

The Devniad, Book 35

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For APA: NESFA #333 February 1998

Orbita Dicta Heard in the halls of Boskone 35, February 13-15, 1998

Note: this attempts to depict the experience of attending a science fiction convention by constructing a fetchingly artistic mosaic of quotes encountered there. You know, stuff people said.

The result is necessarily fragmentary. If not figmentary. After all, I didn't have a tape recorder or anything.

If you find yourself bothered by the lack of narrative flow, go back to first principles: ignore everything else and just look for your own name. Or your friends' names. Or just skip to the movie reviews ...

[Office colleague Forrest Trenholm wishes this reporter a stimulating speculative-literature weekend without being clear on the concept]

Don't forget your Spock ears.

[Once at the con, the first priority is dindin; although as four adults try to negotiate the hellish slot-shaped maze of Route 9 and drink from fabled Bugaboo Creek armed only with a speedy late-model sedan, the con's Restaurant Guide, and their (non)native intelligence, this comment is heard with distressing frequency]

I think that was the exit.

[Once this reporter is safely back on connish ground, hot author and incandescent self-promoter Michael A. Burstein extends his usual friendly greeting]

You are going to quote me at this con, right?

[In the con suite, film reviewer Dan Kimmel proves an honest critic must be a real trouper]

I wrote that the movie of *Starship Troopers* was actually *surprisingly* faithful to the book — and I got in *such* trouble with the Heinlein fanatics, I mean fans.

[Kimmel has some friends left, though]

A buddy slipped me a script of *Contact*. In the movie, it ends with Jodie Foster looking off into the stars.

In the script, it ends with another little girl's voice calling out into space, "Hello? Hello out there?"

[In the Friday-night panel on Mining Legends: How Myths and Legends Are Used in SF, big daddy editor David G. Hartwell of The New York Review of Science Fiction and other venues presents some background we might have mythed]

Otto Ranke made up a long list of mythic themes from cultures around the world and combined them in what he called the Monomyth.

One, the hero has some supernatural circumstance surrounding his birth.

Two, he becomes orphaned or separated from his parents as a youth.

And on and on. There are something like 20 themes. There are superhuman tasks the hero is set to solve, and so on ... Eventually, the hero is thwarted or killed by his enemies. But will come again in the right circumstances, of course.

The thing is, some writers, being aware of this Ranke book, started to write to it ...

[Busy readers, these writers]

When he was still in grad school, Roger Zelazny told me he was studying Northrop Frye. And realized no one in SF was writing in what Frye called the heroic mode.

And Zelazny said he was going to do that someday.

And he did.

In fact, by the end of his career he had developed his own myth cycle in Amber.

[SF Book Club editor Ellen Asher thinks that after a certain point, borrowing gets boring fast]

The use of some sort of gallimaufry of characters created by other authors — using them in a historical setting — it's often just a lazy way of not having to create your own characters.

People get carried away. Oh, I can have Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes in the same book.

[Hartwell doesn't say don't do it, he says do it well]

I think there are more interesting examples, such as "The Dead Lady of Clown Town."

Or you decide to retell the myth of Orpheus, but the hero is not named Orpheus ... or even Orpheus Jones. And he doesn't live in Greece.

[Asher is OK with this]

Explore it. Like if Frodo had dropped the Ring and it fell all the way down the other side of Mount Doom ...

[So don't act like an utter orc, according to Hartwell]

You have to stay away from the cheap, quick rush of the reader's saying, "Oh that's Orpheus."

And of course, it may not work anyway. There are inherent problems. For instance, if you're telling a story that everyone knows, it does lack suspense.

[Though Asher feels SF certainly doesn't lack for passion]

SF is one of the more *contentious* fields of literature. The book clubs send out surveys from time to time, and the SF ones are the ones that come back all written over and scribbled upon.

[Just to spite her, Hartwell agrees]

Vonnegut said in the late 50s that SF is a field where people *don't* agree with each other — just to be friendly.

[Jung Writer Brenda Clough turns the discussion to SF's archetypes]

There's the wise old man, and the pain-in-the-ass old man ...

[Asher cracks wise herself]

... He's usually the very wisest old man.

[Hartwell likes a good pastiche as well as the next editor]

In *New Worlds*, which in my opinion is the best anthology of the year, there's a Kim Newman story "Great Western." About the building of a vast railway in the southwest of England. And it's a parody of *Shane*.

[Asher points at Hartwell]

Or you can read it in *Year's Best SF 3*, coming soon from you know who.

[Fan Eleanor Pearlman must dream in black-and-white]

I fondly remember those old early *Star Trek* episodes, that came out in black and white — or maybe it's just that our TV was black-and-white ...

