reviews this month are certainly piling on books that I've GOT to add to my reading list.

*City of Fire* sounds superb, although seems I must go back and read *Metropolitan* first. Oh well, been meaning to get to that for a few years anyway.

On C. S. Forester's *The Gun* — I can't believe it! Thought I'd scampered the length of Forester's great fiction, from all the Hornblowers through *Sink the Bismark!* and *The Good Shepherd*, by the time I was twelve years old. Yet somehow I missed this one. Which means I'll now have the pleasure of reading it for the first time. Oh thank you Mark, thank you, he sobbed brokenly, tears of gratitude and joy streaming down his cheeks.

Enjoyed your disquisition on "historical religions," which depend on historical events' having actually happened. Not sure how rigorously we must apply that definition, though. OK, as you say, without the Resurrection, Christianity's a fake. And I'd say that, say, without Joseph Smith's having actually laid hands on those golden plates, Mormonism would have a lot of explaining to do. But name me a religion that isn't "historical" in some sense. Don't they all have at least a few creation myths to hang their hats upon?

Hey, I thought of an interesting exception that may prove the rule. The credibility of the Jehovah's Witnesses fundamentally depends on real events THAT HAVEN'T HAPPENED YET: Armageddon, the rapture, and so on. In an analogy to grammar, their belief structure would be not anaphoric but cataphoric — depending on something that comes not before, but after.

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