

# The Devniad, Book 38

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## Washington on Five Minutes a Day.

As Leroy Robert Paige might have put it, "the vacation ramble ain't restful." Nor does it help that, if we were floating drugged and senseless in an isolation chamber, Queen Maureen and I would still find a way to overschedule ourselves. So you'll forgive me if I sound a bit more tired and scatterbrained even than usual here. You see, we've just returned from a 4-day, jam-packed, eye-popping, museum-hopping, foot-burning, stomach-stuffing, distinctly overstimulating excursion to the Brasilia of the North.

Washington, DC, has enough sights for a century of seeing. We probably missed all your favorites. And quite a few of the ones on our own lists as well.

For instance, we lost interest in experiencing the top of the Washington Monument when it was described to us one time too many as "small and smelly." We crossed off the National Museum of Health and Medicine because it's said to have recently downplayed its tastefully bottled displays of pickled organs and embryos (though I hear you can still see Abraham Lincoln's spine). Nor was the Chess Hall of Fame included in my mate's final game plan. And the Kahlil Gibran Memorial Garden was too far out in the burbs; ditto the Museum of Menstruation ...

But the essence of travel is flexibility. (Well, flexibility and money. OK, flexibility, money, and the ability to find a safe public bathroom in a timely fashion.) So we gamely sallied forth and sampled what sights we could.

Many of my SF brethren will be attending Bucconeer, the World SF Convention, in Baltimore in August. If you're going, remember that Washington is less than an hour-and-a-half ride southwest, and well worth at least a day's excursion from the con. So you may find one SF fan's thoughts re DC instructive. Herewith, in no particular order, are my musings on the trip and on city spots both high and low.

### **Courting Trouble.**

My brother Michael, who visited Washington for several miserably rainy days 2 years ago, remembers the Supreme Court as a real bright spot. He says it has the best gift shop in Washington. And there's apparently a basketball gym, built for one hoops-minded Justice and his clerks on one of the building's upper floors. It's known as "the highest court in the land."

Say no more. Maureen and I naturally made this the initial stop on our first morning in Washington. Unfortunately, we were met at the bottom of the building's awesomely imposing steps by a guard with the news that, in order to hold a memorial service for past Justices, they were closing for the day in 2 minutes.

It's always nice to start your vacation on a high note.

### **This Visit Is Overdue.**

One place I make a point of hitting every time I'm in town (OK, that's twice so far) is the Library of Congress. It's across the street from the back of the Capitol. I got to go this time because Maureen, while she wasn't so thrilled to visit a *library* on her *vacation*, also didn't feel like standing in line for an hour or more to take the Capitol tour.

The Library's showcase, the Thomas Jefferson Building, known as the "Book Palace of the American People," is a great extravagant early-1900s overdone elephant pile. The thorough 1-hour tour points out over-the-top Italian Renaissance detailing and symbolic statuary and semi-fatuous slogans everywhere.

One of my favorite details was the dully shining metal bands high overhead in the central hall's ceiling. Turns out they aren't silver or even platinum, but aluminum — from a time when aluminum was more precious than either, since they hadn't yet applied electricity to the refining process.

Now, you should understand that you don't actually see many *books* on the tour. They're in other buildings, or in stacks not on the route, or seen at a distance on researcher's tables from the visitor's gallery, which is behind glass high up above the magnificent circular Main Reading Room.

One great exception is the *Gutenberg Bible*. A sacred relic for book worshipers like the NESFA crowd, it's one of the very first things ever printed with movable metal type. The Library's fabulously valuable copy (bunkered in a massive case behind thick glass, and fairly dimly lit) is I think one of three known to exist that are printed on vellum, treated animal skin. The binding and general presentation look absolutely magnificent, but in 1455 there were a few things still to learn about typographic design. Forty-two lines per page march in closely set, tightly justified rows without paragraph breaks, and in fact pretty light on punctuation too ...