[At the Trivia Bowl, fan Michael Devney grows anxious as the panel showers the audience with chocolates for each correct answer]

Careful, you guys, or the government will make everybody wear helmets.

[Sometimes trivial questions teach you stuff too: this was my favorite of the ones I contributed]

What SF artist also designed parts of the Golden Gate Bridge and all the gargoyles on the Chrysler Building?

[Although even he couldn't answer the above (it was Chesley Bonestell), trivia champ Mike Scott almost doubled some previous winners' scores with a knockout 99 — but says for Brits that's barely brilliant]

We have lots of these contests over there; I probably wouldn't have done as well back home.

[At the Art Show, Jim Mann has monster news]

For this summer, Bob Eggleton is doing the Unofficial Godzilla Movie Coloring Book.

[Tyler Stewart of Harvard Square's Pandemonium Book & Games sure knows his fannish food groups]

For my Pandemonium party tonight, I thought I'd serve some sandwich-type things. You know, so people will have one bit of decent food before they do the rest of the weekend on sugar, salt, and grease.

[There's something ... different about formerly ponytailed NESFAn Kelly Persons]

Why did I shave my head? Well, there was this lab accident with wax. Hot wax.

[Michael A. Burstein is still lurking in the halls and pouncing for publicity]

Aren't you ever going to quote me in *Helmuth*?

[Saturday morning at the NESFA sales table, the talk turns to good-natured critiques of (absent) wives and girlfriends; but, sensing danger, Tim Szczesuil dodges the bullet]

Ann is the sweetest, most intelligent, most beautiful woman I have ever known. I'm very very happy.

Hey, I'm not stupid. This could end up in *print*.

[As Intergalactic Paperboy Michael Devney hand-delivers individual copies of Helmuth to the poor news-starved folk in the Dealers' Room, one gives grateful voice]

Service at last!

[After this reporter introduces himself in a elevator to Tor editor and ace word repairwoman Teresa Nielsen Hayden]

Oh, I know who you are. You send me strange e-mail.

[At my reply that "all e-mail is strange, isn't it?": Nielsen Hayden, after a thoughtful pause]

Someone who sends the e-mail you send would think that.

[Starting off the panel on Forgotten Authors: Charles Harness, NESFAn Priscilla Olson discusses the famous NESFA Work Ethic]

At NESFA Press, we're all volunteers. And this or that book gets started because someone in the club really likes the author's stuff and wants to put the work in.

[And Harness is richly deserving]

He's one of the few people from this era, starting in the 1940s — there are stories in the book's introduction about him arguing with Campbell — who hasn't been honored. After 50 years of writing. You know, 11 or 12 quality novels, 30 or 40 mostly good short stories.

[Olson tries to praise fellow panelist (and legal eagle) Rick Katze]

Rick tries to proof the Harness stuff I give him. But Harness was a patent attorney, and often has lawyers in his stories. Rick gets involved in the legal points and starts scribbling in the margin, things like "The judge is WRONG!" and fails to really proof it.

[Harness has never received enough honor in his own country, says Priscilla]

The British critics glommed onto Harness more than Americans. Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock — they really loved him to death. The Americans, not so.

[But maybe that will change this summer]

He may go to Bucconeer — Harness lives in Virginia. Not sure he'll actually do programming, but maybe signings.

Anyway, the book is coming out this summer. I don't know that it will be a major success, or get love letters like the Zenna Henderson book we did. But he deserves it.

[What Harness stuff should we be seeking out? Aside from the obvious An Ornament to His Profession, coming soon from NESFA Press]

There's *The Firebird*, from 1981 — it's real fun if you can find it. And *The Ring of Ritornel* — a really superior book about a winged centaur. And *Lurid Dreams*, for all you Civil War buffs.

[After years of trying, I lure friends Dell and Ginny Campbell to their first Boskone, along with 14-year-old Lane and 11-year-old Bryan; as I begin the tour, Ginny seems particularly impressed by my natty all-black con attire]

C'mon, everybody, let's follow Darth Vader here.

[NESFA's own Michael A. Burstein interviews Boskone's Special Guest editor Stan Schmidt, who starts with The Early Years]

At Case Western, I majored in physics ... Physics is a good basis for everything, because everything else is applied physics.

[As editor of Analog, Schmidt must dwell forever in the shadow of legendary editor John Campbell]

I sent my first story to poor John at 15, and he sent me one of those printed rejection slips that people now indignantly tell me he would never send.

[What becomes a legend most? Cryptic utterance]

So he hadn't bought anything yet, but I kept trying ... And began to get letters instead of printed rejections ... In the middle of one letter, talking about a story I'd sent, he wrote, "I'm taking 'Flash of Darkness.' Check is on the way."

