

The Devniad, Book 25

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The View from the Bubble.

Henry David Thoreau, who lived in the woods for a while and gave things some serious thought, said “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

The tendency is to believe he was speaking of inner turmoil. But I think Hank had seen enough of life even around Concord, Massachusetts, to also mean desperate physical circumstances. Poverty, sickness, hunger, crime.

You know, the stupid, apparently completely unnecessary stuff that makes you scared and angry to think of it. The Horseshit of the Apocalypse.

I caught my nearest up-close-and-personal glimpse of poverty when I was young. My parents separated, divorced, and our little family fell down through the strands of the social safety net for a while before getting stuck partway. Now that I’m spending my middle years in the middle class (though one never knows, do one?), I can usually keep some sort of safe psychological distance from those depths.

But my friend Alison Paddock just sent me this paragraph, reminding me just how deep — and wide, and close — they are:

Regarding the Real Global Village

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of 100 people, with the relative size of human groups remaining the same, there would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 people from the Americas (North and South), and eight Africans. Seventy would be non-white, 30 white. Seventy would be non-Christian, 30 Christian. Fifty per cent of the world's wealth would be in the hands of six people. All six would be citizens of the United States. Seventy people would be unable to

read. Fifty would suffer from malnutrition. Eighty would live in sub-standard housing. Only one would have a college education.

— Simon Fraser Public
Interest Research Group

Interesting on several levels. But I focused on the last half, and started thinking about poor folks. Including myself, briefly, and perhaps again some time.

There’s a quote I may have mentioned before. It goes straight to the truth of that last half. It’s a line from Rod MacDonald’s folksong “American Jerusalem,” which is about homeless people in New York City:

“Somebody must have got double /
Cause I got none.”

My next thought was to send it to my nephew Jarrod Ferrara. He’s taking his junior year of college in Madrid. Like old Hank, he likes to give things some serious thought. And he’s the right age for it.

Here’s the gist of what I said to Jarrod, in my best Late Pompous Avuncular style:

I think we all won the lottery already.

(By “we” I mean everybody reading this plus a few million of our friends.)

We’re living in a little bubble, floating above the great river of time. An iridescent little pop-teaser of affluence, technology, literacy, political freedom, putative gender and racial equality, so on.

Almost no one else now living or who has ever lived can imagine how nice life is in the bubble.

And somehow, looking out distortedly through the molecule-thin walls, we fondly imagine that we’re the mainstream.

On the other hand, isn't even our own tiny bubble pretty porous?

For instance: Is a hungry child an outrage to the justice of the universe, or just business as usual? Certainly the global village paragraph suggests the latter for other areas of the world. But at least relative want and desperation are with us even in the West, the breadbasket of the world. Not just in the inner city, either. Even out here in the suburbs, we don't all grow up like a bunch of Bradys.

I keep thinking of these little stories I know from various people's life histories. Yes, it's the pits to be poor in Peshawar or Kisangani or Olongapo. But don't forget that, even in our middle-class bubble, we're not so far above it all ourselves ...

Start with a mild example. My wife Maureen was one of seven children of a postal worker and a housewife in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, where we live today. She says she doesn't remember ever actually going hungry, or having it so bad. After all, they had a decent house (by her teenage years, quite a grand big house), her mother Dot knew how to stretch a pot roast, and her father was always employed.

In fact, overemployed. Spike Devlin worked three jobs through most of his prime to keep food on the table, clothes on the back, smiles on his family's faces. All those most heroic, completely unsung parental accomplishments.

But you'll notice, even today, certain holdovers from a childhood that indicate it couldn't have been all that easy. For instance, watch Maureen and her sisters at any kind of big family get-together involving (as most do) some sort of meal. All the Devlin sisters have a secret fondness for eating standing up ... in the kitchen ... before dinner.

I attribute this to their discovery early in life that with seven kids and a tight budget, you get more if you get it first.

Sometimes a cake will be brought to the table looking like rats have been gnawing around the edges ...

People learn these little strategies to cope.

Strategies ... A New York schoolteacher, Frank McCourt, just won the Pulitzer Prize for his memoir, *Angela's Ashes*. It tells of his dirt-poor boyhood in Limerick, Ireland.

The family lived at the bottom of a lane, a wretched alley, housing twelve families. His family's door faced across the alley to the door of the latrine serving all twelve families. Every raw, drizzly winter, for days or weeks at a time, water would flood the end of the lane, the latrine — and the bottom floor of his family's flat.