They named this main building after Jefferson because he seeded the Library's book drive after the British used the first collection for kindling in the War of 1812. And also because Jefferson set up the basis for the Library's long-time "collect everything in sight" philosophy. (Add the Copyright Law of 1870, requiring all U.S. copyright applicants to fork over two copies

of their work, and you better start building bookshelves.) Jefferson pointed out that the original charter for collecting "such books as may be necessary for the use of Congress" could be construed as pretty open-ended. Said he: "There is, in fact, no subject to which a member of Congress may not have occasion to refer."

As you may suspect if you've ever seen a Congressperson, this is for the most part a polite fiction. I asked the tour guide (a book-loving volunteer docent who reminded me a lot of NESFA's beloved Madame Librarian Claire Anderson) if the members of Congress — who, remember, have first call and absolute priority on every single item in this, the largest and most complete collection of books, pamphlets, maps, music, prints, and photographs that has ever existed — if these lexically lucky legislators actually read much.

With a sad little smile, she said, "Well, they do order a lot of bestsellers ..."

### **Tube or Not To Be.**

The Washington Metrorail or subway system — Metro for short — is everything it's cracked up to be. Clean, quick, safe, fairly cheap (say \$1.40 one-way for the longest trip), pretty frequent, with decent signage — the damned thing even has attractive, rather Federalist barrel-vaulted coffered ceilings in the stations. Albeit rendered in concrete. Since parking in Washington apparently plumbs depths otherwise known only in Harvard Square and South Hell, take the Metro and rejoice. Use the time to study your map or plan where to go once you discover the line to get into the FBI building-tour-complete-with-firearms-demo is 4 hours long.

Only complaints: the Metro don't go to Georgetown. You have to get out at Foggy Bottom or across the river at Rosslyn and walk 15 or 20 minutes. And it doesn't run after midnight, which puts a cramp in the

party plans of clubbers, college students, and other children of the night.

### **Take the Terminal Less Traveled By.**

By the way, while we're talking travel: even if you live in the immediate Boston area, for your next plane trip (like Baltimore, say, this August?) you might consider T. F. Green Airport instead of Boston's own overcrowded, construction-crammed, traveling nightmare Logan. We did, and we loved it.

Green is in Warwick, Rhode Island, about 10 or 15 minutes south of Providence just off Route 95. (If it's rush hour, circle Providence on Route 295, which probably adds another 15 or 20 minutes but is a less congested ride.) The terminal has been completely rebuilt and overhauled in the last 5 years. It's clean and modern — big enough to have everything you need, but small enough to be manageable when you're tired, overburdened, and in a big hurry. In other words, when you're flying.

I know Southwest and U. S. Air fly out of Green, so you can get good prices too.

On the ground, long-term parking is \$15 a day in the garage, or \$10 a day exposed to the elements. And unlike Logan, you can actually find a space.

Last week, the appropriation went through to extend the train line from Providence out to Green. When construction is finished, perhaps sometime in 1999, you'll be able to take Amtrak from Boston or Route 128 or South Attleboro right to the airport. Then of course Green will start to become overcrowded too ...

### **Expanding the Beltway.**

Back to Washington. Since many of you reading this are SF fans, and since a lot of SF fans like to eat as much as they like to read and slightly more than they like to breathe, let's fade fast to the food.

My sister Darcy observes that Washington tourists will find a lot of good expensive restaurants and a lot of Taco Bells

and not much in between. There's much truth in that. But we did find that the museum restaurants were sometimes a pleasant exception. The winner: soup and sandwich in the café at the Holocaust Museum. (A serious note: eat *before* you tour the museum's sad, grim galleries; you won't feel too hungry afterward.)

On the more expensive side, the winners were actually two places Michael and his buddy Joe Ampolo recommended from their 1996 trip.

Donatello's, roughly halfway between the Foggy Bottom Metro station and Georgetown, is in a long, narrow space that stretches back out of the hot Washington sunlight into cool dark depths. You get fine Italian food and incredibly attentive service; Maureen, who sat facing the wait stand, said three waiters quivered every time she laid down her fork.

The Old Ebbitt Grill, a couple blocks east of the White House in the downtown biz district, is a bigger places with multiple dining areas and bars on several levels. With dark wood and white tablecloths, it's apparently a Washington institution — ideal eats for the power tourist.