Now, I spent 2 days trying to interpret this sentence.

Was it that my story had been confiscated and investigators were coming to my home?

Eventually I realized it meant I'd made my first sale.

[Not that sales are any easier these days, according to Burstein]

Before he knew who I was, it took Stan 4 weeks to reject my stories. Now it takes him 8 weeks to reject my stories.

[Schmidt observed Campbell's death by promptly following immemorial authorial custom]

I sent Ben Bova a story Campbell had shown absolutely no interest in. Because this is what you do when an editor dies. Dig out all your old stuff and send it to the new guy.

[Finally Schmidt himself succeeded to the Paper Throne]

In 1978 I became Editor of *Analog*. And immediately began getting letters about how I was ruining the magazine. This continued for at least 5 months until anything I'd bought actually *appeared* in *Analog*, you understand.

[Sensing that a fan audience is always fascinated by food, Schmidt discusses his lunch menu during a recent trip to Africa]

Eland, hartebeest, and crocodile. Eland is one of the largest antelopes on the Serengeti — and one of the shyest. Because everybody knows how delicious they taste.

[Burstein waxes wistfully curious about the non-kosher world]

What does crocodile taste like?

[Schmidt belts it out]

Alligator.

[Copies of a recent Analog were given out to all Boskone attendees, but Schmidt had other ideas]

What I wanted to pass out as a freebie was the April issue, because it has the beginning of a 4-part serial ...

Beginning with the June issue, we're going to have a slightly larger size.

[Burstein just can't help himself]

Hhmm. The June issue. Isn't that the one that has a story by Michael A. Burstein?

[Fellow Analog Mafioso Ian Randal Strock, from the audience]

The issue is larger to accommodate your ego.

[In the panel on Exploring Other Genres: The Works of Patrick O'Brian, Tor editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden starts the scuttlebutt about that great series of sea stories featuring captain Jack Aubrey and ship's surgeon Stephen Maturin in the British Royal Navy of the early 1800s]

One of the things that O'Brian does that isn't usually attempted in any genre work is to play with point of view, and unusual characters ... including an absolute nutcase like Stephen Maturin.

... He's a great choice as a point-of-view character, though. A roving expository opportunity. He's always either getting things — or completely *not* getting things.

[Writer Delia Sherman expostulates about exposition]

In real life, you know that nobody stops to explain things as you go —

[Nielsen Hayden stops her to explain things]

— Except fans. Fans stand around saying, "Well, as you know, Bob, the function of the expositor is to ..."

[As the author of some beautiful language herself in the historical fantasy The Porcelain Dove, Sherman appreciates O'Brian's gift]

His language is not self-consciously archaic. But there's not a single word he uses that wouldn't be found in that era.

[And his dedication ... at least until recently]

He has no target audience. His target audience is himself.

Except perhaps in the last few books. I'm afraid that in *The Yellow Admiral* the joy has gone out of it for O'Brian. The joy has certainly gone out of it for poor Jack.

[Bernard Cornwell's novels about a British soldier in the same period aren't quite as addictive, says Nielsen Hayden]

Ellen Kushner described the Sharpe books as "Methadone for withdrawing Patrick O'Brian fans."

[Casting the movie is always fun, though Nielsen Hayden's choice may not be box office]

I always see Stephen as John M. Ford.

[Sherman says try it, you'll like it]

I found *Master and Commander* very heavy sailing, and I thought "OK, this is a major boy book and life is too short."

But a friend told me to read the second book, and I came upon the bear — and that was it.

[The age of sea stories may not be quite blown over, according to author Susan Schwartz]

I missed Philcon this year because I had the opportunity to go to Newport News and attend a seminar on *piracy*.

Pirates we still have with us. In Southeast Asia, for example ...

There was a woman at the conference who was attacked by pirates when she was first mate on a supertanker!

[Not that the first age of sea stories ended that far back, says Nielsen Hayden]

The Royal Navy gave out its last prize money as late as 1942.

[His tone of detached bitterness tells you Steve Sawicki has actually been there, in the panel on Plot Fidelity: What Does It Mean for a Movie to Be Faithful to a Book]

I've done a number of screenplays. A few of which have actually been made into movies.

[NESFAn Jim Mann knows why he's here]

I'm here because I put this panel together and put myself on it.

[Sawicki starts with important distinctions]

A novel is 80,000 words and up. A screenplay is 8,000 words if you're lucky.

... And one of the differences with seeing a movie of a book you've read is that it doesn't match the one you've already seen in your head.

[Fan and fanzine movie critic Mark Leeper gets down to cases]

I saw *Phantoms* recently. It had all of the gunfire from Koontz's novel, but not much of the characterization.

