

# The Devniad, Book 31

Bob Devney

25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760 U.S.A.

508-699-7885 bobdevney@aol.com

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## Gallimaufry Again

For your consumption this month, I couldn't muster the creative time or energy to compose my usual fabulous main course.

But feel free to gorge yourself on the following appetizers.

### New Star in the Nebula.

There's a new writer who's generating quite a buzz on the basis of a few stories. Andy Duncan is already being compared to Terry Bisson and Howard Waldrop. Now his short story "Liza and the Crazy Water Man," from Patrick Nielsen Hayden's *Starlight 1* anthology, is on the preliminary ballot for the Nebula Award. It's a warm, beautifully told tale of the small-time radio music biz in the South during the Depression, and a girl singer from the hills with a magical voice. No, I mean *really* magical.

Duncan writes with strength and sweetness, humor and sadness — all the good stuff. Backed up by a gift for the telling detail.

Here, from "The Map to the Homes of the Stars" in the new Gardner Dozois anthology *Dying for It*, is a man remembering a boyhood friendship conducted mostly from bicycle seats in a small Southern town: "We never rode side by side or single file but in loopy serpentine patterns, roughly parallel, that weaved among trees and parked cars and water sprinklers. We had earnest and serious conversations that lasted for hours and were entirely shouted from bike to bike, never less than ten feet."

Or, from "Saved" in the same Dozois collection, a French newsreel cameraman

tries to be modest about his profession for a new girl he's just met on board an ocean liner: "It is not very interesting. Parades and speeches, and sometimes a fire."

"Saved" is a ghost story about the Titanic; "Liza" is about adolescent lust and perhaps time travel or parallel worlds. The fantastic elements in the Duncan stories I've read so far are not strong. Often a suggestion rather than a shout.

But Andy is definitely one of us, a fellow-traveler. I met him at Readercon, where, for instance, he enthusiastically praised NESFA's new Kornbluth collection on a panel. And where he turned out to be in person a really nice guy. We've corresponded since. Also met at Readercon his companion Sydney Sowers. She's ditto at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, where Andy is busy applying the surgeon's "learn one, do one, teach one" methodology to fiction writing. Sydney has requested I append my first impression of her as "charming, intelligent, and foxy" to all future printed references. Done, darlin'.

The Duncanian Web page is at <http://angelfire.com/al/andyduncan/>. Why not stop by? And I hereby propose we add his link to our page of NESFA recommended authors; he's said he'd be glad to link back to us.

Plus, let me just murmur in a Michael-Bursteinish sort of way that Andy has got one more year of eligibility for the Campbell Award. (After all, Michael, Andy went to Clarion too.)

Check him out, y'all.

### Perry Perry Good.

If you like intelligent thrillers by someone who knows how to write a good

sentence as well as a good story, try Thomas Perry.

His first book, 1982's *The Butcher's Boy*, won the Edgar for year's best mystery novel. It was the story of a gifted Mafia hit man going about his business. Absolutely direct, tough, utterly mesmerizing.

In the last few years, Perry has hit on a series character that's really getting him noticed. She's called Jane Whitefield. Featured so far in *Vanishing Act* (1995), *Dance for the Dead* (1996), and this year's (still in hardcover) *Shadow Woman*.

Jane is a sort of private Witness Protection Program. If you're on the run from an abusive husband, or criminal elements, or even in certain cases the government, she'll be your guide. So the stories have all sorts of great cutting-edge stuff about obtaining new ID cards, evading airport surveillance, and so on. But there's another whole side here too: Jane is a Seneca Indian, living in upstate New York on the land her ancestors worshipped. She often finds the key to modern situations in terms of the former ways, the ancient customs, the strong old spirituality.

This combination makes for one of the one or two best thriller series going today. Be sure to read the books in order, because there's actually a real-time thread to her life as well. Very very good indeed.

#### **Been There, Dunnett.**

It's a good thing that I saw Scottish writer Dorothy Dunnett on her Boston appearance three or four years back. She's the author of the Lymond and now the Niccolo series, some of the most well-researched, complicated, twistedly brilliant historicals ever written.

I knew she was coming to America again, but had vaguely thought it would be in November. That's when her new Niccolo book is due to come out in Britain. I'd turned three or four people on to her work recently, all champing at the bit to

accompany me to the reading and see the great lady.

Well, one weekday midnight in mid-October, I decided November was getting close, and I'd better check the schedule. Went to the Web site of James Thin booksellers in Edinburgh; they have a special Dunnett page. Hadn't looked at it since August's preliminary news that there would be an American tour, but no dates.

