

The Devniad, Book 36

Bob Devney

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

508-699-7885 bobdevney@aol.com

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The Big WWW

By the time you read this, I just might have acquired THE fashion accessory of, say, 1996: a personal Web page.

Fair warning: it will never be a graphics-crammed thing of beauty. I'm a Textan, pardner, after all. But even I must admit that right now the site has much undone, about a million obvious mistakes, and is ugly as a dachshund with eczema.

A poor thing, but mine own.

If you dare to visit, it may be up at <http://members.aol.com/bobdevney/>

Contents? To start, archives of *The Devniads* back through last year, a few *Proper Bostonian* columns, and other miscellaneous resurrected Deviania. Ephemera no more, callooh, callay!

Speaking of dog-ugly, it also features a photograph of the author.

I also might include, say, material from secret manuscripts of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers II*, Asimov's *Cracks in the Foundation*, Zelazny's rural masterpiece *Amber Waves of Grain*, Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night Before The Sun Also Rises*, the true text of the *Necronomicon*, and nude pics of Princess Di.

Hey, I said *might*.

Aarrggghh.

Gee, there was supposed to be a whole other article here. But my PC seems to be dying today — keeps quitting out of Word 7.0. I'm typing this between the raindrops. Devney's Law: Anything that *can* happen, *will* happen — to [insert one's name here].

So now I can't do my final assembly and editing of that story. But — I've got to leave in 1 hour for the meeting at which this ish has to be collated into APA:NESFA.

Executive decision: this month, it's the Web teaser above, movie reviews, and Backchat. That's it. That's all, folks.

The shortest issue of *The Devniad* in years. While I rage and grieve, I suppose some of you will feel nothing but relief ...

FlimFan

"Hollywood films want to tell us truths we already know or falsehoods we want to believe in. In other words, *they reinforce*. Art films want to disturb us, to tell us truths we don't want to know. In other words, *they unsettle*."

— Screenwriter William Goldman
(*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Princess Bride*, *Misery*, *Absolute Power*, etc.)
in the April *Premiere*

Movies that have reinforced or unsettled me since last time:

EXCELLENT:

The Sweet Hereafter — The first time we see Mitchell Stephens, he's in a car, moving slowly forward into a fog, pulled along by forces he cannot see. Then we realize it's a carwash, and for a moment we're prepared to take this lightly. But Stephens isn't smiling. A call he takes on his cellular phone while the mists roil outside — it's from his daughter Chloe — is fraught with strain. And what he finds outside the carwash brings him up short. Stephens is a lawyer

pursuing an accident suit in a northern Canadian town, and he (and we) comes face to face with a tragic piece of evidence. Atom Egoyan, who wrote and directed this fine, sad, mysterious film from the novel by Russell Banks, soon has you seeing tragic evidence everywhere. His people are living in the not-so-sweet aftermaths of wrong turns, of loving the wrong people, and of wrongful deaths. It's a film about children and parents, and betrayal that runs both way. As the lawyer, Ian Holm gives a superb performance. He's a quiet, skillful ambulance chaser who's too smart not to realize that as he tells his clients there are no accidents, someone's always to blame ... his words turn and cut against himself. I can't emphasize enough how intelligent, subtle, and observant this movie is, despite its bare plot and stark landscape. *The Sweet Hereafter* is a legal thriller with no lawbooks or courtrooms. No cheap suspense. But you can't live in this world and not care about how its stories comes out.

Oscar and Lucinda — I've started this review about six times, and each time failed to find a good way to capture this film. Some good things are just indescribably delicious. Let me simply list what I loved about this story (from the novel by Peter Carey, directed by Gillian Armstrong of *My Brilliant Career*) of two eccentrics, an unworldly Victorian clergyman and an unladylike Australian heiress: The fact that it's the only movie I've ever seen about obsessive gamblers that loses the big losing streaks and money troubles. The way Ralph Fiennes as Oscar constructs a whole off-kilter performance out of scarecrow clothes, haystack hair, and constantly twining hands. Oscar's fervent prayer as a boy, when his fundamentalist father declares all sweets are from Satan: "O Lord, if it be thy will that thy people should eat pudding, smite him!" Lucinda's (Cate Blanchett's) amazingly welcome smile. The way her story isn't just about choosing between two men (Fiennes

versus Ciaran Hinds in a strong, useful performance as a more conventional cleric), but about her (surprise, surprise) *work*: her early fascination with glass and career as new proprietor of a glassworks. The beautiful cliffs and strands of Devon. The towns and rivers of wild Australia. The brilliant high comedy Armstrong finds in the horror with which proper Victorians regard gambling ... so that our couple, who find such pure joy in it, are always half exhilarated, half ashamed of themselves. And the way the story saves the most extravagant gamble of both their lives until most of the way to its sparkling, unexpected end.

GOOD:

Dark City — In the shadowy metropolis of the title, which apparently has been transported whole from 1940s *film noir*, creepy bald beings with weird powers interfere ominously with the life of the human inhabitants. These Strangers are aided by the narrator, Keifer Sutherland as a twisted psychiatrist who talks in short (and soon annoying) gasps like Peter Lorre. But he could be interfering with their plans for the hero, Rufus Sewell — an anmesiac who may be a serial killer savaging the city, and who seems to possess strange powers himself. Cerebral William Hurt is the depressed detective trying to piece all this together. Luscious Jennifer Connelly is the hero's estranged wife, who since this is SF *noir* is a nightclub singer. And Ian Richardson (British TV's deliciously evil politico Francis Urquhart) is Mr. Book, the extremely Eddorean leader of the Strangers. *Dark City* plays a great SF trick very well, punching up the ol' background paranoia by questioning the ordinary circumstances of your life to bring out the most sinister possibilities. Effects and atmosphere here are undeniably excellent. Especially the cool unfolding buildings and the climactic honest-to-God mind duel, a kind of Mentat

Armageddon. Director and co-writer Alex Proyas of *The Crow* has produced a better, more serious film this time: a visually gifted science fantasy with a first-rate cast and excellent effects. Wouldn't be surprised if it makes the Hugo ballot next year. But if you're an SF fan, chances are you've read much of the material before, if not seen it; say "German Expressionism" and "dream logic" and you've pretty well summed things up.

