

The Devniad, Book 26

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Gallimaufry

I usually try to stick with the discipline of having a main piece on a single topic to lead off these columns. But this month I'm just relaxing and talking about whatever comes into my head. Because I can.

In the beginning, as usual, is the word. I find I often have a word frying in my brainpan. It sizzles quietly up there for a while, with me turning it over from time to time. Maybe I like the sound of it, or have just learned (or forgotten) the meaning. Usually it makes a pleasant fragrance in my head for some unspecified period, then drifts smokily away.

While commuting to work this morning, my head crackled with the usual highway driving thoughts:

"Hope that phone gives you brain cancer, moron."

"What's worse, potholes or road construction?"

"Even if you won the lottery, where would you *park* a Lexus?"

"Aieeeee!"

A dangerous business, this high-speed deathrace we undertake twice a day. In several respects.

But also in the pan were two isolate words: "nulliparous" and "Tobermory."

"Nulliparous." "Having not yet given birth," you know. Usefully divides females into moms and nons.

Come to think of, why just females? Hard to think of a man who isn't nulliparous. Maybe the odd (no pun

intended) transsexual or two. Oh, and Zeus. Didn't he bear Athena from his forehead?

Ouch.

"Tobermory" comes via a song the late great Stan Rogers is singing on the car radio — from the UMass Boston folk music station, WUMB. Called I think "The Last Watch," this song would wring salt tears from a peppermill.

It's about an old sailor saying goodbye to a favorite ship before it's broken up for scrap. The ship sailed the last leg from Tobermory. Sob.

I looked it up later. Since Stan was a real Canadian ham, he probably meant the town of that name in Ontario on Lake Huron. But the atlas also shows what must be the original Tobermory, on the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland.

Man, look at the cool Scottish names on this map. Coll. Tiree. The Firth of Lorn, for God's sake.

Castlebay. Struan.

Muck. OK, so they're not all romantic.

Accompanying the verbal fry-up in my head, there's usually a song spinning on my cerebral CD player. Quietly, again, in the background. Triggered by a word or phrase (maybe thinking of "Tobermory" will start a replay upstairs after the radio's off), or, naturally, just by hearing the song out there in the real world.

Bill Cosby calls this phenomenon "having my music with me." Always got my music with me. Don't you?

Lately it's been stuff from Townes van Zandt, a Texas songwriter of great gifts and little fame who died a few months back. Among many other fine things, he wrote "Poncho and Lefty," a quietly devastating

story/song/poem that takes all the wind out of the Old West.

Also featured lately on WBOB, All Bob's Favorites All the Time: tunes from Runrig, a Scottish group that plays what I'll call "Celtic anthem rock."

They do an electric version of "Loch Lomond" that will rock yer world, laddie.

Joke break: Account exec, writer, and art director all attend an ad biz conference. Walking on the grounds for a lunch break, they spot a curious old bottle half-buried in the shrubbery. Pick it up, brush it off: out puffs a genie.

Genie says: "Since there are three of you, you may have one wish each."

Genie turns to the copywriter: "What do you want?"

The copywriter says his wishes are few: "A villa in the south of France, with a vineyard and a hammock and plenty of French girls to keep me company for the rest of my life."

Genie: "That's what you want? Then let it be so —" and sends the copywriter off in a puff of smoke to the Riviera.

Genie turns to the art director: "What do you want?"

The art director says her wishes are simple, too: "A beach house in the Virgin Islands, with a swimming pool and a sailboat and plenty of tanned young men to keep me company for the rest of my life."

Genie: "That's what you want? Then let it be so —" and sends the art director off in a puff of smoke to St. Croix.

He turns to the account executive —

Who says, "I want both of them back here after lunch."

Books on my kitchen table this week (there being no room left on my bedside table):

Venus Plus X, by Theodore Sturgeon. Somehow I'd never read this 1960s classic short novel by one of SF's best stylists. I

remember several other Sturgeon works with great respect. This one's an honest attempt at writing a real utopia, founded on true sexual equality through universal androgyny. But the parallel narrative of life in American suburbia rings completely false. And everything was so dated I've consulted three references to make sure this wasn't written in the 1940s. Sorry to say, but I'm sorry I read it.

The Night Crew, by John Sandford. His "Prey" books about high-ranking Minneapolis cop Lucas Davenport have been some of the best thrillers of the last decade. This looks like the start of a new series about a nocturnal Los Angeles freelance video news producer named Anna Bathory. She roams the night with her crew, looking to scoop the competition with footage of murders, fires, riots, and other L. A. divertissements she can uplink to the locals or the nets for a fast few thou. Nice gritty characters and good potential here.

