

The Devniad, Book 37

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The Big Lie

A lot of us have trouble getting to all the books we want to read. Others read too much junk: stale romances, tired spy stories, anything by Piers Anthony. And English literary giant Samuel Johnson had trouble finishing books he started — a shameful fact which he turned to his advantage sometimes by inquiring haughtily, “You mean YOU read a book *through*?”

But the most common and debilitating literary affliction of all must undoubtedly be ... lying about what you've read.

Come on. Admit it. Don't say you've never done it.

At a party, whether it's a NESFA Other Meeting or the annual working picnic of the East Bournemouth Amateur Gynecologists Association, someone turns to you and starts talking about the latest hot lit pick, or about some classic of the genre.

"Have you read ... Peake's *Gormenghast*? ... Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*? ... Fujiyama's *The End of History*? ... Disch's *Camp Concentration*? ... Dante's *Inferno*? ... Bujold's *Komarr*? ... Vinges' *Zones of Thought*?"

Oh yes, you have?

Liar.

Liar liar liar!

Look, the only person on the planet I'd believe actually got through that Hawking thing is Albert Einstein, and he's dead.

OK, Albert Einstein and Mark Olson. But that's it! And as for the rest of the list — the last two aren't even *out* yet, you pathetic meretricious (book)worm.

This topic occurred to me because I finally started reading *The Princess Bride*, by William Goldman. It's a book I've owned for

years. Everybody I know has read it. (At least, so I've always believed.) I've seen the movie twice. I knew it was comparatively short, a comic fantasy masterpiece, and just my cup of tea — but I'd never gotten to it until this weekend. (Yes, it's inconceivably good fun all right. Just as I thought.)

And I'm sure if you'd asked about it previously, I would have pretended I'd already read it. Lying instantly and without compunction. Because I'm a reader, dammit, and we have our pride.

This is so liberating. Let me keep talking.

Okay. Okay. Gulp. Here goes.

I've read every one of the Hornblower books three or four times, but never really submerged myself in *Moby Dick*.

Proust — never even a nibble of the biscuit.

Tolstoy — OK, I did go through a lot of the shorter stuff (*Master and Man*, *The Death of Ivan Whatsisname*, etc) with pleasure. But never *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*. And you know what — I don't think I ever will. So there.

Science fiction? Mr. Bigshot SF Expert here has never yet touched *anything* by, to take some names at random, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Sheri Tepper, Jack McDevitt, Susan Shwarz, Allen Steele, Judith Tarr, Ian Watson, or Ian Wallace.

Please don't deluge me with outraged letters. (Right, like that ever happens in fanzines.) I don't want to say that I'll never read these people. If I live, I will. In fact, I own books by every single one of them that I'll get to any day now.

The point is, I just haven't quite yet.

So come join with me, brothers and sisters in mendacity. Your friends will still love you even after you confess you haven't

quite got to *Robinson Crusoe* or Robinson's Mars trilogy ... Burrough's *Naked Lunch* or (the other) Burrough's *Savage Pellucidar* ... *The Charterhouse of Parma* or even *Chapterhouse: Dune*.

Shamelessness loves company. Go ahead, admit one today. Remember, a man who *hasn't* read is still at least slightly smarter than a man who *can't* read.

Or try this one ... real words to live by if you're anything like me: Those who can, read. Those who can't, read reviews.

When They Offer You An Award, Hugo For It.

A few weeks ago an e-mail (which I'm now attempting to have bronzed; tricky, that) informed me that I was one of the 1998 Hugo nominees in the Fan Writer category.

As those of you who are SF fans know, Hugo Awards are voted annually by subscribing and attending members of the World Science Fiction Convention — the 56th of which will meet in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A. this August for crabs 'n' gabs galore.

A Hugo is sort of like SF's Oscar as far as fame is concerned. Although as far as voting procedures is concerned, it's more like SF's Peoples' Choice Award. Hugos are voted by fans; the separate awards voted by fellow pros are called Nebulas.

Hey, what do you call a Hugo from a Baltimore worldcon? A Crab Nebula ...