[Pro critic Dan Kimmel rounds on Sphere]

I urge you not to see *Sphere*. It was a terrible movie. And based on what I hear is a not-very-good book.

[Endings should be carefully calculated, according to writer Joan D. Vinge]

Originally, "The Cold Equations" had a happy ending. But John Campbell had too many stories that were upbeat, and told Godwin to rewrite it downbeat.

[Sometimes a great book is enough for Jim Mann]

People say, "Wouldn't you love to see a movie of *Lord of the Rings* or *The Demolished Man*?" No, I really wouldn't.

[Sawicki notes that SF can make the transition successfully]

A while ago PBS did two SF movies: *Lathe of Heaven* and *Overdrawn at the Memory Bank*. Both made excellent films.

You have to understand: movies are entertainment —

[Or not, cautions Kimmel]

— Well, if they're done right.

[After his reading, Darrell Schweitzer forces the sale of his dark fantasy The Mask of the Sorcerer on this helpless reporter]

This is me as a serious novelist.

[Teenager Lane Campbell, at her first con]

I like this place OK, even if my little brother doesn't. I like the art, and Japanese cartoons, and all the weird people ...

[After a few hours, though, younger brother Bryan Campbell isn't feeling quite as sercon]

I wanna go home. I wanna go home. I wanna go home. I wanna ...

[If you think a con is a battlefield, try video games, says Steve Sawicki]

I saw a guy win the world record once, in a video arcade, for the game *Battlezone*. The one with the little wire-drawing tanks?

It took over 14 hours. Once the machine froze because it burnt out a chip, and once the plug got pulled out of the wall.

Both times, he had to start all over. It was awful.

[In the Dealers' Room, Larry Smith hawks S.M. Stirling's new Island in the Sea of Time, in which all of Nantucket is mysteriously transported back to the Bronze Age (reading this fairly satisfying book after the con almost delayed this Devniad into the next Ice Age)]

I read it personally ... and I recommend it strongly. I've been hand-selling this one all weekend.

[At the banquet, fan Dietrich Kulze III keeps praying our table will be called to the buffet last, winning the consolation prize of a free bottle of wine — with the inevitable karmic result that we're called second-to-last, netting the less coveted prize of cold leftovers; my comment]

Nice going, Dietrich.

[Artist Bob Eggleston prolongs the after-dinner suspense before announcing Donato Giancola for the Gaughan Award's Best Emerging Artist]

Ten years ago tonight, I was the one accepting this award. And what a long, strange trip it's been ...

[Priscilla Olson at the podium, wrestling a recalcitrant microphone to the ground]

I'm the only Luddite in NESFA, and they have me doing this!

[Special Guest Editor Stan Schmidt looks a gift bag in the mouth]

Oh, boy, unsolicited manuscripts!

[Hal Clement muses on the tight security about the winner's name re the Skylark Award for, what, Most Lovable Pro? (about to be affectionately announced for James White)]

You know, NESFA is an extremely sneaky organization.

[SFRevu netzine editor Ernest Lilley reflects on his considerate treatment from press liaison Elisabeth Carey and others at Boskone]

Here, I get some respect. But at Lunacon, which is my home con, they know me all too well ...

[Kinda like the attitude toward this reporter exhibited by that selfsame Elisabeth Carey]

Still ambushing people, sneakily going around taking down their words?

[Since a right-wing conspiracy somehow contrived to have me completely miss every single appearance of the Author Guest of Honor, my reputation for comprehensive con coverage rests entirely on this report from fan Jeff Wendler at the Orlando in 2001 party; thanks desperately, Jeff]

Walter Jon Williams said that all the technology in his books *Metropolitan* and *City on Fire* is completely nonscientific. He thought more people would catch onto this. They're completely fantasies.

[I sneakily ambush Jeff re his new girlfriend Lori]

She does read a lot, but not science fiction. So coming here with me, letting me drag her into this strange environment: she's got a lot of heart.

We saw the play earlier tonight, *Sweet Salvage Rivets*? With all those in-jokes about fandom itself, not even about the books?

I understood about one thing in four. Lori, not a one.

[Bookseller Chris Edwards uses the party to talk about, well, books]

Richard Ben Sapir did some great little books that nobody much mentions. Like two from the 80s: in *Quest*, somebody discovers the Holy Grail. And he wrote another good kind of historical called *The Body*, about a body archaeologists find in a grave in Palestine. Along with an old board with "INRI" inscribed on it, you know?

[Jeff Wendler sums up one charm of cons]

It's only at conventions that I buy books I may never read.

[At the crowded breakfast buffet Sunday morning, a lady in a wheelchair makes a fan-

tastically generous gesture toward the empty place at her table, telling the waitress]

Just bring anybody waiting in line with a badge.

