

The Devniad, Book 40

by Bob Devney

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Orbita Dicta

Heard in the halls of
Readercon 10

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Below are a few quotes I picked up at a recent science fiction and fantasy convention I attended. The big idea is that this piece's abrupt transitions, sarcastic contextualizations, and general all-out sensorially maximized assault on the reader's powers of attention and continuity map a fair approximation of the con-going experience. Although I bet you got some sleep last night.

If you're not a science fiction fan, just read every *n*th quote. Nothing's going to make sense to you anyway. Oh, wait, there are movie reviews at the end.

DISCLAIMER OF ACCURACY: Every word quoted here must have been said by somebody in the long, talky history of the English language ... further deponent sayeth not.

[Current Hugo short story nominee and fine person Andy Duncan, just arrived in the lobby with his luggage but seemingly well-briefed by the absent Michael Burstein]

I've written up a whole list of things to say so you can quote me ...

[This reporter]

... That's one.

[At the registration desk, Rcon staffer Karl Wurst has a private system to distinguish me from my absent brother Michael]

Oh, you're the dapper Devney.

[At dinner surrounded by fellow Southerners (and one Northern spy), foxy-charming-and-intelligent Alabama fan Sydney Sowers discusses the recent rerelease of Gone with the Wind, still harboring an ancient grudge]

Carol Burnett ruined that scene for everybody forever with those curtain rods.

[Friday night, this reporter's panel-going starts with a bang at Stories For The Turned-On Brain, as novelist Liz Hand ejaculates]

For me it's always like a geometry problem, writing a sex scene. Trying to remember who's got what where!

[SF god and gay guy Samuel R. Delany appreciates a captive audience]

A straight friend of mine was in jail once. And he was lonely, and so on. So to cheer him up I wrote something, a straight erotica piece.

Apparently did very well, too. He said it was eventually passed from hand to hand among the other prisoners until it disintegrated ...

[Writer and erotica publisher Cecilia Tan of Circler Press is amused that movie actors have more trouble with love scenes than nice clean killings]

As though faking sex were any different than faking violence!

[Delany distracts the audience with talk of poet W. H. Auden]

Auden said that if a scene in a work of art actively arouses the audience, it distracts from the art.

[Hand is impressed by one past master for whom seducement was kid's stuff]

In *Lolita*, Nabokov is seducing the reader. The whole book is that seduction. "I will charm you into understanding how I can feel this way."

[However, writer Suzy McKee Charnas knows another Good Book that she can't recommend]

I heard the Bible all on tape recently. It's true there are sex scenes. But also — it was like being locked up for 6 weeks with an abusive parent. Threats, promises, and wheedling.

[Which segues neatly into the panel on New Maps of Heaven, where our high priest of polysyllabification commits the sin of modesty]

I'm John Clute. I mostly criticize.

[Tor Editor Teresa Nielsen Hayden urges a return to that new-time religion]

We've had an almost arbitrary, and almost unnatural, absence of religion in SF ... As though we could exclude an entire category of human experience and still make any sense of the world.

[Clute demonstrates unquestioning belief in questioning beliefs]

I'm an agnostic ... I find a writer like Gene Wolfe intensely moving and cruel, intensely absorbing, but it is not the absorption of conversion ... On the other hand, I find Orson Scott Card less absorbing. There seems an actual element of *persuasion* in the text.

[The short story "Beluthahatchie" -- about a blues singer's arrival in the afterlife -- is my pick for the best fiction of any length on this year's

Hugo ballot, but not until his kaffeeklatsch do I learn from writer Andy Duncan what in blazes his title means]

It's from a list of place names by the great black writer Zora Neale Hurston ... She gives it as the name of one of the suburbs of Hell.

[Few fen realize Readercon stalwart Kathei Logue is secretly working for the Colombians]

As far as I know, I hold the worldwide patent on kaffeeklatsches for SF cons. I started the first one in the 1970s — because I'd hurt my back and needed to do something that would let me contribute to the con sitting down.

[Ten minutes after our first meeting, brand-new NESFAn Rick Heller traps this reporter in the lobby with a shy request]

I've written a 60,000 page near-future novel about gene therapy and I need advice on how to market it. Not writing or style, just the marketing. Would you read it?

[Ernest Lilley, celebrating the first anniversary of his world-class webzine SFRevu, has bad news for an unfortunate contributor (OK, me)]

I cut down your prose.

[Prompting a lightning riposte by kibitzing NESFAn Michael Benveniste]

That's what most people do all day long at this con.

[Fan and Lt. Cmdr. E.J. McClure, U.S.N., explains how she got ready for the Meet-The-Pros(e) Party despite rough duty lately followed by a long trip from dockside in Florida]

I took a 20-minute Navy power nap.

