

The Devniad, Book 29

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Enemies List

Throughout the ages, Man has been vexed by plague, pestilence, and hunger. Death and taxes. Marauding Huns and, to be fair to the Hunnish point of view, recalcitrant Romans.

Here are a few banes of my present blissful existence.

People with porches. Maureen gets jealous and I get hell.

Bosses. I don't have a problem with authority, just authority figures. Suspect you're all with me on this one. Except perhaps those of you who are unemployed. But then again, ask yourself, who fired you?

Internet developers. At work, we just upgraded our browsers to Netscape Navigator 4. At home, AOL just upgraded my browser to Microsoft Internet Explorer. Luckily, both have only slowed my access time and trouble by about 20%.

Our friend Mr. Sun. Ninety-three million miles away yet still he makes me put on sunblock. Which naturally flows down from my forehead, UP from my chin, probably streaming up off my forearm and ankles when I'm not looking — RIGHT into my eyes just to hear me scream.

Sound engineers. Whether they're at the network, the local station, or the production studio, I don't know. But whoever they are, I'll get them someday, the guys who turn down the volume on the TV programming you want to hear and turn it up for every single commercial.

Robert A. Heinlein, C. S. Forester, Manning Coles, Tim Hardin, my father.

They went and died on me. See "Time" below.

Squirrels. The one who lives his malevolent little life in our bird feeder tree recently had a flash of Satanic inspiration. He realized we couldn't replace the plastic cap that blocked his access to the yummy seed if he simply chewed the cap free of its restraints again. And — here's the brilliant part — took it UP the tree with him.

J. Michael Straczynski. He's seduced all my friends and family with his falsely alluring SF TV show, which I like to think of as *Whore of Babylon 5*.

The IRS. They're on the list not for the usual selfish reasons, or due to militiaman psycho syndrome. But because as most literary SF fans know, a special circle of Hell is reserved especially for those Internal Revenue Service folks who pressed for the Thor Power Tools decision. Aimed at U.S. hardware manufacturers, it means that publishers no longer find it economical to maintain midlist or slow-selling books in inventory for years. Thus contributing to the bestseller-only management style that keeps Koontz and King books around while my beloved Walter R. Brooks Freddy the Pig reissues fail to find a new mass audience and sink back into the muck.

My new trifocals. The reading channel for close-up work, which occupies the bottom of the lens, just got stronger with my new prescription. Which means I can't quite focus on stairs or mysterious lumps on the sidewalk — or use those sidelong downward flick-glances formerly so useful for checking out reclining babes at the beach. Where I shouldn't go much anyway these days, because of Mr. Sun (see above).

J. D. Salinger, R. A. Lafferty. They don't produce enough anymore.

Sean Penn. He's married to Robin Wright, perhaps the most beautiful woman in movies today. So none of the rest of us can be. (Robin was Moll in *Moll Flanders*, Jenny in *Forrest Gump*, and The Princess Bride in —well, you figure it out.) I'm none too fond of anybody who goes out with Winona Ryder, either. Listen, I know it's adolescent these days — and at my age — to still have any kind of a crush on a movie star. Which only proves my point: what's Sean's excuse?

My alimentary system. This is a delicate matter, so fainter hearts should just skip this section and read on below. But I've been thinking lately of Tycho Brahe (1546-1601). Great guy to think about anytime: Danish astronomer; most gifted pre-telescope observer; had an assistant named Kepler you may have heard of; wore a silver nose because his first one came off while dueling. Now, in my forties, I've come to have much sympathy with him because of the manner of his death. Attending a baronial banquet near Prague, Brahe was too polite to leave the table before his host for a men's room visit. His bladder burst, and he died of sepsis 11 days later. Anyway, my own personal collection of tubes and sacs seems to be just that little bit more impatient these days with even a modicum of delay. First faint harbinger, I've heard, of many more delights along this line.

Woody and Mia. They destroyed my faith in perfect love.

