

The Devniad

Book 42

un zine de Bob Devney

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Hey, Here's An Unusual Idea for a Fanzine: Let's Review A Coupla Books!

Sorry, but that's all I can think of for this month. Or at least all I have ready to go right now.

Since most of you read a lot more books than you see movies, I often don't bother. But this time, let's go wild.

Oh, and in the middle between books and movies, look for some other odds and ends.

Look, I never said structure — or innovation — was my strong suit.

Geoff Ryman, **253** (St. Martin's Griffin, 9/98, trade paper, \$14.95) — You know how your brain has learned from bitter experience to interpret the words "Here's an experimental novel I'm sure you'll enjoy" as "We're introducing the anesthetic now, you'll be stupefied before you know it"? Well, here's an experimental novel I'm sure you'll enjoy, and without risk of tears or visible scarring. A version of *253* has lived on the Internet since 1996; this paper-and-ink artifact is subtitled "the print remix." It's the story of 253 travelers on a tube train hurtling between the Embankment and Elephant and Castle stops on the London underground on January 11, 1995. Their journey lasts for 7.5 minutes ... or about 253 lifetimes. Each traveler has precisely one page of the novel to him- or herself. And — get this — each of these pages contains exactly 253 words. In Ryman's preternaturally skilled hands, this loony structure proves about as limiting as an infinitely capacious sonnet. (OK, there are

some footnotes, too, that don't count — he's not crazy.) After reading this book, I find myself looking at strangers on the street, or in a restaurant (I don't ride the subway much anymore) and echoing Ryman's unvarying subheads for each character in my thoughts: "Outside Appearance ... Inside Information ... What She/He Is Doing or Thinking." Under these rubrics, you move right into the lives people lead behind their eyes. You meet young love and old longing, satisfied ambition and not-so-quiet desperation. Encounter all those business people and unemployed folks, the street theater troupe, the Jesus freaks (one benevolent, one crazed), the illegal Russians. Get to know the determined African cabbie, mobbed-up restaurateur, retired spy, working burglar, synaesthetic music student, and of course the man who smells bad — all paraded by in a multiracial, multicultural, intensely alive snapshot seven subway cars long. There's even a small but significant SF/fantasy component: among the passengers are a time traveler, a ghost, and a, er, nonhuman. And a fascinating diatribe about what Americans and Brits (Ryman's a Canadian living in England) think of one another, and how "What Britain is now achieving is the commercial slavery of America, but with no movies, no religion except possibly Islam, and the worst, most sullen manners in the world." But again, don't be afraid: it's not all interiors or description by any means. And *253's* deep cynicism and despair is matched or in fact overcome by an even larger component of sheer joy. It is large, it contains multitudes. There's action that moves forward and backwards in time, tying various passengers

together in strange and wonderful ways. And the trip itself is a plot, with a crash-bang ending. To be honest, some small portions of the book, such as the tricked-up advertisements for itself, don't quite work. And somewhere in the first half I hit a patch of characters that were a little boring for a while. But let's not quibble. This is the best novel I've read this year at least, and one of the most enjoyable reading experiences of my not-so-young life.

Peter Dickinson, *The Walking Dead* (a years-old paperback —uh-oh, managed to lend out my copy already so can't remember too many details ... how embarrassing ... wonder if this ever happens to *real* reviewers? ... keep talking, maybe they won't notice I'm even more than usually vague) — A nebbishy British pharmaceutical researcher arrives at his company's satellite lab on a small Caribbean island for a working vacation. Ha! Within weeks he's up to his protocols in a rich island gumbo flavored with voodoo, experimentation on political prisoners, a revolution against the interestingly deranged local Papa Doc dictator type, a lab rat named Quentin who may wield potent — let's call them rodentomantic powers — powers, and the psychological if not indeed magical underpinnings of zombiesm. One classical rule for a novel is that the main character must undergo a change by the end of the action. In this case, hoo baby, don't worry. Famous SF con bookseller Art Henderson gave me this one to get me hooked on Dickinson, one of his pet sleeper favorites. Mission accomplished, sir. The guy (Dickinson) writes with immense and slightly weary authority, treating the most hysterically unlikely subjects and tumultuous events without ever raising the tone of his authorial voice.