[Could raw sex also have helped lift E.J.'s spirits?]

We saw Terry Bisson for a minute over there. He's cute!

[As E.J.'s escort, Ernest Lilley goes to alert status]

Hey, wait a minute. I thought you said he was *shrewd*?

[NESFAn Sharon Sbarsky believes in the at least semi-secret ballot, particularly when it comes to my nomination for Best Fan Writer (honest, she brought it up)]

Well, your name *is* on my Hugo ballot. There's — a number beside it.

[In the lobby late Friday, NESFAns Mark and Lisa Hertel smile indulgently at all compliments directed at their new fan unit Liana, even when bookseller Art Henderson exclaims]

Look at all the hair on that baby's head! What is this, lycanthropy?

[For the Saturday a.m. panel Essential Stories, Bay Area scribe Carter Scholz brings up some Guy we never heard of]

There's a fascinating writer named Guy Davenport who's built up an amazing body of short stories. His collections like *Tatlin!* and *Da Vinci's Bicycle* — you could call them alternate histories, but they're much more than that.

[Unlike most of the other panelists, fan writer Ed Meskys came prepared to talk about novels, and stands on that position]

I'd recommend John Brunner. Especially three books about the problems of civilization: *The Sheep Look Up*, *The Shockwave Rider*, and *Stand on Zanzibar* ... They're examples of why I read SF for the excellence of the ideas.

[Lit fic star Michael Swanwick is like a kid in a confection synthesizer]

I couldn't make a short best-100 list for science fiction. Maybe a best 1000 short stories, if I really disciplined myself.

[But he'd make a start with]

Russell Hoban. A very fine American writer who lives in England and has completely fallen off the American publishing map. You may remember his *Ridley Walker* was a best seller in 1980 ... He's still producing. His *Fremder* from a year or two ago is an excellent book dealing with a space voyage in the 21st century.

And I just saw galleys from *The Best of Avram Davidson*, from Tor. It's a labor of love by Avram's widowed ex-wife Grania Davis. What might help to get it some attention [which Avram found it hard to garner during his lifetime] is that every story has an introduction by a celebrity author.

[Editor Ellen Datlow affirms that Davidson's phoenix spirit lives on]

Avram is someone who for example greatly influenced Lucius Shepherd.

[Swanwick's a Shepherd fan too]

Another great writer! There's one of his stories about a boxer, "The Beast of the Heartland" — I heard that Joyce Carol Oates wrote him a letter saying it was the best American short story of its year. And I can't disagree ...

He's one of a kind. I can't imagine Lucius collaborating with *anybody*. His stuff comes right from the hindbrain.

[Meskys is still crazy about Hal Clement after all these years]

... Unfortunately, his best novel is still one of his earliest — *Mission of Gravity*.

[Swanwick seems a good prospect for NESFA's upcoming three volumes of Clement reprints]

Unfortunately? He has that, though — he wrote *Mission of Gravity*. That's a lot. So many of the writers of his time didn't have the talent or didn't bother, and are now forgotten.

[When talk turns to Ursula Le Guin's 1969 masterpiece THE LEFT HAND OF

DARKNESS, *Swanwick brings sad news from the gender wars front*

I don't think that book will last. I taught a class with Judy Moffett once, where she'd had them read it. And these smart, attractive young women came up afterwards, and we discussed that book.

They asked if we liked it. Because, they said, they didn't. Found it kind of sexist ... And you go back and look at it now, the neutral state *[of the hermaphroditic Gethenians]* isn't really neutral, it feels more like it's male.

[Introducing the topic of writer Thomas Disch, at least in my notes Carter Scholz kind of talks like a Californian, doesn't he?]

"Getting Into Death," from his collection *The Asian Shore*. Wow! Masterpiece.

[OK, a really articulate Californian]

Karen Joy Fowler and Jonathan Lethem are two other authors I'd mention. Both producing writing that plays with this ambiguity of what's genre and what's not — and also playing with the reader's expectations.

[In the lobby, three-book-a-week fan Joe Petronio parses the thrill of schlepping shopping bags full of books-to-be-autographed back and forth to the con every day]

It's that intimate connection. You talk to the writers, they hold the books in their hands ... you can go back years later and there's the memory written down, there's that signature.

[At the panel on Hollywood and SF, SF Chronicle capsule reviewer Don D'Amassa offers a capsule review]

Science fiction has become very big in Hollywood. Not very good, but very big. *[But he thinks we protest too much re being ripped off by flix folks]*

SF writers steal as much as Hollywood does. If ideas were that proprietary,

anybody who wrote about a galactic empire would have to write a check to the estate of Doc Smith.

[Although book developer Leigh Grossman says the prevailing Hollywood/TV ethos isn't exactly seeking the shock of the new]

The idea is, "What can we do that's as much like *The X-Files* as possible without infringing the copyright?"