Two Web discoveries bring back memories of two long-time favorites:
www.outermost.com/freddy/index.html

A Web page for Freddy the Pig! I'm so excited. Freddy is the hero of a funny, warm, colorful series about talking animals written by Walter Rollins Brooks from the 1930s through the 1950s. Of genre interest: *Freddy and the Baseball Team from Mars*, etc. At 11, I liked Freddy even better than Dr. Doolittle, which is saying a lot. Oh my God! It says here Brooks also wrote some magazine stories in the 1940s about a talking horse you may have heard of: Mr. Ed. I never knew that. The things you learn on the net ...

www.fish.com/~muffy/pages/books/rex_stout/nero_wolfe.html

There's a Web page for Nero Wolfe, too! Rex Stout wrote dozens of books from the 1930s through the mid-1970s about this 370-pound armchair detective and his streetwise

sidekick Archie Goodwin. Think a Montenegrin Mycroft Holmes meets Lew Archer in NYC. The way Wolfe and Archie handle words — each in their own very different way — and their prickly relationship make every one of these stories a joy. I first discovered them when James Bond himself recommended Wolfe, in one of Ian Fleming's books.

Been dipping my toe into computer games this last year. First *Quake*, a prime example of what hobbyists quaintly call a "shooter." And this month *Panzer General*, a venerable classic (from 1995!) which *PC Gamer* magazine in May named number 13 in the 50 best PC games of all time.

If you're interested, ranked ahead of it were 1. *Tie-Fighter Collector's CD-ROM*, 2. *Doom*, 3. *WarCraft II*, 4. *Civilization II*, 5. *System Shock*, 6. *Heroes of Might and Magic II*, 7. *X-COM: UFO Defense*, 8. *Command & Conquer: Red Alert*, 9. *Links LS*, 10. *AH-64D Longbow*, 11. *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, 12. *Red Baron*. Never played any them. Let's see ... *Quake* came in at 15, and my brother Michael's old favorite *Sim City 2000* was ranked 38.

Panzer General is proving quite interestinkh. But as I told someone after my first weekend learning the game, "The good news is that last night the Germans failed to take Warsaw. The bad news is that I'm the Germans."

About the political incorrectitude of all this: It's only a game, fairly intricate and technical, about combined-arms strategy and tactics on simulated historical battlefields. They don't issue you any Nazi regalia. None of the game pieces you attack are tagged "helpless civilians."

Nevertheless, I'm feeling a little uneasy about playing the bad guys. So much so that when I went to bed late after my first game, I dreamt I was in the French Resistance. Honest. Talk about dream compensation.

Not only that, we were smuggling rifle barrels in big baguettes. Gee, a dream psychology twofer ...

Sent my 14-year-old niece — who rejoices in the wonderful name of Erin Easterbrooks — several books lately. After I heard that she's now a voracious reader, and that several of her teachers think she's the smartest student they've ever had.

I had about 8 minutes to make my selection. Maureen was leaving to go see her sister, Erin's mother Karen, immediately. Here's a question for all of you: what books do you run around your house and gather up, in that case?

Anyway, here's what I sent along:

Jane Austen, *Emma*

C. J. Cherryh, *The Pride of Chanur*

Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*

J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*

James H. Schmitz, *The Witches of Karres*

What do you think? Other suggestions to follow up, if she likes these? Tony Lewis: what did Alice particularly like at that age?

My nephew Jarrod Ferrara comes back from junior year in Madrid in a few days. Be good to see him. OK kid, siesta's over ...

Yours too, reader.

FlimFan

Here are my totally subjective ratings of movies seen since last issue.

Excellent: *The Fifth Element*, *Chasing Amy* (although be warned, Maureen walked out because of the extremely sexual content of the language), *Bound* (video).

Good: *Breakdown, Into the West* (video).

Decent: *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, *City Hall* (on Showtime).

Awful: *Murder at 1600*.

Reviewed this month (below): *The Fifth Element*.

A Fifth Column.

This futuristic fantasy was conceived by a 16-year-old and cost \$90 million. It's hard to imagine a more perfect recipe for Hollywood success.

But in this case, success would be deserved. *The Fifth Element* combines the stunning visual excellence of *Blade Runner* with the lighthearted approach to plot, character, and reality of *Barbarella*, plus a hint of *Brazil* nuttiness. This is one wild SF romp. Don't expect to take it seriously; it's pure fun.