Yes, there was the final schedule all right. And there was Boston —

Oh God.

Her Boston appearance, at Waterstone's on Exeter Street, had occurred that night. About 5 hours before.

Not in November, to celebrate her new Niccolo book. In October, to coincide with the reissue in paperback of her Lymond series.

To quote Conrad: "The horror! The horror!"

If any of you manage to catch Dunnett on her American tour, don't tell me about it. I couldn't bear to know.

#### **Everything But the Curl**

I like everything about my HP LaserJet 5P personal laser printer, which I bought new in February at a great price because they were discontinuing it for the 6P.

Except that lately, it's been curling paper like crazy.

This gentle convexity of the foolscap might be OK if I were making paper dolls and wanted for some perverse reason to make them look, say, 3.5 months pregnant. But the people at the copy center can't put this stuff through the sheet feeder. They are not amused. In fact, they're charging me extra for placement by hand.

The manual and the HP Web site say try changing the paper. I put in some real expensive, premium stuff, Hammermill LaserPrint. No good. The manual and the Web site seem to murmur gently that in that case, sometimes stuff happens.

OK, so maybe it started with summer humidity. But it's now late October, and still I suffer the ineffable Curse of the Curl.  
Any ideas? Anybody?

### **VideoPix**

Siskel and Ebert say that *The Whole Wide World* is now available on video. Remember, the true story of a small-town schoolteacher in 1930s Texas and the strange young local writer with whom she falls in love, Robert Howard? Starring *Jerry Maguire's* Renee Zellweger and *Men in Black's* Vincent D'Onofrio (he played the UFO alien's farmer-suit). I thought it was a little gem; now's your chance to assay it for yourself. Maybe. My local Blockbuster tells me they aren't going to stock it; maybe you more metro types will have more luck.

### **Go for The Prestige.**

Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* won the World Fantasy Award last year. Perhaps even more impressively, several NESFAns including Mark Olson have already mentioned they really like it. Big news is it's now in paperback (Tor trade pb, \$14.95). The book's centerpiece is the story of an obsessive rivalry between two English stage magicians through the late 1800s and just into the new century.

I'm not sure the ending is quite up to the level of the rest of the novel. But this is a minor quibble. For the most part, it's a work in absolute control of its language and smooth mastery of every reaction it produces in its audience.

At one point, the novel tells you that there are three stages of a performer's illusion. There's the setup. The performance, with its showmanship and display. "The third stage is sometimes called the effect, or the prestige, and this is the product of magic. If a rabbit is pulled from a hat, the rabbit, which apparently did not exist before the trick was performed, can be said to be the prestige of that trick."

I shouldn't say anything more. Read the above a few times. Then go get the book.  
It's like magic.

### **Cruel and Unusual.**

It occurs to me that NESFAns, other SF fans, and most of my friends could find a number of immediately relevant words in David Grambs' delightful paperback *The Endangered English Dictionary* (W.W. Norton Company, 1997; \$13.95). The guy spent years combing unabridged dictionaries for the really good ones. You know, words to describe our characters, our tendencies, our preoccupations.

Such as *mechanolater* (mek-a-NOL-a-ter), one who overestimates the importance of machines. Or *xenodocheionology* (zen-o-do-KY-on-ol-o-jee), the lore or love of hotels and inns. Or *acervation* (a-ser-VAY-shun), an accumulation or heaping up.

Then there's the ever-popular *pilpulistic* (pil-pool-IS-tik), hairsplitting. The unfortunate *pinguescent* (ping-GWES-ent), becoming fat. Or of course *zelotypia* (zel-o-TIP-ee-a), fanatical zeal.

And it's probably a good thing for me that few of you have been aware until now that there was such a word as *witzelsucht* (VITZ-el-zookt), strained or futile humor ...

## FlimFan

Here are my totally subjective takes on movies seen since last time.

