

# The Devniad, Book 34

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## Flick Faves of 1997

I've *got* to get into the city more often. As of this writing, I still haven't caught many art-house flicks such as *In the Company of Men* and especially *The Sweet Hereafter*, which sounds like just the kind of thing I would love. Perhaps more than some of the movies I've listed below.

But it was a decent year nonetheless. And I think a great one for SF film. Imagine how happy, say, Alfred Bester would have been to see *The Fifth Element* as a major motion picture. Or Mack Reynolds to see *Men in Black*. Or even maybe Heinlein to see his own *Starship Troopers*.

Although maybe not.

In any case: drum roll, please. Of the 85 or so movies I saw in 1997, these were the ones I enjoyed the most:

### 1. *The Fifth Element*

The stunning visual excellence of *Blade Runner* combined with the lighthearted approach to plot, character, and reality of *Barbarella*, plus a hint of *Brazil* nuttiness. This is one wild SF romp, given a stylish French twist by director Luc Besson. Bruce Willis saves the world as a retired-commando-turned-aircab-driver, opposing evil aliens and Gary Oldman's perfect weirdness with the aid of ultimate test tube babe Milla Jovovich, and Chris Tucker sporting movie history's most hilarious hairdo. All in sensational settings from a futuristic aircar-crammed New York to a titanic spaceship. The most pure fun I had at the movies this year.

### 2. *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 by writer/director Masayuki Suo. 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. Trust this 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. A graceful delight.

### 3. *Chasing Amy*

Screw *The Full Monty* — this is the year's best gritty little sex comedy. Brilliant new writer/director Kevin Smith demonstrates that Generation Xers are just like everybody else: wholly passionate about stupid stuff (comic books, SF, whatever) and always falling in love with completely inappropriate people. Ben Affleck (later of *Good Will Hunting*) and Jason Lee are best friends and comix-creating partners; along comes the totally cool Joey Lauren Adams to ball things up. Queen Maureen walked out when the straight guy and the gay girl started topping each other's oral sex stories. I was laughing too hard to walk ...

### 4. *Don King: Only in America*

There was no better performance this year than that of Ving Rhames (*Pulp Fiction*, *Rosewood*) in this amazing biopic from HBO. He's an absolute revelation as the fast-talking, cigar-jabbing, back-stabbing King of Boxing. He'll make *your* hair stand up

straight. And there's a great *movie* here as well by director John Herzfeld and writer Kario Salem. Sometimes they have King look directly on-camera, talking trash to HBO and the astounded viewer. The scene where King keeps saying "motherfucker" while trying to gain the support of an elderly preacher and his deeply dignified wife should be famous 50 years from now.

### **5. *Men in Black***

A completely satisfying mainstream comedy that deals wholly in SF terms without apologies. Based on a 90s comic book, it feels more like a 1960s hardball short satire by Ron Goulart or Robert Sheckley. The Big Concept: all the conspiracy theories (and, in the flick's best running gag, the tabloids) are 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, there're stellar talents Tommy Lee Jones, Rip Torn, Vincent D'Onofrio, and Linda Fiorentino, plus enough aliens to turn Whitley Strieber, well, Grey.

### **6. *Jackie Brown***

(see review in this issue)

### **7. *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control***

This is a vivid, poetic, extravagant documentary by Errol Morris, one of our modern masters. It shows the work of four men: a scientist who studies African naked mole rats, another who builds robots, a topiary gardener, and a circus lion tamer. Its subjects include obsession, childhood dreams coming true, evolution, succession, the similarities of animal to animal and to man, and those old favorites life and death. Plus how a woman and a pony both place a foot with the same powerful grace, and how primordial a giraffe-shaped tree looks wrapped in fog during a midnight rainstorm ...

### **8. *As Good As It Gets***

An actual adult comedy that's fresh, intelligent, well-acted, character-based, beautifully observed —everything we're always whining we can't find in flicks nowadays. *Broadcast News'* James L. Brooks puts plenty of sting in this stew, too. Jack Nicholson is outstanding as an obsessive-compulsive, self-absorbed sonuvabitch who hates the whole world and whose acid comments have everybody else returning the favor. Including the gay painter down the hall — the ever-appealing Greg Kinnear — and the waitress (Helen Hunt) who serves said sonuvabitch the same meal at the same table of the same restaurant every day. Wish *we* were served dishes like this every day.

### **9. *Ulee's Gold***

Peter Fonda as Ulee the Florida beekeeper hasn't heard this much buzz about a role 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. This film shows us how you can keep things — your family, your word, yourself — even sweeter than honey, more painful than a bee's sting. Fonda's work is strong, quiet, slow, and sad, as is the rest of this fine film by independent Victor Nunez.