And Pan-American culture may be homogenizing the world, but there are a few vestigial regional differences still twitching. Two apparent Washington restaurant specialties: folded napkins placed horizontally on your setting; and dishes featuring pasta stuffed with chopped veal, often mixed with spinach and cheese.

By the way, if you're an SF fan who likes food and tee shirts, there's a great one I saw in Georgetown that's *you*, baby: "BODY BY BEN AND JERRY'S."

### **Great Moments in Menswear.**

Fashion sightings that stand out for me on this trip include two types I haven't seen quite so many of anywhere else.

There are a lot of African-Americans dudes doing Washington in these tunic-and-

trouser outfits. Not dashikis; the colors aren't so bright, more like cream or brown or black. But looking very cool indeed ... as though the phrase "Nehru jacket" could never remotely be applied to anything *they* would wear.

And there are a lot of European-American guys in suit pants and oxford shirts, plain blue or striped, or just white. With braces and bow ties. This includes on Saturday and Sunday of the Memorial Day holiday weekend, remember. It's nice to know our policy wonks and bureaucrats are working so hard. But these guys *do* look a bit too much like they think Georgetown was named after George Will.

Women's fashions? Not qualified to judge, your honor.

And of course, in the places we went, the most common fashion differentiator was what kind of camera you'd accessorized.

### **Where the Chic Clique.**

As mentioned earlier, Georgetown is quite a hike from the nearest Metro. But it's got a lot of nice shops and restaurants.

Not including Fino's, the main-drag tourist clip joint we forced our nephew Jarrod to take us to our first night in town because we were so tired and starved and it was the first place we came to on M Street. (Jarrod has been at George Washington University in town for 4 years, so naturally we visited on a weekend when he could only give us one night before taking a trip back home to North Attleboro. He did provide lots of native-guide tips, though, before we left.)

To get a picture of Georgetown, think Boston's Back Bay. M Street is crowded trendy-going-tacky like Newbury Street, but there are beautiful little million-dollar dusted-brick townhouses on quiet tree-lined streets a block or two up the hill.

And walk downhill from Georgetown 5 or 6 blocks to get to Washington Harbor, a new riverfront development where you can

buy drinks at an open-air bar and sit and watch the world walk by on the Potomac riverbank. Pretty magical, really.

### **I Don't Feel Right Coming Up With a Cute Subtitle for This One.**

Back down to the Mall, Washington's incomparable Museum Row: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is another example (with the Newseum and the American Visionaries Museum in Baltimore, of which more next issue) of a new museum where they got things absolutely right. Michael and Nomi Burstein already talked about it in their APA contributions not too long ago, so I won't go into too much detail.

But they handle the huge crowds as smoothly and expeditiously as possible. They've made very wise provision in a scaled-down children's area for visitors under 11. And the building's subtly twisted, blocked, distorted modern architecture is absolutely integral to the horror story the museum tells.

Maureen and I have seen or read quite a bit on the subject, so I can't say that the museum held many surprises. But the tone and content selected hit all the right notes. You see the Nazi's attempted extermination of all of Europe's Jews from many angles of time and place and theme. (The material on Anne Frank is, somewhat surprisingly, hidden in a little alcove on the Netherlands Holocaust.) You see the early Nazi rallies and the secret enabling documents. The heroic uprisings and the desperate escape attempts. The rail cars and the ghetto cobblestones. The barracks and the crematoria.

The shoes and the hair.

(In another extremely thoughtful design decision, the most graphic photos of killings and corpses are hidden behind little "privacy walls"; you look over only if you've got the stomach for it.)

But, unlike most books and broadcast treatments of the subject, the museum's creators don't neglect other facets of the whole story, beyond the horrifying deaths of 6 million Jews. (This amounted to almost 70 percent of the prewar European Jewish population.) Such as the corresponding mass slaughters of Polish and Russian Slavs (10 million, or about 15 percent) and European Roma or Gypsies (500,000, or more than 30 percent). Or even the efforts of some few isolated, courageous rescuers, from a Franciscan abbot in Italy to Raoul Wallenberg and Oskar Schindler to the salvation of almost all the 7,000 Jews of Denmark by their neighbors.

