

The Devniad Book 46

un zine de Bob Devney
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Flick Faves of 1998.

I'm not sure what "best" means when you're evaluating works of art. So let's keep this simple: of the 65 or so feature films I saw this year (a low number for me, for a variety of reasons and distractions), this is simply a list of the stuff I responded to most strongly.

1. *Saving Private Ryan*

No movie moved me more this year. The two battle scenes that bookend this near-masterpiece — with their denatured colors, fade-in-and-out roars of sound, and fearfully jittery handheld camerawork — are fantastically energetic: really gory, really scary, really real. Tom Hanks is brilliant, by turns detached, tender, and harsh, as the infantry captain who guides his company through the inferno of World War II's D-Day invasion, then leads a hand-picked squad to find a single soldier somewhere in battle-torn Normandy. Despite the occasional and to me unwelcome dose of unthinking Hollywood jingoism, with director Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, man, you are *there*.

2. *Out of Sight*

This tour de force by director Steven Soderbergh is creamy, stylish, and above all surprising. Take the plot — boy meets girl in a car trunk during his escape from prison, boy loses girl 'cause she's a federal marshal, etc. George Clooney as the bank robber suddenly becomes a star, with a screen personality we can't look away from. Jennifer Lopez as the fed femme hath charms to make the savage beast require a cold shower. 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.

3. *Shakespeare in Love*

(See rave in this issue)

4. *Something About Mary*

Gross guffaws galore. This and *Private Ryan* almost made me throw up. In a good way, now, from laughter this time. Cameron Diaz is pretty and really warm; Ben Stiller plays a hilarious loser we can all (well, me anyway) identify with. Gen X directing duo Peter and Bobby Farrelly carefully crafted this one to offend women, men, boys, girls, 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.

5. *Pleasantville*

A teenage brother and sister (Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon) get sucked into their television set ... and into the characters of Bud and Mary Sue in the neat, clean world of a black-and-white 1950s TV show. Where their knowing 90s presence, attitudes, and actions color the world with new ideas. Literally. This fine Hollywood fable — written, produced, and directed with beautiful pictures and big ideas by Gary Ross — concerns itself with family values, conformity, racism, sexism, and the primacy of artistic vision, all damned entertainingly. Its values are love and freedom and good books. As Bud says near the end, "Things that are silly. Sexy. Dangerous. Brief."

6. *Return to Paradise*

Coupla years back, you met up with two other twentysomething Americans in Malaysia. The babes, the booze, the hash were cheap and easy. You partied for a month, splashing around the bay in water as warm as God's own bathtub. Nice. You've been back 2 years; now, seems your little Asian idyll had some unexpected consequences. You've got one *bitch* of a decision to make ... With that setup, director Joseph Ruben, writers Bruce Robinson and Wesley Strick, and stars Vince Vaughan, David Conrad, Joaquin Phoenix, and Ann Heche create a deeply involving thriller/morality tale, a sleeper with one unstoppably interesting story.

7. *The Truman Show*

We know the difference between real life and the movies; no existential dilemma there. But between real life and TV? Things get a little blurry. Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* exists on that flickery boundary. Beautifully written by *Gattaca*'s Andrew Niccol, this funny, exciting, thoughtful Hollywood movie actually explores a big idea with a modicum of intellectual rigor. Think *Forrest Gump* meets *Dark City* meets *Real Life* meets *28 Up*. Jim Carrey is excellent as a nice guy gone a tad paranoid from frustration; a naïve dreamer who sometimes acts like his world revolves around him ... Which (spoiler ahead) is about right.

8. *Dark City*

In a shadowy *noir* metropolis, creepy bald beings with weird powers interfere ominously with the lives of twisted psychiatrist Keifer Sutherland, depressed detective William Hurt, mysterious singer Jennifer Connelly — and brooding hero Rufus Sewell, an amnesiac and possible serial killer wielding strange powers himself. *Dark City* plays a great SF trick very well, punching up the ol' background paranoia by questioning the ordinary circumstances of life to most sinister effect. Great SFX and atmosphere, especially the cool unfolding buildings and climactic mind duel, a Mentat Armageddon. Director/co-writer Alex Proyas utilizes neogothic

expressionism and dream logic to craft a visually gifted, visionary science fantasy.