So they'd all just up and move to Italy for the winter.

Italy was what they called the room upstairs.

A colleague at the ad agency where I work was telling me only this morning about his father-in-law. The man grew up as one of 17 children of a fisherman on the Massachusetts coast. He remembers they were "poorer than the poor kids."

Once in a great while, his parents would bring cookies into the house. Perhaps they doled one out to each child after dinner as a special treat. In any case, the man says, as you got a little older you realized that your parents would stash the box of cookies, with a few left over, underneath their bed.

So, in one of the riskier and more desperate expeditions of your young life, you'd crawl in there after midnight.

There you'd be, trying not to wake your parents. You'd wriggle silently under the bed like a hungry little snake — and bump heads with the kid there before you.

— OK, I keep having trouble here. Look, my attitude to this material seems to be wavering back and forth.

This stuff should play as pretty grim. But somehow, it keeps taking on this note of amused resilience. Maybe that's a tribute to the toughness of the human spirit.

Or maybe I'd clown at our own funeral.

A graphic designer I once worked with was said to have spent his childhood (in a small town around these parts) exiled to a kind of doghouse in his parents' back yard. Sleeping out there, living on scraps.

He joined the Marines at about 15 to get away. From that back yard, World War II must have looked like a vacation.

His group was cut off behind the lines on some Pacific island hellhole. It may not have been such a stretch for him, the way he was forced to live: sneaking up, knifing some lone Japanese soldier for his food.

Let's not neglect a little autobiography here, either.

In my own dysfunctional family, after my parents separated my mother would still usually cook dinner, grasping at some vestige of a normal home life. This illusion would last only about as long as it took to bring plates to the table, however.

Then each of us four children would snatch our portion and retreat, growling, to our own noisome dens.

I remember only one occasion when we actually went hungry for any extended period.

We were living in an apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts. I was probably about 12 or 13 years old.

The alimony check was several days late. My mother must have been beginning to suffer severe nicotine withdrawal without cigarette money, and I guess hunger was creeping up on the rest of us.

It must have been gradual, though. I don't remember much real discussion. Just that I found myself at one point standing precariously on the kitchen counter, looking

in the highest cupboards which my mother couldn't reach and where, logically enough, we never stored anything.

The great thing was, it worked. I discovered and (doubtless after taking the lion's share) handed around a box of strange-looking crackers abandoned at least a year before by previous tenants. Like big saltines, except even heavier on the cardboard taste than usual.

They were our first matzos.

I've had a soft spot in my heart for Judaism ever since.

Maybe when you're a kid, certain deprivations are even worse than a few hunger pangs. For instance, clothes.

My closet is stuffed to bursting with shirts these days ... Perhaps precisely because, during my sophomore year in high school, I had two shirts I could wear to school every day.

One was short-sleeved, bright yellow, with huge paisley designs splashed all over it like vomited amoebas. It fit my Tubby the Teenager physique like a hot dog casing.

The other was less fashionable.

I stayed out sick quite a bit that year. Maybe it was some virus from the amoebas.

Last one, I promise.

In a great documentary movie of the 1980s called *Powaqqatsi* (or maybe it was its earlier companion piece *Koyaanisqatsi*), frenetic human activity is set to cyclic Philip Glass music. There's one 10-minute scene of hundreds of men dressed in breechcloths hauling huge, tremendously heavy baskets of mud up or down (I forget which, and after a while perhaps they did too) a gigantic hill of mud. Every man is coated with mud from head to foot.

The next time I start whining to you about how miserable my job is, slap me.

FlimFan

Movies seen since last issue: *Sling Blade*, *The Devil's Own*, *Citizen X* (HBO; again), *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Buffalo Bill* (on Showtime), *Liar Liar*, *Inventing the Abbotts*, *Persuasion* (TV, again), *Return of the Jedi*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*.

Reviewed this month (below): *Citizen X*.

X Hits the Spot.

It's like an alternative universe.

Much is familiar: The cop fighting against the system. The sarcastic, unhelpful boss. The terrifyingly debased serial killer. Obstructionists upstairs ... sad corpses in the lab ... suspects in the dirty streets ... savaged bodies in the killing fields.

But everything's even shabbier than usual, most of the cops are wearing military uniforms, and the detective's name is Viktor Burakov.

The scene is Rostov-on-Don, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 1980s. The movie is the true story of the hunt for Russia's most prolific serial killer: *Citizen X*.