To continue. The top professional creative categories -- such as Best Novel or Best Short Story or Best Dramatic Presentation or Best Professional Editor -- rightly swipe the lion's share of the SF community's attention. Compared to these, Best Fan Writer is not exactly the Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, it's the moral equivalent

of, say, Best Hairdressing Achievement in a Subtitled Documentary. You know, one of those awards they hustle across the Oscar stage at lightspeed while Billy Crystal takes a bathroom break?

I say this in a spirit of superstitious denial and stupendously neurotic self-deprecation, of course. After all, presumably this is precisely the kind of self-consciously lexiphanic crypto-rodontade that got me where I am today.

Actually, I'm enormously pleased. I assume a few of you faithful readers of *The Devniad* — you know, Devheads — had everything to do with this nomination. Thank you from the bottom of my shriveled little heart. You give me reason to live.

In a spirit of full disclosure, let's admit there are a few other folks also up for this award. (Besides Cheryl Morgan and Terry Frost, who werz robbed by not getting onto the ballot, or Ernest Lilley whose *SFRevu* should certainly have got at least a nod for Best Fanzine — oh hi Cher, Terry, Ern; hope you read down this far ...)

The U.K.'s great David Langford, perhaps the funniest fan alive, has won the damned thing every year since about 1066, with interruptions only for the War of Jenkin's Ear and the bar's running out of beer at Eastercon. Then there are Mike Glycer, Andy Hooper, Evelyn Leeper, Joseph T. Major — all fine writers with many more years of meritorious service to the fan community than I.

*So why vote for those dried-up has-beens?
Vote for me me mmeeeeeeeeeeeee ...*

Sorry. For a moment I was channeling Michael Burstein or something. Won't happen again.

Naturally, any sane reckoning of the odds would estimate that I have about as much chance of winning as of deciding that I'd look good in an earring and just then having my lobe pierced for free by the fortuitous arrival of a micrometeorite from the Crab Nebula.

But hey -- if they cared about the odds, spermatozoa would just stay home.

Anyway, if you wish to refresh your memories about precisely how great I wart in 1997 — fan writing from last year is what's under consideration for this year's voting — again, it's all clumped together within my suspiciously well-timed new Web page, at the following address:
<http://members.aol.com/bobdevney>

The Hugo committee says it may publish Web site addresses, etc., for all the nominees it can. I'll try to repeat those of my rivals here next time, in a spirit of absolute fairness and great-hearted philanthropy that almost cries out for some sort of recognition, don't you think?

I just want to say that if you vote for me, I promise to make each and every one of you immortal. There's a lot of love in this room tonight ...

FlimFan

Movies I've experienced since last time:

GOOD:

City of Angels — “What do women want?” asked Dr. Freud. I’m guessing one answer might be a heavenly looking guy who declares that one night of bliss with you is worth giving up immortality as a supernatural creature second only to the creator of the universe. So yeah, this flick about an angel (Nicholas Cage) and the human (Meg Ryan) who gets him thinking all earthy-like should click with chicks. And truthfully, sap that I am — I liked it too. Amongst celestial visitation flicks, it may not be as lighthearted as *Heaven Can Wait*, and it’s certainly not the masterpiece its original was: 1988’s *Wings of Desire*, from German director Wim Wenders. Yes, this adaptation’s heavily Hollywoodized. Yes,

the moviemakers should have thought harder about the implications of angels as nonhuman lifeforms. But *City of Angels* is more thoughtful and visually interesting than *Ghost* or *The Preacher’s Wife* — or director Brad Silberling’s previous spooker *Casper*. And it manages to recreate some of the dreamy gravity and cool shots from Wenders’ film: angels as solemn guys in trenchcoats on top of skyscrapers, statues, and other impossible heights. Nicholas Cage looks properly soulful. Meg Ryan really makes you feel good, hoping everything works out as you watch her fall in love. Dennis Franz (Sipowicz on TV’s *NYPD Blue*) plays the big-hearted patient who brings them together. Warning: this movie contains one of those Hollywood death scenes where the character is apparently dying of dirt, with facial smudges the only visible evidence of fatal trauma ...