9. *Central Station*

Oh, the humanity. As we follow a cynical old woman and a wickedly innocent 9-year-old boy from the cruel, crowded heart of Rio de Janeiro's train station to Brazil's stony northwestern frontier, it's obvious we're not in Hollywood anymore. Actress Fernanda Montenegro displays untucked chin and crummy clothes; director Walter Salles shows us all the miles this woman has come. Then makes her go a few more, to find a home for the boy (Vinicius de Oliveira), some peace in her heart — and some sort of spiritual center for Brazil's own soul. Sometimes melodramatic, often over-obvious, this movie is always unashamed about showing us ugliness and beauty, smiles and tears.

10. *Oscar and Lucinda*

Some good things are indescribably delicious. Let's just list what I loved about Gillian Armstrong's eccentric flick concerning an unworldly Victorian clergyman and an unladylike Australian heiress: The fact it's the only movie I've ever seen about obsessive gamblers that loses the big losing streaks and money troubles. The way Ralph Fiennes as Oscar constructs a whole off-kilter performance out of scarecrow clothes, haystack hair, and constantly twining hands. Cate Blanchett's amazingly welcome smile as Lucinda, and her brilliant career as proprietor of a glassworks. And the way the story saves the most extravagant gamble of both their lives until most of the way to its crystalline, unexpected end.

Then there are some excellent movies from other years I finally saw and loved this year. From 1997: *The Sweet Hereafter*, *The Matchmaker*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Gattaca*. And from 1996: *Infinity*.

And ten more really enjoyable flicks from this year: *The Last Days of Disco*, *A Simple Plan*, *Antz*, *Dangerous Beauty*, *A Civil*

Action, The Zero Effect, Practical Magic, Pi, Shot Through the Heart (HBO), Ronin.

As a public service, and to promote even more argument, here, finally, are the "Best of the Year" lists from two guys not fortunate enough to have their own personal fanzine:

Gene Siskel: 1. *Babe: Pig in the City*, 2. *The Thin Red Line*, 3. *Pleasantville*, 4. *Saving Private Ryan*, 5. *Shakespeare in Love*, 6. *The Truman Show*, 7. *Antz*, 8. *Simon Birch*, 9. *There's Something About Mary*, 10. *Waking Ned Devine*.

Roger Ebert: 1. *Dark City*, 2. *Pleasantville*, 3. *Saving Private Ryan*, 4. *A Simple Plan*, 5. *Happiness*, 6. *Elizabeth*, 7. *Babe: Pig in the City*, 8. *Shakespeare in Love*, 9. *Life Is Beautiful*, 10. *Primary Colors*.

The Bibliad

Paul Mann, ***Season of the Monsoon***, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1993, 339 pgs (hc)

In the October issue of the SF e-zine *Event Horizon*, Lucius Shepherd gave a rave recommendation to this series (*Season of the Monsoon* is the first of three novels so far) about a Bombay police detective. I can see why he liked it; he says it features "a thousand gods manifesting in surreal urban landscapes worthy of Bosch." And he's right. The exotic attraction here is very strong.

Listen as the detective, George Sansi, talks to his friend the medical examiner: "There is no other country on earth where a conversation like this could even take place," he added. "Here, when a policeman investigates a murder, he not only has to look at all the usual motives ... — he has to take into very serious consideration that it could have been committed by agents of ... an illegal eunuch empire ... [O]nly in India."

But before I read this one, I read Mann's 1993 thriller about a hostage crisis aboard the British royal yacht, *The Britannia Contract*. It was a clumsy potboiler; really second-rate.