Lines to get the same-day timed admission tickets are long, and usually sell out by noon if not earlier. But you can pick your date and time up to a year in advance and just order by phone through ProTix at 800-400-9373.

You know, it's a funny thing. I remained dry-eyed through all the sadness and horror of the journey on which the museum conducts you — until I came near the end. I finally teared up at the photographs of wild-eyed skeletons in stripes, cheering as tanks of the U.S. 11th Armored Division rolled in to liberate Mauthausen ... It was the relief, I suppose.

### **A Brief History of Headlines.**

Only a year or so old, the Newseum is one of the area's hottest new attractions. It was Maureen's favorite of all the sights we saw, for a reason I'll disclose shortly.

Across the river in downtown Arlington, but still on the Washington Metro line (about a block or two from the Rosslyn stop), this place is billed as "the world's only interactive museum of news." It's a nice concept. Three levels of an ultramodern building stuffed with displays, theaters, TV studios (it actually feels like more of a TV than a print presence here), "rare artifacts,

multimedia exhibits, and news memorabilia."

You can find your hometown newspaper nameplate, check news headlines from your birth month, tour a working broadcast studio, see today's newscasts from all over plus today's front page from 70 worldwide newspapers, and — here's what floated Mo's boat — do your own 30-second standup in front of a camera.

You impersonate a reporter, weatherperson, or sportscaster, posing in front of one of three backdrops with a mike and reading today's spiel off a TelePrompTer. They show your tape to the assembled hordes of visitors on overhead studio monitors after about a 5-minute delay. Naturally, you can also buy your personal copy of this great moment in journalism. Stop by our house anytime, day or night, and Mo will be glad to run "our correspondent" Maureen Devney's White House news brief on the retirement of Air Force One for you seven or eight times.

By the way, this is all funded by The Freedom Forum, started by Gannett newspaper mogul Allen Neuharth. So here, as in most of the Washington area museums, admission is free. And I couldn't detect any actual bias toward Gannett rags, although how would I really know? Anyway, be careful about scheduling this visit: it's only open Wednesday through Sunday.

My favorite areas of the museum actually featured the more historical stuff. Did you know that the *griots* of West Africa, who go around from village to village singing news and gossip, are nevertheless so despised they are buried away from the community? Fair warning, Geraldo.

Also, I finally got to see a *quipu*. That's the arrangement of knots on cords that messengers carried to spread the news of births, deaths, crop yields, and new laws the length of the great Incan Empire. The one I saw was from Cuzco, Peru, about 1440. The

thing looks kind of like a primitive sporran, but if you know the code it's apparently a wee bit informative.

Meanwhile, about the same time over in the Mideast, a Sultan's letter marked with the picture of a gallows meant death for the messenger if the message didn't get through.

Finally, there's what's billed as "America's first newspaper" — the issue on display is bannered "Public Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick," issued in Bofton on Thurfdday Sept. 25. 1690. (Does that sound right to you? Why did I think America's first newspaper was from Philadelphia?) This distinguished journal of record was soon banned because it included the news that the King of France was having sex with his daughter-in-law. *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*, huh?

#### **Room at the Inn.**

We stayed at the Doubletree suites hotel in Pentagon City, part of Arlington. It's a 10-minute walk to the Metro, then about 15 minutes across the Potomac to Washington. Only \$99 a night — a steal compared to prices in the city. And since Maureen gets up early and I stay up late, having a suite with an extra little room means that the sleeping person doesn't have a light in his or her eyes. On a frantic trip, this helps save our sanity ... not to speak of our marriage.

#### **Just What This Town Needs, More Partisanship.**

One semi-surprising thing is how apolitical Tourist Washington is. The museums and monuments manage somehow to bleach all the primary colors out of the people and events they commemorate. You've got to really strain your imagination to bring back the smoke and sweat and ambition and partisan striving that underlay all this whited-sepulcher history.

Maybe they're missing a bet here. What if you opened up a new tour line called, say, The Party Bus? Democrats and Republicans would take separate tours. OK, perhaps actually riding sweating Hawaiian-shirted tourists around on donkeys and elephants would be a bit literal.

But you could have bus rides for liberals where, like, you get off and stand on the steps of the Capital, flinging the taxpayers' gold doubloons to mobs of illegal immigrants.

