

The Devniad Book 49

un zine de Bob Devney
25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760 U.S.A.
e-mail: bobdevney@aol.com
For APA:NESFA #347 April 1999
copyright 1999 by Robert E. Devney

Guns 'N' Poses: Virtual Unreality in *The Matrix*

In a submarine cruising the dark, deadly sewers beneath a ruined city, a crewman sticks his head through the hatch into the ready room to bring news of a virtual reality training session. "Neo is fighting Morpheus," he announces — and is almost trampled in the rush of everybody to go see.

That kind of truly teenage hunger for fun energizes this SF/horror/shooter/kung fu flick. It should certainly energize its box office among the testosterone-onset set. But it's also enough to kick it up into a status as a significant science fiction film, I think. Despite the mindless (is there any other kind?) violence. Despite the fact that stars Keanu Reeves (Anderson/Neo), Laurence Fishburne (Morpheus), and Carrie-Anne Moss (Trinity) — when they aren't sending us out of our minds with excitement in the action sequences — mostly just mouth cryptic bullshit and strike fabulous poses in black leather. (Long black raincoats for the boys; tighter outfits for Carrie-Anne, natch.) Despite a deeply stupid story and some big dead spots.

The filmmakers — *The Matrix* was written and directed by brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, whose debut was 1996's equally visually impressive and better-written lesbian killer thriller *Bound* — display an almost caricatured media-fan sensibility here. It's like you gave \$80 million to some brilliant kids running the projector at Arisia. What they're offering is a huckster's tableful of used SF story ideas and blow-chunk expository lumps.

But *man* do they make it *look* good!

What gives this movie stature is you can feel there's a real commitment by real artists behind it. Kind of a naively serious commitment to some half-baked ideas and lame storytelling moves, granted. This is not the cynical, carefully crafted satire of *Starship Troopers*. But equally, it's not the pure buck fever of the guys who took a bead on the box office with *Independence Day*.

These guys care passionately about their movie. It's too messy to be anything but a labor of love. OK, it's a comic book. But a seriously meant one. Despite everything, the quality shines through.

Take one great camera-wonk example you've probably seen in the TV previews: Neo is with Morpheus on top of a skyscraper. Morpheus goes to the edge of the roof, sets himself — and jumps *up*. Your viewpoint stays straight ahead for a long moment, looking at nothing. Even the camera is stunned. Then it pans up and out to catch Morpheus' flying body, already dwindling with distance and *way* higher than it could possibly be. And finally watches him land, cloak flying, on another building a football field or so across the way.

Whereupon Neo utters the film's signature line of dialog: "Whoa."

The film starts with Keanu Reeves as Anderson, a computer geek for a big-city big corporation who moonlights as some kind of virtual-reality bootlegger. He's apparently been on a quest through the waster digital underground of techno dance clubs (!) for a mysterious dude named Morpheus. He believes only Morpheus can answer The Big Question.

Which I'd always thought was something like "Why is there evil" or "Has

he hegemony and shall she submit” or “What do women want” or “Why isn’t there a special name for the tops of your feet?” But it turns out to be, “What is The Matrix?”

Anyway, surprise surprise, Anderson finds Morpheus. It’s Laurence Fishburne in a long black coat. Morpheus confirms his feeling that “There’s something wrong with the world.” And tells him about The Matrix by cueing him into something everybody who works for a living knows already: “You are a slave. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage ... a prison for your mind.”

Except it turns out that he really means it. I don’t want to say too much more about the rest of the plot. There’s a lot of the justified paranoia of *Dark City*, and lots of cool virtual reality training and battles and stuff. Morpheus gives our hero a new name: Neo. And a very new outlook on the world. And it’s explained that the enemies are Agents, which are sentient programs, and the Sentinels, which are — well, something else. Which I found confusing: couldn’t the Sentinels be the sentient guys, just for ghod’s sake *euphony*?

About the plot, let me just say also that among the storytelling tricks the filmmakers don’t seem to know is, *don’t* try to explain *everything*. If all you can come up with is bad science, why use science at all?

Don’t peel back a layer of the onion ... and show us the core. Just show us another onionskin, for crissakes. An open question can *increase* the horror, if you use it right. Duh.

Oh, and did I mention the big sag in the middle? Lots of really stupid exposition there for a while. I know the movie wants us to catch our breaths, but we almost catch a *nap*.