### **10. *Good Will Hunting***

(See review in this issue)

Of lists and the making of lists there is no end. At least not in this issue, yet. So here are great movies from previous years I saw in 1997: *The Whole Wide World*, *Citizen X*, *The Crucible*, *Sling Blade*.

And ten more excellent flicks from 1997: *Titanic*, *Donnie Brasco*, *Starship Troopers*, *Dream with the Fishes*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *L.A. Confidential*,

*U-Turn, Alien Resurrection, Con Air.*

Finally, for your convenience (and invidious comparison), here are the Best-of-Year lists of two critics you may trust even more than I:

**Gene Siskel:** 1. *The Ice Storm*, 2. *L. A. Confidential*, 3. *Wag the Dog*, 4. *In the Company of Men*, 5. *The End of Violence*, 6. *The Full Monty*, 7. *The Sweet Hereafter*, 8. *Good Will Hunting*, 9. *Mrs. Brown*, 10. *As Good As It Gets*.

**Roger Ebert:** 1. *Eve's Bayou*, 2. *The Sweet Hereafter*, 3. *Boogie Nights*, 4. *Maborosi*, 5. *Jackie Brown*, 6. *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, 7. *L. A. Confidential*, 8. *In the Company of Men*, 9. *Titanic*, 10. *Wag the Dog*.

### Words for the Wise

The *wörterbuch* of the month is the brand-new *Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases*.

At first *ODOFWAP*, as I think I'll call it, is a little disappointing, because I find far too many of the entries already familiar.

(Hello, my name is Vocabulary Boy, and my super power is being a know-it-all. Did I ever tell you about my first week in college, when a classmate flourished his brand-new dictionary and said, "Look at all these ridiculous words. 'Vocoder!' Who the hell would know what a 'vocoder' is?" and I replied, "You mean an artificial device for reproducing human speech?")

Anyway, it isn't just me or my similarly well-endowed (verbally, anyway) NESFA friends. This book really does seem to aim a little low, Oxford Guys. If we don't already know them, words like *angst*, *decor*, *gauche*, *maven*, *shish keebab*, and *zen* are already in our standard American dictionaries, thanks.

But things improve upon closer inspection. For instance, while I knew that a *chakra* was one of the centers of spiritual power in the human body, it's cool to hear

that it's also "a thin knife-edged disc of steel formerly used as a weapon by Sikhs." Or "the circular emblem on the flag of the Indian Union."

And I've been looking up *grogard* for months, fruitlessly, in other sources. It crops up in computer gaming circles, seeming to mean an expert wargamer. And here at last it is: "(literally, 'grumbler') A member of Napoleon's Old Guard ... a veteran soldier."

Hey, I thought *honcho* was Spanish! Turns out to be Japanese for squad or group leader. Come to think of it, I knew a Japanese sergeant was a *honcho*, but never made the connection.

How about *nada*? Most of us know the meaning in Spanish from Latin for "nothing, nothingness." But our newly beloved *ODOFWAP* has the derivation from Sanskrit, giving us its meaning in Hinduism: "inchoate or elemental sound considered as the source of all sounds and as a source of creation." Wow. Great name for a headbangin rock group, dude.

And here's a nice one, a musical term that itself makes a grand musical sound rolling off the tongue: *rallentando*. From the Italian to slow down. "A gradual decrease of speed; a passage (to be) played with a gradual decrease of speed."

Useful phrase when, say, you're navigating a car driven by your brother-in-law and you desperately watch the landmarks zip by too fast to see:

"Rallentando, Roberto, if you please ..."

### FlimFan

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

#### EXCELLENT:

**Amistad** — How come there aren't more slavery movies? It can't be that *Mandingo* and *Jefferson in Paris* between them said all there is to say. Maybe the feeling is that

African-Americans won't like to see their ancestors degraded on screen. Or that European-Americans will be ashamed to see theirs doing the degrading. Well, Steven Spielberg has bucked conventional wisdom and made a serious, beautifully photographed, authentic-looking, well-acted film about slavery. Which, of course, means it's really about freedom. For Cinque (the African actor Djimon Hounsou in a strong, affecting performance) — captured in Africa, brought across the sea in the Spanish slave ship *Amistad*, leader of a shipboard uprising, and now forced to watch in chains as white lawyers argue over him and his fellow African survivors in an 1840 U.S. court — freedom is almost a physical necessity. For former U.S. President John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), freedom is more abstract but no less necessary to the soul. Adams is considered to have had the most consistently sour, unlikable personality of any senior politician in American history, very possibly due to his severe chronic hemorrhoids. Perhaps wisely, Hopkins chooses to ignore this note in his performance. His Adams may be aged, ill, and sometimes muddled, but he's capable of sudden sharp perception and in the end most effective oratory, which lends a thoughtful conclusion to this thoroughly worthy movie. But before the measured note of hopefulness struck at the end — look, I'd read plenty about the capture and transport of slaves, and the terrible conditions aboard the slave ships. Perhaps you have too. *Amistad* shows it to you, and that makes all the difference ... Of course, some of the issues that *Amistad* brings to horrid life aren't dead yet. We see why right up there on the screen: Chains leave scars.