And of course, top stop for the conservatives' bus would be a visit to the D. C. jail for smokes and cocktails, while enjoying the screams and pleas of (former) welfare recipients being flogged.

#### **Roll On, Weary Traveler.**

Wheeled luggage? Absolutely. Get some now. It's totally worth it.

But don't do what I did and just get one wheeled carryon to try out the concept first. Naturally, although it contained *my* clothes, it was immediately appropriated by Queen Maureen.

So she sailed merrily along through airport terminals and hotel lobbies with nary a care in the world, popping wheelies ... while I toiled far behind, lugging seven or eight of her lead-lined steamer trunks on my poor achy breaky back.

Well, that's what it seemed like.

#### **Mo Miscellania.**

Maureen also wants you to know that there's a touch-tone phone on Susan B. Anthony's desk in the Sewall-Belmont House, a noted suffragist landmark, so it's not exactly completely authentic ... And that we tried three times to get on the city's big tour bus lines, but each time they were too crowded (Old Towne Trolley Tours) or sold us seats they didn't have (Tourmobile) or said we didn't need reservations when it turns out we did (DC Ducks) ... And that there's no front-viewing windshield on

Lindbergh's little Spirit of St. Louis in the National Air and Space Museum: can you believe he had to look through a little periscope or stick his head out the side window? ... And that if you try to walk around Arlington National Cemetery in the steamy Washington heat (we had 3 cool days but got heated up on Monday) you'll absolutely *die* ... And that Nordstrom's department store in the Fashion Center at Pentagon City is absolutely lovely, with wide aisles and pleasantly complaisant servitors.

Finally, when pressed by her kulturkaze hubby, Maureen said that her favorite thing in the whole incredible Asian collection of the Freer Gallery of Art (which included Tang Dynasty metalwork-looking ceramic bowls and Silk Road cross-cultural treasures and an amazing Japanese screen of "The Waves at Matsushima" that just knocked me out) were the gold-toned water coolers.

But she was just having me on.

I think.

## RAH

*Here are 100 words about the Great Man for SFRevu's Robert A. Heinlein retrospective on the 10th anniversary of his death ...*

Growing up, I hero-worshipped the guy like everybody else. But put that aside. Let's agree that, good or bad, Robert Anson Heinlein and his drop-dead storytelling gifts helped make science fiction into mainstream business.

In the 1950s, he was first to sell real SF into slicks like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Boy's Life*. And in 1969, when TV newsgod Walter Cronkite covered the moon landing, the SF writer he interviewed was RAH ... Although Heinlein used this worldwide exposure to dis the idea of a female

astronaut as "110 pounds of recreational equipment."

As I said, "good or bad."

*Reprinted from SFRevu, June 1998; read it again at <http://members.aol.com/sfrevu/index.html>*

[Later note: Editor Ernest L. tells me the last line of the above Heinlein squib has subsequently been questioned by *SFRevu* reader John Paul Vrolyk. Who says Heinlein brought up the idea of a female astronaut, yes, but it was "the others present who dismissed or mocked the idea."

I don't remember any others present in that segment besides Heinlein and Cronkite. And my admittedly flawed memory has Heinlein personally uttering that "recreational equipment" crack, which (with perfect 29-year hindsight, of course) brands the man as something less than a fully committed feminist.

Anybody got a transcript? Or a memory that supports either version ... or offers some rashomonically inspired further redaction?]

## Some More Mr. Nice Guy

As promised last months, here are the Web sites for the fine scribes (five noble souls and, well, me) who have been touched by the fickle finger of Hugo nomination for Best Fanwriter. I swiped these from John Lorentz's big, helpful Hugo area on the Bucconeer world SF convention site, where you can find the final ballot replete with pointers to nominees in all categories. Plus in many cases the actual nominated works. All at <http://www.spiritone.com/~jllorenz/hugos/final.htm>

An informed public being the best source of sensible Hugo voting, you really

should give all these a look before settling on the clearly obvious choice.

