

The Devniad, Book 33

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Ripley Again, Believe It or Not: A Review of *Alien Resurrection*.

A felt history that mimics real life. That's the great secret advantage of sequels that most Hollywood retreads get wrong. French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Delicatessen*), screenwriter Joss Whedon, and company mostly get it right with *Alien Resurrection*.

A small seedy crew of mercenaries who pleasingly recall both the freighter crew of *Alien* and the combat team from *Aliens* docks with a huge military/medical research ship. Mad med scientists aboard have grown a clone of Ellen Ripley, who died fighting the aliens 200 years ago. Since a burnt scientist's hands wobbles unerringly back to the bunsen burner, they've also raised up a dozen cute little teathy snakeheaded babies.

Ripley's character retains all of the dark baggage that's a gift of *Alien 3*, plus some new wrinkles. And when inevitably our double-dentured friends break loose and start menacing and munching, you get the winnowing chase through the corridors that's climaxed every *Alien* movie since this seminal SR/horror series began.

There's no interesting new bit of technology like *Aliens'* walker/loader/fighting cage. But you get some neat underwater scenes in a flooded compartment. (Unfortunately for us humans, it turns out that the aliens can swim like sea snakes on speed.)

The spaceship exteriors look good, like giant blackened mutant F-116s crossed with huge freight trains. And the interiors are nice dark dirty beat-up hitek hives, with

plenty of perches above eye-level for maximum pounce-a-phobia. Plus open-grid floors, so you fear for your very soles ...

Now here's what I mean about sequels and felt history: Ellen Ripley and I go way back.

I've known her for 18 years now. Or at least it feels that way. That's longer than I've known my wife. Granted, I've spent only 368 minutes in Ripley's company through the first 3 movies. But they've been pretty intense minutes, after all.

She's like some exotic, interesting friend of a friend from college. You've only seen her at a few parties or a dinner or two over the years, and there was always other stuff going on. But you've paid attention.

You know she's hard as nails, but has a softer maternal side. Has seen some tough times. Doesn't sleep too well. Has trouble, given all she's been through, with trust. Has a history of relationships that all ended badly, like with screaming and running away. Likes pets. Doesn't scare easily. Handy with tools and machines: you know, spaceships, androids, flame-throwers ...

A good sequel like *Alien Resurrection* builds on the bond we've developed with this kind of series character. We want the movie to succeed, just because we're so glad to have her back. And we can catch subtle shifts in her personality that would go right by in a new character. Instead, we're surprised and pleased; we feel smarter, more perceptive.

The years have not softened Sigourney Weaver's face. She's gone the other way: Ripley here looks tougher. More concentrated. Harrowed. And when she smiles, the bony loom of her forehead and the thin cords of muscle that bracket her

mouth remind us disturbingly of her reptilian friends.

But we also feel heartened, because we know it takes one to kill one.

However, as right as Weaver gets it in *Alien Resurrection* (I'll bet the fact that she was co-producer helped), that's how wrong Winona Ryder is for her part.

Ryder can play the hell out of characters who are smart, vulnerable, voluble, mercurial, sly, and/or cute. But her role here calls for icy, tough, and violent.

What you get instead is small, vulnerable, tremulous. And not believable for a minute. I haven't seen a role go this wrong since Michelle Pfeiffer played an ex-Marine.

Also awful is a new monster, introduced late in the film. I don't mean "aweful" in a good way, either. The explanation of its genesis is pathetic, and its physical appearance is double ditto. To take H. R. Giger's original and magnificent alien design and try to top it with *this*? Lucky they didn't make the whole film about this thing or you'd have to call it *Alien Desecration*.

Meat Miss Taunton.

Maureen and I went to a beauty pageant last month. We accompanied her sister Kerry, whose daughter, our niece Kelly, was competing that night for some scholarship money to further her ongoing college career.

Now, I'd seen a few minutes of, say, the Miss America pageant on TV over the years. But this was my first local, live, on-the-spot beauty pageant ever.

It wasn't quite what I expected.

For one thing, I wasn't prepared for how large a part in this glamorously intermingled talent-o-rama/fleshfest would be played by ... the military.