In the Sansi books, I think we have the rare instance where a bad writer is rescued by a great subject. India is so little-known to us, and offers so rich a palette, that Mann's basically cardboard characters, slightly purple prose, ingrained unconscious chauvinism or racism — even the fact that, as Shepherd says knowledgeable critics have pointed out, he's not entirely accurate in some of his depictions of subcontinental life — all that can't keep us from being fascinated by the India we keep glimpsing through the fog.

Jim Crace, *Quarantine*, Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1997, 243 pgs (hc)

Like Paul Park's brilliant *The Gospel of Corax* a few years back, this is a modern, psychologically acute novel featuring as one character the historical Jesus.

I came to it via a rave recommendation by my friend John Vaughan, who enthused, "Besides everything else, it's got one sentence that's the greatest thing you ever heard. It comes during a description of this guy beating a sick, dying camel to death ..."

Now, who could resist *that*?

Apparently Crace, a new literary light in England (winner of the Whitbread Prize and nominee for the Booker), came to his subject by thinking about the narrative of the young Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness, when the Devil tempted him and Christ readied himself for his adult ministry, and by reading this passage in a medical meditation: "An ordinary man of average weight and fitness embarking on a total fast — that is, a fast during which he refuses both his food and drink — could not expect to live for more than thirty days, nor to be conscious for more than twenty-five."

Crace places five fascinating characters against the blasted landscape of some hermit caves outside Jericho: a donkey- (and

wife-) beating caravan trader, his abused but resilient pregnant wife, a barren townswoman praying for fertility, a blond northerner who's almost a professional pilgrim, a cancerous old man, a crazy young desert nomad, and — the vaguest, most innocently devout of all — a teenage carpenter from Galilee who "was transformed by god like other boys his age were changed by girls."

This is a most subtle, intelligent, and perhaps profound piece of writing. It should stay with you long after your own time in these caves is done.

Iain Pears, *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc., New York, 1998, 694 pgs (hc)

It's Oxford, England, in the late 1600s, as the nation recovers from the religio-political bloodshed of the Cromwell years and goes forward under the restored King. A fellow of New College, Dr. Robert Grove, is found dead. His young servingwoman, Sarah Blundy, is accused of the murder.

This huge, involved, ultimately quite marvelous book is basically a *Rashomon*, presenting differing views of the murder, its investigation, and events before and after through the eyes of four disparate characters: Marco da Cola, a visiting "gentleman of Venice" and amateur physician. Jack Prescott of Lincolnshire, Oxford student and son of a notorious late Royalist. Dr. John Wallis, Oxford professor of geometry, cryptographer, and intriguer ("the greatest English mathematician before Newton"). And Anthony Wood, Oxford scribbler and antiquarian. Each narrator is, of course, totally unreliable in his own special way ...

Wallis and Wood, it seems, were historical personages. You also get appearances by such remembered figures of the age as memoir-writer John Aubrey, chemist Robert Boyle, philosopher John Locke, physician Richard Lower (who conducted some of the earliest experiments in transfusion, which play an important part

in the story), Cromwell's former spymaster John Thurloe, and architect Christopher Wren.

This novel is big on irony, and on delightfully disgusting tidbits about life in the good old days. For instance, you may feel a lot better about *your* job when you read Sarah Blundy's work schedule:

"She would leave her lodging at six in the morning to go to the Woods' in Merton Street, where she worked as a servant every day except Monday, which was devoted to Dr. Grove. Here she stayed until seven in the evening. She was given four hours off every Sunday, and one day every six weeks to herself."

There's gobs of good stuff here on the English class structure, medicine, philosophy, politics, revolution, academia, the writing life, penology, superstition, love, and religion. In fact, there's almost too much: I nearly quit in the middle, a rare impulse for me. But stay with it, I beg you. This thing is as thick, rich, dark, and twisted as *The Name of the Rose*.