I spoke about signature lines earlier. And about mouthing bullshit. Here’s another example of both: Neo encounters someone who’s trying to bend a spoon, let’s say, purely with the power of his mind. And succeeds. How? He tells Neo: “Do not try to bend the spoon. That’s impossible. Instead,

only try to recognize the truth: ... There *is* no spoon.”

So now we know what to put on our tee shirts, right?

Oh, and on the back will go the line Neo utters when he’s creating his plan to attack an Agent stronghold: “We’re gunna need guns. *Lots* of guns.”

Which leads directly to another of the flick’s most impressive slow-mo set pieces: Neo is in a giant office building lobby, with about a thousand bad guys shooting at him. Since all they can hit are the marble walls and columns around him, the air is full of marble chips and lead projectiles. But he drives forward magnificently, black coat flying behind him, gun blazing ... A superb *ballet de bullet*, to be sure.

Maybe you’ve seen that kind of thing before. But have you seen it shot from below, with a torrent of ejected shells falling like deadly rain into your upturned eyes? I didn’t think so.

Last note: I keep talking about the visuals of this movie. And the art direction is first class; there’s a good look here throughout. Although there are scenes — like one I think of as Baldy’s Birth — to prove once again that Hanruedi Giger, who started this whole biomechanoid ball rolling with those chilling yucky/scary designs for the first *Alien*, has a lot to answer for.

Afterthought

About all the violence in this movie. The shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, have occurred since I saw *The Matrix*. Two kids who killed 13 of their classmates were known to wear black raincoats similar to those that look so cool on Neo and Morpheus, although they started wearing them months before the movie came out. And they certainly went in carrying “guns ... lots of guns” and pipe bombs too.

This morning the governor of Colorado was on TV, and was asked what we could do to prevent such tragedies. He answered that we should get the message to “the people who sell violence in this country” —

wait for it — "in the movies and on television and video games." Gee, I guess the gun interests that command such powerful political support in his state are purely nonprofit. What, they're in it just for the thrill?

So guns don't kill people, entertainment kills people? Black raincoats kill people? So kids who see *The Matrix* will get helicopter gunships and attack office buildings?

The hot streak of cool killing in our entertainment media has got to concern any thoughtful person. And I'm definitely part of the problem, feeling defensively that you'll have to pry the TV remote control for *Saving Private Ryan* or *Heat* or *The Fifth Element* or *Ronin* or *Men in Black* or *Pulp Fiction* or *Grosse Pointe Blank* or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* or *Die Hard* or *Aliens* or *Starship Troopers* or *The Matrix* — along with the PC joystick for *Quake* or *Panzer General* — from my cold, dead hand.

But hasn't entertainment been serving violence with heaping helpings of relish since cave paintings, or tribal war dances, or for that matter GILGAMESH, THE ILLIAD, or BEOWULF? And -- the same media mix washes over troubled minds in Canada, Great Britain, and Australia. Why don't you get the same levels of societal violence?

One could write a whole essay about this. Maybe someday I will.

There Hugo Again, Fandom

For the second glorious year in a row, I've been nominated as Best Fan Writer in the Hugo Awards, SF's equivalent of the Oscars or is it the Darwins? Final honors will be announced at the World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne, Australia, in early September. Unfortunately very likely without me in attendance, since Queen Maureen believes "we" have better things to do with "our" time and money.

Thanks to all those who stuffed my name into the ballot box (hmm, perhaps that could have been better phrased), some of

whom are presumed to be glancers at *The Devniad*.

Once more it will be an uphill battle, my friends. Since the other luminaries in this contest are old Hugo hands Mike Glycer, Dave Langford, and Evelyn C. Leeper, with Maureen Kincaid Speller joining the fray for the first time, apparently in the naïve belief that excellent writing, a winning personality, and showing a nice bit of bum are all it takes.

My prediction for the outcome: Evelyn, Mike, and I go down in a snarly heap fighting each other. Maureen carves off enough of the electorate who appreciate British wit to topple King David from his ancient Skull Throne. And Melbourne's own hot fanwriting hand Terry Frost surges to victory on a huge write-in vote fueled by Anzac solidarity, his unblemished anti-Pauline Hanson / pro-Frank Sinatra record, and beer for everybody.

What's Herstory?