**Bob Devney:**

<http://members.aol.com/bobdevney/>

**Mike Glycer:**

<http://www.spiritone.com/~jllorenz/hugos/f770.html>

**Andy Hooper:**

<http://www.oz.net/~cjuarez/APAK/>

**Dave Langford:**

<http://www.ansible.demon.co.uk/>

**Evelyn C. Leeper:**

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/4824>

**Joseph T. Major:**

Joseph doesn't seem to have a Web site, but I'd guess you can get in touch via the zine FOSFAX, which last I heard was c/o FOSFA, P.O. Box 37281, Louisville, Kentucky 40233-7281.

## FlimFan

### Big Screen News

Big-time movie reviewer Dan Kimmel of *Daily Variety* and other media tells me I got it wrong last month. The passing of the Charles Cinema isn't quite the last gasp of 70 mm in Boston, thank God.

Says Dan:

"There is, of course, the Wang Center, which does a movie series every winter, and still packs them in for "Lawrence." There's [also] at least one (maybe two) screens at the Cheri which can handle 70 mm ... [Also,] Sony is building a new complex on Boylston St. (near Tremont) which they claim will be the equal to their Lincoln Plaza in New York -- minus the Imax screen ... You are correct that Boston is woefully underscreened, a complaint I've heard from people in the industry for at least a decade."

### Love Bites

Earlier this month, TV movie critic Gene Siskel acquired a brain tumor requiring immediate surgery. Don't worry; from all reports, he's doing fine.

However, I've not yet recovered from the stunning blow received when Queen Maureen used Siskel's plight to count coup on me ... in the delightful way common among combatants embroiled in that decades-long war that is a happy marriage.

When we heard the news about Siskel, Maureen instantly turned the point and drove it home: "See what happens when you watch too many movies?"

Proving *her* point, here are my addled thoughts on movies I've experienced since last time:

### GOOD:

**Mrs. Dalloway** — It's one of the most boring movies I've ever loved. But if you're the sensitive type, like me, you'll relish the measured detailing of a day in the life of a London society woman in this excellent adaptation (by writer Eileen Atkins and director Marleen Gorris) of Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel. You'll observe with delight not only what a posh party's hostess says to arriving guests ("How good of you to come"), what words a skywriter sputters out over London ("KREEMO TOFFEE") or a headshrinker substitutes for "gone mad" ("I prefer to say that one has lost one's sense of perspective"), and what an MP's wife wears for a walk in the park (green chiffony dress, big lovely yellow hat). But you'll also see how Vanessa Redgrave as Clarissa Dalloway is always touching people, reaching out warmly in encounters with servants and old suitors and her unimaginative husband. How although now, in her 50s or 60s, close friends and good health and romantic love may be "over" for her, she still somehow regards the world with the hope that young Clarissa shows in flashbacks to a country weekend long ago.



There's a cross-story here also about shell-shocked World War I veteran Septimus (Rubert Graves) that's fairly old hat. But Redgrave at 61 lights up the screen. Hearing Woolf's celebrated stream-of-consciousness first-person narrative in voiceover, we're fully engaged with the mind of a human being like ourselves as she deals with regret and resilience, suicide and salvation, love and letting go.

**Les Miserables** — It's a rare phenomenon: a good movie without a hint of greatness. Danish director Bille August hits all the high points and plays all the melodrama as written in this handsome-looking film treatment. (Note: no singing or dancing, now. This is an adaptation of Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, not the 1980s musical.) You may know the characters, all solidly performed by good actors: Jean Valjean (Liam Neeson), imprisoned for 19 years for stealing bread. Fantine (Uma Thurman), who tries to support her daughter with beautifully noble factory work but is forced into really grungy-looking prostitution. (You know you're getting old when Uma Thurman plays someone's mother.) Her daughter Cosette (Claire Danes), who's raised all innocent in a convent and naturally gets the hots for the first dangerous revolutionary hunk (Hans Matheson) she can find. And of course Inspector Javert (Geoffrey Rush), hounding Valjean down all the years because his sense of duty may be a tad overdeveloped. But Javert is not really the villain here. What comes across instead is the oppressive, smothering weight of conventional morality. For almost every other character, all you have to do is tell them that fate once forced Valjean to steal and Fantine to sell her body. That means he's a thief and she's a whore, finally and ineradicably, case closed. So the Revolution of 1830 comes as a big relief. Because, melodramatic though it may be, the story's simple, strong moral messages still have the

power to move us still at least semi-miserable ones.