**Jackie Brown** — I've been thinking about this movie ever since I saw it, and it's gained even more flavor in memory's marinade. Quentin Tarantino's first writing/directing gig since the astonishing *Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown* purposefully has

some of the cheesy, amateurish feel of the 70s caper and blaxploitation movies it emulates. This may be what turns off some people — like my sister-in-law Kerry, who hated this film. But as with Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks*, we have here a gifted director paying tribute to a beloved guilty pleasure. The peril: doing too good a job imitating second-class work. Burton stumbled over that line; Tarantino, my opinion, doesn't. Pam Grier plays Jackie, an aging stewardess desperate enough to get involved in a smuggling scam, then bold enough to try scamming the chief scammer (Samuel L. Jackson). Frankly, I thought Grier's was the weaker link between two stunning anchor performances. If you've seen anything from *Pulp Fiction* to *Fresh* to *Die Hard with a Vengeance* to *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, you know by now that Jackson is a great screen actor. His Ordell is a mesmerizing guy: a gun-running smuggler with surface charm and most definitely no heart at all. So no surprise how good Jackson is. But this film also provides a bigtime kickstart comeback for Robert Forster, whom Tarantino hired while saying approvingly, "OK, you were in mostly B movies before. But you were in the A's of the B's." As veteran bail bondsman Max Cherry, Forster's tanned, tired, still-handsome face has seen it all and not thought much of any of it — until he lays eyes on Grier, still a knockout looker. Watching them warm up to each other is one of this movie's delights. Speaking of delights, did I mention that Robert De Niro plays a stoned, not-too-bright armed robber and Bridget Fonda a stoned, vicious, vacuous beach bunny? They make a great couple, too. Oh, and you can't review a Quentin Tarantino movie without praising the dialog. As De Niro's character observes after a lovemaking bout, "Yeah, hit the spot." Look, there are more surprises, bellylaughs, and memorable bits of dialog here than in any five other features filling up your flixplex.

**Good Will Hunting** — You'll like this one, about a troubled kid who may be the smartest person in the world. Sums up the secret life history of every single reader of *The Devniad*, right? Thought so. It's a pretty smart movie, too, directed with a bracing raggedness by Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *To Die For*) and written by and starring rising twentysomething actors Matt Damon (*The Rainmaker*) and Ben Affleck (*Chasing Amy*). Damon does an appealing job playing the screwed-up prodigy, an orphaned, abused delinquent from Boston's working-class Southie neighborhood who takes a janitorial job at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mostly so he can sneak up to the board when no one's looking and jot brilliant solutions to problems it took 2 years to formulate. Affleck is realistic and understated as the buddy smart enough to realize Damon is throwing his life away. Stellan Skarsgard does a standout job as the math professor who realizes he's Salieri to the kid's Mozart. Minnie Driver exudes warmth as the med student who examines Damon for a heart as well as a brain. I had a little trouble with Robin Williams as the psychiatrist brought in to shrink the prodigy's head; his performance seemed a little lumpier than in *Dead Poet's Society* or *Awakenings*. The script is a real talkfest (too much so for my wife Maureen), turning on a number of cleverly written set-piece speeches — Williams in the park, putting Damon straight; in his office, talking about his wife; Damon explaining his gifts as best he can to Driver; Driver telling a dirty joke; Affleck giving Damon something to think about; the prof explaining just how brilliant the kid is. This last is a tad reminiscent of Wallace Shawn's making similar comparisons in *The Princess Bride*: "Aristotle? Socrates? MORons!" And that's probably my reason for feeling that, while one of the year's best and most enjoyable movies, this is not quite a great film. The kid

is too much the Hollywood Genius, unrealistically brilliant at *everything* ... Or perhaps today I'm just good will lacking.

