

# The Devniad, Book 28

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## Orbita Dicta

**Heard in the halls of  
Readercon 9  
Marriott Westborough  
Westborough, MA, U.S.A.  
July 11-13, 1997**

**NOTICE ABSOLVING ME OF ALL  
BLAME: The people quoted below might  
very well have said something resembling  
what's approximated here. But if you  
disagree and have a tape or something,  
maybe it was some other universe.**

*[At the Friday night panel on The Science  
Fiction of C. M. Kornbluth, fine new short story  
writer Andy Duncan recounts one of the few  
endearing CMK anecdotes around]*

So this woman leans over the stroller  
containing little baby Kornbluth, and he says  
up at her, "Madam, I am not the child you  
think me."

*[Duncan seems to like NESFA's new collection,  
His Share of Glory: The Science Fiction of C.  
M. Kornbluth, which (by the way) you can find  
out how to order at <http://www.nesfa.org/press/>]*

There are books that belong on every SF  
reader's shelf, and this is one of them.

*[Writer Barry Malzberg likes much of  
Kornbluth, but one story he'd take to the bank]*

I liked "The Last Man in the Bar." I liked  
it so well I decided to write it again ... I got  
\$150 for the story I based on it. I'll bet that's  
more than Cyril got for the original.

*[Which last may be one of the reasons why, as  
Kornbluthiac scholar Mark Rich observes]*

His own brother said, "Normally, he was  
a surly sonuvabitch."

*[Co-Guest of Honor Algis Budrys says BS to all  
the SOB talk about his dead Co-GOH]*

I was a close friend of Cyril's. Second  
maybe to Fred Pohl, but a close friend. He  
was not at heart a surly son of a bitch, I  
don't care what his brother says.

... Think of him as something a little  
more complicated. And as, during the  
period he was writing, THE writer of  
science fiction.

*[Malzberg also rates Kornbluth pretty high]*

He was a great science fiction writer. No  
worse than the 4th or 5th best of his time.

... But in my opinion, the work shows an  
unremitting loathing of humanity.

*[Writer Michael Kandel disagrees]*

I'm shocked to hear all this — about  
despising humanity. I'd put it that there was  
not a grain of sentimentality in him.

*[Duncan favors CMK's story "Gomez"]*

Gomez is a dishwasher with uncanny  
mathematical powers who is co-opted by  
the Pentagon: a Robert Heinlein figure, Rear  
Admiral MacDonald.

*[CMK was not so rah-rah re RAH, per Budrys]*

Cyril, by the way, DID hate Robert A.  
Heinlein. He felt he was a fascist militarist,  
who would sell his mother down the river if  
the cause was just.

And he said so.

To Heinlein.

*[Budrys sums up]*

This convention could not have picked a  
better guest of honor.

*[In the audience, NESFan Tony Lewis adds perhaps the most convincing elegy of all]*

Even Asimov admitted Kornbluth overmatched him. There are very few people of whom Isaac Asimov ever said, "He was smarter than me."

*[Kandel ends with a plea for Clemency]*

Also, in the way he was so unsentimental, some say misanthropic — another writer accused of the same thing was Mark Twain.

*[In a program item on the origins of his newest novel, hot young author Jonathan Lethem recalls an auspicious omen at his first con]*

I met Paul Williams at Sercon 1, in the Clairmont Hotel — the same hotel where Philip K. Dick met Paul Williams years before.

*[To the eternal question "Where do you get your ideas," Lethem can answer "Ashby Avenue"]*

I was walking home from the con down Ashby Avenue that gorgeous day, so exhilarated by everything that had happened, and I thought in my terrible ambition, "I want to blow those people away." I really wanted to write the next great science fiction novel. And I thought of a story featuring a black hole as a character, and a woman falling in love with that black hole.

*[But before he could write As She Climbed Across the Table, he had some living to do]*

I hadn't yet read much of Don DeLillo. I hadn't had some particular emotional experiences, or a particular romance yet.

It eventually became a novel that I could write successfully. I took many years to get that book right. But it was always a sentimental favorite to me.

It's the ridiculous idea, and my overwhelming commitment to that idea .... It's the book where I declare my personality most openly.

*[Meanwhile, back at P. K. Dick headquarters]*

My other two novels — they wear Dick on their sleeves. [Laughter] ... I know that sounds very weird.

*[Lethem talks technique]*

You should be careful to find a couple of key differences between a first-person narrator and yourself, and FASTEN on them. Because he's going to be mostly you.

*[After writing Gun With Occasional Music on a typewriter, he now swims in the PC sea]*

Once you're working on a computer screen, everything is suddenly liquid, and you can't COUNT your drafts anymore.

*[Lethem has dipped into collaboration occasionally]*

Carter Scholz, the writer I drove up here with, wrote the best of my collaborations with me. It's about Franz Kafka and Frank Capra. Once you notice the similarities in names, you begin to see there's more there.

... So Kafka survives TB, comes to Hollywood, and becomes the screenwriter behind *It's a Wonderful Life*. It turns out that Hollywood is pure Kafka. You know, he just can't leave this town.

*[At the Meet the Prose party, Andy Duncan just found out his short "Liza and the Crazy Water Man" is on the prelim Nebula ballot]*

When I went to Clarion West, I was afraid. Not that I wouldn't produce the stories. Not of being critiqued. But that they would all look at my stuff and say, "Hey, THIS isn't science fiction," and throw me out. But everywhere in this field, people have been incredibly nice to me.

