

# The Devniad, Book 23

Bob Devney  
25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760  
508-699-7885 bobdevney@aol.com  
APA:NESFA #321 February 1997

## **Orbita Dicta Heard in the halls of Boskone, February 1997**

***Author's Certificate of Authenticity:  
Everybody quoted here said something  
like this. Kinda. You know, more or less.***

*[NESFAn Leslie Turek, once legendary as a fanac fanatic, justifies lazing about playing Magic all the livelong day now]*

There's a slogan of mine that a friend wants to put on a button: I EARNED MY SECOND CHILDHOOD.

*[Guest of Honor John M. Ford introduces his Ask Dr. Mike symposium]*

This is supposed to be a multidisciplinary study. So those of you who are not multidisciplinary can just go to the bar immediately.

*[Dr. Mike lays down the law]*

You came here with a brain full of mush . . . and you shall leave with the mush evenly distributed.

*[Dr. Mike realizes that astronauts aren't the only ones getting ancient]*

We must be evolving. The Velikovsky jokes are no longer getting a rise.

*[Dr. Mike answers this reporter's question, "Did O.J. do it?"]*

With Stolychnaya and Galliano floating on top, it certainly does it for me.

*[Dr. Mike on whether Cheese Whiz is really cheese]*

Let's start with whiz. We're all familiar with Budweiser or Sam Adams, the precursor chemicals . . .

*[On politics]*

Obviously, Strom Thurmond's brain is so dense that it has slowed the passage of time to the rest of his body.

*[On belt tightening]*

Some say the super civilization in the asteroid belt was trying to build a Dyson Sphere, but their funding ran out.

*[On the best way to solve ANY of life's little problems]*

Look in the back of the book.

*[Adorning a hallway in his best biker/killer coat, SF reviewer Ernest Lilley recalls a recent fashion disaster]*

At Arisia, everyone was wearing more leather than me.

*[Fanzine editor Ed Meskys has bad news and good news]*

It's been 3 years since I put out an issue of *Niekas*. So to make up for it, I've got two issues close to ready.

*[During the Trivia Bowl, Moderator Mark Olson disses one of the questions I submitted beforehand]*

Oh, this one is really terrible. I shouldn't even — all right, here goes. In the category of author's name sound-alike answers, this is "What the fishermen did to the fish." I can't believe I'm doing this. OK, anybody? Anybody? The answer is "Haldeman." I know, I know. Sorry.

*[Moderator Tom Whitmore takes unfair advantage in introducing the "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?" game show]*

Because this is improvisation, only I get a script.

*[NESFAn Chip Hitchcock glimpses a new Ford on the drawing board]*

We've seen the first sixth of a new fantasy Ford is working on, *Aspects*. And if he keeps on going with it the way it is, I think he'll be up for another World Fantasy Award.

*[My brother Michael Devney, when I sneezily announce Saturday morning that I may be catching the terrible cold that is already ruining his weekend]*

Shoot yourself now.

*[In the panel Non-SF Films That Fans Like, NESFAn Claire Anderson lets us glimpse a schedule only possible with insane dedication and/or time dilation]*

I saw 2.5 films per week last year, one-third of which were subtitled. And some of the subtitles weren't in English.

*[Mark Leeper says go east, young film fan]*

Half the films made in the world are these Hindi neighborhood movies. The Hindi isn't really a drawback, since the melodrama is so clear anyway. So go see films from India.

*[Connie Hirsch tries to narrow it down a little]*

The musicals?

*[Mark won't let her]*

They're ALL musicals.

*[Film critic Daniel Kimmel brings news from the front far, far away]*

*Star Wars* passed *ET* this week at the box office . . . I understand Spielberg

sent Lucas a card with R2D2 accepting a crown.

*[Kimmel talks kids' stuff]*

As far as how old kids must be to see a certain movie, I use the Flying Monkey Test. If your kids were frightened by the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, they might not be ready for *Jumanji*.

*[Connie Hirsch says no wonder Rodriguez was a tad desperado]*

I saw a book on the net about how Robert Rodriguez made *The Mariachi* for \$7,000 as far as the basic shooting goes. The book is called *Rebel Without A Crew*.