**Deep Impact** — Robert Duvall has the plum part, as a veteran astronaut. He delivers plenty of craggy authenticity and hot pilot heroics in a perilous space mission to head off a comet strike and save the world. The coltishly beautiful Tea Leoni makes a pretty deep impression too, as a network TV reporter who nevertheless turns out to have a heart. But Morgan Freeman steals this flick from them both — as a guy who just stands there and makes speeches. They're surprisingly well-written speeches, you see. And Freeman delivers them beautifully. In fact, he's such a powerful, straight-talking presence as the U.S. President that you feel he'd actually make a promising Prez in real life. A sample from one speech, with full marks to writers Michael Tolkin and Bruce Joel Rubin: "Cites fall, but they are rebuilt. Heroes die, but they are remembered." Without giving away any more story developments, let's just say I'd also give a good grade to the special effects. When you put an unimaginable catastrophe onscreen, you know it's working if the audience goes quiet. Well, there are scenes here when you could hear a tektite drop. And the science didn't seem too objectionable either. (*Devniad* Science Advisor Dr. Stephen Kennedy says he tried and failed to catch the comet's tail facing toward the Sun.) Basically, there are few new ideas here, but most individual bits were quite intelligently written and acted. In a genre where *Independence Day* set the new (low) standard, that's earthshaking.

#### **DECENT:**

**The Big Hit** — Wouldn't you know it? Just when a caper goes wrong and your own mob is trying to kill you, your fiancée's parents hit town for the weekend. That's life for henpecked hitman Melvin Smiley (former teenpop star Mark Wahlberg) in this

dark comedy/actioner by Hong Kong director Che-Kirk Wong. The erstwhile Markey Mark plays it all nicey nice here as a young, hunky, talented assassin who happens to be a pushover in his personal life. Both his fiancée (Christina Applegate) and his girlfriend (Lela Rochon) take continual advantage of his polite, extremely soft-spoken good nature. As do Smiley's people, a crew of young bodybuilder hithunks (Bokeem Woodbine, Antonio Sabato Jr. — and Lou Diamond Phillips in a role where, finally, vicious overacting actually *helps*) who make Melvin do all the work during a showpiece shootout early in the movie. However, nothing here breaks new ground, unless you count the old mob-movie convention about crooks' only killing each other; one of the flick's sickest laughs comes from what happens to a chauffeur who's only trying to help. It's also slightly creepy how the camera flirts with China Chow's high school/bondage allure as a kidnap victim. Her Keiko is Smiley's true soulmate in the movie, though. She's tart, smart — and surprisingly calm about being snatched, threatened, and thrown tied-up into various closets and trunks. Last year's *Grosse Pointe Blank* and 1994's beautifully deadpan *Cold-Blooded* were funnier, more stylish stories about 20-something hit men, but guess it won't kill you to see this one too.

**The Horse Whisperer** — First I have to get over my friend Steve's comment that the short-form title they used on the marquee could be pronounced "Horse Whiz." Then I have to get over the book, by a dude named Nicholas Evans. As it galloped its way to bestsellerdom, you could hear its hooves ringing on the shameless old boards of every one of those famous Bridges of Madison County. Anyway, you may know the story: nervy British-born New York magazine czarina (Kristen Scott Thomas) has a 13-year-old daughter (Scarlett Johansson) seriously injured in a riding accident. She

trucks daughter, horse, and self to Montana for some healing at the hands of a cowboy shaman (Robert Redford). Redford's character is called a "horse whisperer"; apparently his competitors are more like "horse torturers." He starts out all brusque and laconic, and then this Brit babe sashays into his corral and — well, let's just say you could read this as the story of an attempt to take a free, proud, independent spirit and break him to the saddle. And I'm not talking about the horse. OK, it's hard to get past the formulaic nature of the East-meets-West love/hate relationship here. But Redford, in his first dual acting/directing role, works hard every minute discovering details that bring the tale to life ... like the big Western hats under every man's chair at a family picnic. And the visuals, especially those incredible Montana landscapes, are so stunningly beautiful I just can't bring myself to vote "neigh."