[On the third hand, Craig Shaw Gardner points out sometimes Hollywood steals from the best]

Bob Gale got *Back to the Future* from reading Robert Silverberg's *Down the Line*.

[Terry Bisson reels off some flix pix]

I was disappointed by *The Truman Show*. It played out too straight, they didn't second-stage it. You know, "Cut: to Fiji ..."

... I was very impressed by *Contact* as a movie. The weakness of it was Sagan's weakness, where in places it didn't ask the right questions, and the end fell apart. But they didn't bullshit around with a lot of explosions and chase scenes.

[Bisson is a cinematic contrarian after my own twisted heart]

I think Keanu Reeves can be a good actor. Have you ever seen *River's Edge*?

... The man who wrote *Deep Impact* *[Michael Tolkin]* also wrote what's for me the best science fiction movie of the last few years, *The Rapture*. Which is about the Christian End Times taken straight.

[Don D'Amassa delivers the single most depressing statement of the entire convention]

Last year, for the first time, the percentage of media-related books published in the genre was over 50 percent. *[But do TREK and X-F readers then move up to more Rconnish material? Not per Ernest Lilley, in the increasingly suicidal audience]*

People who read tie-ins jump to ... other tie-ins.

[Most unfairly, films bogart the big slice of the audience that's got attention deficit disorder]

Movies you can see in 2 hours. Books take much longer.

[Especially books about Mars; or Russkies, as writer James D. Macdonald reminds us]

Did you hear about the Russian novelist who committed suicide by leaping from the top of his suicide note?

[Since this reporter's super powers don't include bilocation, NESFA's Leslie Turek copped some quotes from the talk on sleep by Readercon stalwart Eric Van, where an audience member reacts to a statement that the average person goes to sleep at 10 p.m. and awakes at 6 a. m.]

"Oh, this is the science-fictional part of the talk!"

[Van describes the f-f-functions controlled by a key portion of the brain]

You know, the Four F's — Feeding, Fleeing, Fighting, and ... erMating.

[As not exactly the most omnipresent toiler in the NESFA vineyard, I quiz Deb Geisler vaguely on who's doing what for NESFA's Boskone thingie next year]

So Laurie Mann is running programming — oh, OK, with her husband Jim — and what exactly is it you're running?

[Her Awesomeness Boskone Thirty-Six Chairperson Geisler, with steely patience]

The con.

[Former Omni editor Ellen Datlow, volunteering at the Tiptree Bake Sale Table, also drops a few crumbs about her upcoming new e-zine, Event Horizon (register at <http://www.e-horizon.com/eventhorizon>)]

We're shooting for a Worldcon debut.

... For nonfiction, I was looking for people with distinctive voices. So we'll have Lucius Shepherd on mainstream writers he

wants to bring to the attention of the field. And we're giving Barry Malzberg a place to be as curmudgeonly as he wants. The same for Jack Womack.

[This reporter asks a stupid question]

Is it a pay medium?

[Datlow pauses a little, and says evenly]

Five cents a word.

[This reporter gulps; then]

Oh, wait a minute. I wasn't talking about what you'd pay the writers. I meant, what will it cost the readers?

[Datlow humors this idiot]

It's free.

[Chastened, we repair to the bookshop, whence writer Barry B. Longyear enthalls an audience at Intergalactic Book Works with a bad-cover story (see what a difference a hyphen makes?)]

So in my book *The God Box*, there's a scene that *cries out* to be the cover. You've got two of the most beautiful women in the universe — stripped way down, you know, and hacking away at each other with bloody great swords.

And instead, they looked at the title, and chose to illustrate the book by showing a dumb guy standing there, looking at, hehhhhhh, guess what, a little box!

[Fan John Hommel (I think) thinks a change is agonna come in publishing and retailing]

I'm willing to pay a dollar to read the next Gene Wolfe short story on the net.

So why do I need Barnes and Noble?

[Writer/radiogirl Ellen Kushner kicks off her interview of Co-Guest-of-Honor Lisa Goldstein by relating how she knew her when (say, 1981)]

David Hartwell came into my cubicle — I won't dignify it as an office — at Pocket Books. And he said, "Remember Lisa Goldstein from the World Fantasy convention? Well, she's written a book."

It was the manuscript of [*Goldstein's first novel*] *The Red Magician*. I left the company right afterwards, and the thing I was saddest about was that I wouldn't get a chance to work on that book.

[*Goldstein's influences for that work stretched from Middle Earth to the Middle Kingdom*]

Oh sure, I read Tolkien along with everybody else. But also Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. She wrote about her mother growing up in China, a completely different culture from the one she grew up in. And I wanted to do that ...

I wasn't telling my mother that I was writing it. But I needed all the detail about life in Hungary. So I'd say, what was it like when this and this were happening? Then run home and write notes.