[Fantasy author Greer Gilman isn't quite revived yet, despite breakfast]

Well, I have to run to my panel. It's Fantasy Before Tolkien. I could do that one in my sleep. And I may have to.

[Waiting in the breakfast line, Ernest Lilley does some soul-searching (for which very few editors are at all equipped)]

The core of me is knowing very few facts, but extrapolating *hard* from what I know.

[While Ernest's companion E.J. McClure — active-duty naval officer, SF fan, and as Ernest says "a seven-sector callout" on the babe scale — muses on the impact of TV everywhere]

We did have a junior officer who explained himself once by saying, "I saw it on The Discovery Channel, SIR!" The captain was absolutely *slain*.

[At the Analog Mafia panel, as editor Stan Schmidt removes Michael Burstein's toy octopus from his own head (don't ask)]

OK, it's time to inject a note of dignity into the proceedings.

[But author Michael F. Flynn isn't one to let a cephalopod slide]

I was just contemplating the Second Amendment: the right to bear arms?
[Schmidt has bigger things on his mind]

So starting in June, *Analog* will be 1 inch taller, and 3/8 of an inch wider; and we'll get 144 pages instead of 168.

... Apparently even that much increase in size can get us better visibility and different placement on the newsstand, the distributors tell us.

By the way, that increase in page size more than compensates for the decrease in

number of pages. We should have about 10% more room for stories. Say about one more regular short story per issue. Or I can go back to having more novellas.

[And other news is even more electric]

We finally have a Web page:
www.analog.com

[Michael F. Flynn announces he has discovered The Secret of Selling Stories to Analog; as every would-be writer in the room leans forward, he intones]

Step One, write lots of stories.

Step Two, sell them to *Analog*.

[In the Dealer's Room, Mike Walsh of Old Earth Books talks about one of his fine new E. E. Smith Lensman reissues upcoming as possibly marking a turning point in political correctness]

The blurb on back says basically, there's lots of neat stuff here, and it lists what kind of stuff — ending by saying something like, "and lotsa beautiful babes"!

You know who wrote that blurb? Lambda Award winner Nicola Griffith, that's who. Only she could get away with that ...

[In the panel on Science: The Year in Review, NESFAn Mark Olson muses about current astronomical Secret Origins stories]

One image of the early solar system is about 200 Marses — Mars-sized bodies, you know — rattling around and colliding ... So the Earth is made up of about 30 or 40 Marses that eventually stuck together, and the Moon is 5 Marses.

[We'd believe the following statement by Hal a little quicker if The Incredible Clement hadn't just finished working out relative masses in his head and determined that Mark should have said Earth is 10 Marses and the Moon about 2]

I was a high school teacher instead of an astronomer because I was a lousy mathematician.

[Continuing the modesty marathon, The Awesome Olson prefaces one discussion by averring]

I'm not an expert in black holes. I'm repeating what I've read, not what I've calculated.

... But a black hole has these properties we know about: mass, angular velocity, and charge. Black holes ain't got no more properties. Their composition: who knows? They could be made of kitchen appliances in there.

[Modesty doesn't keep one from turning a neat pun, eh Mark?]

The dark matter problem does seem to be heating up ... oh, sorry.

[This from a mystery astrobabe at the back]

I work at the Center for Astrophysics here in Cambridge ... One thing that fascinates me is the Kuiper Belt, out at the distance of Pluto. It's out there, but not out as far as say the Oort Cloud. But it's all these great huge honking objects ...

And then, what do we tell the kids about Pluto? I personally like to say we have eight planets and Pluto. Because it's such a deeply weird object ... You've even got its so-called moon, Charon — that bad boy is two-thirds the size of Pluto itself!

... Pluto breaks every single rule for a planet.

[At the panel on The Arts in Science Fiction, SF writer Alexander Jablovkov says many of his colleagues get artists all wrong]

Usually, they invent artist characters that are universally loved and admired. Well, there are no real artists like that!

[Delia Sherman finds excellence under the rainbow]

There's a wonderful book called *The Rainbow Sonata*, whose author unfortunately I forget. But it's 400 pages about writing a

sonata. One of the most gorgeous books I've read, but definitely hard science fiction. Yet very unconscious, very intuitive.

[And New York Review of Science Fiction editorial mother figure Kathryn Cramer thinks Ursula Le Guin attained a peak (or valley) of artistic commitment with a minor work]

In *Always Coming Home*, she's so into the music of the people she's describing that you even get a cassette tape!

[The panel spends a lot of time on the difficulties of showing, describing, or actually printing the art for which your artist character is supposed to be famous; Jablovkov says cheating is helpful]

Delany had the smarts to have Marilyn Hatcher [his ex-wife who was a Pulitzer-Prize-winning poet] write all the poems in his books.