*[Fan Joe Petronio went to meet some pros, but so far he's only managed to meet me]*

I keep a database now of every book I buy. So I know exactly how much I spent last year on books.

No, I haven't shown it to my wife.

*[You'd think such a sharp guy would have better taste in cons]*

I only wanted to go to one con this winter, so I skipped Boskone and went to Arisia instead. Big, BIG mistake. The panels were dead boring. Or they were about gaming, and people are trading cards and getting into yelling matches about it.

*[If it's summer, Robert Sawyer must be on an awards ballot — which makes an author's heart go ka-ching ka-ching]*

Anybody who says awards don't affect your income is wrong. After I got the Nebula, sales of that book shot up. And in the contract for my next book, my U.S. advances doubled. My European advances doubled. My Japanese advances went up 500%.

*[Legendary short story writer Michael A. Burstein (it's my fanzine, he's my friend, I can use any adjective I want) should get a commish on Sawyer's newest novel Frameshift]*

If you don't like it, I swear I'll give you your money back! I've never given that kind of guarantee before. At least on a hardcover.

*[The prof in this bit by NESFAn Chip Hitchcock must have been an ale man]*

There was an op ed article in the Boston Globe this week where the writer kept getting John Adams mixed up with Sam Adams. What made it worse is that the writer was the chairman of the history department at Boston University.

*[In the hall, Paul Di Filippo, another wild man of the short form, shows he can go long]*

This is my first novel, *Ciphers*, that's coming out soon. Yes, it's a big monster of a thing ...

*[Flips book to display illo of a beautiful nude woman]*

... But I'm not sure about the cover —

*[Reporter abandons all gender sensitivities]*  
Yow.

*[Di Filippo has the grace to look concerned]*

Yes, well, I have gotten that reaction from some people. Which is why I'm not that sure about this.

*[At breakfast Saturday, Paul Giguere seems to have found his dream girl]*

She likes reading science fiction books, but she doesn't want to go to cons. So I go alone.

*[While Tor editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden shatters any dreams this reporter might have had of originality]*

This technique of stringing quotes together into a portrait of a con was done in the 1950s, you know. By some fans from Toronto who styled themselves the Derelicts. It's called "derogation," after "Derelicts' Derogation."

*[I forget when and where Nomi Burstein said this]*

Are you having fun going around quoting people out of context?

*[When the showing of A Kornbluth Family Home Video is delayed 15 minutes because none of us literary geniuses can work the VCR, somebody mutters]*

This wouldn't happen at Arisia.

*[In the con suite, volunteer Amy West talks about life in the word mines]*

At Merriam-Webster, we're making lots of money. We're owned by Encyclopedia Britannica, you know. But it's us who are keeping them afloat.

*[At a panel on the career of co-Guest of Honor Algis Budrys, Daniel Dern starts with two works not everyone might have read]*

Two Budrys books I could read over and over are *Michaelmas* and *Silent Eyes of Time*.

*[Hard SF high priest David Hartwell places Budrys in high company]*

For a while I kept getting A. J.'s stories mixed up with Ted Sturgeon's. Both writers with a high, high command of the polished slick style who tended to focus very closely on a central character.

*[Barry Malzberg praises Budrys the critic]*

I learned a great deal from his criticism in *Galaxy* from '65 to '71. I learned more goddamned things from that than from anything else I can think of ...

The last two sentences of a column he wrote summed up everything I read in 30 years:

"It is not enough to be right. You have to be right on time."

*[A. J. himself started beforetimes]*

I wrote my first story when I was 9. I got my first rejection slip — from Malcolm Reiss of *Planet Stories* — when I was 11.

*[Budrys had lots of trouble with his stern, demanding father — a Lithuanian diplomat who hated his son's chosen avocation — until]*

Finally, my second novel, *Who*, came out. And he actually read it, in the British edition.

He took me aside with awe in his face, and he said, "My God, you've got talent. In here is a [stern, demanding] Russian secret police colonel. And he's perfect.

"And you don't know anybody like that!"

*[His latest published novel, 1993's superb Hard Landing, took some hard time to write]*

I called up the police station and did 5 minutes of research. But it took 17 years to finish, because I was doing other things.

I'm currently working on two novels, one SF, one fantasy. They may take less time.

*[For several years, he'd been editing his own SF magazine, Tomorrow, which recently switched from paper to ether]*

I've never been a publisher before, and I hate it. The electronic version is more fun, because I don't have to deal with distributors.

Now you pay 10 bucks, we give you a password, and you can access 6 issues online. Plus the 3 issues we've done already, for free.

*[Although his wife Edna pleads from the audience]*

Buy the old magazine back issues too, everybody. I want that bedroom back.

*[Hartwell points out that the career is on the upswing lately]*

You are Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction Convention next month. How do you like that?

*[Budrys could get used to it]*

I love it. I'm crazy about it.

The career has gone more or less where it deserved to.

The one thing I resent is that I've never won a Hugo or a Nebula, and I know damned well I've done work that deserved it.

... Something always happens. *Rogue Moon* lost to *A Canticle for Liebowitz*, which some folks think wasn't even eligible that year. The fans in Seattle felt that *Canticle* had gotten jobbed the year before, so they jobbed me.