[*Kushner turns her eyes to the prize*]

What difference did winning the National Book Award make to you?

[*Well, actually, it felt kinda nice for a bit there*]

I was wooed by the mainstream for a while. And for a while I succumbed. My fourth book, *Tourists*, was published as a mainstream book, and then reviewed in *The New Yorker*.

... You start feeling that your stuff is so important. But you're not writing what you want to read.

[*She makes to us her moan*]

I like to whine a lot.

About lack of recognition. Lack of monetary rewards for something you've worked so incredibly hard on ...

On the other hand, sometimes you look at what you're doing and it's so enjoyable. This is my job today: researching Elizabethan spies.

[*She's had worse*]

I was a proofreader for Safeway supermarkets. Displays and signage and so on. So boring. "Broccoli: two cees, one ell."

But now that I'm not there any more, I go in and all the words are messed up. One time they were advertising "homily grits."

[*Kushner has no shame*]

Now for the Oprah Question: So how did you and Doug meet?

[*Goldstein dishes all the dirt*]

We were working together in a bookstore ... isn't that the perfect Readercon answer?

[*Kushner is really a Jewish John Clute*]

Thinking about your subjects and your style ... You're really a Jewish Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Your whole family is a magical realist family.

[*Goldstein agrees*]

Yes. Like "A Traveler at Passover" is practically just my uncle, verbatim.

[*She may face a harder future*]

Next I'm thinking of writing a planet-and-alien-and-spaceship science fiction story. I got back to reading more in the field and realized there are a lot of possibilities there ...

[Stephen P. Brown of SCIENCE FICTION EYE faces absolutely no heavy weather getting Co-Guest-of-Honor Bruce Sterling talking about anything, let alone science ... and fiction]

Science has a lot in common with writing. If you haven't done anything great by the time you're 30, you're not gonna.

But you can continue to work, productively. Mathematicians in particular are always living into their 80s ...

As time goes on, I'm getting better and better at writing more and more about less and less. I'll end with a three-volume novel about the lines in the palm of my hand.

[Can you say, midlife crisis?]

"Hey baby, you're 18, lick me all over, I'm hottt!"

That's a perfectly decent, appropriate thing for a 19-year-old to say. But today you can't do it with the same kind of innocent brio ...

I'm softer now, not as cynical as I thought I'd be. I have kindly feelings toward even the world's most septic idiots.

[On his relationship with Wired magazine]

It's worked out that for a while I've done a piece for *Wired* every year or 8 months. Kevin Kelly, the managing editor, is always saying things like, "How'd you like to go to the military knife fighting warfare conference?"

... But that's an interesting community they cover. Networking, media, communications — it is to us what the hot air balloon was to Jules Verne.

[On his brightness]

Using exactly the right jargon, you can convince the reader that you know everything.

I'm not a universal genius ... but I play one on TV.

[What is SF anyway, your Bruceness?]

I don't think most successful science fiction texts read very much like regular novels. They have this 500 pound secret agenda.

Sci fi is spectacle — the Squid on the Mantelpiece problem. Mom and Dad are worrying about their bank account, pruning the cherry orchard, and word comes that a giant kraken is leveling the city ...

[Does this guy give good quote or what?]

I want to hurt the reader's brain in some indelible fashion.

[And now, let's have a chorus of "Olympus Mons Breakdown"]

Bill Gibson was right when he compared science fiction to country music. It has that same kind of one-gallus hick charm.

[Or make that "White (Lab) Rabbit"]

It could be that science will be split. Between industrial research and a kind of scientific counterculture. People who are stealing to study things that don't pay ...

A lot of scientists already have that different style, you know. They look like their Moms dressed them — but no one could dress that badly without intending to.

They really pine to be the stud ducks of geekdom.

[But sleep thou lightly, O Readerconista]

It's kind of a belle époque now, a pleasant time in which to live.

But we're sleepwalking toward the Great War. Some big ecological catastrophe.

Last week, I walked out on my porch *[in Austin, Texas]* and I could smell Mexico burning ...

[Chris Edwards of Tiger Eyes Press slickly sells this delighted reporter a \$30 copy of R. A. Lafferty's Alaric ... after I balk at paying \$175 for the great stylist's obscure nonfiction masterpiece on the fall of Rome, aptly entitled The Fall of Rome]

Believe it or not, it's the same book. But this Canadian guy reissued it as *Alaric*. Because that was the title in another edition.

Why anybody would bother to do a new edition of a rare book everybody wants — but use the title that nobody's heard about ...