That comparison is actually quite apt. It's easy to see why *An Instance of the Fingerpost* was one of the literary sensations of the last few years. This book is actually somewhat related to Crace's QUARANTINE in a manner I'd rather not specify. Let's just say it deepens as it goes along, in quite surprising — in fact, miraculous — ways.

Squibbles

He Came, Esau.

I was visited by a killer flu recently, which basically made the whole month of January pretty hairy. Its peak lasted at least a week, and everyone cheerfully informs me it takes another month to recover. Swell.

During the week in which I was disinclined to stand up much, or to do anything but lie in bed groaning, I didn't shave. After I was up and around, it seemed this might be a good start on trying to grow

a beard again, which I hadn't done since college. Hey, it's the nineties — all we twentysomethings sport goats, bro.

Reaction has been mixed. Perhaps because right now, I look like a leprous yeti. Patience, fleas, the night is long.

But my favorite comment came from Dr. Stephen Kennedy, Science Adviser to *The Devniad*. Steve suggested delicately I might want to at least trim around underneath, down toward my collar. "So it'll look like you're trying to do something and haven't just been *drunk* for 2 weeks."

Words from all over

I found this stuff in some New Zealand slang page on the Internet, the exact URL of which I'm ashamed to say now eludes me.

But here's hoping you'll enjoy the following regardless. The New Zealandish is given first, followed by the English (or, anyway, Americanish) translation.

Chilly bin — a picnic cooler

Judderbar — a speed bump

Hoon — a lout

Kiwi — a New Zealander

Kiwifruit — an edible New Zealand fruit

Rellies — your relatives

Smoko — a short work break

Yank tank — a large American-made car

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

Indefatigable museum maven, con costume entrant, and Internet correspondent Charley Sumner actually *responded* to a question I asked earlier — behavior rarely seen among readers of *The Devniad*. His best suggestion for a superhero nickname for the incredible Mark Leeper, head brainiac of The Internet Movie Database's Stump the Staff department: Captain Cinema.

If you're listening, Mark, I think you'll admit it has a certain panache ...

New Jersey/New York fan Jeff Wendler reports a heroic tale of how he won the trivia contest at Arisia, the mediaphiliac SF convention in the Boston area last month. His harrowing ordeal began when he walked in the door and the MC threw an orange at his skull. Catching it apparently won Jeff instant appointment as one of three contestants for the trivia competition.

Say, these Arisia moderators are *tough*.

Jeff stayed comfortably in front in the *Jeopardy*-type format all the way by the crafty expedient of refusing to answer any question he wasn't sure of. Since many of the questions were what he classified as "practically impossible" — one *Star Wars* example asked for the model number of the Millennium Falcon, which Jeff reports was only correctly answered by an audience member who must have had "an incredible amount of time on his hands" — his opponents languished well into the negative numbers all night.

At battle's end, all three contestants were awarded \$10 dealer's room gift certificates ... accompanied in the case of the low scorer by a whipped cream pie, which was unexpectedly dumped on his head.

I'm presently helping compile questions for the Trivia Bowl to be held at NESFA's Boskone convention next month. In the past, it's been a somewhat more sedate affair. But Mark Olson was asking a while back if we could come up with any improvements in the game. Now on my mettle re the Arisian model, I'm aflame with inspiration!

OK, perhaps ducking stools aren't high-tech enough. While my initial idea of adopting centrally controlled electric cattleprod fixtures field-wired to each spectator chair may turn out to be a tad effort-intensive. Not to say pricey. And just taking the usual prizes of tiny chocolates we throw at audience members for right answers and substituting 50 mm number 316 stainless steel ball bearings may be bad PR because of what I've dubbed the Jean Shepherd factor. ("You'll put your eye out with that!")

But as the Arisia people have proved, a great trivia contest organizer is resourceful. It is with tremendous excitement I realized tonight that by strictly enforced Commonwealth of Massachusetts code regulating inns and public houses, the contest room will be equipped with overhead sprinklers.

I can only hint that, should you by any chance attend the Boskone Trivia Bowl, keep watching the skies ...