Holy Cow!

My private belief is that the two terms below were invented by a history of religion instructor looking for a foolproof way to weed out the unfit on his final exam.

"*Homoousian*: believer in a 4th century Christian creed that the Son and the Father are made of the same substance."

"*Homoiousian*: believer in a 4th century Christian creed that the essence of the Son is similar to but not the same as that of the Father."

And in another development, I read somewhere this month the assertion that the Talmud mentions that Christ was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Panther. Never heard *that* one before. Can any of you confirm or deny? The attribution, I mean.

The implications are staggering, of course. Most critically, it would mean that Christ was half-Italian. Thus bolstering my passionate belief that Italian food is the cuisine most clearly beloved of God.

Californians Can Crash a Tad Easier on Their Futons Tonight

Will California ever fall into the sea?

This answer just in from The Straight Dope, AOL's wonderful on-line site of trivia etc. (there are also four books, all of which I own and treasure) by the world's smartest human, Cecil Adams:

"It all depends on what you mean by 'fall into the sea.' If you mean 'when will California break off the continent and sink to the ocean floor,' the answer is 'never.' The sea, you see, is only about two miles deep. California is about twenty miles thick."

Whew, dudes. That's a load off fer shure.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not)

Live in Vain

Minnesota fanwriter/den mother **Geri Sullivan** of the very good *Idea* joins fanwriter **Vicki Rosenzweig** of the quidnunc *Quipu* in noting that the name I missed in my Bucky quotes — of **Maureen Kincaid Speller's** friend, the British fan who suffers *Strange Delusions of a Drunken Fuckwit* — is the Isle of Jersey's most famous fanwriter, **Tobes Valois**.

And MIT brainiac **Gary Dryfoos** notes of my sister **Darcy's** handing **David Cherry** the title "A Canticle for Liebowitz" to try to communicate visually at Bucconeer's SF Pictionary game: "Reminds me of the time I had to send 'Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones'. Catcher got it in much less than a minute, though I no longer remember how."

If you can remember it, Gary, you weren't enjoying it enough.

And by the way, if you liked my Bucky con quotes, you'll get a much less twisted picture of the pirate life through con reports by **Cheryl Morgan** in Sept's *Emerald City* (try through <http://www.emcit.com/emcit.htm>) and at the Web sites of **Janice Gelb** (<http://www.geocities.com/Area51/8018/>) and of course the famous complete-freak **Evelyn Leeper** (<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/4824/index.html>).

Of an earlier con, fanwriter **Tom Jackson** would "sure like to know more about how **Harlan Ellison** wound up at the convention [Readercon, July 1998]. Surely he didn't fly across the country just to put in a 45-minute appearance?"

Anybody have any scoop I could share with Tom? Not that I'm not curious meself.

By the way, fan **Chaz Boston Baden** keeps a genuinely useful Web page listing contact info for scores of SF/fantasy congoing vendors and booksellers. Check it out at:

<http://ddb.com/smofs/dealers.html>

And speaking of dealers, still haven't got to our great local resource, Pandemonium at Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass, U.S.A., since the big renovation there; dying to see the results. E-mailed owner **Tyler Stewart** to ask if the rumors were true about free buffets, saunas, and barber's chairs? His wiseass, not-too-wise-for-a-guy-who-wants-me-to-spend-money-in-his-store reply: "I'm sorry, those are only for Hugo winners."

You'll pay for that, Stewart! Just when I was going to let you stock back issues of *The Devniad* and tap into the really big bucks.

Advance book report department: After praise from other reviewers, and meeting extremely personable and simpatico writer **Patrick O'Leary** at Bucconeer — and after the damned thing was nominated for the World Fantasy Award, just in case I was still afraid it might be lousy — finally started O'Leary's *The Gift*. So far it's fabulous. Takes somewhat tired old fantasy tropes and vocabulary and, well, magically makes them come alive again. More on this next month for sure ...

From "Deep Thoughts"

by **Jack Handey**

(on TV's old *Saturday Night Live*)

"I don't think I'm alone when I say I'd like to see more and more planets fall under the ruthless domination of our solar system."