[Discussing Sharyn McCrumb and other Southron literati with Virginia gentleman and bookseller Art Henderson, I quote Pat Conroy's vivid definition (incidentally presenting myself here with one of life's rarest, sweetest pleasures, an authentically ungratuitous triple-dipper quotation)]

"My mother, Southern to the bone, once told me, 'All Southern literature can be summed up in these words: "On the night the hogs ate Willie, Mama died when she heard what Daddy did to Sister.'"

[At the Tiptree gender-bending fiction awards ceremony/banquet/auction, Nalo Hopkins has only one regret about Kelly Link's co-winning this year for her short story "Travels With the Snow Queen"]

I wasn't the one who got to call her and tell her she beat out Salman Rushdie.

[Other Co-winner Candas Jane Dorsey admires the unique prize for her Black Wine: a "wearable art" scarf that displays hand-painted scenes from the novel]

I'm wearing my book!

[Gifted auctioneer/writer/comic actor/madwoman Ellen Klages has dignitary Samuel R. Delany model an attractive little black velvet number]

Who wants to buy this man a hat?

Oh come on, it makes a really good story when you get home.

[To a guy who should know better than to trifle with a lesbian feminist auctioneer holding a live microphone]

As someone who makes 46% percent more than the average woman, you should be able to bid a little more than *that!*

[Klages, the tease, builds a bidding frenzy that sends a piece of artwork toward the \$300 mark]

Candas will sit on it for you in the bar afterward. I'll put on lipstick and sit on it! ...

[As the auction ends, Readercon programming princess Ellen Brody rushes back in from the hall; excitedly, to our tablemate, fan Susan Murosako]

Have you ever known me to be really impressed by anything to do with hanging around authors and big shots?

[Murosako, puzzled]

Not particularly. Why?

[Brody, face shining]

Harlan Ellison just kissed me on the cheek!

[And now a growing clamor is heard distinctly, noises off — a confused babble of fans in the hall, all their lit'ry Rconian pretensions vanished like chocolate Gillian Anderson figurines at a fanboy buffet, crying as if with one celebrity-humping voice]

Harlan's here! It's Harlan! Harlan! Omigod it's Harlan!

[While one lone wiseguy proves there'll always be a fandom]

Harlan who?

[Though Ellison was rumored next year's GOH, the public didn't expect even this lightning 45-minute inspection visit, and the crowd goes wild ... thus pitifully reduced to craning around a

ring of six-foot-plus fans in the hall and yet failing to get a glimpse of the Big E, this reporter complains loudly]

With all these big goons stacked up, it's like the Secret Service or some—

[And just then the disciples part and a small white-haired guy with glittering eye strides out, laughs loudly, squeezes my arm, and bestows my own personal Encounter of the Ellison Kind before throwing himself back into the throng]

I don't know if they're protecting me from you guys ... or you from me.

[A little later, as the howling pack brings the poor famous bastard to bay in the bar, one pushy blonde fan elbows up front and bores in like an asteroid miner on thionite]

Would you mind terribly if I had my picture taken with you, Mr. Ellison, please pretty please? Can I can I?

[Ellison, with a challenging smile and defiant lift of his chin, though he knows the cause already lost and himself fated to be gripping and grinning in seconds]

No.

[Stuff like this chuffs conrunners no end, indicates Readercon staffer David G. Shaw]

Well, we wouldn't exactly *mind* if word got around that this is the kind of con where Gene Wolfe and Harlan Ellison just decide to, you know, *drop in* ...

[As the air in the lobby still vibrates in the aftermath of the Ellison Event, writer/editor F. Brett Cox gets talking (in reaction?) about the Nice Guys of SF]

One figure who I think is universally acclaimed as a great person is Michael Bishop. He's a fine writer who doesn't always realize himself how good he is; I think he's too modest about his own work.

That's not always the case in our field ...
[At the Boston in Orlando 2001 party, Leslie Turek hears mentioned the Holocaust Museum]

Are you interested in the Holocaust? Because my friend Mary Doria Russell's next novel is something to do with the experience of Jews in Italy, where they had a relatively high survival rate. She traveled there recently to research it.

[NESFAn Chip Hitchcock talks about the pesky problem of what to call this zone-hopping semi-virtual-telepresence interstate commercing Boston-in-Orlando bid, after dismissing my favorite name, "FlorEascon," with a wave]

It's now been decided that the name will be Magicon 2. If we get it, of course.

Because a lot of people liked Magicon 1, in Orlando in 1992. And Mark Olson and a lot of other willing NESFA people worked on that, and people may remember.

I liked Oddity or Odyssey myself.

[At brunch Sunday, NESFAn and stalwart new SFRevu revuer Paul Giguere brings good news for many femfans about who'll be playing Father Sandoz in the movie yes movie of Mary Doria Russell's The Sparrow]

Antonio Banderas bought the rights to it, lock stock and Zorro.