**GOOD:**

**Tomorrow Never Dies** — Nor apparently does this 36-year-old series. Pierce Brosnan has lost enough of the pretty-boy look to become the finest and deadliest Bond since Sean Connery first shook up our martinis in 1962's *Dr. No*. Remember, the word that best summed up Bond's character in Ian Fleming's books was "cruel"; like Connery, Brosnan looks like he could actually put that license to kill into practice. Unlike that tanned marshmallow man Roger Moore. The action starts with the traditional opening spectacular, set this time at a terrorist arms-dealer bake sale in Russia. And goes on to range from a parking garage in Germany (where Bond breathes new life into the phrase "backseat driver") to the South China Sea aboard one of those artificial island/badguy bunker/stealth ships you only see anymore in Bond movies. The women are first-class: the terminally seductive Teri Hatcher and the terrific martial arts mistress Michelle Yeoh, last seen kicking back with Jackie Chan in *Supercop*. (One critic — Dan Kimmel? Mark Leeper? — noted that these films are increasingly in Bondage to Hong Kong actioners; sounds about right.) The main villain — the usually reliable Jonathan Pryce as an evil media baron — is unexpectedly, unrelievedly bad. He has not a single plausible moment in the entire film. But one of his lieutenants is the great, brutish-looking stage magician Ricky Jay, who often acts in the films of his friend David Mamet; he's magically matter-of-fact about his evil here as the computer expert. All in all, I'd grade this as B or better Bond.

**DECENT:**

**The Postman** — Near its end, this post-Holocaust epic presents an image that —

even though we've witnessed the aftereffects of nuclear winter, plague, and the collapse of Western civilization, topped off by Kevin Costner quoting Shakespeare — still retains power to terrify: an army of postal workers with guns. This occurs about 2 1/2 hours in, though, so it fades into the general silliness of the long last third of the movie. But we do have fun at the start. The film makes good use of its settings — first the desert, then the dark forests of the Pacific Northwest — as Costner makes his way by his wits through a shattered world. On one hand, there are small towns offering handouts and hootenannies. On the gripping hand, there are the bad guys in their desert fortress: a giant open-pit mine under the command of General Bethlehem. Will Patton does a good if somewhat predictable job as this copier salesman turned dictator, by turns cultivated and deadly. (His men probably watch his face constantly for fear o' that little frown of Bethlehem.) Heroine Olivia Williams has a spottier script to follow, changing inexplicably from demure small-town temptress to frontier woman wildcat, then back again. Costner remains likable throughout. In fact, he seems to have insisted that everybody but the villain and a skeptical sheriff like him on sight. I prefer *Waterworld*, where he had the courage to play a pretty cold customer and where scenes such as the battle in the atoll attain dramatic heights we never reach here. Like its film, I thought David Brin's popular 1985 SF novel *The Postman* fell apart toward the end. But the central insight of this story — that a postman (or even “just a drifter that found a bag of mail”) might catalyze the restoral of civilization through nostalgia, hope, and the precious gift of communication — remains curiously moving and, ultimately, satisfying enough.

Important news just in from AOL's Traveler's Corner. To wit:

"You might notice that Brazilian women's bathing suits are actually covering more than they have in the past. The *fio dental* (dental floss) suits are being pushed aside by the *asa delta* (hang glider), which covers the rear in a V-shape.

"Brazilian sociologists and anthropologists believe the change reflects Brazil's recent stable, conservative political climate."

I *knew* there was a reason I disliked conservatives.

Remember when such synergy was the stuff of SF? Believe it was Heinlein who first clued us to a link between women's skirt lengths and the stock market. An early step toward chaos theory, perhaps?

**Covering the world.**

## Backchat

on APA:NESFA #331, December 1997

### To Tony Lewis

Awesome to see eight books upcoming from NESFA Press all listed at once. And what a great selection. Boucher, Clement, Harness, Leinster, Eric Frank Russell, Walter Jon Williams ... it's like walking into a Ben and Jerry's shop: "I'll take one of everything, please."

Everyone involved in the Press's work deserves a big kiss from all fandom.

Sad that NESFA Press gets rudolphed when it comes to invitations to small press panels at cons. A Boskone program item sounds good, perhaps featuring yourself and several of the latest book victims I mean champions. Any idea how we stack up in terms of hard numbers against other leading SF small presses? Say in works issued per year, sales, etc.?

### To Tom Endrey

At least your "cat fever" sounds better than this Hong Kong chicken plague now menacing the world. Cough cough bacawk!

As an amateur onomasticist, I loved your little primer on translations of popular Hungarian family names: So Szabo=tailor, Nagy=big, Nameth=German. And Endrey would be "nobleman from Endrey." Very interesting, Sir Thomas! In case you were wondering, "Devney" comes from the Irish for either "poet" or (I'm afraid much more likely) "man from Dublin."