FlimFan

Flicks flown by since last time (bless me, Father, it's been 2 months since my last reviews ... so expect a fat lot of flicks):

EXCELLENT:

Saving Private Ryan — The twin battle scenes at each end of this near-masterpiece — with their denatured colors, fade-in-and-out roars of sound, and fearfully jittery handheld camerawork — are not so much gory (though there's gore galore) as just plain scary. Even if you've never been in combat, you can tell it's just like this ... and you want no part of it. This painful hyperrealism also extends to the movie's portrait of command. In a magnificently honest performance, Tom Hanks as Captain Miller must first get his company through the inferno of World War II's D-Day invasion, then lead a hand-picked Ranger squad to find a single soldier somewhere in battle-torn Normandy. Miller is by turns detached, tender, and harsh as he motivates his people in pursuit of two mostly contradictory goals: getting the job done and getting home. There's talk this is an anti-war film. Absolutely not. To its credit, *Saving Private Ryan* engenders questions: Should you risk eight men to save one? What's a good man, and what's a good man's life? Would I have been cool or cowardly back then and there? When if ever is it OK to shoot prisoners? But the answers we get are often topped with a hefty dose of Hollywood patriotism. In fact, one gesture late in the movie — a salute — was so cornily predictable that I spent two minutes beforehand pleading under my breath for it not to happen. Also, there's a coincidence so far-fetched (a character in an intense knife fight is one we've met before) that I didn't even realize it was so until afterwards ... These flaws dampen director Steven Spielberg's achievement, but they do not snuff it out. Because the lasting memories we shall save from *Saving Private Ryan* are not of Hollywood heroics, but of war's truest legacies, fear and wasteful loss and finally lonely death.

Return to Paradise — A coupla years back, you were young, carefree, careless, and spent a month in Malaysia with two

other twentysomething Americans. The babes, the booze, and the hash were cheap and easy to get. So you partied for a month, living in a thatched-roof bungalow and splashing around the bay in water as warm as God's own bathtub. Nice. Anyway, you've been back in New York City for 2 years when this lawyer shows up. Seems your little Asian idyll has had some unexpected consequences. And you've got one *bitch* of a decision to make ... That's the setup for director Joseph Ruben's (*Sleeping with the Enemy*) deeply involving thriller/morality tale. Vince Vaughn, who made his mark in *Swingers*, is again impressive here as the alpha American. He's big, aggressive, and has spent his whole life looking out for No. 1 — does he have a conscience at all? David Conrad as the middle friend is a nicer guy, but is nice enough? And the question for Joaquin Phoenix as the third friend is, does he ever stop being a victim? Ann Heche of *Donnie Brasco* is laser-sharp as the lawyer, who's even more desperate than her case demands. And there's also a spiky almost-cameo by Jada Pinkett Smith as a heedless journalist. You know, the acting and directing here are both fine. But it's the smart, excruciatingly balanced story by Bruce Robinson and Wesley Strick that might move this unstoppable little sleeper onto my list of best movies of the year.

GOOD:

Ever After — A nice surprise. I expected a medieval romance, but it's set in the early 1500s, and also takes its subtitle literally: "A Cinderella Story." The frame tale has the Brothers Grimm visiting the French court after publication of their *Fairy Tales* (1815). The Queen claims one of their stories was actually true, Monsieur Perrault's 1697 "Mother Goose" version notwithstanding — and in fact IDs her own great-great grandmother as the real "little cinder girl" ... Fade to Drew Barrymore in a peasant dress

sleeping by a hearth, sweetly if cinder-smudged. This movie possesses a certain brisk matter-of-factness, a groundedness you don't expect. They really do take a fairy story and put flesh on its bones. Good solid flesh it is too, with Barrymore playing the lead. After all, she's been raised at her country manor as the hands-on sister and virtual servant to her stepsisters and evil stepmother Angelica Houston. (Houston darts her eyes around a lot, but relishes the role so much that we do too.) There are several jokes about this sturdy Cinderella's willingness to get her hands dirty — exteriors were filmed in picture-perfect Perigord, and one scene has her hunting the local truffles with a local pig — which would be hard to imagine in more sylph-like portrayals. She's also the cheeriest Cinderella we've seen. Though kinda pinko, chastising her Prince (Dougray Scott) about peasants' rights early in their relationship. He admires her spunk. She wears an heirloom slipper, encrusted with tiny glass tiles, to the ball. The rest is (fairy tale) history ...