*[Still, these days, all in all, life is good]*

More and more often, as I sit down to write and rewrite, it comes out the way I wanted it. That wasn't always true.

*[On a panel named Bad Crazyiness: Society, Subversion, and Speculative Fictions, Paul Di Filippo muses on things that surface in our culture]*

Yogurt used to be a fringe food. Kooks ate it. Now everybody does. There's been a real revolution in eating habits.

*[SF Age editor Scott Edelman wonders if SF has lost its edge]*

Look at the reaction real subversion gets. When *Rites of Spring* premiered, they were tearing up seats in the theater. When they hung up something called Piss Christ in a museum a few years ago, there was major outrage all over.

Then look at our field. Is subversion subversive if it's invisible?

*[A fan in the audience says at least Tepper isn't tepid]*

Sheri Tepper has written of her belief that men and women should live separately, only visit each other, even monogamous pairs. She's been attacked from both sides of the field. If you have both camps hating you, that's subversive.

*[Edelman goes two further]*

Probably the two most subversive science fiction novels were *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Dune*, with its sneaked-in environmental message.

But even there ... The message of *Stranger in a Strange Land* is NOT that group sex is cool. Group sex is only cool if you're a Martian.

*[Writer Lance Olsen thinks William Burroughs could eat either of the above for, well, you know]*

*Naked Lunch*. So much of today's subversive literature is a footnote to Burroughs.

*[Discussing History and Fictional History, editor Ellen Asher of the Science Fiction Book Club thinks sincerity is key; learn to fake that and you've got it made]*

It's much more important in writing historical fiction that you have verisimilitude than that you have accuracy ... After all, you're not writing your French characters' dialog in French, are you?

But not too much flavoring. You have to avoid attacks of the "forsoothlies."

*[After spending all of her The Porcelain Dove in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, Delia Sherman is not sure we'd want to]*

Most of us would not enjoy a conversation with someone from the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century. Different jokes, different slang, a whole different way of looking at things ... People found torturing cats just hysterical in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

*[Alexander Jablovok agrees]*

Can you get excited by an 18<sup>th</sup> century erotic story? They're whipping nuns and so forth ... There's a weird specificity to some of the stuff there that leaves us cold.

*[Subtle narrative master John Crowley thinks the past was always living in the past]*

Until 20 years ago, almost all fiction was told as though it happened in the past ...

Every novel was over before it began.

*[Not true of history itself, Sherman points out]*

History does NOT have a beginning, middle, and end. It just has a middle.

*[Which is why, co-Guest of Honor Kim Stanley Robinson might say, paranoia is the act of imposing narrative on the universe]*

Conspiracy theories and secret histories all express the desire that history make sense.

*[Some moderators at least try to begin panels on a nice, sprightly, upbeat note, like fantasy writer Katya Reimann]*

Welcome everybody. This is Reality and Dream in Fiction —

*[But there'll always be a fandom, as a woman in the audience immediately makes clear]*

— Are you sure?

*[And stellar critic John Clute doesn't help much either]*

My uninterest in dreams in fiction is that usually they don't work very well in fiction.

... One immediately obvious failure of a children's book written by some Awful Aunt is that it's told as a dream, in a condescending manner.

... How can stories engender the hooks that dreams do?

*[Writer Jennifer Stevenson thinks Elizabeth Hand pulled it off a novel or two ago]*

How do you account for the hallucinogenic quality of *Waking the Moon*?

*[Hand recalls it well, considering]*

Drugs.

*[Which brings up hookah-smoking caterpillars, although as Jonathan Lethem says]*

In Lewis Carroll, the issue is never that a animal is talking, but that he has such an irritating personality.

*[At least Lethem has done a little research here]*

Science has confirmed that dreams occur in a very short burst of time in the sleeper's REM dreaming period. And that the narrative is *imposed* on a series of glancing, fragmentary, chaotic impressions.

... My image would be a network, lattice, or web nudged ... vibration in response to that nudge ... trying to make sense of those disturbances.

*[Clute agrees we never stop making sense]*

There's the astonishing magic of the term "And then," which to our rationalistic mind implies causality.

*[And then, in one of those 3-minute, back-of-the-room exchanges that are a chief glory of Readercon, Paul Park explains his renegade Jesus in last year's brilliant historical novel The Gospel of Corax]*

If you're both divine and human, some people have a tendency to de-emphasize the human part completely. But that's not portraying the part about both God and Man, is it?

And it's more believable when you have, say, a preacher who has been a sinner and repented, than someone who has been a Perfect Master since the age of 6.

*[Oh yes — right at the end of the panel, somebody brought up Joyce, but Clute wouldn't let that riverrun]*

You don't begin talking about *Finnegans Wake* at 5 minutes to 4:00.

*[Ernest Lilley, editor of the new webzine SFRevu (see <http://members.aol.com/sfrevu/sfrjun97.html>), talks the modern faned equivalent of "where do you get your paper"]*

You may have noticed that you can only fit about a dozen names in each slot of your AOL address book. Ah, but it turns out you can put as many as you want up top in the CC: space of your outgoing mail doc.