A nice Web site if you're interested in What Happened Today in History is Scope Systems at: www.scopesys.com/anyday

For instance, on April 2, after I looked things up I was able to announce to my office mates that today was Charlemagne's Birthday. We celebrated with the traditional drunken toasts in Old Frankish. (Named after an art director I knew, Old Frank.)

I was really high on this site because it contained 30-40 birthday, deathday, and holiday listings for every date. And on the aforementioned April 2, I discovered the site's reach even extended to science fiction authors! There it was: "1948 **Joan D. Vinge** American writer."

But my confidence in the site's accuracy was shaken a bit by the last word in the entry: "(*Dune*)."

A Death in The Family

This is a serious one.

My brother-in-law, James Ferrara, died April 14, only 3 weeks after being diagnosed with lung cancer. He was 52 years old. Jim leaves his wife of 29 years, Kathy (Maureen's sister), his daughter Dacia, his son Jarrod. (Jarrod flew back from his Peace Corps post in Honduras to attend Jim in the hospital.) Plus Jim's sister Sandy and his brothers Tony and Paul, and others in the large Ferrara clan. The ripples do spread out ...

I don't intend to write it up in *The Devniad* every time we lose a family member. Sadly, as the years go on there'll be more than I can handle. And Jim and I weren't even as close as we could have been; my loss, too, it seems. But this one left me in a reflective mood.

Because Jim also leaves an incredible number of devoted friends, many from his long involvement in a society that's mostly invisible to me: the world of jock culture. He was a star athlete at a local high school, long-time manager of a big sporting goods store and school sports equipment supplier, and dedicated coach in a junior football league. As in SF fandom, apparently a good man in that milieu can make lots of friends.

I know Jim did. Because they all came to his wake.

It may have been the largest memorial event I've ever attended. It went on for hours longer than scheduled, to accommodate all the people who wanted to say goodbye. Their signatures completely filled up the visitors' book supplied by the funeral home; we had to hustle around to find another copy.

There was a cold, driving rain that night. But hundreds of people stayed in the line, which stretched over a block away — I calculated at one point that it took most people 1 hour and 20 minutes just to get out of the rain and to the entrance.

What most affected many of us watching were the clumps of 12-year-old boys you'd see coming in the door. All wearing their team jerseys. Many of them attending their first-ever service for someone who'd died —

Coach Ferrara. Many of them with tears tracking down their scared young faces.

There's a famous phrase at the end of John Motley's classic Victorian history, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, talking about the death of the new state's beloved leader, Prince William of Orange. William the Silent, they called him. I kept remembering that line. "[W]hen he died, the little children cried in the streets."

While he was alive, I never really considered Jim Ferrara's place in my world. He was just, you know, one of my brothers-in-law. Friendly enough. Called all the women "darlin'" and all the men "big guy." Smoked a lot. Threw a nice barbecue. Watched tons of football on TV. A good guy. Didn't talk that much ... James the Silent.

Perhaps there are more princes among us than we will ever know.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

Fred Lerner's drattedly difficult *Beowulf*-inspired name for his fanzine continues to give trouble — turns out I didn't get the translation quite right last ish. Despite Fred's having given it to me correctly earlier. And of course, you can't get anything past fans! Oh no, straightway you grim and greedy creatures of damnation, fierce and furious, are ready, and seize me, rent me greedily, bite into my body, and drink the blood from my veins, swallowing bite after bite ...

Led by monstrous John Kessel. Who appears otherwise to be just a first-rate SF author (*Corrupting Dr. Nice*, *The Pure Product*). John writes from North Carolina State U. with his professor's gown cloaking his actual status as the creature of shadows, deprived of joy:

"Just a minor obsessive note: "lofgeornost" if I remember my Old English, is actually the superlative form of the word (like "fastest" or "biggest" in modern

English). So it doesn't mean "desirous of renown" but "*most* desirous of renown." Which, among the old Anglo-Saxons, was not a sign of egotism, but a virtue. If you desire renown, then presumably you will do Good Deeds in order to get it."

Oh well. Guess my West Mercian has gotten rusty in the last 1300 years ... Sorry, Prof K. I'm *most* desirous of forgiveness.

SF fan and movie maven Dan Kimmel alerts us that director David Cronenberg's upcoming *eXistenZ* may very well make Dan's year's ten best list. Says it's a throwback to that talented horror director's early stuff, especially 1983's *Videodrome*. (I also thought his 1988 *Dead Ringers*, with Jeremy Irons as twin gynecologists spiraling down into murderous psychosis, was one of the most disturbing movies of all time.)