But serious fun, with serious money and talent behind it.

The money comes from Gaumont, a major French studio, which ladled on enough francs to make this the most expensive French-produced movie ever. (Do not derange yourselves, *mes amis*; the whole thing's in English.)

The talent starts with hot 38-year-old French director Luc Besson. He wrote the first treatment as a teenager before growing up to create such earlier pure movie-movies as *Subway*, *The Big Blue*, *La Femme Nikita*, and *The Professional*.

What's this one about? Well, as some of you have always suspected, every 5,000 years or so Earth is approached by a hugely glowing black alien sphere of "pure evil," bent, straightforwardly enough, on destroying all life hereabouts. But guardian aliens built a temple in the desert a couple millennia back, containing the only weapon that can defeat that evil. (This is all established in a prolog, set in 1914 Egypt.) Components include four hand-held stone thingies, each etched with the symbol of one of the four elements: earth, air, fire, water. You need another component, nature unspecified, energized with a mysterious "fifth element," to activate the weapon and hold off the Big Badness.

In 1914, the stones are taken off-Earth for safekeeping. Three hundred years later, it's showtime as the Black Thing comes

back, approaching the solar system. Enter Bruce Willis, into whose laps falls the task of retrieving the stones and saving the world.

Willis does fine as retired-commando-turned-aircab-driver Korben Dallas. (For 60 years, SF fans have dreamed of aircars zooming around the streets of some future city. Finally, a movie just does it. And it looks spectacular. Can you imagine New York traffic with aircars? Enough said.) Not surprisingly, Korben gets to use both his sets of professional skills a lot, driving and shooting and wisecracking all over the place. All this in sensational settings include a futuristic New York City, then a spaceport, then a resort liner floating high above a vacation paradise planet.

Naturally, there's also a girl. Her name is Leeloo (or, in French, maybe Le-Eluu), and her origins are a tad peculiar.

You see, there are these good aliens, the Mondoshawan. Fairly early in the movie, Earth scientists take a blown-off Mondoshawan hand and somehow end up quick-cloning Leeloo.

Now, the Mondoshawan look like elephantine bipeds with kind of anteater heads. Whereas Leeloo — woo-woo! — is a perfect specimen of a human female, has red hair, great eyes lips bone structure etc., looks terrific in a few strategically wrapped "thermal bandages," and much resembles 21-year-old Russian-born *Vogue* model Milla Jovovich. Who's making a promising start here in her first big movie role.

Jovovich doesn't talk much, since events give her character — the ultimate test tube babe — no leisure time to learn a lot of English. But she's got the animal-energy thing down pat, shows some great moves courtesy of 8 months of karate class, and possesses a nice directness when she looks through the camera into your eyes.

Anyway, I vaguely recollect the scientists saying something about the Mondoshawan having a 200,000-times-more-complex DNA weave job than us. Thus,

they contain all sorts of genetic potentials, so maybe that includes the possibility of their DNA's making Leeloo.

But basically, who cares?

Unlike the case with the insultingly stupid *Independence Day*, you've got very little impulse to raise objections to the science in this "SF" movie. Because there isn't any. They barely even try.

Even Dr. Stephen Kennedy, my faithful moviegoing buddy and physics/general science advisor, didn't waste his time after this one saying "Spaceships can't make a whoosh sound in vacuum" or "There's no way you'd allow non-computer-directed aircar driving in such a crowded urban nexus" or "How could organic material as large as an entire hand survive a spaceship impact on a planetary surface at terminal velocity?"

Instead, we mostly talked about fun. And Gary Oldman's perfect weirdness. And the scene where Korben eats takeout at his apartment window off the counter of an airborne Chinese junk.

Oh, yes, Gary Oldman. With a hemi-Boy-George haircut and a demented cowboy accent, he plays a downsizing-happy corporate chieftain who's in league with Pure Evil. Or is that redundant?

No more talented actor in the history of cinema has made such a specialty doing strange readings of kinky roles. Always played with unblinking conviction. Oldman's character is named Zorg, which is the most normal thing about him. You've got to see his haircut and clothes to believe them, but Zorg is a guy who absolutely would look just like that.