From "Deep Thoughts"

by Jack Handey

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

"I think a good movie would be about a guy who's a brain scientist, but he gets hit on the head and it damages the part of the brain that makes you want to study the brain."

FlimFan

A Hit, A Palpable Hit!

The Success of *Shakespeare in Love*

But soft! What light from yon projector beams? It's *Shakespeare in Love*, and it glows brightly indeed, friends, bestowing pure pleasure from entrance to exit. A wonderful, thoroughly modern movie about age-old subjects like lust, vanity, ambition; the lovers' triangle, the acting bug ...

You can't exactly call it highbrow, of course, what with penis jokes, slapstick, and bar fights. (All proper Shakespearean elements, remember.) But neither is it *Men in Tights II*: I'd say the more you know about Shakespeare, Elizabethan drama, and the theater in general, the better chance you'll appreciate this fast, funny, romantic, smart movie. Certes, I could scarce credit two hours fled with such sweet speed ...

Let's see, the plot. Deep breath. Young so-so playwright (Joseph Fiennes) aches to compose breakthrough effort but is blocked until he finds muse in form of rich babe (Gwyneth Paltrow) who adores his stuff but also wants to be an actor (no actresses allowed on Elizabethan stage, you know) so naturally they fall in love even though she's to be sold or given in marriage to a high-born scoundrel (Colin Firth) and I haven't even mentioned the disconcertingly perceptive Queen (Judi Dench) or the self-centered leading man (Ben Affleck) or the rival playwright (Rupert Everett) who's at this point to be plain better than our hero

(this movie could kindle a mini-revival for Christopher Marlowe) or the embarrassing facts that our would-be Shake-scene's sold his play (before putting feather to folio, mind) to two rival theater managers (Geoffrey Rush and Martin Clunes) and that his working title is *Romeo and Ethel the Pirate's Daughter*.

The date's given I think as 1593; the real *Romeo and Juliet* was apparently composed from 1594 to 1596. Perhaps this is the story of an unrecorded early draft? Certainly what I know of Shakespeare's day suggests this structure is at least half-timbered from actual Tudor history. And most of the characters actually existed, except for Viola De Lesseps, the love interest played by Paltrow, and Colin Firth's villainous Lord Wessex.

It's not much matter. The look of the movie is just right, keeping us visually well-grounded in the Elizabethan world — literally in the muck of the streets. You see the smear of dirt on a velvet sleeve, the spatters of ink on a writer's fingers, the splintery texture of the very beams holding up the theater. But visuals aside, this isn't about heavy realism. The very first scene — with a theater manager's feet held quite literally to the fire by an impatient creditor — plays torture for laughs. This is romantic comedy all the way, folks: nobody gets hurt. (Onstage, anyway. In contrast to the actual *Romeo and Juliet*, which you'd have to call a tragicomedy. Comitragedy?) And quite a modern comedy too: the main joke in the torture scene is really about creative movie studio financing. Then there's the souvenir mug on the Bard's desk. And of course the scene with the astrologer/psychiatrist, complete with couch.

Much other wit is of the in-joke variety. For instance, if you're acquainted with lurid Jacobean revenge dramas like *The Duchess of Malfi*, when you find out the name of the urchin here with the heart of a serial killer, it's worth a really big laugh. But again, the brilliant script makes young John Webster's shy bloodthirstiness funny whether you know his later history or not. And there's plenty of great stuff about actors' vanity that

will be familiar to anybody who's ever examined one of the species on the *Barbara Walters* or *Rosie O'Donnell* shows.

In the rich supporting roles, you get to see a theatreful of English talents at the top of their form. Hey, there's the guy who died in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Look, that foreman-type from *The Full Monty*. Wow, the mental piano player from *Shine*. Hey, isn't that the dude who played Mr. Darcy in the Brit TV *Pride and Prejudice*? Yes, Simon Callow, Tom Wilkinson, Geoffrey Rush, and Colin Firth all do splendidly, thank you.