George Flynn. NESFA's proofreader extraordinaire, he catches all my (and everyone else's) mistakes in this APA. We all make a show of thanking him, but it's time you knew how we truly felt, George.

Could it be — Satan? People have different theories who's behind all the trouble in our lives. Some say President Clinton. Jesse Helms is a popular candidate in more enlightened circles. My mother, who had a real love-hate relationship with our Church, liked to blame the Pope. In

science fiction, of course, we have Harlan Ellison and Piers Anthony. This all reminds me of a song from the 1950s, called something like "The Merry Minuet." One refrain went about like this: "Jews hate Moslems / South Africans hate the Dutch / And I don't like anyone / Very much." Not true for me personally, of course, as I'll prove in a forthcoming essay, "Things I Heart."

Time. Time crumbles things, said Aristotle. And has been proving it almost ever since.

FlimFan

Here are my totally subjective ratings of and rants on movies seen since last time.

Excellent:

Shall We Dance? — Lured by the enigmatic loveliness of a dance instructor, a businessman enters the exotic, slightly risqué world of ballroom dancing in this accomplished Japanese entertainment. Koji Yakusyo is Mr. Sugiyama, a married accountant who's constrained and conventional even for a Japanese. Tamiyo Kusakari is the instructor, a dedicated young woman named Mai who has learned to love and trust nothing but the dance, yet has become dissatisfied even by that. Whatever you may think from that setup, be advised their relationship is not quite what you'd expect. But do expect the movie to deliver beauty, good humor, lots of just plain humor, and a wise knowledge of human nature — including that of the audience, to whom it plays shamelessly at times. Writer/director Masayuki Suo knows the vast pleasure we take in seeing people who are uptight, or disapproving, or tangled up inside, just ... relax. And go with the music. I'll remember things about this film

for a long time. Including two of my favorite characters: Naoto Takenaka as Mr. Aoki, an office nebbish who turns out to be a hilariously hot Latin dance specialist, “the Japanese Donny Burns.” And Reiko Kusamura playing a beautifully serene middle-aged instructor. When her hot-to-trot new students let their faces fall because Teacher isn’t exactly Madonna, she asks cheerfully, “Disappointed I’m older?” Not at all, ma’am; like your movie, you’re just about perfect.

12 Angry Men (cable, Showtime) — Guess the bloom’s not off the rose. Reginald Rose wrote a real acting extravaganza in 1957’s *12 Angry Men*; 40 years later, he adapts his own original. It’s still about big-city jurors stuck in one hot, shabby room debating a capital murder case. Back then, director Sidney Lumet kept things simple and strong in black-and-white, focusing on faces. William Friedkin follows suit, but in color and with more tricky camera angles. Where Henry Fonda was crisp and upright as the man who holds out for due deliberation, the older Jack Lemmon brings vulnerability and a more fragile bravery to the part. George C. Scott plays Lee J. Cobb’s role as the kid-hating blowhard with his mental anguish closer to the surface. For a guy I didn’t know could act, Tony Danza does a surprisingly good job as the juror (remember young Jack Warden?) who rushes to judgment on his way to the ballgame. And so on, through a uniformly splendid ensemble. Three big changes: the addition of topical talk that plays well (at least for now) and replaces some 1957 stagginess with a more realistic dialogscape. A brief intro shows you an Hispanic defendant and a judge; the original got more mileage from leaving them to your imagination. And four of the jurors are now black — including Mykelti Williamson (Bubba from *Forrest Gump*), who retools Ed Begley Sr.’s old white racist as a young ex-Nation of Muslim racist. Problem: he’s still

stuck saying “They breed like rabbits,” “These people are born liars,” and so on. Not that I believe no African-American could exhibit racism toward an Hispanic, but in these words? Still, with strong characters and tight writing, this remake, like its revered predecessor, shows how to build strong drama 12 ways.