*[And she reveals two of her secret cinema passions]*

Two films no one I've recommended them to has EVER not liked:

*I Know Where I'm Going*, a 1946 film by Michael Powell, who made *Red Shoes*. About a woman who goes to Scotland to get married. Kind of like *Local Hero*, if you liked that one. Of course, she has no idea where she's going really.

*Get Crazy*, also called *Flip Out*, by the same guy who directed *Rock and Roll High School*. It parodies Dylan and Mick Jagger and so on, with Malcolm McDowell as more or less Mick.

*[Offering help in Building an Alien Language, David Alexander Smith points out a sad truth about that mother, Nature]*

If your aliens are squishy-crunchy, they're going to be prey for *something*.

*[Joe Mayhew starts the Reviewing As Hazardous Duty panel with a comparison not overly flattering to either party]*

Don D'Amassa has been reviewing SF since God had acne.

*[Here's why Mayhew is widely regarded as a mensch]*

I see myself as a yenta. As a reviewer, I put people together with books they might like.

*[For some, the glass is always empty and spilling onto their favorite silk tie, as D'Ammassa has learned]*

I've actually had more adverse reaction to good reviews than bad ones. They think the good ones weren't good enough.

*[D'Ammassa insists on more than just the facts, ma'am]*

I've actually had a writer write to me that my opinions had no place in my reviews.

*[Tom Easton of Analog on his 6-month lead-time]*

If the author or publisher sends me the book on disk, at the start of production, the review appears in good order. If they wait to send galleys, the review will hit a month or two after the book's in the store. If they wait until they can send me an actual book, by the time it's reviewed it will already be way out of the bookstore and forgotten.

*[Easton reveals why his magazine is the Heavy Metal of the science fiction world]*

*Analog* has readers with rivets. Engineers and so forth.

*[Besides dark eyes to die for, Janice Eisen has a kind and good heart]*

When I was reviewing for *Aboriginal SF*, I made a particular effort to pick books by new authors.

*[In the interests of gender parity, let it be recorded that Joe Mayhew also has kind of a*

*cute twinkle in his eyes as he adds this tip for a kinder, gentler reviewing style]*

Anything you write, read it aloud as if you were saying it to a sick friend.

*[In the audience, fan Jeff Wendler isn't feeling particularly kind today]*

The SF reviewer for the *New York Times*, Gerald Jonas, is really artsy-fartsy. I make an effort to avoid a book if he really likes it.

*[We're shocked, shocked that Eisen would even hint at something like this]*

I've seen reviews of the Shatner books that say, "in a style very reminiscent of Ron Goulart." Which gives you a big clue to the real authorship.

*[Joe Mayhew makes an assumption here that I'd avoid like the plague]*

One of the best ways to escape clichés is to quote the writer's own words.

*[In the panel on Where Have All the Fanzines Gone?, Jerry Kaufman reminds us it's always been an underground activity — and economy]*

Fanzine fandom is a gift economy. You trade by giving your fanzines, and the responses — letters and so on — are the gifts you get back.

*[Britfan Rob Hansen, attending the con-within-the-con FanHistoricon 6 as guest of the First FanHistoricon Fan Fund, names the top zines]*

BLAT, although infrequent, is probably the best fanzine around. Then there's *Plotka*, which is a little hard to find but well worth it. And then of course there's *Wacked Bananawings*, which is rather a complicated story.

*[My notes seem to have the name of the zine that British/Australian fan Cheryl Morgan mentions as given below, but it could equally well be Flashbus, or even Flushbull, and I'm really not so sure about Mindzine, maybe it's all a conflation with some other zine, so you'd better swim over and ask Terry for a copy personally — and doesn't this kind of confusion only add to Orbita Dicta's raggedly loony charm?]*

The best fanzine coming out of Australia right now is from Terry Frost, *Mindzine Flashback*. Apart from my own *Emerald City*, of course. *Anzapa* and *Ethel the Aardvark* are also excellent.

In any case, we want you all to read a few of these. We're very keen to improve international awareness for the run-up to the Aussie worldcon in 1999.

*[It is a truth universally acknowledged that many wonderful science fiction fanzine articles have nothing whatever to do with science fiction, as Hansen reaffirms]*

Andy Hooper did a piece in *Apparatchik* recently. All it was about was going for a walk. It was brilliant.

*[Once the talk turns to Web-based fanzines, the air grows thick with tech talk until Hansen calls a halt]*

I foresee endless discussions about all this, HTML and so on. It's becoming the modern fanzine fan equivalent of "Where do you get your paper?"