In fact, Rush is a revelation. After he portrayed essentially the same character twice in a row (a scary, humorless, narrow, inhumanly repressed, duty-obsessed official as Javert in *Les Miserables* and Walsingham in *Elizabeth*), I thought he might just go on playing, you know, Lavrenti Berias or Republican congressmen for the rest of his career. But his Philip Henslowe the theater manager — greedy, cheerfully deceitful, totally unscrupulous, yet gifted with a crazy and somehow pure faith in the theater's happy mystery — may be the best character in the movie.

The other major performances are almost as yummy.

Joseph Fiennes does a good job suggesting the fire, physicality, and desperate ambition of our young dramatist — this movie could have equally been titled something like *Shake on the Make*, or (a cast joke) *Good Will Humping* — although I'm not sure it's the breakthrough role for Fiennes that his brother Ralph found in *The English Patient*. Do I ache to see the next Joseph Fiennes movie? Maybe not quite. Nevertheless, he shows us a good time as he quips, sighs, burns, teeters between pride and insecurity — and steals from everybody. One of the real joys of *Shakespeare in Love* is watching half the lines and incidents from our movie get poured directly into his play.

Gwyneth Paltrow (a few years after her luminescent *Emma*) again takes on the challenge of an English accent, and also in a number of scenes of playing a woman playing a boy actor. She does at least

passably on the first, in my less-than-expert judgment — and fails miserably on the second. We don't for a second believe she's a guy. But fear not, it doesn't matter a damn. She's meltingly romantic in the love scenes. And overall, pretty damned funny. Also pretty damned hot.

Which reminds me. A word before you take your aunt to this movie (as I and my siblings did). You should know that the nude sex scenes here came in 3rd hottest of the year on some teen poll I saw ... too late.

Luckily, Aunt Ann seemed distracted from all the steamy stuff by the plum performance of her favorite actress, Judi Dench, as an aged but still sharp Queen Elizabeth. She (Judi, not Aunt Ann; OK, both) comprehends whole subplots with the lift of a brow and slight widening of her eyes; the lady is, as usual, a royal pleasure to watch. Ben Affleck also turns in a star turn as Ned Alleyn, who's the greatest actor of his day as he himself would be quite willing to tell you. The script intelligently uses him to validate young Shakespeare's growth for us; as rehearsals on this new Romeo play continue, we see new respect for his buddy the Bard overcome Alleyn's vanity, as talent calls to talent.

For this movie's wonderfulness, I'm inclined to be most grateful to the writers, actors, art director, and wardrobe designers, in that order. The direction and cinematography are fine without being outstanding.

For instance, the director is John Madden II, who did lots of solid British TV work and then the rather worthy, sometimes quite funny *Mrs. Brown* in 1997. But nothing to prepare us for *this*.

So where did this shining thing come from? First writing credit goes to Marc Norman, who earlier gave us — what? *Cutthroat Island*? *The Killer Elite*? But wait: the co-writer is Tom Stoppard. In fact, I've read that Norman wrote the initial idea, and Stoppard mostly took it from there.

Now this starts to make sense. As a screenwriter, Stoppard has provided scripts for intelligent films such as *Billy Bathgate*, *Empire of the Sun*, and *Brazil*. But much more

to the point, he's also a truly fine playwright who began his career with another sharply hilarious, classic Shakespeare tribute: 1966's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Plus many worthy, tricky, satisfying, funny plays since, from *Jumpers* and *Travesties* to 1995's *Arcadia*.

Perhaps when it comes to great playwrights, it takes one to show one.