*[Artist/writer Joe Mayhew opens his A. J. Budrys interview by getting the subject to name names, producing a long Lithuanian equivalent of Algirdas Jonas Budrys]*

... Unless you want to translate it into English: Gordon John Sentry.

*[When he was a boy in the mid-1930s, Budrys's family was stationed in Königsberg, East Prussia, where his father held a diplomatic post]*

I saw Hitler come parading up the streets a couple of times ... The reaction of

the people is what I remember. Ordinary people, German *hausfrauen* — they soiled their pants, they headed for our bushes. Some of them copulated.

They screamed their heads off because of this little man.

That was when I became an SF writer. There was more in the world than the world would admit.

*[After his first professional sale to Astounding Science Fiction in 1952, he sold to other markets too, but kept on good terms with ASF's famous editor John W. Campbell, a hot Cold Warrior]*

One of my pen names was Paul Janvier; interesting how it came about. I had too many stories in his inventory, and Campbell said how about a pseudonym. I said how about Ivan Janvier, which I'd been using in *Fantastic Universe*.

Campbell said "Oh, no, not Ivan!"  
So it became Paul.

*[A writer by any other name still can't make enough money to live]*

It got to a point where the kids — there are four boys — were eating 10-dollar bills for lunch. So I got a job in a PR shop.

*[Which could be idillic]*

We had Pickle Packers International as a client. At one point, we built a 12-foot pickle ... Presented it to the city of Chicago, which had an empty courthouse square because people had objected to the Picasso sculpture originally intended for the site ... So we had all the newspapermen out, a tremendous event ... They called it the Picklecasso.

I did that.

*[A good interviewer always asks the extra question, as Mayhew knows]*

What happened to the pickle?

*[Budrys spears it]*

I'm glad you asked ...

We gave it to someone who cut out a hole in it and entered it in a canoe race on the Fox River. In the middle of the race he turned it over. It floated away.

The Fox connects to the Illinois; the Illinois connects to the Mississippi.

That pickle could be anywhere.

*[Even good interviewers have to ask the one about influences]*

There were writers who impacted me early on. Spy and thriller writers, as it happens. Eric Ambler, C. S. Forester, Nevil Shute — and Geoffrey Household, with one novel, *Rogue Male*, which he never equaled. Although he came close with *Dance of the Dwarves*.

*[Budrys on his career as one of the finest reviewers the field ever produced]*

I did book reviews as fast as I could type. All first drafts, with negligible exceptions.

The *Galaxy* reviews are all collected in a book called *Benchmarks*, from Southern Illinois University Press. Which you'll have to look around hard to find anywhere.

*[On how you should write]*

The stuff I know about writing ... I put it all down in a book, called *Writing to the Point*.

Nowadays, when somebody says "Tell me how I should write," I say give me ten and a half dollars, and I give them the book.

*[On the downside of experience]*

A couple of years ago, getting a root canal, I had a small stroke.

There are several things I can't get back. My handwriting is terrible. My skills at the

keyboard are not what they were. And I can't remember simple names.

*[On the upside]*

Now I'm 66. I have an enormous backlog of stuff back here, which I use as the need comes up.

*[Editors David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer are in hard SF heaven, interviewing co-GOH Kim Stanley Robinson — starting with the early years]*

I was a very methodical reader, and in my library the science fiction came after the Zs in general fiction. So I was in college by the time I got to it.

*[His first professional contact came at the tender hands of Harlan Ellison]*

I went to a lecture he gave, and raised my hand in the Q&A session. I asked for the address of this Clarion SF workshop course I'd heard about.

This was not a wise question to ask Harlan ...

He made me stand up in middle of the audience. "So, you want to be a science fiction writer, boy? And you think you can get it at some writer's workshop ... " On and on about how tough a career it was, and all that. It was awful.

"Show us the Writer's Look. Go on.

"Aw, kid, you look like a death's head."

*[Although he's not sure Harlan isn't right about Clarion]*

Socially, I bonded with all 24 of my fellow students. Still in contact with most; they're my brothers and sisters for life. Robert Crais, Greg Frost, all the others ...

But as a literary experience, as much bad as good. There's this homogenization effect, this urge toward safety because of the intensive critiques ... The shooting gallery syndrome, where you go bang-bang-bang as the story goes by ...

I could name several writers in SF now that are children of a dysfunctional workshop.

*[Yet he survived to make his first sale, for the Knight original anthology Orbit 18]*

I was driving from home in California to grad school out here at Boston University. Called my mother on the way, and she said, "There's a letter for you from someone named Damon Knight."

I had her read it over the phone. Standing beside Highway 80 in Rawlins, Wyoming. I'll never forget it.

He basically wrote, "I loved it. Can I buy it for \$700?"

*[What's his position in the field today?]*

There's a science fiction niche that may have been semi-empty, which is science fiction that has lumps of scientific exposition in it.

People scorn expository lumps. But anything is interesting if you make it interesting.

*[Being interviewed by two leading definers (deifiers?) of "hard SF" doesn't faze Robinson]*

I don't think there is such a thing as hard science fiction, except maybe as a *completely* empty ecological niche.

... I've also been presented as a literary SF writer. Now think of this term: "literary science fiction writer." It's bad on several levels: marketing, esthetics, lots of others.

*[After writing his great trilogy Green Mars, Red Mars, Blue Mars, what does he think of black-and-white Mars?]*

I saw these stereo photos from Viking of the Martian surface. A cliff set sideways on a cliff. Very interesting in backpacking/engineering terms.