*[Introducing himself for the Long Live the Legion! panel, Don Sakers explodes once and for all the myth of comic-book-reading grownups as pathetic losers who overcompensate for the empty impotence of their joyless existence by overcompensatory fixation on flashy, over-inked, two-dimensional soi-disant "superheroes" — you know, just like SF-reading grownups]*

My super name is Get A Life Boy, and my power is super cataloging.

*[Hugo-nominated writer and serious Legion of Superheroes fan Michael Burstein relishes the cascading subreferential nature of certain comic book dialog]*

I love moments such as when they ask him, "Why are you called Brainiac 5?" And he says, "Because Darkside 2 is taken."

*[Brother Rob Hansen explains it all for you]*

We should say that they rebooted Superman so that he'd never been Superboy, but that gave them problems because Superboy had been involved in the creation of the Legion . . . So they created a pocket universe.

*[Writer and comics fan Brenda Clough peeks behind the curtain]*

So what you're saying is that the problem is not that the characters age, but that the writing team changes at DC headquarters.

*[Don Sakers has a modest proposal]*

We've talked about getting up enough money at cons to BUY the Legion of Super-Heroes . . .

*[Priscilla Olson takes a long-term view]*

. . . And then NESFA Press can keep it going forever!

*[For the Build Your Own Religion panel, Esther Friesner gets right to the fun stuff]*

Sin. Now, one of the worst sins in medieval religion was the sin of accidie, which is the sin of "eh, whatever . . ."

*[Elise Matthesen suspects that when it comes to the Method, we're acting]*

I think the amount of knowledge that most people have about the Scientific Method amounts to taking it on faith.

*[Josepha Sherman unloos one of SF's best-kept secrets]*

Someone asked Isaac Asimov once why he didn't have any Jewish characters in his books. He stopped, looked around, leaned in close and whispered, "They all are."

*[An audience member reminds us that sometimes, pace Marx, religion is the PCP of the people]*

Yesterday was the tenth anniversary of the Iranians' Islamic death sentence on Salman Rushdie.

*[Of course, movies and TV too often play religion just for stereotypes, as this attendee observes]*

Far too often, if we see people who are Muslims they're planting a bomb . . .

*[Matthesen helps defuse this myth]*

. . . and THAT'S considered observant.

*[NESFA's Paul Giguere answering congratulations on his editing job for John M. Ford's official Boskone book, From the End of the Twentieth Century, available NOW from NESFA Press]*

I'm SO glad it's over.

*[At the Good Things on the Web panel, Daniel Dern feels out the audience]*

Is there anyone here who doesn't regularly spend hours and hours on the Internet? . . .

*[Thinking of the access nightmares of my past few months with America On Hold, this reporter can't resist]*

. . . Me. See, I've got AOL.

*[Dern draws us all in]*

The Internet is kind of like a con in hypertext.

*[James D. Macdonald sounds a cautionary note]*

Remember, the DWIM switch has not yet been implemented. Do What I Meant.

*[Steve Sawicki sounds it again]*

How you get started with all this Web stuff is you just pick 8 or 9 weekends.

*[Dern joins the dismal chorus]*

If you have too much time — which as fans you don't — the Web is the solution.

*[From the audience, Hiawatha Bray, unmasked as the Boston Globe's excellent computer affairs columnist, dissolves a few more strands]*

The dirty little secret is, the more time I spend on the Internet, the less I spend on the Web.

*[But for some reason, Sawicki still seems drawn to the romance of the whole damned thing, in a Clive-Barkerish sort of way]*

One of the major arguments against legal monkeying with the Net is that the Net was born of Chaos and Chaos it shall remain.

*[At the banquet, as the Guest of Honor is announced, in a move to stir audience enthusiasm my brother Michael begins a boisterous chant that is immediately taken up by the entire assembly or at least me]*  
FORD! FORD! FORD!

*[After the Amazing Chanting Devneys keep it up for several speakers and Con Chair Davey Snyder feels obliged to announce from the podium that we're essentially harmless, our sister Darcy loyally rallies round the clan standard]*

I'm taking my name badge off now.

*[Hugo-nominated author and friend of the family Michael Burstein, loyally pretending to be the only one in the hall who thought we shut up too soon]*

How come you guys weren't chanting BURstein BURstein BURstein when I got up to talk?