EXCELLENT:

A Civil Action — You'd think it would be a movie about money and the deaths of eight children. But we never glimpse much money, and the kids are only snapshots in a lawyer's hand. The only death? Dimly perceived through the dark, rain-streaked window of a car. Steve Zaillian wrote and directed this fine, cool, smart film with admirable restraint. For him, it seems to be about pride and compassion versus resources and experience. The movie's based on the nonfiction book by Jonathan Harr about a 1980s suit against two large corporations accused of toxic dumping that may have caused a "leukemia cluster" and other damages in the town of Woburn, Massachusetts. John Travolta stars; at first, his performance is all about lawyerly tricks, but later he's considerably darker and more distanced, and by the end certainly sadder. Wiser? That's one of many questions left up to us. The part of the chief corporate attorney/villain was offered to Brando and Newman, but Robert Duvall plays it in a more minor and perhaps more correct key than they could have; he's a man who's not necessarily bad, just too smart for our own good. You can look deep into every face on the screen here and watch them thinking, hoping, suffering: James Gandolfini as a troubled worker, John Lithgow as an enigmatically small-minded judge, William H. Macy as Travolta's doomed financial adviser, Kathleen Quinlan as a victimized mother/activist (Maureen liked her performance best), and Dan Hedaya as the tannery owner with a face like an old leather boot. Did Travolta's character suffer more from his pride or his compassion? At the

end even this gifted mouthpiece has no answers, no voice. *A Civil Action* is a winning piece of work. And very satisfying for containing so few of the usual satisfactions.

A Bug's Life — That makes two movies in a row showing off the lifestyles of the rich and formic. This one's livelier, rowdier, more raucous than *Antz*. But for the entomologists among us, it shows even greater disregard for actual ant anatomy, behavior, culture, etc. For instance, the Queen, though gifted with the oversized voice of Phyllis Diller, is smaller than the worker hero (Dave Foley as the inventive yet impractical Flik). And isn't actually shown to have anything to do with making little ants, which *Antz* at least hinted looms large in the typical queen's day. *A Bug's Life* felt more like a classic children's entertainment to me. Even on the level of the accomplished visuals, the look is more Potter than Piranesi. But it's a well-made movie on its own terms. The Disney/Pixar creative team, who gave us the groundbreaking *Toy Story*, are good at thinking through how the world might appear from ant level. Trust me, you'll never look the same way at a cute little bird again. And there are some brilliant imaginative touches — like rain. (Think artillery bombardment.) Or, in the film's visual high point, how wonderful it would be to literally fly between the raindrops at night. While none of the performances dominates as did Woody Allen's neurotic hero in *Antz*, we enjoy a whole insecterie bearing the unmistakable voices of Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Kevin Spacey, David Hyde Pierce, Bonnie Hunt, and Roddy McDowall (his last film). Though as one flying bug notes, "From up here you all look like little ants!" By the way, the on-purpose "outtakes" over the credits are among the best parts of the show, so at movie's end, don't get ants in your pants ...

A Simple Plan — This is one simply brilliant thriller by director Sam Raimi, whose baroquely twisted and funny *Army of Darkness* and *Darkman* in no way prepared us for the pared-down intelligence and

serious, winding-sheet inevitability of this movie. Here's the plot (great screenplay by Scott B. Smith, from his own first novel): three men find a big bag of money in the snowy midwinter, Midwest woods; it turns into a big bag of trouble. Bill Paxton is Hank, a smart, decent guy with a steady job, a wife, a baby on the way. Paxton's Everyman here is his best role since the fine 1992 sleeper *One False Move*. Hank's brother Jacob is played, in a truly amazing performance, by Mr. William Robert Thornton. (I can no longer bear to call an actor of this caliber Billy Bob.) Jacob is a little slow, usually unemployed, socially backwards. Thornton portrayed another even more simpleminded guy a few years ago in his own *Sling Blade*; it's a tribute to his skill that Jacob is nothing like that character, though every bit as memorable. Brent Briscoe is Lou, Jacob's bigmouth drinking buddy. Later we meet Bridget Fonda as Sarah, Hank's wife. At one point, as Hank has started to learn all sorts of truths about himself and his world, not one of them pleasant, Sarah says to him, "You don't realize how other people see you. You're just this normal guy. Nobody would think you're capable of doing the things you've done." These are all people we recognize instantly from our own lives. In fact, they're us. So imagine the effect this movie has as we realize that, one way or another, absolutely no one will be spared.