This event was billed as the Miss Taunton Beauty Pageant, and held in the high school at Taunton, Massachusetts. Taunton is a nearby former silver-and-jewelry mill town. According to my *Oxford Dictionary of the World*, its castle dates from the 12th century and the Duke of Monmouth was crowned King right there in town in 1685. Although these last two facts don't sound quite right and may be more pertinent to the settlement of the same name in southwest England.

Anyway. The point is, as far my research shows, Taunton doesn't contain a single boot camp, cruise missile launching pad, or naval base within its borders.

Yet the theme of the evening's entertainment was clearly stated in the program : "A Salute to Our Armed Forces"!

And indeed as we entered the high school auditorium, slim young men and women from the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, clad in incandescent dress whites, ushered us to our seats.

Naturally I thought at once of Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas, who dressed similarly for the gay costume party scene in the AIDS movie *Philadelphia*. Though I'm not sure that was the effect the pageant sponsors were going for here.

To tell the truth, perhaps even at this early point in the proceedings my overheated imagination was grasping at straws to feed me any remotely sexual imagery it could muster. Because after all, this was a beauty pageant. Which to my rude untutor'd sensibility meant one thing:

Babes.

Babes in bathing suits. C'mon, admit it, you were thinking the same thing. Unless you're a woman, in which case I follow my master Freud in having absolutely no idea *what* you were thinking.

(OK, as expressed by a married man in his mid-forties accompanying his wife and sister-in-law to a "scholarship competition,"

these depraved, oppressively masculinist ideas had absolutely no business in my head. So? Tell it to the evolutionary forces that made me the troglodyte I am today. Or just chalk it up to a guy thing.)

But instead of cutting right to the main event, they launched into a thousand-year-long chain of opening ceremonies, all again highlighting this inexplicable military obsession. Some sadist backstage cued up a tape of patriotic favorites. To whose lively airs a straggling parade of veterans of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and, I don't know, Border Patrol and Library Police all tramped successively, arthritically — and interminably — down the aisles and eventually clumped together onstage for the salute to our flag.

It's not that I have no feeling for veterans. Heck, I read *Starship Troopers* six times before I was 14 years old.

But I have the suspicion that during their more active service years, some of these veterans themselves would at this point have been the first to suggest clearing the stage — say with automatic weapons fire — and getting on with the show.

Which, finally, they did.

But turns out that, since this was a local pageant, there were only about eight contestants. Which helps explain why the auditorium was only about half-full, and seemingly contained mostly parents, siblings, boyfriends, other extended family members (like me) who had been drugged and shanghaied into attending, and (the most raucous element) college classmates of each contestant.

Also, this and the fact that the contest seemed to be judged and run almost entirely by women, many of whom were former contestants (and, one suspects, mothers or aunts of current or future contestants), may account for why, although there was plenty of contest left to go, indeed

several hours' worth of dazzling festivities ... *very little* of it involved swimsuits.

Instead, there were earnest little speeches. There was singing. There was dancing.

And about the rest of the discussing-my-platform sessions and the showing-my-talent sessions, I'll let all pass in merciful silence.

OK, except to observe that I don't know who had less of a clue about the feelings at play within the bosoms of her audience: the girl whose platform issue was chastity or the one who couldn't sing at all.

Really. At all. Not the slightest bit.

And remember, these performances were *amplified*.

All I can say is that the military theme really came into its own at that moment. Because we few, we hardy few, we band of brothers and sisters in the audience that night — we each surely deserve a Hero of Taunton High School medal with triple death's-head clusters. Just for remaining at our posts during that song.

No one booed. No one heckled. No one whimpered and curled into a tight fetal shell-shocked ball, or dropped our official programs to flee screaming back to the rear.

But it was a close thing, comrades.

Anyway, the evening proceeded according to the eldritch ritual seemingly evolved from ancient times for such unholy rites. Finally there came the one announcement guaranteed to elevate my dozing eyes above half-mast: the swimsuit competition!

The problem was, as the contestants came out and, smiling winningly, pranced like bipedal gazelles around the stage in cute little one-piece numbers: one of them was Kelly.

My little niece Kelly, whom I remember doing stunt driving on her tricycle. Kelly, who had grown into a slim, tall, lovely swan

of a young woman. Kelly, who had delivered such an earnest and heartfelt warning against alcohol abuse during her platform speech earlier, and displayed such overall poise, charm, and grace during the entire competition.