[Sherman did it her way]

In *Porcelain Dove*, I was careful to say that the play I wrote bits of near the novel's end was a very *bad* play.

[Can't remember why this remark of Jablovkov's was on point, but it's too tasty to leave out]

Wolfgang Pauli received a letter with a bad theory. He wrote back and said, "This isn't right. This isn't even *wrong*."

[This one makes a nice closer, though]

Some of my colleagues in SF don't think we're creating popular art. But — simply being unpopular doesn't mean you're not.

[A guy named I think Philip Gay that Tony Lewis introduced me to in the hall starts gassing about a recent article on the Hindenburg]

The skin of that zeppelin did *not* blow up because of the hydrogen. It blew up because its skin — cotton, flammable dope, and aluminum powder — was made of something very much like rocket fuel.

[Chip Hitchcock reports that the Female Heroes in Fantasy discussion soon turned into something more like Revenge of the Moms, as fantasy-and-folktale fem Jane Yolen related a heartfelt story]

My 31-year-old daughter called me up 2 weeks after *her* baby was born, and just kept saying over and over, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

I said, "For what?"

She said, "For *everything!*"

[Esther Friesner put aside her chainmail long enough to admit her own sweet daughter hadn't got quite that far yet]

Mine's 14. She says I do only two things wrong: inhale and exhale.

[At the Gripe Session, next year's Boskone chair Deb Geisler magically reverses one complaint]

You have a gripe about your Magic Tournament. Oh, you mean the Magic Tournament that kept my husband the judge up until 4:00 a.m.?

[Sunday afternoon, my friends in the Art Show revise their opinion of my elevated artistic taste as I'm forced to lug a tiny powder-blue dragon with a "boo-boo" on its claw from table to table, claiming it as promised for my friend Dell's teen daughter Lane; encountering everywhere such emasculating comments as]

My, what a darling little dragon. How cute!

[Delia Sherman, after saying goodbye to our mutual friend E. J. McClure, tries to be nice to me too]

Oh, you've been at several panels. I noticed that you always made very good points. Very thoughtful and interesting.

[Me to Delia Sherman, blushing and gushing]

Oh, gee, thanks. Yes, I've been following you around — you give such good panel.

And I remember your photo in Perret's *Faces of Fantasy*. That beautiful shot of you by the nice house with the white picket fence ...

[Sherman, tactfully, and perhaps even remembering that it was Susan Cooper with the house and the fence, which incidentally was white rail, not picket]

Yes, actually, it was the indoor shot with all this nice intricate floral wallpaper background. But thank you.

[My brother Michael, in the panting stillness of an elevator we just barely caught, staggering under the weight of 100 bags each laden with 1000 books out to our car to go— and quoting Bruce Willis crawling bloody-footed through an airshaft after all the fun explosions, gunfights, and deaths in the film Die Hard]

"Come to the coast. We'll have a few laughs."

Expiring minds want to know

The killer Web site of the month is <http://www.city-net.com/~lmann/dps/>. The Dead People's Server is a great idea that answers the extremely common watercooler question, "Hey, is so-and-so dead?"

So it features a list of dead celebrities, with dates, causes of death, and short descriptions of why they were famous. Plus celebrities who are still alive despite rumors

(or, in the case of John Tesh, devout hopes) to the contrary. All done with brevity, accuracy, and more than occasional humor. I especially like the way the site displays its visitor counter: “129918 curious surfers (and future dead people) since 9/11/97.”

I found the DPS while looking up some celebrity’s name on a net search. Immediately knew it was a real find. Then, reading through, I noticed that it included dead SF authors: Heinlein, Herbert, Simak, Sheckley. Scrolling down, I found the site was now run by NESFA’s very own Laurie Mann: former Boston and now Pittsburgh fan, wife of this APA’s very own Jim Mann.

Great going, Laurie! And geez, Jim, why didn’t you tell us?

FlimFan

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

GOOD:

Great Expectations — What’s the provenance of a fairy godmother’s gifts? That’s the trick question asked by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón as he transforms Charles Dickens’ cool, gray 1861 English novel into a hot, jazzy New World fantasy. A Florida fisherman’s kid named Finn has artistic talent (we see him frenziedly sketching water, fish, the sun), a sensitive soul (we see him hurt by his sister’s infidelity to her boyfriend), and a kind heart (we even see him aiding an escaped convict (Robert De Niro), which seems a bit far to go in making the point). Finn is co-opted by a crazy old rich lady (Anne Bancroft) to visit her run-down beachfront palazzo every week — and to sketch, dance with, lose his heart to, and be tormented by her beautiful, snobby niece, Estella. When the kids grow up, he (Ethan Hawke) is sent to New York

by his benefactor to become a famous artist. And be tormented some more by Estella, now a beautiful, snobby socialite (Gwyneth Paltrow). Like Cuarón’s 1995 *The Little Princess*, this movie has the heated-up simplicity of a fairy tale. But really, how complicated do you want romance to be? Paltrow is luminescent as usual, playing one of the biggest teases in movie history. Hawke is good at looking stunned by love, and Bancroft is always watchable if never exactly subtle here. Like Finn’s Picasso-Lite art (by Italian painter Francisco Clemente), this movie displays pretty colors and bold strokes, with nothing too complicated happening inside the lines.