*[But about the trilogy novels themselves]*

They're all one book.



... The political stuff is much harder to make interesting than the science ... The political chapters are only 30 pages long, but apparently some feel they read much longer ...

One phrase from Michael Bishop's review, "a brutal overload of information." Maybe that should have been the blurb.

*[Who does he read?]*

There's so much SF being written that what I'm likely to read is the new SF written by my friends.

*[Second only to family]*

These days, I do a lot of parenting: an 8-year-old and a 2-year-old.

One of the most criminal aspects of the economic system we live under is driving the dads away from their kids.

*[Plus a few other preoccupations]*

We garden a lot, the boys and I. I do a lot of sports.

Sure, I try to get up in the mountains as much as I can ... My time above 10,000 feet is golden time ...

But I'm not exactly Reinhold Messner. I'm a hiker, mostly. In a way, climbing strikes me as a decadence.

*[Then there's saving the world]*

I used to believe in a kind of leftist ecology.

But leftism has had a series of very bad ecological consequences. Maybe I'm mostly an environmentalist now.

*[At some panel or other, writer Candace Jane Dorsey muses on baubles, bangles and boobs]*

It strikes me that gender is just another accessory, and the entirety of human identity is in how we accessorize.

*[Spies report someone said this at the Updating Your Real Year panel, but neglect to specify just who]*

Cyberpunk dragged science fiction into the 80s and left it there.

*[At the Saturday night banquet al fresco, your reporter had the great fortune, along with a few other fans, to be seated with science journalist Jeff Hecht, co-Guest of Honor Robinson, and iconoclastic icon Samuel R. Delany; the conversation was much too fine to be shared with mere fanzine readers, except for the point where I pompously begin]*

The winners write the history —

*[And historian/fan Beth Natchison serenely tops it with]*

— and the losers write the songs.

*[At the indescribably malicious Tenth or Eleventh Non-Annual Kirk Poland Memorial Bad Prose Competition, Readercon stalwart Eric Van announces the, er, prizes]*

In previous years, we've gone with first prize, a John Norman novel; second prize, two John Noman novels. And so on. This year, we're more topical. Prizes include unpublished John Norman manuscripts!

These include *Web Sites of Gor*, *Sheep Clones of Gor*, and *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Slave Girls*.

*[At the Boston in 2001 party, NESFAan Leslie Turek reports she had some trouble crashing this con ... but with a former worldcon chair battling a mere hotelier, it was Xena Warrior Princess Meets Mister Limpet]*

We showed up at the front desk around 10:00 p. m., and they tried to turn us away. We were supposed to have a reserved, confirmed, late arrival room. If we hadn't shown up, you can bet they would have charged our credit card 70 bucks.

As it was, we had to be really obnoxious, talk to the manager, and make it clear we weren't leaving quietly before they found us a room here.

Somewhere in there, they tried a line I hadn't heard before. "Sorry, we're underdeparted."

I said, "No, you're overbooked!"

*[Fan Elka Tovah Menkes kvetches about some pitfalls of maintaining a fully equipped home office in the basement]*

Friends are always just happening to drop by with something to copy, something to fax, something to laminate ...

*[Fan and pro film critic Daniel Kimmel made Contact earlier this week]*

It's not only one of the best science fiction movies of the year, it's one of the best movies.

*[The group presents editor David Hartwell with a spectrum-smashing, SPF-1000-busting, tie-shaped object sporting a huge gold sunburst and tassel — an artifact fully co-refulgent with his other fashion choices, all obviously imported from some plaidomaniacal couture house on the dark side of the Bizarro World — as your reporter comments]*

Later tonight, David will make the tassel spin —

*[NESFAn Davey Snyder has some unspeakably Chippendalian vision dancing (naked) in her head]*

— without moving the tie.

*[As the sun rises Sunday morning, NYRSF editor Kathryn Cramer does a little deserved crowing at the breakfast buffet]*

The New York Review of Science Fiction — a hundred and seven issues, month after month, without ever missing an issue!

*[In a Sunday panel on adult vs. children's fantasy, John Clute brings up one unsung classic]*

One of the great time travel stories that's still not recognized as such is *Puck of Pook's Hill*, by Rudyard Kipling.

*[Gregory Maguire, author of Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West, indicates the research was easy]*

Oz has no history. Or at least, its history is so thin on the ground.

*[Fantasy's classic nostalgia for the past is on shaky ground in America, according to writer Ann Tonsor Zeddies]*

A return to our past isn't a return to innocence. It's a return to our despoiling of the land that was here when Europeans arrived.

*[Afterwards, Clute is pleased with this reporter's enthusiasm for a certain incredibly strange, iconographically dense, altogether glorious entry in Clute's (and John Grant's) dreamy new Encyclopedia of Fantasy]*

You especially liked [the entry for] FACE OF GLORY? I'm so pleased to hear you say that. People have been talking to me about the book for months, and you're the first person to mention it.

The other editors made me cut the hell out of it, but it's one of my favorites too.

*[Signing NESFAn Mark Olson's copy of the EOF leads Clute to a neverending story]*

If you want to follow a lot of threads of our underlying critical argument, look at the entry for STORY. It has a huge list of cross-references. It functions as a sort of germ of many of the themes we're exploring.