It's one of my favorite films of the last 5 years.

Nobody's ever heard of it.

Citizen X was made by writer/director Chris Gerolmo for HBO, and first shown on that cable network in 1995. I saw it then, thought it was brilliant. Talked it up to all who would listen, but could find nobody who'd seen it. HBO has shown it a few times since. It won the Writers Guild of America award in its category for 1995, and has 5 stars in the current Martin/Porter *Video Movie Guide*.

But there's been no real buzz. To my knowledge, it's never been shown in theaters. However, I just caught it again on HBO, and learned it's available on video.

So now, I cannot rest until each of you rents it at least once.

As I intimated above, one major attraction is the setting. Unlike the last thousand police procedurals you've seen, the world of *Citizen X* doesn't look like Burbank, New York, Toronto, or even London or Paris. It was filmed in Hungary. So the look of the last days of the crumbling Soviet empire — spalled buildings, grubby apartments and offices, seedy rural train stations — seems absolutely authentic.

And if you think the *locations* look world-weary, try Stephen Rea's face. Seeing his fine supporting performance as a police spy in *Michael Collins*, I said he had the saddest face in movies. *Citizen X* only confirms that opinion.

Rea's Detective Burakov is a forensics man, a laboratory criminologist, who concludes that several brutal murders are the work of one killer, and is assigned to head the whole investigation because nobody with seniority or sense will touch a case with such a huge potential downside. Indeed, the bodies pile up remorselessly, and obstacles to a solution mount even faster. Rea's long, melancholy countenance fill with deep misery — and an even deeper determination. Burakov, it turns out, never gives up.

Watching Burakov not give up is one of this movie's chief delights. Behind that exhausted face live honesty and passion and untiring dedication.

Which he needs, because the investigation drags on for years. This movie has two villains. One is Andrei Chikatilo, who kills 52 people out of psychosexual rage. The other is the Soviet system, which kills all initiative in its people and becomes partially complicit in these particular slayings through the kind of murderous politico/bureaucratic inertia you may have thought occurred only in *your* office.

Joss Ackland's despicable Party boss Bondarchuk continually denies necessary resources to Burakov. Because "there are no serial killers in the Soviet Union."

Burakov's immediate superior is the wily, supercilious Colonel Fetisov, a master of both irony and political asscovering. It's Donald Sutherland's best role in years. This movie is full of fine, sharp writing, and a lot of the best lines stud the exchanges between Fetisov and Burakov. The colonel knows his detective is right, yet Fetisov will only stick his neck out so far. But as their connection grows, and the sun of perestroika begins to melt obstacles from their path, their dynamic gradually turns into one of the most satisfying variations on the standard buddy-movie relationship you've ever seen.

An extra-cinematic note here: Fetisov and Burakov are real people. (You can see their pictures in Robert Cullen's 1993 true crime book *The Killer Department*, later retitled *Citizen X*, which was the basis for the film.) Can't help wondering if they're still in the Russian police. If so, what with the Mafia overrunning the country and cops going unpaid for months at a time — I wonder if they ever look back with nostalgia on the good old days? Let's hope for their sake and that of international stability that the answer for them and other good men in Russia never becomes yes.

Other great characters? Max von Sydow as the first psychiatrist to consult on a Soviet murder investigation (he writes what turns out to be an uncannily accurate profile of a killer he calls "Citizen X"). Imelda Staunton, who brings a marvelously Russian face and a gift for warm sympathy to a small role as Burakov's wife. John Wood as the hotshot cop from Moscow who couldn't detect his way out of a paper bag.

And Jeffrey DeMunn as Chikatilo, who shows us that the killer is not so much a dragon as a worm — a perpetually humiliated misfit of a man whose humanity, he says, "died a long time ago."

Chris Gerolmo, who earlier wrote a fine script for *Mississippi Burning*, notes of his work here that "We wanted a movie that

will scare the shit out of you, then break your heart. I hope this does both."

The film succeeds brilliantly by taking the road less traveled. What's the last cop thriller you saw with no gunfights, fistfights, kickboxing showdowns, or SWAT team massacres? Or at least a nice showcase car chase for the heroic detective.

Hell, *Citizen X* doesn't even have a *foot* chase.

It does feature a few quick scenes of gruesome violence showing details of the killings. And the language used to describe these is no less brutal for being clinical.