The Replacement Killers — Handsome Hong Kong leading man Chow Yun-Fat stars in his first English-language feature as John Lee, a two-gun assassin who turns down one last hit for a Chinese gangster in a U.S. city — and so gets targeted by his two less scrupulous replacements. Thus the title, which otherwise seems like a typical bad Hong Kong translation. Mira Sorvino is Meg Coburn, a gorgeous young forger with a street-kid past and no future unless she teams up with Lee. Naturally, they’re made for each other. Other movie couples have first dates: in actioners like this, they have first shootouts. Seconds into Lee and Meg’s first, they instinctively stand hip-to-hip and blamblam away in opposite directions, covering each other’s back. Like the spaghetti Western, this moo goo gai gangster flick takes a classic American movie form and empties it of everything but style. But stylish it is, and thus pretty entertaining too. You’ll remember the set-piece shootemups, filmed with heightened, beautiful, dreamily slow-motion violence: a steamy carwash, a grimy amusement arcade, a dark cartoon matinee, a rainy alley. Hong Kong action giant John Woo only produced, but new director Antoine Fuqua has learned well his master’s lessons about lush visuals and gunplay galore.

Jurgen Prochnow is properly menacing as the mob boss's Eurotrash lieutenant, and Michael Rooker is fine as the tough cop who gets to deliver the film's grittiest line, about using Sorvino as bait: "She's red meat. Gonna put her on a hook, see what the dogs do."

DECENT:

Wag the Dog — Very few comedians do their act on a dark stage with fog machines laying down smoke and other people's voices buzzing over theirs on the sound system. A comedian prefers clean staging and clear sound for a reason. So people will see his face, hear his voice, and *get the jokes*. But an arty, muddy visual style and too often blurry, overlapping dialog are how Barry Levinson has chosen to put over his satire here. For me, it doesn't work too well. (I know most critics have rolled over like puppies for this one. Hey, where I go, I walk alone.) You know the plot: to cover up a Presidential sex scandal (where do they get these crazy ideas?), political fixer Robert De Niro and White House aide Anne Heche enlist Hollywood producer Dustin Hoffman to create an imaginary war — all media spins and faked videos — that will distract the voters until election day. There's good acting here. There are great lines, in the script by Hilary Henkin and the masterful David Mamet. (Such as the opinion that De Niro's character "could talk a dog off a meat truck." Or his take on editing one's cover story: "I read the *first* draft of the Warren Report. The one where Kennedy was killed by a drunk driver.") But the look and sound are too muddled and distracting to really sell the laughs. Plus, it's no accident that the Producer, not the Pres, is the movie's biggest target. You know O'Neill's Law, "All politics are local"? For Hollywood, all politics are *studio* politics.

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #332, January 1998

To Nomi Burstein

That black-tie party of your friends bound for *Die Fledermaus* sounds like fun. Did you know that in Germany, Batman is referred to as *Die Fledermausmann*? Not sure though if Robin is, say, *Die Rotbrust* ... Unfortunately, my German is too pathetic to attempt a translation of your husband Michael's "Ubiquitous Boy." Say, how come we never came up with a superheroine tag for you, Nomi? Ideas, anyone?

Thanks for the Arisia con report. Sorry I had to miss joining you in The Vortex.

To Paul Giguere

What a nice service you provide, sir: a look at choice books upcoming for the next 6 months. This way we don't all have to wade through the *Locus* lists as you did.

That June '98 publication of Bujold's *Komarr* will be crucial for me. I was the only being in this spiral arm who thought that Bujold's last Vorkosigan novel, *Memory*, felt tired and sub-par. I'd better like *Komarr* or I'll have no friends or family left.

To Michael Burstein

Hey, does your new alpha-order responsa scheme mean my name will usually come first? Cool!

I'm aware that your birthday is coming up on February 27. Unfortunately, it's the day after the galaxy-wide celebrations of my own natal date, so everybody will probably be hung over again.