*[Olson riffs on other favorite reference books, including that desert-island necessity Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable]*

If you like *Brewer's*, you'll like *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

*[Barbara Keunzig of Intergalactic Book Works reports chix skiffy is kickin']*

Nowadays, it's the women writers we have trouble keeping in stock. Patricia McKillip, Patricia Wrede. Shariann Lewitt sells very well. Jane Yolen is impossible to keep in stock. Esther Friesner, Rebecca Ore, several others. And I think it's grand.

*[Bookseller Art Henderson, about the "vanity" license plate on his Mazda]*

That's right, it says "Ahura." Some fans get it right away. Others think I just can't spell the name of the black chick on *Star Trek*.

*[In a panel on the writing process, writer Darrell Schweitzer's tee shirt greets Sunday morning with appropriate indignation]*

WHAT AM I DOING OUT OF BED?

*[Eleanor Arnason's attention to detail may strike you as a tad obsessive, but honestly, this is what she said]*

Even when people are reading without speaking, the way words would be spoken can affect the way they're read.

The two worst letters in the English alphabet are "w" and "s." So common. So difficult to say. All those whichs, wheres, and whats. And she. And especially she said — the only thing I dislike about female protagonists is having to write "she said."

*[Worrying about stuff like that may account for Schweitzer's next anecdote]*

The Western and adventure writer Max Brand — real name Frederick Faust — could only write drunk. It was the only way he could turn off his crap detector, so he could be five or six of the most prolific writers in *Argosy* magazine.

*[Maguire said this, or maybe Schweitzer; some writer, anyway; frankly, this reporter had to go to the bathroom]*

While I'm writing, I imagine some fractious 4-year-old who has to go to the bathroom beside me in a car, so I'll get to the story very fast.

*[The panel on using one work as a model for another begins with Alexander Jablov's remembering ripping off Robert Sheckley]*

I decided, "I want to write a version of Sheckley's *Mindswap* in my *oeuvre*" — and I can use that word because we're at Readercon.

... Anyway, now I'll ask the other panelists if they've ever done it, and if so with whom or with which.

*[Robert Sawyer thinks like an academic]*

James Patrick Kelly's Hugo-winner last year, "Think Like A Dinosaur," is explicitly his version of — his reply to — Tom Godwin's famous story "The Cold Equations."

*[Paul Di Filippo is not sure this qualifies as a ripoff, sorry, tribute]*

But Kelly's story is a polemic. It's that dialog that SF writers are engaged in.

*[Jablov whips out a reply]*

Yeah, you mean like "My advance is bigger than yours?"

*[The program gives as an example The Forever War considered as Joe Haldeman's version of Robert A. Heinlein's Starship Troopers; Robert Sawyer thinks the relationship is more fraught]*

I rather suspect that Joe Haldeman on a very deep level must hate *Starship Troopers*.

*[Jablov peels another layer]*

My suspicion would be that at one time Haldeman liked that book, and then found he'd been sold a bill of goods.

*[Di Filippo takes it up a level]*

With many of these situations, I think the imprinting factor is important. That these things, these originals make an impression at a certain age.

Your challenge is, using some of the same tropes, let's see if I can generate the same buzz.

*[Author Felicity "Rosie" Savage, who unless the bio is crocked has already written and sold five genre novels and one mystery yet is only 22 in human years, considers it professional courtesy]*

It's really one magician learning a sleight-of-hand trick from another.

In Iain Banks' *Use of Weapons*, there's misdirection as to which child in one part of the book will become the adult narrator later. When I realized what he'd done, I said "Oh God that's good." And I did it in a novel I'm working on.

*[For Di Filippo, it helps if the homage isn't too obvious]*

If only John Clute or A. J. Budrys spots that you had this influence, OK. But if everybody who reads it immediately says "Wow what a Tolkein ripoff," that should concern you.

*[From the audience, Michael Burstein uses the S word]*

There are two kinds of sharecropping here. One is "Oh, I can make money with this." In the other case, a writer can become obsessed by someone else's character or universe and do good work.

... Or you can repeat your own stuff. Remember, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a sequel.

*[The panel on nanotechnology and Clarke's Law starts with a small tribute by writer/scientist Catherine Asaro]*

There was a wonderful book a few years ago, *The Engines of Creation* by Drexler, who extrapolated and laid out the paths a lot of

writers have since taken in nanotechnology. Everybody's read it. Of course, he did a lot of pure speculation ...

*[So have others, says writer/editor Glenn Grant]*

The problem is an old one in SF: inconsistent extrapolation. You introduce one change, but that change implies a lot of other changes that aren't there.

In Robert Sawyer's *The Terminal Experiment*, there's a guy who's difficult to kill because he's got some nanotech protection. The problem is, there isn't any other nanotechnology in the book. This is the ONLY thing they use nanotech for?

*[Daniel Dern fires back]*

Why don't they shoot him with a nanotech bullet?

*[Asaro estimates the possibilities are large but not endless]*

It's reasonable to say we could put small machines in our bodies that clean things up. Because we have things like that already: they're called enzymes and proteins.

... But there are problems. For instance, microscopic levers would have trouble working because they don't hydrogen-bond to the next level of molecules.

And if you have machines inside the body doing all this fantastic work, they're going to have a big problem dumping heat.