But chiefly, this detective detects. In that, he resembles another recent unlikely cop, Marge Gunderson — played by Frances McDormand in that great black comedy *Fargo*.

The comparison is not unjustified. Like Marge, Viktor Burakov gets his man — and our complete sympathy — by using his eyes and his brain and his heart.

Put yours to use as well. Rent *Citizen X* tonight.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #322, March 1997

To Jim Mann

Just started Robert Sawyer's *Starplex* yesterday, since you and half of NESFA have praised it to the skies. Got about four pages in so far; it does look good.

However, I notice that these first few pages comprise a straight physical description of the *Starplex* ship itself, plus a bald history of the last 18 years of discovery of cosmic jump points or shortcuts, etc. OK for me, but I see why non-SF readers get turned off quickly when they pick up something like this.

To Joe Ross

I would describe the dear lost language of Harpo not so much as "Harponics" as "Honkian" or perhaps "Beepenese."

"Sabrina, The Teen-Age Witch" actually sounds like a pretty enjoyable show. If I ever break my leg and can't get out to my sacred Friday Night Movie, I'll have to catch it.

To Anna Hillier

I've always assumed that the Waldenbooks SF newsletter HAILING FREQUENCIES was named after the maritime term, wireless frequencies set aside so ships can call to or "hail" each other for greeting or identification.

To George Flynn

Nice insight, that Iain Banks' *Excession* shares many similarities with Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep*. Hadn't thought of that, but — absolutely! So far, by the way, *Excession* would be my choice as favorite novel of last year.

The Bobyssey sounds too much like a book about The Bobbsey Twins.

So the originator of "Shut up, he explained" was not Stephen Leacock but Ring Lardner? Aarrgggh, here it is in

Bartlett's, from Lardner's *The Young Immigrants*:

"'Are you lost, daddy?' I asked tenderly. 'Shut up,' he explained."

Of course, I didn't so attribute it, merely quoted John M. Ford's quoting it.

Nevertheless, thanks for the correction, O High Priest of the Blue Pencil Cult. I managed to include it in time for the e-mail edition of the *Devniad*, which I force upon family or friends who fruitlessly think to escape by not subscribing to APA:NESFA.

But wait another minute. HAH! It seems, my redactory friend, that in correcting MY quote you made the fatal error of quoting another Leacockism, which you render as "He leaped on his horse and rode madly off in all directions." I'm small-mindedly delighted to tell you that the ACTUAL quotation is, "He flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions." From *Gertrude the Governess*, 1911.

So there, he explained.

To Tony Lewis

Your map of all our soon-to-be-even-further-subdivided Mass. area codes makes me wonder what happens when we all have bodyphones PLUS separate lines for our bodyfaxes and bodymodems. (This trend is why I don't think cable modems will win out; the cords would be too long.)

Do you know the Steven Wright joke about the car phone with an answering machine? Its tape says something like: "Hello, this is Steven. I'm in right now, so I can't answer your call. But please leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as I go out."

To Michael Burstein

Thanks for the spelling correction on that comic book character. Darkseid, not Darkside. Noted. But by the way, the quote is apparently about a second Darkseid. Is that styled Darkseid II? Darkseid 2? Darkseid Two? Darkseid Too? Darkseid2?

Fellow APAs, is this a problem for you too? Since what we talk about in this zine is so far out on the cutting edge, I frequently have to type words or phrases that I may never have seen in print, or at least haven't memorized the styling for.

Every undertaking has its downside.

To Elisabeth Carey

I have Carey relatives too. Must look up my brother's genealogical project, see if you and I have anything in common besides the SF gene.

My friend Jeff Wendler and I saw the cover for Brust and Bull's *Freedom and Necessity* at the Tor party at Boskone, and agreed it was one of the best and most eye-catching we'd seen. It's a nice early 19th century oil painting in a florid grand style, and really stood out among all the SF and the usual fantasy covers. Sounds like the inside lives up to the outside's promise.

To Ray Bowie

Thanks for the kind words on the Boskone quotes. I realize you don't usually attend. However, perhaps you'll feel more included if I quote and comment on something you said in the last APA — just as though it were part of my Boskone Orbita Dicta. So here goes:

[NESFA's Jeanne Dixon, our very own Ray Bowie, issues another prophecy which, given New England's subsequent record-breaking April Fool snow avalanche, displays about as much accuracy as Ray's usual optimism about the Red Sox's winning the Super Bowl or whatever those sports people call it]

"Winter is just about over ... we'll still have more cold weather with a chance of snow, still I think we are out of the woods."