That was Kelly up there in one of those swimsuits. And that changed everything.

I found I was WAY too embarrassed to look at the stage now. Instead, my eyes scanned the audience like a Secret Service agent with fanatical mission lock. I was looking for high school and college guys and other middle-aged perverts like my former self. Worthless losers who might be assessing the contestants' warm forms a mite too assiduously.

When I found a suspect, I glared, beaming mental threats and imprecations.

Hey, keep your eyes off those young ladies, you slavering pig-dog! Those are talented, accomplished human beings up there. (All right, except for that one singer, and I'm sure her *parents* like her voice.) Whaddya think this is, some kind of meat market?! Eyes *front*, soldier!

So that basically was my night out at the beauty pageant. I returned home a sadder, wiser, and more enlightened though deeply confused man.

Oh, the outcome of the contest?

We wuz robbed.

FlimFan

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

Excellent:

The Wings of the Dove — It's sometimes observed that in a Henry James novel, you never know what anybody does for a living. Not true in this fine movie version of one of his best books. Alison Elliott's rich Yankee

heiress Millie lives off an inheritance so stupendous that "she'd be the Queen of America, if they had one." Linus Roache's character Merton works as a journalist at near-starvation wages. And Helena Bonham Carter's Kate lives by the whim and patronage of others — first her rich, social lioness aunt's in London, then her friend Millie's on a holiday in Venice. (In director Iain Softley's lush but crepuscular visual imagination, in the summer of 1910 both cities were about equally dark and rainy.) It's also frequently complained that Henry James is elliptical and hard to understand. But we understand love. Kate and Merton love each other; Millie loves Merton. And we understand money. Millie's got it; the other two need it desperately. We wonder what they'll do to get it. We find out. The film has all the period precision, luxurious visuals, touristy scenery, and English class-consciousness of *Room with a View*. But Softley's camera makes some edgier, more modernistic moves. This is a deeper, darker piece of art altogether. And emotionally, *The Wings of the Dove* is more like Merchant-Ivory *noir*. We sense a dark realness to the character behind Bonham Carter's frowning, beautiful little face. (This is her best work ever.) And in the real world, as Woody Allen once observed, "The heart wants what it wants."

As Good As It Gets — Yep, the title pretty much says it. This is an actual adult comedy that's fresh, intelligent, well-acted, character-based, beautifully observed — all those qualities we're always whining we can't find in flicks nowadays. Since it was created by James L. Brooks, there's plenty of sting in this stew, too. (His masterful *Broadcast News* and excellent *Terms of Endearment* both similarly mixed sweet comedy with some pretty bitter reality.) Jack Nicholson is outstanding as New York City romance writer Melvin Udall (great movie name, that), an obsessive-compulsive, self-absorbed sonuvabitch who hates the whole

world and whose acid comments quickly have everybody he meets returning the favor. Think Archie Bunker with Woody Allen's neuroses and Andrew Dice Clay's sensitivity; Udall insults African-Americans, women, dogs, Jews, editors, waitresses, and the goodhearted housekeeper whose Spanish accent brands her as a former habitu  of a "Panama City sailor humpy-humpy bar." Nor is he fond of homosexuals like the painter down the hall, played by the ever-appealing Greg Kinnear, whom at one point Udall introduces to a third party with his own patented politeness as "Simon the fag." When the waitress (Helen Hunt) who serves Udall the same meal in the same booth of the same restaurant every day quits to be with her sick son, he tries desperately to get stuff back the way it was. Naturally, his efforts change everything. Decent, quick, and realistically pretty without being Hollywood-star beautiful, Hunt does her best work ever. As the only (halfway) sane person in the movie, at one point she wails, "Why can't I have a boyfriend who's NORMAL?" Causing her mother to respond with sweet patience, "We all want that, dear. But it doesn't exist." A few quibbles about this otherwise fairly magnificent movie: the little boy's serious illness seems to get better pretty quick and fade out of the picture quite conveniently. And it's a little hard to see how we get from Nicholson's loathing everybody to Nicholson's loving Hunt. In fact, I don't think the movie really bothers to do its job here, instead counting on our Hollywoodloving response: our ingrained desire to see the love match occur and our conditioned confidence that it will.