In fact, forget aircar and spaceship special effects: costumes and sets alone put this movie way over the top. The cops and the Mondoshawan especially share a splendidly thick brutal-future look, with huge rounded envirosuit shoulders reminiscent of Jack Gaughan spacemen. Don't think I've seen that on film before,

and it looks great. It's what the powered suits in Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* should look like, but I hear won't, since they dropped the suits from the upcoming worse-and-worse-sounding movie version. (Thank God *The Fifth Element* is so good; I couldn't have stood two big-SF-flick disappointments in a row.)

I don't think I've ever paid this much attention to clothes in a movie before, but one more fashion note:

Many directors would outfit a star like Bruce Willis for a big action/adventure/SF pic in, say, dashing black syntholeather. Besson and his inspired dudsmeister Jean Paul Gaultier instead put him in bleached hair and an orange tank top for the duration.

Which somehow doesn't diminish his cynical, tough-guy persona one bit.

Lesson: Besson knows exactly what's he doing. He's a great pop director, fully in command of his scenes and sets, his talented multicultural cast, his story arc. Even when some element seems to get way away from him, you feel he just decided to let it go.

But he feels your pain, young moviegoer. He makes sure to satisfy your many hungers, offering you a little surprise or a flare-up of special effects or a joke, a dash of violence (martial arts, gunplay, explosions, etc.), a splash of sentiment, a ripple of sex appeal — or, ideally, all of the above — every 2.8 minutes.

Speaking of speed, there's Chris Tucker's incredible Prince-baiting performance as Ruby Rhod, a megastar DJ/interviewer with quite possibly the most hilarious hairdo in movie history. Rhod acts as if he'd had all his androgen removed and replaced with adrenaline.

This guy talks faster than Little Richard, and screams in a higher falsetto, too. But like Oldman's Zorg, he's somehow beyond just a caricature; he's so specific that it all feels bizarrely believable. You can see exactly why he'd be a star, and his presence

gives an extra jolt of fun to the last half of the movie.

Maybe it's a love-him-or-hate him thing. I think gay people might laugh as hard as anybody else at his sheer energy.

Tucker's isn't the only character to execute slick slapstick in this movie. That underrated asset Ian Holm plays a human scientist/priest, latest in a long line preserving the guardian aliens' solemn secret. But Besson gets him a big laugh simply by the way he cuts to Holm sitting up after his pullout bed is pulled out.

And in another scene, Holm is finally to meet the savior his predecessors have reverently awaited for 4999 years. His reaction? Scuttling to his closet, he flicks frantically through a collection of sacred robes, searching for something with for-cripessakes-a-little-*dignity*.

I haven't even mentioned Zorg's evil hirelings, those lizard-skinned, hound-headed, crowd-pleasing alien mercenaries the Mangalores. Or the blue diva with the tentacles; talk about an unearthly soprano!

Then there's Besson's neat little pop-movie *hommages* (that's French for rip-offs). Like Oldman's interpretation of the Chevy Chase smoothtalking-arms-dealer-demo scene from *Deal of a Century*; he pays off his Mangalore torpedoes with a neat new gun, equipped with a nifty "replay" autofire feature that just keeps on giving. Or Jovovich's take-off on the Thumper-and-Bambi scene from some old James Bond film. Or the movie's smirky ending, which is a takeoff on *all* old James Bond films.

Speaking of endings, of what does the key ingredient for the ultimate weapon against absolute evil consist? Let's just say that love is all you need.

One early review on the Web, from FilmZone's Paul Zimmerman, called this movie "*Blade Runner* with the lights on." Besson has said he was thinking more of *Metropolis*. Gary Oldman termed this film "*Stars Wars* on acid."

I think Besson had these SF classics in mind, and more. But with *The Fifth Element*, he gives all this material a great new look and his own light, stylish French twist.

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #323, April 1997

To all

My friend Cassandra Boell, a talented artist who sometimes has to remind me anent SF books that "these things have covers, you know," points out that I raved last month about the illustration for Brust's and Bull's *Freedom and Necessity* but never said whodunit.

That's because I didn't know.

However, a trip to the mall to check the book jacket (plus to the encyclopedia to expand on what I found there) has produced the answer: Gustave Wappers (1803-1874), a Belgian historical/romantic painter. The cover shows a detail from a lavish Wappers painting commemorating an uprising in Brussels in 1830, European revolutionary fervor being very much involved in the novel.

To Tim Szczeznil

That Rathbone book on Wellington's War sounds great. You know the story about Wellington's watching his fresh replacement officers get off the boat? One of Wellington's staff exclaimed at their magnificence and vowed that their arrival on the field would surely frighten the French. Watching his new young popinjays parading around and getting in everybody's way, the Big W replied, "I don't know what effect they will have upon the enemy, but by God, they frighten me."