However, Kimmel takes exception to last ish, wherein my review of the movie *Analyze This* opined that "the trophy for Comic Reinvention of a Mob Boss Character was retired by Marlon Brando in 1990's unsung classic *The Freshman*."

Dan would phrase it a tad differently: "The trophy for WORST comic take on a gangster has to go to Marlon Brando for his trashing of *The Godfather* in the justly neglected piece of trash *The Freshman*."

Oh yeah, well if you're so smart, flickhead, how come you're not a paid professional movie critic?

Um, gosh, that's right, you *are* ...

Fan Gary Dryfoos corrects my piece on Y2K fears, charging that in the flick *2001*, the dialog line isn't "Open the bomb bay doors, Hal," it's "Open the POD bay doors, Hal."

Granted, Gary, but I was re-imagining it to refer to the Millennium Bomb, get it? In *The Devniad's* simmering stew of alienated attributions, unreliable utterance, and metatextual mutation, nobody's quotation is safe. Especially since Stanley Kubrick is dead and can't sue me now.

Gary also has a comment about my comment about Evelyn Leeper's fully packed SF convention reports. "Suppose she read one of her Con Reports AT a Con?"

Then in her next Con Report, she'd have to include the Con Report of the Con Report and so on, and we could approach Infinity and a Singularity and then maybe make time travel possible ..."

Since Evelyn is again competing with me for Best Fan Writer Hugo, Gary, I feel that giving her credit for inventing time travel might unfairly wangle her more votes.

Although this might be the only way anybody ever beats Dave Langford ...

Long-standing ad biz friend Laurie Noyes writes about a phenomenon we might call ... the Laurie Loop? the Laurie Ligature?

"In contrast to the Jane Chord, I'd like to suggest something remotely similar but peculiar to the technology of our times (which should be named for me, of course, but I wouldn't want to appear vain.)

"Which is: When you do a spell check, as my computer automatically does whenever I send an e-mail, do the various words that the computer suggests as corrections for combinations of letters it doesn't understand have any bearing on the original subject?

"For instance: It suggests 'Denver' for 'Devney' and 'maroon' for Maureen."

"And while we're on the subject, what about the Yellow Pages -- ever notice the words paired at the top of each page?

"Marriage-Martial," "Schools-Scrap," "Drive-Drugs," "Odor-Office," "Pawnbrokers-Pension," "Mortgages-Motels," "Limousine-Liquors."

"No, I have not been drinking!!!"

Great suggestion, Laurie. I especially like how you've linked it to the Jane Chord — and grabbed all the credit.

I'll always remember the glorious day when I spell-checked the Japanese name of a top executive at a large client and the program suggested "Hidden Uteri."

Who else has some classic Laurie Loops?

A Fan Writer Hugo Note From "Deep Thoughts"

by Jack Handey

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

"Perhaps, if I am very lucky, the feeble efforts of my lifetime will someday be noticed, and maybe, in some small way, they will be acknowledged as the greatest works of genius ever created by Man."

Backchat
on APA:NESFA #346, March 1999
(and earlier)

To Anna Hillier

Great to see you at Boskone. Too bad we couldn't find Tom Endrey for you.

Regarding your Feb comment, I'm afraid I've eaten all 56 of those chocolates from the Trivia Bowl. So you can't have any. However, why don't you come to the full con next year, attend the Bowl, and win even more yourself?

Your story of the search for the Golden Horse was interesting, if puzzling. For instance, I didn't know there *were* any ski areas off Route 24. What, Mount Brockton? Anyway, sorry you didn't win. A 2-pound golden horse would be a real conversation piece on top of the entertainment center.

To George Flynn

Sorry I ran a quote that had you referring to Boskone Czarina Geisler as the "Chairperson." I guess it does sound as silly as calling one of the Readercon triumvirs (hmmm, triumpuelli?) "Sofabeing." Let the record also show, however, that I didn't quote you directly, but merely recorded what some unidentified layabout at the NESFA sales table *said* you said.

From Jan, about your correction to make it "Gewürztraminer": danke, mein Rechtschreibungermeister.

Also thanks for your coinage of "exosequel, exoprequel, endosequel, endoprequel" to surmount my earlier "antesequel." So you say that Vernor Vinge's "A Deepness in the Sky is an exosequel but an endoprequel of *A Fire Upon the Deep*." Why do I suspect the Tor marketing department won't be splashing this news on the book covers anytime soon?