**Godzilla** — Last summer's blockbuster from the same creative team, Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, was *Independence Day*. It was very exciting and very stupid. This summer's entry from them is still stupid and exciting, just a little less of both. Of course, there's no sense here in talking about the performances of Matthew Broderick or Jean Reno or Maria Ptillo or Hank Azaria, because all eyes are on the lizard. And he's looking pretty good. Some of my SF friends are big Godzilla fans, and they're going around bemoaning how this big-time American production has stolen the soul from their beloved series. Nonsense. OK, this one is light on the terror and has better special effects and a lot more videogame moments than the usual cheap 'n cheesy Japanese standard. That's supposed to be bad? And as for besmirching a classic: you may not have noticed, but Shakespeare never wrote anything called *Hamlet*, *Lizard of Denmark*. Or *Antony and Gamera*. Hey, this is fun. Yeah, or *Rodan and Juliet* or *The Mothra of Venice* or *Love's Labour's Squashed* ...

## Backchat

on APA: NESFA #335, April 1998

### To Michael Burstein

I like Howard Waldrop's comment about the earliest workshopped version of your "Broken Symmetry," "the ass of this story enters before the head does." Surely a prime example of a stricture honored more in the breach.

Didn't know you'd taught school in Brooklyn before your current gig in Weston. Much difference between the two?

Thanks for the Hugo congrats, and right back at you, big guy. See you at LollapaLoser? Oh, sorry, the Worldcon Hugo *Nominees* Party.

### To Paul Giguere

Don't be so modest. I think "SF God of Opinion" would in fact make a catchy nickname for you. If I see it on a tee shirt at Worldcon I'll pick one up.

Loved your deep psychological portrait of how music makes the man. Reminds me of the instant dating psychoanalysis some crude types used to perform in the 60s, based entirely on which Beatle a girl liked the most. If John, she's an intellectual, use big words until she weakens. If Paul (McCartney), she's too into looks to go out with the likes of us. If George, get her stoned and see what happens. If Ringo, tonight's the night.

Remember, gentle readers, I'm not the one who started this discussion. Send your postcards and letterbombs to Paul Giguere, c/o *Galactic Citizen* ...

### To Elisabeth Carey

Congratulations on the new job. As Librarian in a law office, are you not thereby ex officio Chief Collector of Lawyer Jokes? We'll expect a tasty little sampling in these pages, then, from time to time.

### To Jim Mann

Picked up *The Nine Tailors* when I was a teenager, but didn't get very far. Seem to recall it as kind of stiff. However, did very much enjoy the British TV versions of the Peter Wimsey books that public television here ran a decade or more ago. Particularly *Tailors* and *Murder Must Advertise*. And since you term Dorothy Sayers "perhaps the best mystery novelist of all time," 'twouldst behoove me to go back and try again.

Not sure who's *best*, but my *favorite* mystery novelist would probably be Rex Stout. Was weaned on all his Nero Wolfe books, written from the 1930s through the 1970s. Again, they're about a fat, lazy, brilliant New York detective who just wants to stay home with his books and his orchid greenhouses, and must be hounded to solve crimes by his energetic young wiseguy sidekick Archie Goodwin. It's Mycroft Holmes partnered with Lew Archer or Sam Spade. The prickly relationship between them — and the clean and crafty way Stout writes their separate, beautifully characteristic idiolects — keeps me coming back. Have you read them, Jim? Anyone?

### To Nomi Burstein

Nice memoir of your interactions with Monty Wells. I had even fewer contacts with him than you, and so have felt I should stay out of the touching outpourings of remembrance on the NESFA e-mail list and elsewhere since his death.

Now you present another reason for wishing I'd gotten to know Monty — his love of obscure dictionaries. As you know, I share that insanity. By the way, exactly what particular dictionaries are we talking about here?

Gives me an image of comfort, anyway: Monty sitting around a table in Heaven, swapping cool words with Johnson, Webster, Brewer, Murray ...

Oops. Out of time. Well, more smartass comments next month.