*[Grant sees the miracles piling up]*

When you look at things like nanotech, I feel as SF writers that we're like the Guild steersmen in *Dune*. We can predict 30 or 50 years out, and then there's a wall and we can't see beyond it.

*[Apparently physics teacher Michael Burstein keeps up on his homework]*

You can already be in two places at the same time, you know. Earlier this year, they had a particle that split apart into two quantum states.

[Dern predicts small things for nanotech]

If you look at what the extrapolations were for TV, and how well we've failed to achieve them ...

[A panel on dislikable characters — in fiction, meaning not Piers Anthony or Harlan Ellison — starts with an engaging definition by moderator Ellen Kushner]

An engaging character is someone you'd like to have lunch with.

[Short story author Jeff VanderMeer isn't sure he bites]

There are a lot of great characters I wouldn't want to have lunch with. Hannibal Lecter, for instance.

[SF giant Chip Delany expands the definition to fit his own Lecter figure]

The character who wants something — and expends a lot of energy to get it — is interesting.

For instance, the protagonist in my novel *Hogg* is a professional rapist. He expends a lot of energy trying to get it, and fails — and I think readers go “ohhhh” when he doesn't get it, then “OH” when they realize what they first said “oh” to.

... I've also seen an audience of black kids cheering at *The Birth of A Nation* when the Ku Klux Klan rides in to save the day.

[Andy Duncan isn't sure the writer always has a choice]

Sometimes you have a different reaction than the author maybe intended. Like in Heinlein's stories, you can read some of his characters as upstanding characters — or as ranting cranks that you wish would shut up.

[Jonathan Lethem, earlier in the con, predicting the mood late Sunday with uncanny accuracy]

At my first con, I thought there'd be some sort of wonderful culmination on the

last day. There's no culmination. Everybody's energies just fade away ...

## FlimFan

No ... space ... (gasp) left. Rrr -readercon ... near .. ly ... finished me.

Must ... review movies. Will ... keep it short .... (uhh) ..

... *rosebud*.

### Excellent:

*Ulee's Gold* — Peter Fonda as Ulee the Florida beekeeper hasn't heard this much buzz about one of his roles since *Easy Rider*. Ulee's son is in jail, his daughter-in-law long ago ran away down the fast lane, and he's raising two granddaughters and tending his bees with whatever love is left in his withdrawn, resentful soul. Then things get worse. Fonda's work is strong, quiet, slow, and sad, as is the rest of this fine film by independent Victor Nunez.

*Men in Black* — As NESFAn Mark Olson always says, we won. Science fiction *is* the mainstream culture now. And *Men in Black* is a completely satisfying mainstream comedy that deals wholly in SF terms without apologies or explanations. It's based on a 90s comic book, but feels more like a 1960s hardball short satire by, say, Ron Goulart or Robert Sheckley. The Big Concept: all the conspiracy theories (and, in the film's best running gag, the tabloids) are totally true; there *are* aliens among us, and the government is covering it up. The Men in Black keep the covers tucked in. Besides instantly likable Will Smith, this movie features stellar talents Tommy Lee Jones, Rip Torn, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Linda Fiorentino, plus enough aliens to turn Whitley Strieber, well, Grey. Go see it again.

### Good:

*Dream with the Fishes* — For the first 15 minutes of this movie, showing up looks

like a big mistake. You get cheap, ugly visuals and obvious, whiny writing, garnished with scuzzy acting. So one guy's a suicidal nerd and the other's a sick junkie hustler, they get thrown together, hit the road, BFD. Then you start to laugh ... and the laughs get really huge. Then you even start to care. Big time. His first go out of the box, writer/director Finn Taylor completely turns my head around. How did he *do* that?

*Contact* — A very good movie, not a great one. Problems: Jodie Foster acts too scared, fragile, and naïve throughout the entire film to be taken seriously as a scientist, much less as a candidate to ride the wild wormhole machine built on instructions received from Out There. President Clinton's tricked-in appearances add nothing but distraction. And Matthew McConaughey dresses better than the real-life hunk/theologian/White House advisors we see every day. However, this movie has real beauty. Real pain in showing Foster's childhood and lonely adulthood. Real debates about belief in God. And really great special effects, that for once move us to some other emotion than empty excitement. Instead, *Contact* fills us with the genuine sense of wonder that is science fiction's one true gift to the world.

*Face/Off* — It's like the old joke about how they correct the mistaken room assignments in the funeral parlor: just switch the heads. Or here, faces. This movie has the swirling camera movements, berserk action sequences, and obsessive concentration on the strong faces of his actors that made director John Woo famous in Hong Kong. And you've never seen anything quite like the actor's-exercise extravaganza you've got in *Face/Off*: archcriminal Nicholas Cage acting like he's really federal agent John Travolta inside, and vice versa. So for a summer action movie, this one has style to go. But let's face it: when the doctors assure Travolta early on not to worry about this brand-new face-

swapping surgery because it heals in a coupla days and is "completely reversible," you realize that, gee, Toto, we're not in Scienceland anymore.

#### **Decent:**

*Out to Sea* — Basically, think of this as *Grumpy Old Men Get Wet*. Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau schlep their respective shticks aboard a cruise ship, with Brent Spiner fresh and terrific as a Hitlerian cruise director under whom our heroes must toil as geriatric dance hall boys. Director Martha Coolidge previously made *Real Genius* and *Rambling Rose*, two superior flicks. But be warned: the pace here is more IV than MTV.