[In the Sunday morning panel on Words as Magic, verbomancer Gene Wolfe likes a nice nasty beginning]

"Either you bury that body in the woods tonight or you'll finish your honeymoon without your mother!"

Isn't that marvelous? It's the first line of *Mother Finds a Body*, which was bylined as by Gypsy Rose Lee. But actually by the woman who wrote as Craig Rice.

[Writer James Morrow to writer John Crowley]

Do you ever just go through the text and cut out words and phrases you find are just too fine?

[Crowley, being —a somewhat rare thing — brief]

No.

[Wolfe woofs delightedly]

That's how you write those bug-crushers!

[For Crowley, sometimes the medium isn't the message ... no matter how hard she tries]

The woman who founded American spiritualism — more or less a new religion — wrote at the end of her life that it was all false. Had all been accomplished by snapping the bones of her toes.

But nobody in the movement would believe her. It had gone too far for that.

[But he finds magic in magical words]

There's a practice that has two or three words around it: *bibliomancy* or divining by books, and one I just learned, *sortilege*, a kind of divining by lots. You open a chosen book at random and put your finger on a word. That word will be your fate.

[Morrow holds up a copy of Lolita he happens to have on him]

Let's try it!

[Crowley, pointing and reading]

"Judgment." But he moved the book — it should have been two words over, "delectation."

[In the kaffee zimmer, when I mention that two separate individuals here have named him and writer Delia Sherman as genuinely nice pros everybody likes to have around, writer Paul Park promptly proves the point]

Make sure you tell Delia.

[During her kaffeeklatsch, the aforementioned Delightful Delia talks about her latest novel, for which she's now gathering impressions]

It's about the Impressionists. But right now, for part of it I'm doing a lot of research into the brothels of Paris ...

Actually, it's very dry stuff. "Twenty percent of prostitutes were former maids, and fifty percent were from farming families," and so on. The trick is getting to the human realities behind the research.

[It's not every kaffeeklatsch where the hostess bestows on each attendee a copy of the press-on commemorative tattoo from her recent lesbian wedding (to Ellen Kushner)]

The idea of having these at your wedding has spread like wildfire. Or at least like a small damp brushwood blaze.

[Book reviewer and current Best Fan Artist Hugo nominee Joe Mayhew wonders why duty never hath the visage of a sweetie or a cutie]

I've got to pull my weary body up and lumber off to this panel I'm on.

[In the panel on Writing Respectfully About Other Cultures, Paul Park testifies his novel about Jesus, The Gospel of Corax, had a surprisingly immaculate conception]

Research doesn't go far enough to help you get the feel of a whole world. It was very much a process of creation. Making ancient culture out of whole cloth, as I'd done in my fantasy.

You take influences from wherever, of course. My Starbridge novels are very much informed by my travels in East Asia.

[Writer Noreen Doyle has done some digging herself]

Doing archaeology is in some ways very similar to how a writer or reader functions. You try to read the artifacts like words on a page ...

I've been dreaming lately in Egyptian motifs. Like one where my late grandfather called me from California. Well, in Egyptology, the West is the Land of the Dead.

[Is Brenda Clough an SF writer dreaming she's a Chinese Empress, or vice versa?]

My grandfather was the governor of [Xiansu?] Province; my other grandfather invented the Chinese Air Force. My grandmother had bound feet no bigger than a paperback book.

I was born in Washington, D.C.

[James Morrow gets naches talking about his novel Only Begotten Daughter]

I wrote a book in which the two main characters are Jewish: God's daughter and of course her father. And a minor character named Jesus ...

I'm not Jewish. But I tried not to let that stop me.

[Writer Shariann Lewitt holds out the olive branch, then buries the hatchet in the French]

... I lived with a group of people in Saudi Arabia for 2 years. And found how very similar and comfortable they were for a Jewish girl from New York.

Far more similar than when I went to school in France.

[No culture should have too much explaining to do, notes Park]

When I was a kid, I went to a performance of *Under Milk Wood*. It was loaded with every cliché I'd ever imagined about Wales.

... Dylan Thomas, Frank McCourt, Spike Lee, Terry McMillan — when you believe it's your *job* to explain your own culture, you're always going to deal in stereotypes and they're never going to be accurate.

[Lewitt claims the freedom to imagine, dammit]

If we're going to limit a writer's subjects by his or her own culture or gender or whatever, we're going to have a lot of really boring books.

[Kushner's had it with the shuck of the real]

What we've got now is the aesthetic of authenticity. This obsession with it

actually true, did it really happen? Katherine Harrison, before that memoir about her love affair with her father —

The Kiss — did the same material in a novel, and it bombed.

[Switching to Magicon bid news, NESFA's Gay Ellen Dennett says they'll really put on the fatted flamingo at Rivercon]

We've got Naomi Fisher, the party goddess of all party goddesses, doing ours. She'll have two microwaves going ... has been cooking and freezing for months!