The Spanish Prisoner — Campbell Scott plays a young scientist who’s eagerly losing his virginity and becoming a businessman. Just when he invents something wonderful called “The Process,” though, and is expecting a big payoff, his boss starts putting him off, and he gravitates toward mysterious new tycoon friend Steve Martin. That’s the setup for writer/director David Mamet’s new thriller, which features nobody from Spain but several characters who deserve prison. *The Spanish Prisoner* can’t match my earlier Mamet favorites *House of Games* or *Things Change*, but there are still pleasures to be had. Such as Rebecca Pidgeon (Mamet’s wife) as an ironically self-effacing secretary with the hots for Campbell. And we watch Steve Martin closely, expecting him to be funny; this works well, because his enigmatic character is worth keeping an eye on. You’ll also enjoy Ben Gazzara as the boss and Ricky Jay as the hero’s friend. There’s a muffled quality to it all, though. The production values seem pretty low-rent. So though we move smoothly enough from a

Caribbean island to a NYC men's club to Boston's own Logan Airport, the movie never *looks* interesting. What *does* work is much of the dialog: always expect unexpected lines from Mamet. My favorite here has Martin, chatting with Campbell, discovering the poor schmo lacks a Swiss bank account. A few taps on his laptop and he opens one for him — just a few francs, enough for bragging rights. The scientist is bemused; why do such a thing? “Awkward extravagant gesture,” explains Martin. Beautiful.

FAIR:

Wild Things — Just see the last 20 minutes. That's when the plot thank God at last thickens. Before that, it's a pretty lifeless mix of *Body Heat* and a 1960s Roger Vadim/Rock Hudson fleshfest called I think *Pretty Maids All in A Row*. At a sunstroked Florida hotbed of higher yearning called Blue Bay High School, guidance counselor Sam (a *guidance counselor* — at last, the role Matt Dillon was born to play!) enjoys enigmatic relationships with two sexy girl students. There's rich bitch Kelly (Denise Richards, who played Carmen in *Starship Troopers* — I *thought* I recognized that body, I mean face) and stoned greaser Suzie (Neve Campbell of *Scream*). There are accusations, criminal investigations by a wound-tight detective (Kevin Bacon), a trial, talk of murder and dismemberment, sailing, and humid sex (straight and lez so) ... plus, in a related development, alligator wrestling. All of the leads *look* good, as does the scenery: it's a well-shot movie. But the performances are DOA. Director John McNaughton, who did the well-reviewed *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, is just playing mind games here. He cares about plot and surprises too much. (Once he finally starts, he can't stop: you're still getting flashbacks to plot points amid the end credits.) However, he forgets to give us something to care about. Oh, except Bill

Murray, who confidently smirks his way through some scenes as a delightfully sleazy defense attorney. He's totally out of context of the rest of the movie, you understand ... And we're grateful.

BAD:

Lost in Space — The two categories that take up the most space in this movie's end credits are carpenters and plasterers. Could this explain why the performances are so wooden and the story is a thin crust over nothingness? Nah, let's blame director Stephen Hopkins and writer Akiva Goldman. Remember those names. When you see them again in a movie ad, imagine a big stupid robotic voice is booming in your head: "DANGER, WILL ROBINSON!" Look, for about the first third of this movie I just summoned the inner brat and boyishly enjoyed the fast-paced style and spiffy special effects — both big improvements over the original 1960s TV show. Then all the energy seemed to drain away like a marooned spaceship trapped without enough reactor core power on a dying planet. All that was left was this dumb story. It's about a marooned spaceship trapped without enough reactor core power on a dying planet. About the performances again — let's not mention names, but the father is played by a man who was once a very good actor and now couldn't find a good role if it were strapped to his sternum. The villain is played by a great actor who better watch out. The children are played by nice young kids for whom it may already be too late. The pilot is played by a likable young TV comedy hunk. And the mother is played by a woman who's made at least a few interesting, quirky movies. This isn't one.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #334, March 1998

To Tony Lewis

Yes, I know about the *U-505* — the only German sub we captured in action intact during World War II. The U.S. commandeer, Daniel Gallery, who eventually made Admiral, wrote a book or two about his Navy life and I read them long ago. So long ago that I hope these details are right ...

And of course I've been aboard personally. The *U-505* rests high and dry in the back yard of the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. I toured it some years before seeing that great war movie *Das Boot*, so the cramped conditions you see in the flick were no surprise. For some reason, I particularly remember the crew's bed linens, designed in a rather stylish blue check. Check it out, you all.