### **Backchat**

**on APA:NESFA #325, June 1997**

#### **To all**

In my CD review last time, of course it was not a "sonnet" that occasioned the first Aubrey/Maturin meeting, but a "sonata." To be exact, Pietro Antonio Locatelli's Sonata in G Major, Opus 5, Number 1 for two violins and basso continuo. You all probably knew that, but were too considerate of my feelings to write in.

#### **To George Flynn**

Thanks for the stories about Wiscon and hot new author Mary Doria Russell, author of *The Sparrow*. Thanks also for the further history of the phrase "Iron Curtain." Originally, of course, it was coined by the Man in the Iron Mask's interior decorator.

#### **To Anna Hillier**

The trick in romantic stargazing is to gaze at the sky and your beloved alternately. I agree that simultaneously would be much harder.

Enjoy your summer off. We'll all be watching the heavens until you return ...

**To Lisa Hertel**

Thanks for the reviews. I liked the *subject* of *Longitude*, but felt that the author (Dava Sobel) could and should have done much more with it. On the other hand, I immediately called up and left a message on my sister Liz's answering machine about Doranna Durgin's horsy fantasies; if she hasn't read them already, they sound like perfect matches for her taste.

Wonderfully detailed, funny, awe-inspiring report on Disclave '97, the SF Convention That Almost Sank Washington. I'd heard stories; you brought it all to life.

**To Michael A. Burstein**

I wish you great good luck with your novelette and novel projects, Michael. We're all proud of you ... Sure, go ahead and besmirch the Devney name by using it for one of your characters if you want. And unlike many such requests writers get, how about somebody completely pathetic or evil? As Milton proved with Satan, villains are more interesting.

About your deciding not to attend worldcon in San Antonio, you realize that the Legion might then be forced to consider pulling your license to avatarize as Ubiquitous Boy ...

**To Ray Bowie**

Glad you like Nero Wolfe. Have you read the 1966 pastiche by Randall Garret, *Too Many Magicians*, wherein his Plantagenet time-line detective Lord Darcy encounters the fat, brilliant Marquis of London and his wisecracking sidekick, Lord Bontriomphe, get it? Actually a pretty cool tribute.

Hadn't thought about (A. A. Fair's) E. S. Gardner's Bertha Cool / Donald Lam books in years! You're absolutely right, they were quite good. Certainly better than his much more famous Perry Mason books.

**To Mark Olson**

Here I do a whole column on Plymouth and a good chunk on its Rock, and in the same issue you tell me the invaluable John McPhee has another book out — yay! — with an essay on the Rock — boohoo! wish I'd read it before writing my piece.

Your mention of the good guys' super-BB gun in *Patton's Spaceship* by John Barnes reminds me that we're seeing a bumper crop of fun SF weapons recently. Just off the top of my head, there's the skull-mounted number in Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* (wherein Bud's gun in the first few pages is almost literally off the top of HIS head). And the Lazy Gun you mentioned last month in reviewing Banks' *Against a Dark Background*, which brings immediate, fatal bad luck upon its target. And Zorg's gun with the nifty replay feature in *The Fifth Element*. And now this Barnes book. Any others we can think of?

Maybe there's some dark, psycho-literary compensation at work here. As gun control wins a few battles here and there and may be slowly gaining ground even in the U.S. (OK, aside from a minor setback with the Supreme Court and the Brady Bill), perhaps our thwarted imaginations turn longingly to building fiendish new death-dealers in our fantasies ...

**To Elisabeth Carey**

Seriously, good luck on the job hunt. If it's any consolation, both my wife Maureen and I have had the experience in the last few years of going for some months with not much progress, then having earlier prospects we'd almost given up on come to life. In fact, after long droughts we've both been in the situation of having not one but *two* offers on the table in the same week. Would it be out of place here for you to briefly describe your qualifications and the

type of job you're looking for, in case any APA readers can slip you a lead?

**To Tony Lewis**

Again, my sympathies on the loss of your mother.

Settling her estate sounds Herculean, as often with these matters. I wonder how people who aren't particularly educated or good at paperwork manage at all. When our mother died, my sister Darcy handled all the bumf. Supremely organized though she is, it still took heaps of time and frustration.

**To Nomi Burstein**

Thanks for the invite to your moving party. It was good to see your mother Eleanor again, plus your friend Elka; to get the lowdown on what Michael is really like at school from fellow-teacher Carl LaCombe; and to finally meet your father since he doesn't seem to go to conventions.

That's one thing a move is good for: people have to air out their friends and families for all to see. Like their underwear drawers. (I particularly liked that lacy little French-cut number in passionate purple, Nomi. Or was it Michael's?)

**To Paul Giguere**

Man, I keep hearing how good was Bruce Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, and now you join in. I've had the book in my hands in bookstores twice, both times when I lacked the funds to buy it. Must get real soon now.

Interesting concept you have of "hard' romance books." But wouldn't it be simpler just to say "pornography"?

**To Tim Szczesuil**

Your fun day redistributing loam with a rented shovel loader has entitled you to the super identity of: Bobcat Boy.

Your super power: spreading it around.