To George Flynn

Like your observation that unreliable ethnic cues in names is a common SF trope. Of course, one can take this too far. In high school, I remember proudly giving my sister Liz an SF short story I'd written. Unfortunately, she could never actually finish reading it. She'd get to the first

mention of the hero's name and fall down laughing every time.

Perhaps "Ivan Chang O'Kelly" was a bit unsubtle.

To Jim Mann

See "Expiring minds" above. And by the time you read this, I assume I'll already have immensely enjoyed seeing you and Laurie at Boskone.

Re your review of R. A. Lafferty's *The Fall of Rome*, never read it; must find a copy somewhere. Guess it's time for my annual Lafferty rant. For years, Lafferty has been on my very short list of authors in our weird little genre who stand a chance of being famous 100 or 200 years from now. Granted, his stock seems to have been going the other way for the last decade or so — as far as I know he has not now one book in print. But to anyone reading this who hasn't, I say, find something of his and dive in. Perhaps *Past Master*, a space adventure whose hero is Saint Thomas More. Or something really fun like *Space Chantey*. Aside from Cordwainer Smith, I can't think of anyone in science fiction or fantasy with a more distinctive literary voice. Raphael Aloysius Lafferty is not even gone, and I miss him already.

To Lisa Hertel

OK, so breast milk is kosher. But as usual with these pilpulistic debates, many questions remain. For instance: are hickeys kosher? Would it be OK for an Orthodox infantrywoman in *Starship Troopers* to rip the antenna off a Bug with her (the infantrywoman's) teeth? (Surprised the director missed this prime grossout opportunity, by the way.) Would it have been especially proper for Arthur Dent if he were Catholic to have inserted the Babelfish in his ear on a Friday? Come to that, I've always wondered if communion wafers were kosher.

To Claire Anderson

That new film of *The Wind in the Willows* with Jones, Idle, Palin, Cleese (most of the old Monty Python crew) and others sounds absolutely unmissable. Why O why does it have to start Boskone weekend at the Brattle, instead of the weekend before so we could see it and talk it up at the con?

Can't skip the convention, though. As the excellent Rat might put it, "There is nothing — absolutely nothing — half so much worth doing as simply messing about at cons."

To Tony Lewis

If as you say "Slav" is from the same root as "word," perhaps the first sentence of the book of Genesis takes on new meaning. As do all those boastful "firsts" the old Soviet government was always claiming.

To Joe Ross

Enjoyed your analysis of *l'affaire Lewinsky*, and your revelations that Republican politicians sometimes have dodgy private lives too. There's a great little article on this in *The New Yorker* 2/9/98. It's by cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, whose book *How the Mind Works* I raved about a few months back.

Why, he asks, would great men do something so foolish, reprehensible, etc.? Because to get to the positions they occupy, they've had to be risk-takers, pragmatists.

And because they're men, he says, and concupiscence is an evolutionary strategy we took millennia to evolve and would take more millennia to shed. In a year, a man who falls in love with fifty women could have fifty offspring; a woman who does the same with fifty men could have only one offspring. (Septs aside.) And the father of fifty would thus put more of his randy genes into the next generation, and so on. Pinker believes we're mostly still like that. Points to a study where attractive researchers propositioned members of the

opposite sex out of the blue. Percentage of women who accepted: zero. Percentage of men: seventy-five ... and many of the remainder wanted rain checks.

Anyway, it all sounds like civilization is a lie men tell to women. And to themselves?

To Mark Olson

That Douglas Hofstadter book on literary translation sounds wonderful; I've heard nothing but raves. Must add to my groaning get list.

However, why in God's name would Hofstadter and/or his publisher kill half their sales with the zippy title of *Le Ton beau de Marot*? Can you say "marketing poison" in French?

To Leslie Turek

As a member of NESFA: The Next Generation, I miss out on all these grand old stories like the history of you and apparent former flame (now perhaps just a flamer?) Fred Isaacs. Want to fill me in sometime, or should I just ask behind your back?

It scares me to read glowing reviews from you and just about everyone else I respect about something like *Wag the Dog*, since (as you can read elsewhere in this issue) I thought it a bit of a barker. This is why I try to see movies early and not read any other reviews until I write mine. Otherwise, spineless social cur that I am, I'd just go along with the crowd ...

Love your stories about the desecration of all the great historic gardens of America to make way for driveways etc. You should do a whole article on this, if you can type through your tears.

To Tom Endrey

If you want movie reviews more than once a month, just hurry up buying that modem and hooking up to the net. You can get new reviews every DAY, of stuff that's not even OUT yet. And if you want a fan's perspective, Mark and Evelyn Leeper

usually do at least one review weekly in their amazingly frequent e-zine MT VOID.
E-mail Evelyn at: ecl@mtgbcs.mt.lucent.com