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #343, December 1998

To Tony Lewis

Going through every single copy ever published of *Playboy* and other skinzines to index science fiction material? It's a dirty job, but can't think of anyone more qualified, Tony.

Thanks for the bouquet of corrections on my last ish. Trust you to know the proper spelling of Gewurst — Gewurtzz — that

German guzzle. Probably looked it up in some *Playboy* Advisor article entitled, "Get Her Quicker With Liquor."

To Tom Endrey

Thanks for the report on Philcon — haven't heard much about it from anyone else. May try to get there someday, because we lived in the area when I was a kid and I'd love to go back again. (My sister Darcy, brother Michael and I made a pilgrimage to the ancestral home in West Chester, PA, during our Buccaneer vacation last summer, but didn't get into the city.)

About your reunion in Hungary: someday, Tom, perhaps you could write more about the differences in the two languages, or interesting Hungarian idioms that English doesn't mirror, or your process of learning English, or useful Hungarian obscenities and curses. I love that stuff.

See you at Boskone!

To Joe Ross

Thanks for trying to throw light on the Clinton vs. Clinton-haters war by looking up all those dictionary definitions of sex. Just as much fun now as the first time we did so — say about age 10 or 12? OK, for you, 6.

I keep thinking of this whole thing in terms of *Moby Dick*. Has anybody else already said this? Clinton is the White(water) Whale, an overlarge figure of animal appetite and alien morality. The Clinton-killers, Congressional and otherwise, are a mad gobble of Ahabs, so obsessed in their fixed rage they care not if they drag ship and crew and all besides down down down with them to drown in the darkling depths ...

To Elisabeth Carey

Those cat registration certificates you photocopied for us listed Your Ownership as "C. Elisabeth Carey." So what's the C stand for? Perhaps, given your raving ailuromania, the obvious answer would be C'Mell ...

To Anna Hillier

You always mention your scientifically inclined daughter. Have you ever dragged her to a NESFA meeting? Or, say, I know — why not Boskone next month?

To Mark Olson

Thanks for the report on Smofcon in Colorado Springs. But I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop — you mean you spent several days in Colorado Springs and never sought out Robert A. Heinlein's old house? (He *did* live there for years, didn't he? Before California?) I'd assumed there'd be at least bus tours and a shop selling souvenir slide rules cheap plastic waldo grabsticks ... Willis nerfballs ... Lazarus Long herbals ... Harriman Enterprises stock certificates ... Michael Valentine Smith soup concentrate.

To George Flynn

Ashamed to say I can't "please turn to p. 181" in Harry Warner's *A Wealth of Fable*, because I don't *own* a copy. Must repair this serious gap in my SF reference shelf immediamente. Say, wait a minute, aren't there books for sale at Boskone?

Agree with you that Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is not much use as a working stylebook; though worthy, oversimplified. (I like the new *Merriam-Webster Handbook for Writers and Editors*, good old *Words Into Type*, and for a fine single-author book with great personality as well as obvious authority — plus nice long discussions of fine points with plenty of examples — Edward D. Johnson's *The Handbook of Good English*.) Have always cherished some of Strunk and White's more curmudgeonly dicta, though, like "If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it *loud*." Many SF fans seem to have expanded this idea to cover what to do when you don't know what you're talking about, either ...

To Paul Giguere

Seems you reviewed nothing but must-reads last time, bud: Wilson's *Darwinia*, Varley's *The Golden Globe*, McMullen's *The Centurian's Empire*, and Sterling's *Distraction*. Where do I begin?

Your system of printing a running tally of your current recommendations and of promising books soon to come is really useful, too. I've got to get going, though: of your 18 recommendations, I've read only Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog* and Bujold's *Komarr*. Arrggghh.

Maybe if I just quit writing *The Devniad*. Or watching TV. Or, hey, quit my job!