Kundun — This is a film about the early life of the current Tibetan theocrat-in-exile, the Dalai Lama. It was made by the great director Martin Scorsese. Not his best work, but a Scorsese movie can't fail to be full of interest. You probably won't see this in a theater, because 1) a quietly luminous movie about 2) a religious leader who's 3) foreign kept the cash registers closed at the mallplex. Then there's the star-studded lineup of Tenzin Yeshe Paichang, Tulku Jamyang Kunga Tenzin, Gyurme Tethong, and Tenzin Thuthob Tsarong (who play His Lamaship at age 2, 5, 10 or 12, and about 20 respectively) — although, nonactors all, they do a good job playing a human being who just may have a touch of the divine. Scorsese showcases the brutal Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet — Robert Lin has a great creepy cameo as Mao Zedong, informing the visiting young spiritual leader with snaky politeness that "religion is (pause) poison" — and the Beijing government hinted Disney could kiss Mickey Maose millions goodbye if they promoted this movie. See it anyway — next year as a rental? The visuals are stunning, with unbelievably rich colors and costumes. *Kundun* may not convert you to Tibetan Buddhism, but it will make you think.

The Big Lebowski — Steve and I laughed our butts off. Now Steve (my moviegoing accompanist) is a physicist and I'm at least a low-rent litterateur. But when it comes to a flick about an aging L.A. hippie stoner (Jeff Bridges) and his

whacked-out Vietnam vet bowling buddy (John Goodman) and *his* even more hapless sidekick (Steve (no relation) Buscemi) and their clueless investigation of a rich nymphomaniac's kidnapping, I guess we're just guys. And this is definitely a guy movie. Like Cheech and Chong with pretensions. (It was created by the Coen brothers of *Fargo* fame. That was a masterpiece; this is just stupid fun.) The heroes get all the good lines. As when a villain lectures Bridges: "You know, the mind is the largest erogenous zone — " "On you, maybe." Or when Bridges, caught admitting he took Goodman along on a mission he was supposed to undertake alone, tries to cover up: "I meant the *royal* 'we,' man." And Goodman gives a great impression of John Milius with half his bulbs burnt out: "Say what you will about National Socialism, at least it's an *ethos*!" At one point, Buscemi as the sidekick's sidekick recalls his friends have just returned from a desperate attempt at ransom delivery and inquires, "Oh yeah, how did that go?" As if all this weren't enough, the soundtrack features the late great Townes van Zandt covering the Stones' "Dead Flowers," plus Shawn Colvin doing "Viva Las Vegas." Maybe Steve and I should take up bowling

AWFULLY DISAPPOINTING:

Primary Colors — Maybe it's me. With this and *Wag the Dog*, that's two political satires in a row that left me feeling disenfranchised from the party all the other reviewers seemed to be having. This movie, based on Anonymous's (Joe Klein's) novel about Jack Stanton's (Bill Clinton's) (John Travolta's) first presidential campaign, has undeniably smart direction and script (reuniting the 1960s standup satirical team of Mike Nichols and Elaine May respectively). And there're lots of winning performances. Kathy Bates has the showiest role, as an old Stanton campaigner

rebounding from a breakdown; she gets to laugh and cry and swear and put a gun to a fellow political operative's crotch. Billy Bob Thornton of *Sling Blade* as yet another consultant emulates his client in one early scene, unzipping and inquiring if a pretty volunteer would like to "take the snake out for a walk." Emma Thompson as Susan (Hillary) steals our hearts in the sneakiest way, though; we hate it that someone so smart should find herself in so much pain. And John Travolta gets the accent, the manner, and most importantly the hair down perfectly, and even demonstrates that the guy has his heart in the right place. (His "snake" is another matter.) But it's an impersonation, not a role. Which makes it too damned distracting: a 2 hour and 15 minute skit about a pol's character faults. And no skit can be funny or even that interesting for that long.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #333, February 1998

Well, this time there's no chat to backtalk: I just can't find last month's APA.

However, you don't imagine that a little thing like not knowing or recalling what anybody actually *said* will stop me, do you? I'll just fake it, guided by experience ...

To Ray Bowie

Sounds painful.

To Michael Burstein

Isn't that, I dunno, contradictory?
Campaigning for the Campbell *twice*

To Nomi Burstein

I didn't know *that* about Judaism.

To Elisabeth Carey

But did you follow your bliss?

To Tom Endrey

OK, so Nostradamus made a lucky guess.

To George Flynn

Good catch.

To Paul Giguere

Organizing your CDs by height?
Fascinating.

To Anna Hillier

I didn't know *that* about astronomy.

To Tony Lewis

Ghod. All that work and it turns out you're *adopted*?

To Mark Olson

You really should try to read more.

To Joe Ross

I didn't know *that* about Marconi's sex life.

To Tim Szczesuil

Apparently it's called "The Little Black Gag." Yeah, who knew Cyril swung that way?

To Leslie Turek

OK, but are you sure the Olympic Committee will *go* for a card game?