Thanks to you and George for catching me out: so Delany's poetic ex-wife is Marilyn Hacker, not Hatcher. Ack ack.

To Paul Giguere

A prequel to *A Fire Upon the Deep*, and Vernor Vinge has already turned it in to his publisher? Let's go camp at the bookstore until it comes out!

To Joe Ross

I think Pinker's point about prominent men's genetically encouraged difficulties in resisting sexual temptation is that the vast majority of us have never registered the high come-hither counts that a rock star or president may clock. Maybe even given the chance, we'd remain parfait gentil Knights of NESFA. But devastatingly attractive as we may be — seriously, how many pretty woman have we actually *turned down* in our entire lives? Even including conventions, now. Two or three? OK Joe, for you, twenty.

Brad Pitt fights off more than that to get to the Coke machine.

To Nomi Burstein

Thanks for the report on Lunacon. There's a new book called something like *Power Sleep*. Saw the writer on a talk show. (If actually reading the book counts 10 points, seeing the writer on a talk show counts what? Negative 2, you say?)

Anyway, he claims that up until the last hundred years or so, humans averaged on the order of 10 hours' sleep a night. Today we average, oh, 6 or 7.

Based on your experience, mine, and that of many fans I know, maybe cons alone are tanking the numbers ...

To George Flynn

See my comment to Tony on M. Hacker.

I suppose you think you're smart, citing text in Biblical Greek. All right, I suppose I think you're smart too ... You're correct, the quote about "In the beginning was the Word" of course opens the first Gospel of John, not Genesis. And Robert spoke, saying, "Ooops."

Strikes me that John is the Proofreader's Gospel, in a way. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness ..."

Thanks very much, George, for intimating anent Corflu that I might make a sensible choice as a nominee for a Best Fan Writer award. And verily, it hath come to pass ... Yippee!

To Ray Bowie

You're right, I miss all the big movie screens in big moviehouses. I saw the new version of *Lawrence of Arabia* (one of my all-time top ten) at the Charles near Government Center a few years back, in full Cinemascope, 70 mm I believe; absolutely stunning. But the Charles has since gone dark. Not sure if there's a theater left in Boston with that big beautiful wide screen.

Alas, Babylon.

To Lisa Hertel

Stephen Williams' book *Fantastic Archaeology* sounds great. Debunkers are

always a good read (sorry, Tom, but they are), and he's got some especially juicy subjects. If it's just North America, though, he probably neglects Atlantis. Too bad. I did a geology paper on the subject in college, but I bet Williams would have dug up a lot more dirt. So to speak.

When I sent e-mail congrats to you and Mark on the birth of Liana Rebekah, I forgot to append the author's name. So here it is again, done right:

"A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on." — Carl Sandburg

To Mark Olson

You've never understood what people see in Lawrence Olivier? Guess I'd at least partly agree.

I have a fondness for some of his later character work as a villain: the Mahdi in *Khartoum* (bizarre, I know) and the old Nazi Szell in *Marathon Man*. And he seemed most at home for me playing distant, somewhat enigmatic leading men in *Rebecca* and *Pride and Prejudice* from the 1940s.

Other than that, so much of his work, including all the Shakespeare, looks so dated now. Partaking of everything bad we mean when we say something is "stagy."

By the way, I've read his autobiography, and Sir Larry had the fairly common actor's mix of vanity and self-loathing. So he might have agreed with your low opinion — then found a way to cut you dead.

To Tom Endrey

Thanks for the birthday regards. I wasn't trying to sneak my birthday notice in, just replying to Michael Burstein's sally. However, cash always makes a thoughtful belated gift.

Regarding your list making fun of the name of the town where I live (Fattleboro, Rattleboro, Wattleboro, so on) ...

Tom, YOU live in Flushing.

To Leslie Turek

Thanks very much for your soul-baring about your ex-boyfriend Fred. I'm not sorry I asked if you're not.

It seemed a very balanced account, giving him credit for gregariousness and so on. In fact, you really didn't claw him at all. What a well-adjusted lady. His loss, right?

I, on the other hand, am still bitter about Leslie Ford. She stubbornly refused to requite my eternal undying passion throughout several weeks of fourth grade in Wollaston, Massachusetts.

Of course, I never actually SAID anything to her ...