Blade — Just when you thought the bloodline was running thin, *Blade* — not as original as *Spawn*, less silly than *The Crow* — proves there's juice left in its made-from-comic-books class, especially if you cherish darksider heroes and killer visuals. As *Blade*, the Daywalker, Wesley Snipes is a vampire hunter who's half-vamp himself. He's all bad attitude; his character's only a few millimetres thick, but that's a steely millimetre longer than the next guy. (Half of Snipes' movies are pure crap, but I'd put this up there with *Major League* and *Jungle Fever*, just below *New Jack City* and *The Waterdance*.) Kris Kristofferson is properly crusty in one of those biker/mage roles he's doing lately, as the old vampire killer Whistler. And N'Bushe Wright does OK as Dr. Karen Jensen, probably the movies' first love interest/hematologist. Now, it's a truism first formulated for the Bond flicks

that a great action movie demands a great villain. Unfortunately, Stephen Dorff's yuppie-scum-turned-neckbiter Deacon Frost is the weak link here. And, OK, the Blood Club disco is neat, but how about that "ancient vampire temple" in the climax? Built right under what would conveniently become metro New York. Prescient dudes, those long-bygone bloodsuckers ... All in all, the visuals still satisfy. Like one battle in a high-tech vampire library, where the leaves of the ancient vampire bible, *The Book of Erebus*, are preserved in nitrogen, sheaved between huge glass plates. You can bet our boy *Blade* goes through those babies like a kickboxer in a china shop.

DECENT:

One True Thing — This well-crafted family drama was directed by Carl Franklin, who did 1992's excellent thriller/morality tale *One False Move*. But it must be said this movie's blood — transfused from former *New York Times* columnist Anna Quindlen's not-so-semiautobiographical first novel — runs more in the vein of WASPy familyfests like *Ordinary People* or *The Ice Storm*. It could be only a guy's viewpoint that this *Thing* screams "chick flick." Let's just note that not one man here is worth a damn: universally stupid or selfish or weak or all three. (As Roy Blount puts it, "I'm just saying.") We are invited to identify with the main character Helen (Renee Zellweger). Although for a brilliant Harvard graduate / New York magazine writer, Helen seems awfully naive. She's in her mid-twenties and has never twigged before that [LOOK OUT: SPOILER AHEAD] her professor father (William Hurt) is a selfish troll and her homemaker mother (Meryl Streep) a selfless treasure? All dawns on her finally when she's forced to put her career on hold and, sulking at first, return home to play caretaker when Mom gets cancer. Zellweger as *Everydaughter* makes the most out of a lot of painfully squinting reaction shots.

Streep fares better: she can pack about three meanings into one short word at the end of a line, and we're grateful for a little shading against the glare of the plotlight. William Hurt is about perfect as the pompous, pitiful prof. *One True Thing* is powerful material, finally. It's put together with skill to make us remember our own family twists and turns. So we wince and fill up and smile through our tears at all the right moments. But it bothers me a little that, from the viewpoint of its creators, our reactions must have seemed like one sure thing.

Simon Birch — If there's *got* to be a movie about a cute little dwarf boy, I guess this one's not too bad. Plenty of laughs, a few sobs, a little action. Some good dialog too. At one point, 12-year-old Simon (Ian Michael Smith) tells his best friend Joe (Joseph Mazzello) that a girl who finds him cute means it "like a baby turtle is cute." But doesn't this movie think Simon's cute for the same reasons? Certainly, it bestows the usual overcompensations. He's not a normal boy only short; he's brilliant, a terrific little standup comedian, and a religious prodigy. Simon speaks his mind with innocent egocentrism, in any circumstance — including church during the minister's oration; we'd find this obnoxious or threatening in someone not so physically disarming. The credits state this movie was "suggested by" John Irving's 1989 novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Apparently writer/director Mark Steven Johnson liked Irving's setup but took the tale in a different direction. I say toss the dwarf, you'd still have a good story: two boys growing up in small-town Maine in the early 1960s, a bunch of eccentric relatives (including Joe's mother, who won't tell anyone who his father was — a luminous performance by Ashley Judd kinda playing Mary Magdalene as a single mom), a central mystery (Who was Joe's father, anyway? *That* takes us 20 whole minutes to figure out), fresh glimpses of Maine waters and woods, awakening

sexuality, a hilarious Christmas pageant, and oh yeah a stuffed armadillo ...