*[Burstein's reaction when I print the above quote in the con newsletter out of context]*

You're a dead man, Devney.

*[Upon receiving the news that he'd become the first in history to win NESFA's Skylark Award for nice-guyism twice, Hal Clement's modest comments amount to about this]*

Thank you.

*[At our banquet table, Featured Filk Performer Tom Smith recalls a super moment]*

I'd written a song based on Larry Niven's Superman satire, "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex." And it got picked up, with other filkers singing it here and there at various cons, you know. So there comes a con when Larry Niven was a guest, and I go up to him in fear and trembling — and he smiles and opens his mouth, and Larry Niven starts singing MY song! I couldn't believe it! So

later I made him come up on stage and we did it as a duet.

*[After presentation of his "Another Part of the Trilogy" revue by a cast armed with vast enthusiasm and the usual 45 minutes' rehearsal, John "Busby Berkeley" Ford muses]*

It all seemed so simple on paper.

*[At the Tor party, when Ellen Kushner mentions that the title of her upcoming original anthology is The Horns of Elfland, this reporter vaguely recalls it's from a poem, isn't it?]*

"The Splendor Falls." Tennyson. Want me to recite the whole thing?

*[Kenneth Knabbe working the Noreascon 4 bid party]*

Everyone is so convinced we've got a lock on Boston in 2001 that we're afraid no one will actually vote for it.

*[NESFAn Mark Olson misses the good ol' ghetto]*

Science fiction is mainstream now, and that's too bad. Now where will all the misfits go?

*[Hypercaustic critic Greg Feeley softens up on at least one topic]*

My daughter's only 3 years old, but she's already the complete fan party animal. She walks in the door and says, "Where's the Green Room? I'm hungry."

*[With work, NESFA work, Boskone work, work on almost every other convention from here to Melbourne, and work on developing a training course on-line, Mark Hertel finds himself temporally challenged]*

I wish somebody would let you buy time in your life with money. "Here's some cash, now give me a couple extra hours today." But I haven't found any

takers . . . OK, nice talking, got to run back to the Art Show now.

*[While putting in a fairly stressful schedule herself, Mark's wife — new Proper Boskonian editor Lisa Hertel — still finds ways to relax]*

I always take strange men to parties.

*[At perhaps her first Boskone, strictly fantasy fan Jovonna Van Pelt encounters a brand-new talent]*

The best moment of the whole con had to be the poetry session, when I heard this wonderful poem — about an opal — from a poet I don't know. Do you know his work? His name is Joe Haldeman.

*[Michael F. Flynn outlines some writers' outline phobia for the Craft of Writing panel]*

As one writer said, "Everybody does outlines. But some people call them first drafts."

*[Flynn will use any trick in the book]*

I sat down in a hotel room in Philadelphia once and interviewed my character. Now 80% of what she said didn't end up in the book. But 100% ended up influencing what she DID in the book.

*[John M. Ford imagines Flynn's initial question]*

"Is this your first time as a protagonist?"

*[Rosemary Edghill may make some therapist rich if she keeps on like this]*

The worst thing is when you start SHOPPING for them. "Oh, that's wrong for me but it would look lovely on my character."

*[Bruce Coville wants us to be generalists]*

If you want to write science fiction, the worst thing to do is to read only science fiction.

*[Flynn chimes in]*

. . . Yes, you should read a little fantasy as well.

*[Ford on the joys of research]*

History, you'll find, is NOT "the lie agreed upon." It's the lie not agreed upon.

*[Flynn be jammin now]*

Beware the verb "to be," in all its forms. Don't say, "It was cold." Say, "The flames in the campfire froze, and we had to take them into the bunkhouse to warm them up."

And description. John Dunning, a master thriller writer, said the secret of description is to describe the thumb so well that the reader believes he's seen the hand.

*[Got to be sure to put in what Coville said here]*

It was Elmore Leonard who said, "I always try to leave out the parts people aren't going to read."

*[Speaking of "tags," the little verbs that writers put after dialog as variations on "he said," Ford ejaculated thusly]*

The all-time best tag has to be Stephen Leacock's "'Shut up,' the policeman explained."

*[On the next Craft of Reading panel, one participant explains why he can't shut up]*

I'm Jerry Kaufman, and I'm on this panel because I'm a special guest and they had to get their money's worth.