The Pelton book, *The World's Most Dangerous Places*, also sounds like a worthy addition to every coward's (sorry, armchair traveler's) library. The metaphorical recipe for a minibus accident was especially vivid:

put a dozen mice in a coffee can along with glass and nails . . . Ouch!

Travel writing has always been a strong topic for the APA. Now you and I are mining a rich new offshoot: the virtual trip report. Cheaper and much safer than the real thing.

To Elisabeth Carey

Still haven't looked up our Carey connections on my brother's chart. Maybe he'll see this and look for me. Hint, hint. They settled in Morrestown, New Jersey, if that helps.

Agree that young children should be able to attend death ceremonies. A funeral home always has rooms off to the side where you can take noisy kids and explain the matter to them. Plus when a beloved relative is concerned, a wake serves the same purpose for children as for adults: a family reunion — plus a way to mark the passage, think some summary thoughts about Uncle Dak or Aunt Podkayne, get some closure.

To Michael Burstein

Congratulations on your Campbell Award nomination! I think a strong point you should make in your campaign is that Big Bad John himself would have demanded it go to an *Analog* author. Of course, he also would have favored candidates who wore crewcuts or started a new religion ...

Instead of always making a big fuss whenever they say the phrase Campbell Award to emphasize that it's NOT A HUGO, why don't they just make it a Hugo? "Best New Writer" sounds a reasonable enough category.

To Tony Lewis

What, Alice couldn't get into Slippery Rock State Teachers' College? Guess Harvard will have to do. Suford and you must be wild with pride.

To Joe Ross

Liked your long list of 1947 happenings.

So Bernard Baruch coined the phrase "Cold War." Have always wondered who did. People make a lot more fuss about Churchill's "Iron Curtain," but look which phrase has lasted longer.

To Anna Hillier

You mean you don't think comet-watching is romantic?

To Paul Giguere

So you ditched the Mac and got a new Pentium! Congratulations on joining ... the Windows world. Was going to say “the great majority,” but then remembered that phrase means “the dead.” Hhmmmm.

I did like Laurie R. King’s first Sherlock Holmes pastiche, *The Beekeeper’s Apprentice*, and my sister Liz loved it. She just passed the second book, *A Monstrous Regiment of Women*, on to me, and was agog when I told her you said the third was out.

To Mark Olson

Loved your review of Norman Cantor’s book *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. Plenty of meat and mead to think about.

Particularly taken with your stuff on how the Middle Ages differed from our mindset in subtle but profound ways — a civilization “easily the equal of anything else the world has produced.” This suggests another way of evaluating civilizations: not proceeding on a technocentric, chronist (you know, like “racist” or fascist”) vertical timeline progressing from a primitive low to our own world-beating preeminence. But looking at each civilization side by side, and asking parity questions.

Were people more politically oppressed in Stalinist Russia or Third Kingdom Egypt? What art is more vibrant, Pre-Columbian or Late Tang? Did serfs work harder in 1497 Rennes, Brittany or 1997 Redmond, Washington? (I know today’s Microserfs have running water and surround sound, but do you know how many *feast days* Catholic peasants had off? One estimate I saw says minimum 150 per year.) Which had a lower percentage of sexual diseases in 1700: London, Madras, Lima, or Honolulu?

About the Alexandria Digital Literature Service (www.alexlit.com): sounds quite interesting. I may very well submit myself for a list. Although I already know about hundreds of books that I’d very much like to read. They’re in my house. Bought but

unread books: the only convincing argument I know for why you’d want to live forever.

To Nomi Burstein

Stay calm. Remember of Passover: this too shall pass.

To Jim Mann

Nice mix of books and movies discussed last time. Any APA that moves from beer tasting to tortured Jesuits to James Mason adulation to Ewok bashing holds my attention — and admiration.

OK, so you don’t worship *Fargo* as I do. Fandom is a big tent, you betcha.

To Lisa Hertel

Thanks for the megillah on Passover observances, customs, and feasting. No wonder Jewish *cooks* don’t consider it a particularly restful holiday.

To George Flynn

You speak so knowledgeably about phone book capitalization protocols that it occurs to me to wonder: are you now or have you ever been that mythic figure born to King Augeas out of Sisyphus, The Man Who Proofreads the Phone Book?