[In the hall, a fan is really jacked up]

I just heard Jack Womack do a reading. It was fabulous. Like I've met my maker!

[Don D'Ammassa is sympathetic about some heat I've taken recently for one critical remark about the Dean of Science Fiction]

Before the last time I wrote something a little negative about Heinlein for *SF Chronicle*, Andy Porter was complaining he didn't get many letters.

I said, do you want some?

[You hear such interesting stuff in Readercon's halls; for instance, NESFA's Suford Lewis has more bad news for bigots]

They found the skull of Terence, the Roman playwright, a while back, and it turns out he was black.

Isn't that cool?

[At, you're glad to hear, my last panel of the con, author and apparently permanent Hugo nominee Robert J. Sawyer talks SF settings]

We're getting to the point of travelogue instead of exploration as far as setting any stories in this solar system is concerned.

[Of course, our own sphere may still have some surprises left, according to sci writer Jeff Hecht]

There's some stuff about our climate I've been covering as a science writer. The current interglacial period may last considerably longer than we thought. We may indeed be getting lots of old ice melting ... Remember, 20,000 years ago, this *[waves at conference room]* was under 2 kilometres of ice.

If ice caps melt, there's 70 feet of extra water around, as a rough approximation. So my home in Newton, which is only 40 feet above sea level, would be gone. Along with most of Florida, et cetera.

[Fan, writer, and environmental buff Connie Hirsch would miss Florida]

At various times in my life, I've been in love with swamps ... They're like waste areas to us, but ecologically very desirable.

Although this year, I'm in love with deserts instead. Went on an expedition in Arizona. You know, every plant in the desert has spikes on it ... As we used to say to each other, the desert bites.

[Samuel R. Delany drags us back to the bog]

You know, almost every large metropolitan area has to have its swamp. For drainage and other good reasons ... Cover over its swamp, and a city will die.

[Hecht experiences a strange attraction to Jupiter's enigmatic moon Europa]

There's a whole new strange world somewhere under that thick mantle of ice.

[Hirsch replies coolly]

You've just described my refrigerator.

[Sawyer circles back around to the subject]

Stories set in these really exotic environments that take a lot of explaining — they tend to end up as little but explorations of that setting. For one prime example, *Ringworld*.

[Delany closes with a common SF no-no]

I call it the Wheatworld problem.

Our own world is quite a varied place, from blistering Sahara dunes to Himalayan heights ... One should try to make one's fictional worlds interesting and varied also.

[As the friends in her party braid continuous chains of goodbyes in the hall and she hasn't moved a foot closer to the door in 10 minutes, NESFan Elisabeth Carey realizes you can check out any time you want, but you can never leave]
We're leaving now. Can't you tell?

FlimFan

Movies I've experienced since last time:

EXCELLENT:

Out of Sight — Boy meets girl. Boy takes away girl's shotgun and forces her to hide with him in a car trunk during his escape from prison. Boy loses girl when it turns out she's a federal marshal. And so it goes, from Miami to Detroit, during this funny, romantic, sometimes dangerous crime thriller — surprisingly enough, one of the best movies of the year so far. I couldn't believe what a smooth, stylish ride this movie provided until I saw the end credits and realized it was directed by Steven Soderbergh, of *sex, lies and videotape* and *Kafka*. Like *Get Shorty* of a few years back, another done-right film of an Elmore Leonard novel, this is a quality project all

the way. As career bank robber Jack Foley, George Clooney, who's been just OK in TV's *ER* and a couple of so-so movies, suddenly becomes a star for me. Maybe never to be a great actor, but now, in this role, taking on the kind of screen personality we just don't want to look away from. While Jennifer Lopez, here as fed femme Karen Sisco, hath charms to make the savage beast require a cold shower. Plus acting chops of her own proven in *Selena* and *U-Turn*. Watching it dawn on both of them that they're in (completely inappropriate) love with each other is a pleasure every sexy second of the way. Ving Rhames as his partner and Dennis Farina as her father provide strong and utterly likable support, too. And Steve Zahn as the stoner lightweight Glenn almost steals the movie from everybody else, moving from the movie's most amusing moments to its most realistic and chilling change-up.