*[Don D'Ammassa, who at 500 books a year probably read 2 while you were skimming this article looking for your own name, singles out just one he's consumed lately]*

The genre book that most impressed me last year was Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*. But I'd only recommend it to 10% of SF fans.

*[NESFAn Jim Mann can't account for taste]*

I'm amazed at the people in the movie line who ask people coming out, "Was it good?" They don't know my taste; I don't know theirs.

*[And all these different tastes are why there's a limit to cross-genre projects, suggests Greg Feeley]*

People like ketchup, they like ice cream. They don't necessarily like ketchup on their ice cream.

*[During a discussion of how the singular work of Poe and Conan Doyle devolved into broader, less groundbreaking stuff such as the works of Agatha Christie, some sensitive soul in the audience — OK, it was me — offers this appetizing thought]*

Is a genre, then, maggots feeding on the corpse of genius?

*[Speaking of making you sick, how about book prices — which are even higher elsewhere, according to this audience member from Scandinavia]*

In Sweden, a new book is the equivalent of \$10-\$15. Paperback.

*[Jerry Kaufman reveals his reading score, then proclaims himself a sufferer of what I'd*

*thought of as purely The Bob Devney Disease]*

I read maybe 50-75 books a year, tops. I buy a lot faster than I read.

*[Writer Darrell Schweitzer refines his already impressive extortion technique]*

You know, it's possible to hijack one of these elevators. I've seen it done . . . Now let me sell you a book.

*[In the hallway, jan howard finder (aka Wombat) stoppeth one of three to plug Albacon '97, running this October]*

Come to Schenectady. We give good con.

*[The Wise Women panel has the singularly eponymous Jane Yolen examining our preconceptions about old wives' tales]*

If the old people are the ones telling all these stories, why aren't they kinder to the old people IN the stories?

*[So Jane evens the score]*

There is a story about the worth of the elders that is told in many cultures.

At meals, the old man keeps dropping and breaking his plate. So his grown son takes it away, and gives him a poor half-bowl made of wood. The old man eats from that until the day he dies.

And then the boy takes the wooden bowl, and his father says, "What do you want with that thing?"

And the boy says, "I'm saving it until YOU are an old man."

*[If I hear one more strong opinion from author Delia Sherman I just can't be responsible for what I'll say]*

You can only express a certain number of strong opinions until people start calling you a bitch.



*[Elise Matthesen hears a different drummer]*

I think the kind of Wise Woman I want to be is the one who lifts her skirts and goes dancing in front of the gods.

*[Fan E. J. McClure, chief engineer of the U.S. Navy's newest missile destroyer, on what she brought away from the Wise Women panel]*

Hopefully, some wisdom. I'm going to need every ounce of it when my command tour comes up.

*[At some panel or other, I forget, so sue me: Faye Ringel is talking about the crunch on the bookstore shelves, remarking that it seems bad novels drive out good — which fan Mark Dulcey promptly dubs] Grisham's Law.*

*[Seems that in 1997, Joe Haldeman's fans will get an extra heaping helping from the normally quality-not-quantity author's plate]*

I've got five books coming out this year, counting everything. Including even a collection of the poetry, called *Saul's Death*.

*[Fantasy fan and world's best brother-in-law Bob Kuhn proves that rather than do your homework, you should just fake it like me]*

Here I go to all the trouble of reading Katya Reimann's *Wind from a Foreign Sky* the week before the con, and when I arrive they cancel her reading. She got off easy. I had some QUESTIONS for her.

*[Classic Literature and Its Influence on SF may not be a panel for younger fans, according to Faye Ringel]*

I teach English As A Second Language to native speakers — also known as freshmen.

*[Unless they possess strong study skills, according to Don D'Ammassa]*

The mystery writer Robert Parker claims he passed his Ph.D. exams at Northeastern University by spending 2 weeks cramming the table of contents and footnotes of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

*[Tor editor Teresa Nielsen Hayden avers that informed opinion about what's a classic is not exactly steady-state]*

It's like the stock exchange. Writers fluctuate wildly up and down, like Lawrence.

*[Author Greer Gilman is bullish on a particular blueblood blue chip]*

. . . but Henry James is always a good investment.