Good:

George of the Jungle — A few years after his triumphant goofy caveman in *Encino Man*, Brendan Fraser now essays the world’s best-known goofy apeman. And he comes off surprisingly well. As does the movie, which never makes the mistake of trying too hard, maintaining a nice, easy, lighthearted mood throughout. You end up smiling a lot, with occasional big laughs. The largest yuks are provided by John Cleese as George’s gorilla factotum, by far the most intelligent person in the movie. One SF fanworld note: as the society jane George swings with, Leslie Mann looks different from the last time I saw her in the fanzine room at Boskone. Must have done her hair another way or something. And one final, musical note: it’s no use. You can’t escape. Merely reading this review has started that insidious title song beating in your head.

Spawn — This is a really superior comix adaptation, far better than *Darkman*, or *The Crow*, or the last couple of *Batmans*. For one thing, *Spawn* contains the best visions of infernal damnation since Newt Gingrich’s fortuneteller looked into her crystal ball. Michael Jai White plays a government hit man transformed into a disfigured, tormented superhero battling an unholy alliance between all the demons of Hell and his boss. (Who can’t identify with that last part?) The best lines go to John Leguizamo, a slim, handsome actor transformed into an obese, satanic, horrifyingly hilarious Clown who is Spawn’s personal tormentor. The visual style here is astounding. As hinted above, the endless fiery plateaus and bloody

deeps of Hell, aswarm with writhing armies of tortured screaming soulraped hopedead bastards doomed to lost eternities of pain, look really cool. I also love Spawn's cape. It's crimson, yards wide and a mile long, and obeys no known laws of air resistance — it's just a mystical extension of his character. Cool again. And promisingly, the plot follows its comix logix to its comix conclusion — that is, no conclusion at all. Thus allowing for *Spawn II ... Son of Spawn ... Spawn Swims Upstream ... Spawn IX: The Regurgitation ...* and so on.

Conspiracy Theory — Mel Gibson and director Richard Donner made the *Lethal Weapon* series together. So the slick action sequences here come as no surprise. Nor the decent job Gibson does at another rather wounded hero, New York's gabbiest cabby/conspiracy buff. Nor the attraction between Gibson and the most luminously beautiful lawyer ever to work for the Justice Department (Julia Roberts). What got me were the jokes. In the *Lethals*, even the few that work play as either half-assed Gibson improvisations or heavy-handed Donner set pieces. Here, for at least the first half of the picture the writing and direction are cranked up another whole level, and *the action itself* is so fresh and startling that it makes you laugh. Not *at* the movie; *with* it. When government ninjas winch down from whisper-mode black helicopters in the middle of a crowded Manhattan-evening shopping street. When Gibson knocks a guy unconscious, then checks for faking. When he escapes from villain Patrick Stewart without getting up from his chair. When you see one extravagantly right decorating decision a paranoid conspiracy buff might make. In fact, I'm laughing now ...

Decent:

Cop Land — This one has a great cast, including Harvey Keitel, Robert De Niro, Ray Liotta, and Sylvester Stallone in his acting debut. (Well, it feels like it anyway.)

It's got a great concept, with an entire town across the Hudson taken over by corrupt NYC cops. And it's got great reviews from some critics, but not me. The same man (James Mangold) both wrote and directed: usually a good sign. But one which may explain here why both jobs seem overdone, muddy, needlessly confusing, heavy-handed. We KNOW Stallone did a De Niro, gaining 40 pounds for the role: you don't have to portentously pan down his body to linger on his slight gut. We get it that Stallone is doing some real character work here, playing the sheriff as a lumpy loser; how about some variety in the role BEFORE the predictable shootout at the end? We don't need this much backstory. We appreciate De Niro and Keitel's excellent set-piece speeches; how about something better to do for talents like Janeane Garofalo, Annabella Sciorra, Peter Berg, and Cathy Moriarity? There are some good spots in *Cop Land*. But maybe you'd better wait for the rental in case you decide to skip town early.