Good:

The Rainmaker — "Rainmaker" is shyster slang for a partner that brings income into the business. Which is probably what Francis Ford Coppola is doing on this movie. Coppola is a great filmmaker who's

made a few stinkers. Remember *One from the Heart*, or the recent *Jack*? With this one, he finds a good middle ground and a leisurely style filled with details that pleasantly elevates this commercial material. *The Rainmaker* is based on a John Grisham novel about (surprise, surprise) an idealistic young Southern lawyer (Matt Damon, who does a good job but seems to be channeling Leonardo DiCaprio). The focus is on his first court case, defending a dying boy and his mama against a huge insurance company that wouldn't pay for lifesaving treatment. Coppola is more interested in little comic or touching scenes than in big dramatic Perry Mason Moments. As defending counsel for the insurers, Jon Voight gets every fatcat move exactly right. In recent years, from *Mission Impossible* to *Rosewood* to *Heat* he's turned out a whole series of consistently interesting bad guys. Other familiar faces keep popping up in smaller parts. Claire Danes as a battered young wife is precisely the wrong person to fall in love with, but after the most innocently erotic scene ever filmed about transferring a patient from a wheelchair into a hospital bed, you understand why Damon's character just can't help himself. Mickey Rourke sure has gone gray. Hey, that's Dean Stockwell. Look, Virginia Madsen! And in a key role, Danny DeVito is perfect as the hero's assistant and mentor in the sleazy ways of ambulance-chasing weaseldom.

Titanic — Look, movies aren't Marxism. For all the industry uproar about its bloated economics, *Titanic* didn't cost *me* \$200 million. My ticket outlay was \$6.00. Oh, and popcorn money ... My verdict: well worth it at that price. OK, so director James Cameron (earlier captain of both *Terminators*, *The Abyss*, etc.) found not a moment's subtlety in the first hour or so. The love story between the beautiful, dissatisfied rich girl played by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio's handsome, poor young hobo/artist is blazingly obvious.

Ditto Billy Zane as the villainous fiancé. And it probably does argue a certain shallowness of artistic resource if your mission is to present the sinking of the *Titanic* — and to accomplish it you just go ahead and practically rebuild the whole ship for real, then sink *that*. However, Cameron's insane insistence on absolute authenticity, from dishes to davits, means that you soon forget you're watching a recreation. Everything feels right. As you launch into the fatal hours of the [WARNING: SPOILER DEAD AHEAD] collision with the berg and the sinking, the film gathers increasing momentum, intelligence, and authority. It seems like someone with a time machine just took a camera back and wandered around, recording a glorious full-color, God's eye view of the worst maritime disaster in modern history. Cameron may be a stiff at handling love, but death he does very well. And the ending finds a true and transcendent grace.

Decent:

Boogie Nights — I had a vague idea this was a raucous, big-budget Hollywood studio look at the 1970s porn industry — *Staying Alive* as produced by The Playboy Channel. Wrong. This is an edgier, artier, smaller-budget independent film made by a new filmmaker, Paul Thomas Anderson, who shows a fair amount of promise. Not as much as some people think, though — many critics seem to have been blown away by this movie, but I thought its collection of smart observations and acidly funny scenes of stupidity, vanity, and self-destruction didn't add up to enough. And I didn't have as much fun as I thought I would. This movie is definitely a downer, not an upper. But let's talk about the good stuff. There's a brilliant scene late in the film about an attempted drug scam that goes wrong. It contains the same sound-effect gag, repeated twenty or thirty times, that somehow surprises us and the characters