Rush Hour — What's faster, Jackie Chan's hands or Chris Tucker's mouth? This fairly amusing action/comedy calls it a draw. Tucker was a scream (literally) as the disc jockey Ruby Rhod in *The Fifth Element*. Here he plays grandstanding LA cop James Carter, forced to babysit visiting Hong Kong supercop Lee (not, say, Richard Ng Song?) while the FBI solves the kidnapping of the Chinese consul. Naturally, the pair end up battling (usually Chan fights, Tucker smartmouths) each other, the villains, and the feebies while cracking the case. I've praised Tucker's energy, verbal velocity, and cartoony body language before; if he were white, he'd already be as famous as Jim Carrey. And if Jackie Chan were American, he'd be even famouser. One small scene, where he needs to scale a 12 foot brick wall, shows why. Chan pauses, then runs at the wall real fast and sort of ping-ping-pings himself off two angled corners to the top. Where he encounters a surveillance camera pointing at his head and neatly turns its lens away before disappearing over the edge. All without special effects; he just *does* it, in about 2 magical, effortless seconds ... Chan can go out a bus window and into the far window of a taxicab alongside like Astaire dancing downstairs. And I haven't even talked about his trademark fists-flying/confetti-kicking/prop-playing martial arts magic. Most incredible of all: Chan does his own stunts. All of them. Of course, sooner or later he's going to wind up dead. Rich and world-famous, but dead ... So better catch this movie now.

DISAPPOINTING:

The Mask of Zorro — "Out of the night, when the full moon is bright, comes the horse that's known as Zorro ... He's *bold* an' he's *braaave*, carves a *Zeeeeee* for his *naaame* — the horse that's known as Zorro." As a

child fan of the TV series, I sang that theme all day long. Now I realize the word was probably "horseman." And "zorro" is Spanish for "fox." So "horse" didn't make any sense at all, did it little Bobby? I'm going on about the TV show, which I liked, to avoid talking about the movie, which I didn't much. Look, it's got a couple of dandy duels. Anthony Hopkins as the "old" Zorro is fine, if not riveting. There's good chemistry between Antonio Banderas and this new English actress Catherine Zeta-Jones, so it scores high on the date-o-meter. And Banderas has the charm and athleticism to bring off the mask, the cape, all that jumping around. While Zeta-Jones shows a real gift for the required flashing and heaving (eyes and bosoms). Plus her Spanish accent is beautifully trained and about doubles her already significant sexiness. However, you've seen the best parts before in the previews. The story stinks like Sergeant Garcia's sweatsox. (He's a no-show, by the way. How dare they tamper with the sacred canon?) The last half goes downhill fast. I'm just thinking well, at least in Old California, we won't get some cliché explosion-filled finale. Then comes the showdown at the old mine, with all those kegs of gunpowder ... If I gave letter grades, this Zorro would carve a C for his name.

Lethal Weapon 4— You just know that a movie with "4" in the title will brim with fresh energy and new ideas. On the Bizarro World, maybe. This latest entry in the long-running hit series plays as pretty tired. Los Angeles cop Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) isn't so young or tortured anymore; he may even consider marriage with his pregnant girlfriend Lorna (Rene Russo). Partner Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) still frets about family life as his kids enter adulthood. The buds still indulge in lotsa their patented badinage and horseplay, much improvised on the spot. I've always hated that stuff. Did have high hopes for hot young comedian Chris Rock, who debuts as a cop who's also

Murtaugh's secret son-in-law. But the movie does too little with him. And usual comic relief Joe Pesci had only a few scenes. OK, that leaves the action. Starting with The Human Tank, an overachieving psycho who shoots up downtown LA wearing a nifty full-head helmet and body armor, accessorized with an assault rifle *and* a flamethrower. Then the fight in the trailer home moving at 70 mph down the highway; we've got a convenient ringside seat because one whole wall is construction-grade Saran Wrap. Most entertaining: some great martial arts sequences. Jet Li, a star in mainland China since grade school, makes a nice sneering Triad villain here. Li effortlessly kicks Riggs' and Murtaugh's asses numerous times, until the final showdown, of course. Too bad; Li was the only lethal thing on the screen this time out.