*[Nielsen Hayden isn't buying]*

Henry James wasn't exactly a big influence on SF writers. I take it back. Henry James was a big influence on Gregory Feeley.

*[Debra Doyle looks to the east]*

Everybody claims Chekhov as an influence.

*[But Don D'Ammassa treks far afield]*

I prefer Sulu.

*[D'Ammassa then get more serious]*

I've recently read through the early works of Andre Norton. The character of her heroes, the long journeys with nothing much happening but the trip itself — I'd bet money she was reading James Fenimore Cooper.

[Speaking of horror, Faye Ringel looks way back to a certain sermon from 1741]

Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God" is the foundation of all American horror.

[Nielsen Hayden concurs]

Yes, the idea that you are a spider held in the hand of God over a fire. Why has he not opened his hand? Whim . . . The abyss could open at any time.

[Greer Gilman thinks somebody — well, everybody — hasn't been doing their research]

*The Golden Bough* and *The White Goddess* are what everyone bases their idea of historical paganism upon. And they're both works of fantasy.

[Someone starts quoting from "The Second Coming," and soon the entire panel has caught the Yeats infection, chanting in unison]

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity."

[And Faye Ringel gets a huge laugh with this quick follow-up]

He was talking about fandom.

[Bob Kuhn, beginning a message on my answering machine 2 days after the con, in a croak which demonstrates that he, like me, has caught that miserable cold from my brother, Typhoid Michael]

You hold him down and I'll kill him.

*Richard, Mother, The Whole Wide World, Fierce Creatures, Dante's Peak, Stars Wars (again), Rosewood, Shine.*

Let's invent a new category to consider for awards, or just to help us think about certain films.

Call it, however absurdly, the nonfiction science fiction movie. It would be a film with SF elements or interest that is nevertheless factual in content. Last year's example: *Apollo 13*.

This time, let's consider *The Whole Wide World*.

This independent film is based on a memoir by retired schoolteacher Novalyne Price Ellis. Published in 1988 when the author was 76 years old, it's the story of her romance in the mid-1930s with a young man in a small Texas town, Cross Plains.

The title derives from that young man's self-description as "the greatest pulp writer in the whole wide world." He was Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian, Red Sonja, and other heroic fantasy icons.

This movie about one episode in his life strikes me, on a small scale and wholly on its own terms, as a perfect little gem of film-making and an American original.

As brilliantly embodied by Vincent D'Onofrio, Bob Howard is big-boned, not unhandsome, soft-spoken, endearing in a bumbling kind of way. He's introduced to an attractive young schoolteacher (Renee Zellweger as Novalyne Price). Feisty, determined Price draws a bead on him under her flapper hat with a shrewd cowgirl squint, and keeps smiling at Howard with the prettiest mouth east of Abilene. Their first meeting goes well.

But she finds it vexingly hard to arrange a second. Howard's mother is the smothering type, stonewalling all his

## FlimFan

Movies seen since last issue:  
*Everybody Says I Love You, Looking for*

phone calls. (Except one about some other writer named Lovecraft.)

Novalyne persists. Pretty soon Bob is back, swinging his big arms around, talking louder now. Taking her for long rides at night out into the country in his convertible. He quotes poetry. Tells her about writing. Gives her daring French novels.

No less than he, she seems a little bigger than the small-town milieu in which we find her. They both keep doing the best thing a movie character can do: surprising you.

In one café tryst, he's scornful about the realism of a women's-magazine story she's trying to write. Hurt, she lashes back. "Well, I haven't seen any barbarian swordsmen, or beautiful Amazon women, or giant snakes frolicking around the streets of Cross Plains lately!"

Howard gives us the key to his character with one reply in his soft Texas voice.

"Well, I have . . .

"You better look a little closer next time."

They quarrel, make up, quarrel. Time passes. He's got his writing and his mother; both consume him. Things do not end well.

Perhaps I'm just starved for a film about a writer, and one in our genre at that. Or simply gaga over Zellweger, a really attractive, fresh, direct presence (this is her first film; she stole *Jerry Maguire* from Tom Cruise for her second). But this movie succeeds on all sorts of levels: as an unusual study of a real relationship . . . a fascinating character sketch . . . an authentic period piece . . . and a portrait of the artist(s).

For instance, it's famously difficult to show a writer *writing* and make it interesting. The filmmakers do so beautifully here.