every time, and works every time, to build a quite hilarious level of tension. Then there's Mark Wahlberg's career-making turn as the hero, an ambitious teen whose combination of nothing upstairs and really something downstairs brings him from busboy to Most Promising Young Porn Star in an L.A. minute. Julianne Moore takes a risky and ultimately heartbreaking role as a porn queen who tries to make every set a home and every crew a family, because her empty feeling has nothing to do with sex. And Bert Reynolds combines an oily self-assurance and a curious kind of decency in the role of the director who dreams of bringing a more artistic dimension to his frigflicks. You know, like some lame spy plot setup before the boinking begins.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil — Perhaps the most easy-going movie ever made about murder, voodoo, rampantly pathological acquisitiveness, and neurotically solipsistic transvestitism. It's based on the best-selling (avowedly nonfictional) book by New York writer John Berendt, who visits Savannah, Georgia, and stays for years, discovering that the city makes all these eccentricities and more seem pretty damned charming. But the movie is harder to like than it should be. Director Clint Eastwood's easy-going style slows things down; everything is muffled. Even the murder trial seems curiously stretched-out and undramatic. Of course, no movie featuring Kevin Spacey playing a rich bachelor antiques dealer and killer with eyes described as being "black as limousine windows" can be really bad; he's terrific as usual. Clint's daughter Alison adds a sweet, sassy, natural presence in her small role as the writer's love interest; her performance really catches our eye, and must have made Daddy's day. John Cusack does OK as the writer. He's got a tough job in his scenes with the transvestite Chablis, who's played by the lady himself. You catch his ladyship improvising a lot. Surprise never flickers in

Yikes. I hope this snowstorm on your way to Philcon doesn't herald another Boston season of heavy-weather cons. Was it 2 years ago or 3 that we had Arisia, bad blizzard; Boskone, even worse blizzard; then Readercon (in July, when we thought we were safe), huge typhoon!

To Michael Burstein

Your intro last time said "I really have nothing to say." As if *that* were any bar to a real writer ...

To Tom Endrey

I liked your description of the guy you thought might be a car(d) thief. If other Magic players had him arrested, what would the indictment read: Grand Theft Mana?

Also liked your list of Magic cards. Although I know nothing of the game, they've got some cool names. And it's nice to know our card-crazed 8-year-olds can't help osmosing some recondite vocabulary from names like "Benthic Behemoth," "Phyr Grimoire," "Caldera Lake," "Interdict," and "Verdigris." I remember being the only kid in second grade who could define or spell "invulnerable," thanks to our steely friend Superman.

Also quite appreciate your thoughtful, superbly knowledgeable review of the sources, background, and scope of Vincent Di Fate's new art tome *Infinite Worlds*. After all, you're our SF art guru, guy. I'd been close to ordering the book, and first reading of your criticisms scared me off. However, a second reading shows that you feel it could have been improved, but is still a major and attractive work. So I'll bite.

About *Starship Troopers*, I did review it last ish. As to how the director got his buff young male and female stars to do that co-ed shower scene in the buff, happens I *do* know the story. They complained bitterly and were on the point of refusing when director Paul Verhoeven, who's originally

from the Netherlands, yelled that they were childish Americans making a big thing of a little nudity, and pulled down his own pants and underwear. Thus inspired, the cast soldiered on *au naturel*.

To Tony Lewis

I know the telcos' phone numbering efforts are among your minor areas of interest. What's your opinion of the latest changes in eastern Mass? I'm not anywhere near having a decent mental map yet; how about you? All I've managed to retain is that if it's very close to Boston, it's probably 617. If very close to North Attleboro, it's probably 508. Outside those little flickering lamps of familiarity, all else is darkness.

To Anna Hillier

So November is "The Harvest of Meats." Why does that sound like something unpleasant a race of hideous alien carnivores might celebrate upon invading Earth?

Yes, *Riven*, the sequel to *Myst*, sounds like a computer game I might love. Although I never really tried *Myst*. When it came out, my computer was too old and underpowered to handle it. However, the one PC game I've asked for in my winter solstice footglove is *Panzer General II*. Of course, some might say it doesn't sound very PC at all ...

To Leslie Turek

Absolutely loved your November review-of-the-move-*Titanic*'s-trailer-as-though-it-were-the-whole-film bit. Why didn't I think of that? Especially your line about "the longer director's cut ... out later this year." Brilliant!

And you're quite right, like too many trailers these days, this one told far too much. Why not just show that incredible shot looking straight down at the hero and heroine clinging to the near-vertical deck as

the ship goes down, then fade to a big bold head: HAVE A TITANIC HOLIDAY.