[Nice prophesying, jinx-face.]

There, how was that, Ray?

Oh, by the way, "obiter dicta" means "things said in passing" — it's Latin for incidental sayings or observations. So I add the "r" to remind you of "orbit," giving it that requisite spacey SF feel, and slap it as a title on remarks or opinions I or my spies overhear as we orbit around Boskone.

To Paul Giguere

Like your Web page. Smart, easy-to-use design. Going to put on all your APA contributions, too? In case we weren't paying attention the first time.

Much enjoyed all the *Star Wars* jokes and parodies you skimmed via the Net. Even the ones I'd seen before. Caught *The Empire Strikes Back* again last night. One thing that strikes me: are there any human females in the entire Starwarsian oeuvre besides Leia? OK, I just thought of Luke's aunt in the first movie. But aside from that? God, makes you think that Chewbacca was once just a normal human male who — er, didn't date much.

What do you mean, you heard there'll be only one more Culture book from Iain Banks? Is he insane?

Or just an indefatigable player of games.

To Mark Olson

Agree in the main with your views on both *Growing Up Weightless* and *The Scholars of Night*. They both demonstrate why John M. Ford was a great choice as Boskone guest. He's a writer of enormous power and talent. But the market hates a generalist.

Ford's been shuffled into the shadows for far too long. Good on NESFA that we dragged him into our own little spotlight.

So you think J. Michael Straczynski, creator of *Babylon 5* and God-Emperor of many a media fan's universe, is an ass? I

think he's an important enough figure now that you owe it to fannish history to get down in print your experience of his wrongdoing. I'm at least semi-serious here.

That film about Robert E. Howard's love affair — *The Whole Wide World* — was indeed Hugo-worthy, I think. I'd read a brief mention of it pre-release, so when it showed up for 1 week at metro Boston's best art house— the Kendall Square Cinema — I pounced. Pray it comes back for another brief run, or wait for the video ... perhaps early in 1998?

From my single visit there for the 1993 worldcon, appears I liked San Francisco better than you. Wish I'd known about Dark Carnival when I made my pilgrimage to Berkeley.

Did get to Other Change of Hobbit, which I agree was nice but no better than Pandemonium. Met Charles Sheffield there at OCOH, all alone with the store manager and no customers for his book signing. Pretty awkward, since at the time I'd only read one of his short stories. But we talked about books signing horrors, and I ensured his net money loss for the afternoon by talking him into buying the just-out Clute/Nicholls 2nd edition *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

To Nomi Burstein

Thanks for the delightfully useless primer on true Arabic numerals. Had never known that Middle East Arabs don't use them. Next you'll be telling us the French don't do fries, or the Dutch don't treat.

About song lyric mishearing: I was 11 years old before I realized that the lyrics of "Silent Night" were referring to all being calm and bright in the vicinity "round yon virgin mother and child," NOT about the shapeliness of the Mother of God as a "round young virgin."

You want my Oscars opinions? *Fargo* should have won Best Picture. Billy Crystal was great, especially the best-picture

montage and song. *Fargo* should have won Best Picture. *The English Patient* was very good, not great, didn't deserve a wholesale sweep of the top awards. *Fargo* should have won Best Picture. Quip of the night: When Andrew Lloyd Webber picked up the Best Song award for *Evita*, saying "Thank God there wasn't a song in *The English Patient!*" *Fargo* should have won Best Picture. Salma Hayek is one of the most beautiful women on this planet. Jennifer Lopez makes Salma Hayek look like Janet Reno. *Fargo* should have won Best Picture.

Want to hear my opinion about the Best Picture race?

To Lisa Hertel

Thanks for the thoughtful report on Purim; I had no idea. The little kids must go wild — noisemakers in the synagogue.

My sense of holidays is pathetically parochial. First I drew a complete blank on Purim. Then, just today, I told somebody Cinco de Mayo was a continent-wide South American holiday celebrating Simon Bolivar's liberation of Venezuela.

Turns out Cinco de Mayo is purely Mexican, commemorating General Ignacio Zaragoza's defeat of French forces on 5/5/1862 in the Battle of Puebla.

Oops.

Thank God nobody asked me about Id al-Adha, the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice, or Dasahra, the Hindu commemoration of Rama's victory over the demon Ravana.

Or Arbor Day, which must have something to do with Druids, right?