Howard sometimes composed his stories aloud. So we see him at twilight in his room, bellowing out lines of purple magnificence, hunched over the keyboard in a summoning trance. And they orchestrate these scenes with terrific Conan music. Deep, restless chords rise and fall ominously, fraught with dark power.

The moviemakers also take care to show Howard in his place. There's an unforgettable scene where we witness the lovers' most passionate kiss. It's set in a specifically Texan landscape of rugged bluffs and wild woods, rough ridges and shining river waters. From Howard's viewpoint as he gazes across the land, we see the pioneer promise of the frontier years in this country — overlain with his Hyborian Age of blood and magic.

With a look, we know that in Robert Howard's eyes these times are one.

I said "lovers" above; not strictly accurate, perhaps. Remember, these were nice young unmarried people in a more restrained age. But is there sexual tension or romantic tenderness here? Certainly. On the river bluff. In the look on Novalyne's face. At the typewriter keyboard. And in a mostly silent scene where Howard washes the body of his adored, dying mother.

I knew something about Howard's own end going in — one dimly remembered sentence of fact, perhaps. The movie puts a much different feeling behind that reality, without altering its dark essentials.

That's one of its chief fascinations, of course. *The Whole Wide World* is a true story.

Again, you could also make the case that it's a science fiction movie, or at least a fantasy. There are genuinely a few moments when you are shown one thing — and you see something else.

Shown a Texas river valley . . . and see Cimmeria. Shown an overgrown farmboy shouting at his typewriter . . . and see the soul of the artist, wrestling in joy and torment with his barbaric craft.

I know I may lose most of my audience with what I must say next. But as Howard proclaimed, “the road I walk, I walk alone.”

Grant that this IS a science fiction movie. Then if you’re really trying to pick SF’s best dramatic presentation of 1996, *Babylon 5* isn’t even in the same solar system with the eccentric little planet that is *The Whole Wide World*.

## **Backchat**

**on APA:NESFA #320, January 1997**

### **To Joe Ross**

Found your report on Hebonics, the special language of American Jews, to be as amusing as I’m allowed to admit considering I’m not of Jewish heritage. (Laughed wildly at “He walks slowly” = “Like a fly in the ointment he walks.”) I did live in Brookline as a boy, does that get me extra credit?

I’m thinking about inventing Harponics, the special language of Irish Americans, but despite my ancestral skill with blarney have got no further than “He walks slowly” = “He hardly shifts his great ass along at all, the lazy layabout that he is” which is mere slander without brevity or wit. I’ll have to drink on it.

### **To Anna Hillier**

Great to finally meet you at Boskone! Just like your picture; I’d have known you anywhere as long as you carried a telescope.

You know, I heard 1997 mentioned as HAL 9000’s operational date a few

months back, with announcement of a January “birthday” party at MIT. But along about December I caught some of the movie (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) on TV. Would swear that in that actual patch of dialog, he gives an earlier year. Can’t remember now; maybe it was 1992. What gives? Anyone?

### **To Ray Bowie**

Hope your kidney stone operation went well. Did you ever read Samuel Pepys’ *Diary* from the 1660s? He noted similar attacks several times, and kept observance of the date he was finally made free of “the Stone.” Seems to me he carried it around with him. The whole *Diary* is really great, entertaining reading. Pepys was a high government bureaucrat (First Secretary of the Royal Navy), reported on the Great Plague and the Fire of London — and was very frank, honest, and revealing in what he thought no one else would ever read. One of my favorite things he said: “Women and music I cannot but give way for, whatever my business is.”

### **To Nomi Burstein**

Thanks for the remarks on Arisia. I wasn’t able to go this year, so your report nicely performed its proper function of making me long miserably for all the great stuff I missed.

But one thing — you consider panels scheduled after 6:00 p.m. to be “late-night”? When do you go to bed, sundown? Look out, people, she’s some kinda negative vampire . . .

### **To Mark Olson**

Dug out *Faces of Fantasy* again to see if, per your remark, Robert Jordan looked like someone one could loathe. See what you mean. And of course I automatically hate people who have made millions writing SF or fantasy

novels while I've not yet got around to doing so.

Rummaged around at Boskone for that Tom Godwin novel you liked, *The Survivors*. But didn't think it would be easy to find a 1958 Gnome Press hardcover, and so it proved. I'll put it on my mental Lifelong Quest list.