**Backchat
on APA:NESFA #339, August 1998**

To all

Hey, in July we got a joint contribution all the way from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, from new NESFAns Andy Duncan and Sydney Sowers — one a fine short fiction writer and Hugo nominee, the other a great Southern beauty and poet — and out of 11 contributors in August, only George Flynn responds even the extent of a simple welcome? (Good going, George. Can always count on you.) Where are our manners? They're going to think we're, you know, standoffish Yankees or something.

Of course, my moral outrage is somewhat diminished by the fact that I didn't say anything either ...

**To Sydney Sowers and Andy Duncan
(from contrib in July ish)**

Great to see you in the APA! Welcome, friends. We're honored by your presence.

And since I helped get you into this thing, hope the experience has been agreeable.

Your revelation that *Gone with the Wind* is *not* a wide-screen movie would make a great film buff trivia question. Certainly one I would have got wrong.

And I'm sure your piece on Alabama barbecue struck a chord with many famously hungry NESFAns. Hey, not that our Orlando bid has been reduced to fried flamingo wings dipped in good-eating crow sauce, maybe you should have a con down there. You could center it around your favorite place, the famous Archibald's in Northport, AL. Call it, oh, "CueCon?"

To Nomi Burstein

Congrats on your new future-fan nephew. You guys looked extra happy when I saw you at Bucky. Good reason why.

Yes, the con was all very strenuous. But I do find it somewhat disturbing that the last line of your con report should include with the words, "Good thing Bob's not around."

To Tom Endrey

Yes, I remember David Brin from the 1989 Boston Worldcon as a really entertaining speaker. And if we got him as a guest now, his experience on *The Postman* has probably given a lot of new Hollywood horror stories.

To Jim Mann

Great to see you and Laurie at Bucky! And thanks again for the treat of that first meal at The Rat. Memories are made of this

...

Agreed that *The Truman Show* should be a Hugo contender for this year. While not all that original, I thought it was superbly done.

To Tony Lewis

I heard good things about your Oldliweds Game event at Bucky. But missed it myself, so I selfishly would love to see it

done at Boskone. You've got my vote. And your topics of SF and sex — that about covers my wide range of interests.

Any stories from the Harness and Williamson signings? Another of the thousand things I missed!

To George Flynn

See mine to Sydney/Andy above.

Also, agree with you about Dave Langford, even if he beat me handily for Best Fan Writer. (Along with Mike Glyer and Evelyn Leeper, of course.) Gee, maybe he's a genuinely better writer. In any case, see no reason to change the rules. If enough people vote for you for 1000 years, you should get 1000 Hugos, and the more honor to you.

To Anna Hillier

Loved your Emily Dickinson quote. "There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away." Amen, sister.

To Paul Giguere

Your new astronomy bug sounds stellar. Although one that keeps you up nights.

Something I've wondered. My eyes are now bad enough that my glasses no longer correct me to quite 20/20. Am I correct that in looking through a telescope, if my eyes are worse than yours, I'll see less than you, or see it less clearly?

To Mark Olson

I've been tempted by Daniel Pool's books on the Victorian Age. Your review of *Dickens' Fur Coat and Charlotte's Unanswered Letters* has probably put me over the top, and I'll go buy it or its predecessor.

Now that you've read Kurlansky's book *Cod*, and pronounced it not quite as good as John McPhee, try Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*. It's about a recent fishing boat sinking, but also about storms, Gloucester bars, the North Atlantic, and the fishing industry old and new. I had the same

gauging system as you do: did it measure up to McPhee? Would be interested in your answer.

To Joe Ross

Loved your overview of the Clinton case, the Watergate not-so-parallel, etc. Of course, I share most of your liberal Democratic politics, although you're much more active than me.

The majority of my political activity consists of sitting on the couch and cursing the TV. When really upset, I stand.