My Best Friend's Wedding — When you can't decide if you even LIKE, let alone adore, a starring character played by Julia Roberts, you know a movie's in trouble. Here, a guy (Dermot Mulroney) that her character had a fling with in college and kept as her best friend suddenly decides to get married; naturally, she realizes she loves him and flies to Chicago to break up the wedding. Where she spends the rest of the movie doing unlikable things to easy-going Mulroney and his dewy young fiancée, Cameron Diaz. I think writer Ronald Bass and director P. J. Hogan had real ambitions for this material, beyond extruding the usual romanticom goo. There's some good stuff. Example: this film will surely earn a footnote in film history as *The One Where M. Emmet Walsh Sings*. And in fact, the use of music overall — from the stylishly deconstructed girlgroup song-and-dance number over the opening credits to the

genuinely quirky and cool Dionne Warwick sing-a-long at the rehearsal dinner — kept me from ditching this flick at the altar. Ditto the performance of Rupert Everett as Robert's gay boss, who becomes our favorite character halfway through the movie. The ending is also surprising, if so 90s that it hurts. But finally, what are the chances *My Best Friend's Wedding* will leave a lasting cinematic impression? I give it a month.

Picture Perfect — Her perky/whiny manner is fine for lightweight comedies like this. And as for the cleavage she throws around throughout the movie, in the immortal words of John Candy's reaction in *Splash* to the thought of a pretty woman wondering around the streets of New York City in the nude, "I'm for it of course." However — back to Jennifer Aniston in *Picture Perfect* — will somebody, anybody, please get that hair out of her face?! Talk about distracting. Anyway, Aniston (of TV's *Friends*) is a NYC ad gal who's forced by the usual farcical storyline to hire a guy she just met (Jay Mohr of TV's *Saturday Night Live*) to pose as her fiancé. Complications ensue, handsome rake Kevin Bacon suddenly notices her, blah-blah-blah. Aniston manages to make the terrible things her character does seem halfway appealing. Bacon's properly vain and perverse. Mohr is so good at playing a funny-faced, nice-guy schlub that he could have used a personality injection. Reality check: Aniston seems to start off the film as a junior copywriter, rising in about a week to director of creative services. I'm only a copywriter at a tiny Mass ad agency, but my impression is that in the real world (if that label applies to the ad biz), this might take a year or two. Or five or eight. Aside from that, the client is a sexist moron, the account exec can't stop lying, and the agency principal is a soulless slavedriver. So at least they got SOME stuff right.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #326, July 1997

To all

I've perpetrated a hug-and-slug review of the latest Honor Harrington novel in the August *SFRevu*, a newish webzine by Ernest Lilley. You may have seen Ern around Readercon, Boskone, or Arisia, etc., or caught him on the air until recently in NYC on the Sci-Fi-Talk radio show. He tells me the Aug ish should also have revus on books by Allen Steele, Deborah Christian, James Alan Gardner, James F. David, Greg Bear, and Brenda W. Clough, plus a movie review of *Event Horizon*, if my stuff isn't enough for you. See this ish at the following, though I'm not sure if it will be jul97 or july97. Anyway, try <http://members.aol.com/sfrevu/sfraug97.html>. Ensure future vus by e-mailing SFRevu@aol.com with subject "Notify Me" or "Email Subscription."

To Mark Olson

About John McPhee, of course I've read him. The man is a god. Or will be eventually; when he dies, he'll immediately get a big statue in the Temple of Essayists. Right near the entrance, convenient to the coffee bar and bicycle rack.

In fact, his pieces were appearing in the 1960s in my father's issues of *The New Yorker*, one of my early touchstones of good writing. He lost me a little in the 1980s with about the third or fourth geology book in a row, but the new collection sounds great; I'll be sure to get it. By the way, you know how certain compliments you hoard up and cherish all your life? Well, if you look closely at your last issue you'll see you inadvertently compared me to McPhee;

mentioned my writing in the same breath as his. No, no, don't spoil it for me ...