Re your note to Paul Giguere, the Orbita Dicta quotes earlier here show that, besides Paul, your reviewing rival Don D'Amassa also recommended Christopher Priest's *The Prestige*. To the extent of calling it last year's most impressive novel. Just got it out of the library. Once this APA and 1,000 hours of *Proper Boskonian* work are out of the way, I may be able to read it and tell you whether I think they're both nuts.

#### **To Michael Burstein**

Just read Michael Flynn's *Firestar*, which you and many others have mentioned deserves a Hugo nomination. Sounds like it may be the odds-on favorite for the final award, if I read the signs aright.

Afraid I disagree.

*Firestar* is about an important and longed-for subject — a near-future renewal of the space program — and it has lots of fun stuff in it. A good story. In fact, a good book overall. Glad you steered me to it.

But too many of the main characters — rich industrialist lady, hot-shot pilots, hard-nosed executives — seem taken from bestsellerdom central casting. The rich lady's teacher husband never makes much sense to me at all. There isn't enough face time with the pilots and the actual space flights themselves, and what there is never seems to light my fire. The villains are pathetic, and the slams at the government are stale libertarianism. (Justified slams, maybe, but I've heard them before.)

Now the kids, students in the special schools being prepped all unknowing for a spaceflight fan future, were freshly done and exciting to read about. I'd have loved to hear even more about them. And about those schools, and how Flynn thinks they would really run.

I think Barnes' *One for the Morning Glory*, or Gould's *Wildside*, or Banks' *Excession* were last year's excellent books. For me, *Firestar* belongs in the rank just below the top.

And as far as my getting more fanwriting exposure, thanks again for the kind words, Michael. It's not that I'm unappreciative of my friends' advice, just shy. And busy. OK, and lazy.

I AM e-mailing this *Devniad* to a few more people every time, besides the paper distribution in the APA. At Boskone, Ernest Lilley actually introduced me to someone as "Bob Devney, who writes a good e-zine." I'm looking more at expanding that, seeing other e-zines, etc. Given that I'm closed out of SFWA threads, etc., what other parts of the net should I jump into?

#### **To Tony Lewis**

Upsetting to hear your rumor that *Analog* and *Asimov's* will shortly switch from paintings to strictly computer-generated cover art. That's just what we need in this world, less art and craftsmanship created by hand in traditional materials. Good Ludd!

Granted my reply here will churn through the bowels of a laser printer, a photocopier, and two dark satanic computer mills on its way to your house. But that's different, isn't it? With words, the physical presentation is a tad more peripheral to the impact. Or, frankly, most fanzines couldn't exist.

You're right to add John Barnes' *One for the Morning Glory* to your Hugo shortlist. Absolutely first-rate

postmodern fantasy. And with plenty of yummy ironic recursiveness too!

**To Lisa Hertel**

You guys go to one science fiction convention per month? PER MONTH???? Conventions you actually WORK on, too. Where do you find time to, say, maintain normal osmotic processes in your cell walls or even watch *Babylon 5*?

Lisa, have I mentioned how much I like your writing? You're one of those NESFA people who seem to listen and work more than they talk around the clubhouse. But here you have these nicely crafted sentences of some length, with force and scope of argument and pellucid exposition. Do continue.

On Walter Jon Williams' *City on Fire*, see my note below to Elisabeth Carey.

He replied he did have a sequel in mind, but would do another singleton book or two first. Because if he went straight to a third book in this series, he'd probably kill off all the characters in the first chapter, since he was so sick of thinking about them right now.

**To Paul Giguere**

*Holy Fire* by Bruce Sterling sounds great. Since I just had another birthday (it's February 26, day before the national holiday, parades, fireworks, etc. on Burstein's Birthday), gerontocracy looks better to me all the time.

Paul, more congrats on the Ford book you edited. Came out great. Next, I assume you're tackling, say, a special NESFA hundred-volume set of selected Perry Rhodan stories.

**To Elisabeth Carey**

Your cat photo came out fairly well. Was this one named Galliano, Ouzo, or Arrack? And given this great new capability, can little magazine-style color photos of each APA author next to his or her masthead be far behind?

About a possible sequel to *City on Fire*. On an SF interview site Martha Soukup helps run on the Web, someone asked Walter Jon Williams about that.