GOOD:

Dangerous Beauty — In 16th century Venice, even rich wives had it bad. Marriage kept you pregnant and virtually imprisoned in hubby's palazzo; you didn't get out much, perhaps didn't even know how to read, and got no respect from any man in your life. For a girl named Veronica Franco, played by dangerously beautiful Catherine McCormack in this gauzy version of the real Franco's life, things are even worse: lacking a dowry, her choices boil down to servant or nun. Or, of course, whore. Turns out that the courtesans of Venice apparently got more education, freedom, and respect than mere wives ever could. Franco goes for it, and we follow her career via lush visuals depicting all the obligatory scenes you'd get if Merchant Ivory did *Moll Flanders*. Feasts, mobs, plagues, a royal visit, a trial, a bare suggestion of a sea battle, and of course a tasty sprinkling of nude love scenes amid bedlinens to die for. There's even an impromptu poetic duel. (These never work

in the movies; were they any more convincing as entertainment in real life?) Certainly plenty to see here. Like the incredible Jacqueline Bisset, still looking great as Mom. Also, once she got her tongue working again, my artistic friend Rebecca pronounced the guy playing Franco's true love — dark, curly-haired Rufus Sewell — “the most gorgeous man who ever lived.” Well, McCormack (the martyred wife in *Braveheart*) more than matches his looks and talent. The movie could have been even better if it weren't trying to serve three mistresses: 16th-century history, 20th-century feminism, and timeless romance novel tropes.

There's Something About Mary — Gross guffaws galore. This latest by the Gen X Rhode Island directing duo Peter and Bobby Farrelly contains not one but several scenes of the if-I-can't-stop-laughing-soon-I'll-throw-up variety. Yet it's sweeter than their other movies, *Dumb and Dumber* and *Kingpin*, because Cameron Diaz (Mary) maintains such a nice warm presence at the heart of the story. And because we're not talking here about dog-shaped delivery vans or Amish bowling hustlers. This is simpler: A loser (Ben Stiller) moons after the prettiest girl in high school, miraculously gets one actual date with her, screws it up, thinks about her hopelessly for the next 13 years, and finally decides to look her up again. Except for the actually-getting-the-date part, could be a documentary on the young lovelife of the average science fiction fan. And speaking of verisimilitude, some scenes feature the high school in Cumberland, RI, where my niece Erin goes. (Erin is somewhat like Cameron Diaz, except prettier.) There are actually some plot twists and surprises here, too. But mainly there are laughs. Big laughs, and more than a couple of them. Stiller alone has one or even two scenes that may fix him forever in comedy history, like Harold Lloyd climbing that clock — or Meg Ryan faking that orgasm.

Fair warning: this movie may offend women, men, boys, girls, married couples, dog fanciers, architects, African-Americans, private dicks, citizens of Nepal, the inhabitants of Santiago, Chile, pizza delivery technicians, people who are complexionally challenged, people who are differently mentally abled, people who are differently walkingly abled, and manufacturers of hair gel.

DECENT:

Armageddon — One way to enjoy this latest doomrock flick is to pretend the star is really Steve Buscemi. You know, the “funny-looking” killer from *Fargo*? Buscemi, the Peter Lorre for our time, provides many of the (intended) laughs here, as a genius oil-drilling geologist with a penchant for gambling, strippers, nihilism, and playing with explosives. As the previews hint, he and his wildcatting colleagues are recruited to keep a Texas-sized asteroid from walloping Earth and reducing it to chili powder. Look, just the sight of Steve Buscemi in an astronaut suit makes the movie for me. If you insist on something more, though, the film has fun playing off spit-and-polish NASA types versus the hard-living, grimy, grab-ass experts on Buscemi’s crew. The big surprise of the movie is this rough macho humor; there’s a lot of it, and it mostly worked for me. However, about the putative stars — Bruce Willis and the special effects? No surprises here. As the wildcatter boss, Willis does his usual tough-guy bit. Like all the actors, he’s handicapped because (except for the jokes) all the dialog is hammy, all the drama is overcooked, and everything is so predictable. In other bad news, several meant-to-be-moving montages — showing reactions of people around the world to the disaster — look exactly like IBM commercials. (Director Michael Bay, who made *The Rock* in 1996, was still doing Miller Lite TV spots as late as 1995.) The effects do

come fast, big, and loud, though: the meteorite strikes are indeed good enough so that, when you exit the theater, you may catch yourself casting thoughtful glances skyward. Also, the asteroid surface just about defines the phrase “hostile environment” ... Except for welcoming our astrocats with what seems (at times) to be nice, snuggly Earth-normal gravity. (And at other times, not.) Science-wise, this movie isn’t quite as atrocious as *Independence Day*, but it does leave the average SF fan with a few nagging little questions. Such as, how come the meteorites mostly only hit cities? And about the ballistics of the proposed save-the-world deflection strategy: are they kidding or what? And wouldn’t a shuttle approaching an asteroid that’s accessorized with its own asteroid belt last about 30 seconds dodging space junk before it acquired more holes than Gore-Tex on a porcupine?

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #337, June 1998

Hah! With all this Readercon stuff to report? And then 10,000 times more quotes to create I mean compile for next ish's Worldcon report? Sorry, but I've got to stay alive and try to keep this under 1M words.

See you in September ...