About our current civilization's "bubble" of affluence: I can't be certain it won't last, indeed wax, without popping. But you seem to think its survival is a cast-iron certainty. Needing, you say, only the restraint of politicians, the decline of economic planners, and world-wide peace ... Man, that better be one thick-skinned bubble.

The thing about Readercon's catering too much to the pros: it's been my suspicion they always told pros that it was mostly a convention for them, without many of those pesky fans — then whispered aside to the fans, psst, come on in, you wouldn't believe how many pros we've seduced into coming. Just don't wear fur bikinis or talk too much about *Star Trek*.

An admirably deceitful arrangement that I always thought worked beautifully ...

To Tim Szczesuil

I'm a big fan also of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin sea tales. Jim Mann too, I believe. We should all work on Mark Olson so he gives them another chance. Before he abandoned O'Brian's ship, though, Mark did put us onto a great book to help with all the 1810 Royal Navy jargon. It's called *A Sea of Words: A Lexicon and Companion for Patrick O'Brian's Seafaring Tales*, by Dean King (1995). And I've subsequently found the same author's *Harbors and High Seas, An Atlas and Geographical Guide to the Aubrey-Maturin Novels of Patrick O'Brian* (1996). And of course O'Brian's own slim nonfiction *Men-of-War: Life in Nelson's Navy* (1974, 1st American edition 1995).

Regarding your PC game *Dungeon Keeper*, sounds like fun. Although seems it possesses the kind of hectic real-time gameplay that Jerry Pournelle terms uncomfortably close to "whack-a-mole."

To Elisabeth Carey

You're right, there seems little hope the Paul Verhoeven movie of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* will be much good. Rumor (and clips) indicates they've left out not only all the serious political and moral themes you discussed so adroitly, but the powered suits as well! So even action fans won't get the thrills that could have been theirs for only another \$100 million in the production budget.

To Mark Hertel

With both your and Mark Olson's giving such raves to *Vacuum Diagrams* last issue, Stephen Baxter is looming big-time on my get2scope.

About NESFA's not "needing" a 24-hour connection to the Internet: live large, guy! I say get a T1 firehose wire mainlined right into the clubhouse stat, so everybody can play Quake Clan deathmatches over the Internet all night long.

To Michael Burstein

Sounds like you're cranking on the writing career, man. When the novel hits the publishing houses this fall, I hope they all stand up and salute. Anyway, will be watching for the upcoming sequel to "Broken Symmetry," which I imagine would by definition have something to do with gluons ...

Do you realize that 50 percent of the movies you reviewed last month (2 out of 4) treat homosexual themes? Then further on, you admit that you "used to love Bob and Ray."

There's nothing wrong with it, of course.

To Joe Ross

Interesting memoir of your UMass reunion. But distressing to hear these affairs are turning into one big fundraising extortion — sorry, exhortation. Guess Douglas Adams was right: marketers

founded this world, and their heritage will always out.

So the purpose of the afikomen, handed down over centuries, is to hold children's interest in the seder. In ancient times, had they no video games?

To Nomi Burstein

Been working on a naming project for a client starting up a process control consulting/software company, and am finding all these companies on the net that do the work with staff linguistic experts like you. Our client is just hiring the bargain-basement version, though: me.

So far, names that *won't* get presented to the client (always the best kind) include BilkaTron (remember, these are consultants), SoftCorps (say it out loud), Revolutionary Advanced Process Experts (they wanted some initialisms), and Intelligence 'R' Us. Sometimes, work's fun.

To Paul Giguere

So *Corrupting Dr. Nice* is the most Hugo-worthy book you've read so far this year. You do make it sound yummy. Although I wonder if it will suffer with Hugo voters as with the Academy Awards, where wit and humor often get blackballed as "not serious enough." Well, duh. You may suspect, of course, where MY sympathies lie ...