Early buzz on this movie was terrible — director James Cameron (*Terminator*, *Aliens*, *The Abyss*, etc.) was even more tyrannical than usual, he went a tad over budget (\$200 million, so it's the most expensive movie ever), the thing is a bloated egotistical effects-crazy disaster, etc. I was even thinking of reviving the old joke title they had for another supposed flop (Costner's *Waterworld*): *Fishtar*. Now the buzz, from audience focus groups etc., has entirely reversed to big raves. Well, I'm writing this paragraph on Wednesday 12/10; we'll know on the Friday after this one. [Later note: see my full review in *Film Fan* above.]

About *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*: you're right to wonder whether documentarian Errol Morris treats his subjects with laughter or with respect. Often enough, say in his merciless unveiling of the nutty inhabitants of *Vernon, Florida*, he does seem to be holding them up to derision. (VERY funny movie nevertheless.) But with this latest, he's getting at some deep thoughts, and very much treats especially the lion tamer and the topiarist with respect. In fact, it almost tears your heart out when the topiarist says there's no apprentice behind him, no one willing or able to take over the work when he's gone. And you know that wonderful garden will someday soon disappear. Unless YOU'RE interested, Leslie, perhaps?

To Claire Anderson

I think *The Whole Wide World* would indeed make a good addition to the NESFA video library. A fine little gem of a movie, and as you indicate, this memoir of incidents in the life of Conan's creator Robert E. Howard does have some genre interest.

Would LOVE to see your film reviews. You and Dave must see at least twice the movies I do in a year, and get into the urban

art theaters a lot more often to catch some of the really interesting, exotic stuff. For instance, what was *Zero Kelvin* like at the MFA?

To Joe Ross

Sounds like you've served your time in PC configuration hell. Can't wait til this industry finally gets a tad more mature and "plug and play" actually attains some shred of truth.

Speaking of computer illiterates: my sister Darcy, while she can process the odd word, has little patience with our cybermaniacal culture. When her learned husband Bob Kuhn, who used to run all Radcliffe's computing and just landed a big new job bossing half the cybernerds at Boston College, gets into a technical dialog at home, she sits nearby loudly imitating the nonsensical gobble of adults on those *Peanuts* TV cartoons: "Wuh-WUH wuh wuh wuh WUH!" It's quite devastating, really. Wonder if this technique would help at, say, a club or worldcon business meeting?

To Paul Giguere

I read the first book of Dorothy Dunnett's 16th-century Lymond historicals when I was young and strong-minded, so it didn't slow me down too much and I went on to read the rest of the series with pleasure. But I've had two other people I tried to turn on to Dunnett also stopped cold as you were by *The Game of Kings*.

OK, it was her first book (1961) and is a bit challenging.

However, I've had great success when I start people with *Niccolo Rising*, the first book of her second series, which she began in the 1980s. Would you consider trying that one? (I'll lend you mine if you can't find it anywhere.) I promise you, there's much pleasure to be had in her humor, cynicism, incredible wealth of historical detail and perspective on chunks of history you've never before encountered, and twisty

delight in torturing her characters (and readers).

To Mark Olson

Another nice set of book reviews. Must rush out and search for Richard Woodman's Capt. Drinkwater series, which you credit with "the same vigor as the best Hornblower."

Coleman's *The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire* also sounds interesting. I disliked Ronald Reagan so much that I must doubly rush to give him credit for helping pound in quite a few of the last spikes in that coffin. Kind of ironic that one of the key insights of Marxist analysis was so correct: it IS the economy, stupid. And capitalism's best battles against communism were fought and won in that purely economic arena. So politics and culture are just sideshows; how dismal.

To Tim Szczesuil

The PC game "Dungeon Keeper" is on the top ten Christmas list of many gamers. And it won kudos in all the gaming mags. But it was your rave review here a few issues back that just persuaded me to buy it for my brother-in-law Bob Kuhn for the holidays. I'll let you know how he likes it.

But after all, a game where a demonic dungeon master is the protagonist and he must fight the bad fight against those pesky good-guy heroes who keep trying to penetrating his lair ... something that suits a fantasy fan who nevertheless has a dark side and a sometimes dyspeptic view of the world — you have no idea how closely that description fits Bob.

Besides, I loved the game's advertising slogan: "It brings bad things to life."