Thanks for the kind words on my *Starship Troopers* bit. Might be a hard movie to watch again, though, anytime soon.

The "last man" short-short story of my example was in fact just a variation of yours. I dimly recall seeing them both together (with other variations also?), perhaps in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* magazine in the 1960s.

### To Ray Bowie

Agree that the 1958 *Titanic* movie *A Night to Remember* was terrific. That and *Sink the Bismark* helped make me a fan of the ever-decent Kenneth More. Plus Honor Blackman, Alec McCowen, and an incredibly young David McCallum. And don't forget, the script was by top-notch British spy thriller writer Eric Ambler! Anyone who likes the current excellent movie treatment — which should include just about everybody — should see this earlier one also. It's got simpler special effects, a quieter tone, just as much drama.

### To Mark Olson

Thanks for another clear-thinking set of book reviews. And I love your analogy about my caricaturing Heinlein's being equivalent in fairness to someone saying Bob Devney does nothing but watch movies. Well scored, sir.

But my main rant this month is in re your skepticism about Sister Wendy's enthusiasm for modern art.

Criticism is tough once you get beyond representational art, where you can say of a painting, "Yup, looks just like old Ma sitting in her chair, Jimmy." Or of a statue, "C'mon, Mike, Dave isn't quite *that* well endowed." When you dismiss an abstract work as "paint just dribbled on a canvas on the floor," maybe you're just not trying.

Because remember, you met those *other* artists halfway. Mrs. Whistler, for instance, was three-dimension, while the painting of her is one-dimensional. The model for the *David* had pink skin where the sculpture is white marble. You're tacitly accepting in these cases that at least part of the art happens in your mind, not in any physical characteristic of the artwork.

Maybe the abstractionist makes you do a lot more of the work. Or wants you to learn new rules beyond perspective or pointillism or other mind games you've already gladly learned to play.

Perhaps we'll get taken by some total cynical Soho fraud occasionally. But — you're a science fiction reader, Mark. Haven't you said this to people to whom you're trying to introduce our own favorite weird, widely scorned art:

Maybe we'll learn to see something new and wonderful.

**To Paul Giguere**

The account of your connection with Steven Pinker was fascinating. Particularly the story of the patient who at her exit interview presented as cheerful and well-adjusted but exhibited microbursts of extreme sadness on the videotape examined after her suicide 2 hours later.

Every so often, you hear about someone — a professional gambler, a cop, a psychiatrist, a nun or con chairperson — who's gifted at drawing accurate conclusions about people's hidden feelings based on their excessive eyeblinks, touching the nose, frowns, so on. It's always seemed to me there might be an entire minor science there. Is anyone pursuing your early research on the graphical database of facial expressions?

No, really, I'm sincerely interested. My nose was just itchy, is all ...

**To Leslie Turek**

That's both you and Mark Olson recommending Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind* as similar to the subjects of Pinker's neat *How the Mind Works*. Sounds like I'd better schlep it onto my groaning buy list.

And in your honor, I had Stouffer's macaroni and cheese tonight for both of us, blissfully overcooked the way you prefer. The way I look at it, I don't drink and I don't smoke. *Something's* got to kill me.

**To Richard Whatever Harter**

You mean, what if someone traveled back in time and gunned down the dinosaur that became Tony Lewis? Hmm, maybe that isn't worded quite right ...

**To Joe Ross**

So you're teaching dueling legal ed classes on succeeding weeks. I note that the two titles, considered together: "How to be a landlord and stay out of legal trouble" and "How to be a tenant without getting ripped off" do seem to cast landlords in the less flattering light ...

Actually, I did what you say you're considering: reread *Starship Troopers* before seeing the movie. However, all my finely tuned adult critical apparatus went dead within a few pages and I just enjoyed the hell out of the damned thing again. One note, however, is how sunnily optimistic Heinlein was about the educational system. Those high-school paper — not even term paper — assignments were *hard*.

**To George Flynn**

Sorry about forgetting 3 million Welshmen in my tabulation of all the Celts. Seems my calculations sprang a leak.

**To Anna Hillier**

Sorry you're not fond of Chinese art. I like it in the befuddled way belonging to a guy with poor eyesight, meager powers of observation, and almost no art training.

Do remember that when I was a teenager I noticed particularly a peculiar way some Chinese paintings exaggerated a common scene: weird, impossibly steep and curvy mountains swooping out of the sea.

Then I saw a photograph of this particular archipelago in southern China. Incredible geological formations in those parts; all these weird, steep, curvy peaks ... Ohhhhh.