Re your suspicions about space aliens' kidnapping three contributors last month and forcing them to mislay their APAs: seems worth a deeper probe.

To Ray Bowie

See my review earlier of *George of the Jungle*. They did well, although there's no way in live action to reproduce the wonderful tackiness of the illustration style used in Jay Ward's original TV cartoons. But I think you'd love it; get your video rental reservation in now.

Glad you enjoyed your nomination as the Kidneys of NESFA. You'll notice that I

didn't pick anyone specific as the equally vital Stomach of NESFA. Too many candidates, including I'm afraid myself.

To Tony Lewis

Suggestions for NESFA's upcoming Hal Clement (Harry C. Stubbs) collection, with the short novels *Needle*, *Iceworld*, and *Close to Critical*. How about: *Clement Weather*. Or *In Clement Weather*.

For the collection with *Mission of Gravity* and other Mesklin stories: *Gravity Thrills*. Or *Heavy Reading*. Or *Mission Accomplished*. Or *The Meskliniad*.

For the volume of shorter fiction and articles: *Stubs*. Or, since I imagine there'll be astronomy in there: *Grand Tour*. Or *Small Worlds: Shorter Fiction of Hal Clement*.

Or, if the first two are already set in stone, with the musical titles (*Trio for Sliderules and Typewriter*, and *Variations on a Theme by Sir Isaac Newton*), for the short-pieces one (since I imagine his chemistry background will also show up), how about: *Intermezzo for Burner and Pipette*.

To George Flynn

So a pet peeve of yours is "crediting/blaming institutions for the work of others" by using a "faceless 'they.'" Guilty. With an explanation.

Why did I say "they've loosened up the Hugo rules for Best Dramatic Presentation"? My plea is ignorance, sir, pure ignorance. Thanks for setting me straight with some of the facts. When they put out the kidskin-bound deluxe memorial edition of *The Devniad*, I'll leave instructions so they amend that line to "Sharon and George and some other guys — apply to George Flynn and he'll gladly supply further exact names and census data — loosened up the Hugo rules" etc.

To Tom Endrey

Welcome back, Tom! Always hoped I'd be able to write those words someday.

Man, what a crowded and interesting APA you have. Love the exotic new title, *Xiang Xing's Magic Machine*. AKA *Cindy's*.

Some people will tell you that your 486/66 is slower than your former Pentium 60 because you have to consider *both* processor power (Pentium has a big edge over 486) *and* clock speed (60 is only slightly less than 66) when comparing two PCs. However, the real reason is hidden in certain malign influences revealed in a study of the Nazca Lines in South America as seen from a close planetary approach. Plus an unholy pact between the secret Swiss watchmaking cabal and Bill Gates. Let's talk later, somewhere less public ...

Also great to hear that you're helping Andy Porter out occasionally with *Science Fiction Chronicle*. Long may it, er, chronic.

To Jim Mann

Hope your Pittsburgh con goes well. Just thinking how little I know about your city. Since I've never been there, my impressions are from movies, and pretty vague at that. River bluffs, traction cars, and big loft apartments downtown from a 1987 thriller called *Lady Beware*, with Diane Lane as a department store window dresser /stalker victim. And comfortable, slightly shabby old houses and lawns from *Roommates*, a nice 1995 flick with med student D. B. Sweeney's being raised by his unforgettable grandfather, Peter Falk.

I thought that was all. But a little trip to the Locations link of that astonishing, invaluable resource the Internet Movie Database (<http://us.imdb.com>) shows Pittsburgh locations for *Blind Spot*, and omigod of course *The Deer Hunter*, and *Diabolique*, and another omigod *Flashdance*, and *Groundhog Day*, and *Kingpin*, and *Mrs. Soffel*, and *Silence of the Lambs*, and of course that quintessential Pittsburgh pic *Night of the Living Dead*. Yet they talk about LA and New York as movie towns ...