### Excellent:

**U-Turn** — Director Oliver Stone takes a break from politics to fix himself a nice, nasty, old-fashioned *film noir* plot topped with heaps of black humor and quirky visuals, which he then spills out onto the un-noirish Arizona desert. Call it *noir hâlé* — *noir* with a sunburn. Drifter Bobby Cooper (Sean Penn) has trouble on the highway and stops in town to get his car repaired. Plus to get himself beaten up, lied to, seduced, beaten up again, shot at, robbed, and tempted by plots to kill someone. Which certainly sums up *my* typical car repair experience. Stone continues the mannerisms he used to assaultive effect in his masterful *Natural Born Killers*: washouts; solarizations; images of crosses, cacti, hills, eyes thrown on the screen for eyeblinks of time to nicely unsettling effect. The cast is marvelous. Penn plays a flashy creep who wins our sympathies because everybody else is worse and besides he's having the worst day anybody ever had. Jennifer Lopez, the most beautiful woman on the planet right now, shows some acting chops as the treacherous love interest. Nick Nolte does a fine John-Huston-in-*Chinatown* number as a treacherous older husband. Billy Bob Thornton is realistically moronic and greedy as the (I'd say treacherous but that would be redundant) auto mechanic. Claire Danes is the treacherously sexy *younger* love interest, and Joaquin Phoenix is her too-stupid-to-be-treacherous boyfriend. There's a great exchange when he threatens the blasé Cooper: "My name is Toby Nathan Tucker. Do you know why they call me TNT?" "Because they haven't got much imagination?" Some people have called this film derivative. I think Stone's just working

in the grand *noir* tradition — and having a grand time.

**L. A. Confidential** — If you think the Los Angeles Police Department is bad *now*, try 1953. The captain (sweet old James Cromwell from *Babe*) is a kindly Irish father figure who preaches corruption and brutality as parts of the job. The righteous young lieutenant (Australian newcomer Guy Pearce) is ambitious as Lucifer, and as popular as a Boy Scout at an SS rally. The street bull (Australian Russell Crowe, who was good as the preacher/gunslinger in *The Quick and the Dead* but could use more Luca Brasi here) will use fists, feet, or gun on anybody who gets in his way. And the slick operator (Kevin Spacey) wastes his considerable skills on liaising with the TV/movie community and pulling celebrity drug busts. They're all set loose on the streets of L.A. — along with hooker Kim Basinger, sleazy reporter Danny DeVito, and millionaire pimp David Straithairn — in a lurid, twisty plot from a book by James Ellroy, directed in a mannered, hyped-up, effective style by Curtis Hanson. This is one slick, well-made package, with not a step wrong except perhaps my reservations about the casting of Crowe. You get plenty for your money, too, with a police riot, intense interrogations, multiple shootouts and beatups, and several routinely shocking murders plus a *really* shocking one. And most shocking of all, somehow there's a strain of sweetness and heroism underneath it all. If it's not a masterpiece like *Chinatown*, *L. A. Confidential* is only the next step down. Confidentially, I think you'll very much enjoy it.

**Good:**

**The Full Monty** — A steelworker turned scam artist in unemployment-ravaged modern Britain persuades his best friend they can make thousands by becoming male strippers for a night. Further recruiting proves difficult at first. “Why wouldn’t wimmen want ter see US strip, then?” “Because he’s fat and you’re ugly!” But Gaz (the rat-facedly appealing Robert Carlyle, who played the equally unstoppable Begbie in *Trainspotting*) is undaunted, and soon chivvies a whole lineup of assorted and mostly awkward regular guys into trying to master the fine points of dirty (chorus) dancing in 3 weeks. For those only out for a good time — you know who you are, girls — the film does have some bleak moments, as you see lives blasted by joblessness. Also, the Yorkshire accents and slang can be daunting. For a start, “the full monty” is Britglish for the whole nine yards; here it refers to full frontal nudity. Although no promises, now. In fact, actual stripping doesn’t get all that much screen time. But you get to know these guys, their wives and lives, their spirit and humor. It’s bloody heartwarming, really, beneath all the yuks. I usually laugh more than anyone else in a given movie theater; in *The Full Monty*, easily a dozen women had me beat. Chicks really dig this flick. My friend Steve says it’s not the male nudity, it’s the male humiliation ...

**The Edge** — Anthony Hopkins, Alec Baldwin, and David Mamet avoid being outsmarted (or upstaged) by a 600 pound Kodiak bear. While not the great movie this cast and screenwriter might have accomplished (Mamet wrote *About Last Night* and *The Untouchables*, and wrote/directed two of my favorite sleepers, *House of Games* and *Things Change*; I hear he’s also done a few plays), *The Edge* is nevertheless an intelligent lost-in-the-wild thriller, set in the breathtaking Canadian Rockies. Hopkins is restrained, rich,

bookish. His macho rival, Alec Baldwin (employed in that notably masculine profession, fashion photography), starts with the smooth arrogance he does so well. Hopkins’ character reveals unexpected strength and Baldwin’s unexpected weaknesses ... as you might expect. Still, this movie actually gives you things to think about. Such as, most people who die in the wilderness die of shame. Whining about what they should have done, they don’t do the one thing that could save their lives: thinking. Or, pity the poor billionaire. He may never meet a single person who doesn’t just want his money. For Mamet and director Lee Tamahori, somewhere north of Alberta lies Allegory. Occasionally we are granted a blessedly straightforward Enemy, like the bear. But often the most savage attacks on our persona come from our friends, our loved ones, most of all Ourselves. That’s when we’re forced closest to the edge.

**Seven Years in Tibet** — Heinrich Harrer is a Nazi / Cold yet friendly as a collie / He climbs Tibet / Glory to get / And then it’s Hello Dalai! This movie is actually a pleasant surprise. Brad Pitt does fine going from nasty to nice as the Austrian mountaineer who, stranded in Tibet by World War II, meets and becomes adviser, then friend to the boy who rules as the Dalai Lama. OK, it’s the shameful old Hollywood device of having a white guy show us a foreign culture, instead of making a film about Tibet with, here’s a thought, all Tibetans. But let’s count our blessings. There are quite a few people named Rimpoche and Denzongpa in the cast. The boys playing the Dalai Lama at different ages show youthful openness with hidden depths. It’s fascinating to watch the Chinese Communists attack the kingdom with bribery, threatening diplomacy, and finally outright invasion. The Andes do a fine job standing in for the Himalayas. Director Jean-Jacques Annaud, who’s created an

unusually wide range of interesting flicks (from *The Bear* to *The Lover*, *The Name of the Rose* to *Quest for Fire*), makes some of his points here with grace and subtlety. I liked this film as much as *The Last Emperor*. If not quite as much as the superb, beautiful, eminently rentable (hint, hint) 1995 film *Beyond Rangoon*.

**Decent:**

***In and Out***—A so-so comedy about an Indiana high school teacher (Kevin Kline) who is “outed” as homosexual on national TV. Problem: he says he isn’t. From there, the uneven script by Paul Rudnick (who writes hilarious movie commentary in PREMIERE magazine as by Libby Gelman-Waxner) suggests this movie should have been named *Hit and Miss*. Some bits are really funny, as when after a disastrous wedding full of scandalous occurrences, high schoolers gather in a basement rec room to breathlessly discuss events. An oblivious parent yells down the stairs, “How was the wedding?” The kid’s eyes all meet, and they chorus in reflexive, stonewalling teenager unison, “Fiiine.” But then there’s stuff like the late revelation that causes you to reexamine a main character. If that person’s history is as reported, you’re talking about a pretty disturbed individual. And there’s the banal ending, which should have music by a new saccharine chorus named Up With (Gay) People. Kline does make the most of his good moments. Tom Selleck plays well against type as a tab-TV reporter. Joan Cusack as Kline’s fiancée, in one critic’s admiring words, wields her wedding dress like a weapon. And Bob Newhart as the principal gets to deliver screen history’s most unenthusiastic hug.

**Backchat**

**on APA:NESFA #328, September 1997**

Only time for a few this month.

**To Michael Burstein**

More hearty congrats on winning the Campbell Award. Occurs to me to pretend that all Campbell victors are automatically enrolled as honorary Scotsmen. Therefore, let me be the first ta weesh ya a fairr wind up ya kilt, Laird McBurstein ...

**To Matt Ryan:**

Greetings! Welcome to the APA. Sucker.

I’ve seen 26 of the 33 titles on the list of movies you want to see. My top five choices would be *Fargo*, one of the best black comedies of this or any other decade. *The Shawshank Redemption*, an absolutely first-class, old-fashioned movie-movie about prison and freedom. *Sense and Sensibility*, a sunny and funny Jane Austen historical. (Bring a date.) *Koyaanisqatsi*, a mind-blowing documentary about Western civilization circling the drain. *Rob Roy*, a really enjoyable adventure historical.

I plan to see *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* myself this week. Will let you know.

**To Tony Lewis**

Lehrer's "National Brotherhood Week" has a similar theme, but the name of the misanthropic 1950s song I quoted was definitely "The Merry Minuet." Seem to remember it was also cited in a YA by Madeleine L'Engle— *Meet the Austins?*

**To Mark Olson**

Masterful correction of my blurry idea about Thor Power Tools, the IRS, etc. Together with a crystalline little dissection of SF publishing trends. Bravo. Thanks.

Maybe the reason you're optimistic is that you're not a Norwegian *bachelor*.