About your Feb rave for *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, you're absolutely right. When I talked about my favorites such as *Words Into Type* or Edward Johnson's *Handbook of Good English*, I should definitely have added the *DOEU*. I was concentrating on style books, and it's so

firmly about usage. Certainly *sui generis* even in that category. The editors say they focus on "the use of words that pose special problems of confused or disputed usage." But they spread the net wide: 978 pages of word discussions, with more than 20,000 citations of actual usage one way or t'other. Not that they don't give recommendations where appropriate. But in the battle between prescription and description, they give descriptionistas a huge new arsenal. Probably at least half the people reading this should rush out and get a copy right now, hint hint. I've cherished mine since the book first came out in 1989.

And by the way, George, the *DOEU* does note that "*Chairperson* is a recent coinage (1971) ... greeted with much resistance by usage writers and others resistant to neologism." But has been used by publications such as *Business Week*, *Science*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Saturday Review*. While "Our evidence, however, shows that *chair* is not nearly as commonly used as *chairperson* ... Clearly all three [*chairman*, *chairwoman*, *chairperson*] ... are in standard use, and you can use whichever you like best." Now, on to *chaise lounge*, or is it *chaise longue*?

To Leslie Turek

I pray you can stay workless as long as possible. Not that I'm jealous or anything ...

Hope you've got lots to tell us about your April trip to Slovakia. Especially interested in those Slovakian words and phrases you're learning; care to share a few with us? I'm big on obscenity, blasphemy, etc. You can tell so much about a country or a person from their indiolectal imprecations, Great Ghu!

I, for one, haven't *heard* your patented true story about how your cleaning lady married Harlan Ellison. And there may be a few other newer NESFAns in this APA in the same deprived state. Do tell again. With Harlan coming up here for Readercon in July, maybe we could mention your tale and ask for his side of the story too.

To Tony Lewis

Your cool set of “Forgotten English” words and phrases — did you think they would be “of especial interest to George Flynn and Bob Devney” because they were so obscure or because they were mostly so dirty? Well, you’re probably right either way.

The only one I’d heard of was “rigmutton,” a wanton wench etc. Say, isn’t there an English beer called “Rigwelter”? Makes me wonder what Diana Rigg’s name really means.

It was an extra bonus that your words came from a calendar. So my February 26 birthday word was “sproag,” to run among the haystacks after the girls at night. Well, that sounds a little closer to my nature than, say, what the astrology columns have for Pisces born on my day. Say, given various NESFAn birthdays, could you list a birthday word for each? What are yours and Suford’s and Alice’s, for example?

To Tom Endrey

I knew you were an expert in SF art, but your look last ish at one or two cautionary examples in the market shows some easy mastery. Wish I’d gotten you to talk art at the banquet table at Boskone.

Didn’t understand your reference to buying SF art in the early 80s from “advertising agencies” like the one you named, Jerry Leff Associates. I work at an ad agency, and our products are advertisements, brochures, mailing pieces, Web designs, etc. Other agencies I know also do broadcast. Did some ad agencies at one time also act as art galleries or agents?

Hey, speaking of the art market and so forth, I found this old comic book in the attic, *Action Comics* No. 1 from 1938. Think I can get anything for it?

To Paul Giguere

Agree with your rave for Vinge’s *A Deepness in the Sky*. A truly involving read. Wonder if this summer’s Melbourne worldcon will see our more ambitious sequinheads clacking around trying to do Spiders. Might be worth the fare just for that.

Grateful to you again for listing your favorites among stuff upcoming in SF publishing. Wow, *Cryptonomicon* by Neal Stephenson in May! Zow, *The Cassini Division* by Ken MacLeod in July! Pow, *A Civil Campaign* by Bujold in September! Zow (I’m running out of ejaculations [guess this happens as you get older]), *Ender’s Shadow* by Card, also in September!

Haven’t looked it up, but one of Ender’s chief rivals in *Ender’s Game* was Bonzo something. So this upcoming book is from the villain’s point of view — as if Shakespeare did *Othello’s Shadow*, about Iago. Interesting idea; like Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked*, where he did the Wicked Witch’s POV. Let’s imagine more.

No Shit, Sherlock, by A. Conan Doyle channeling Moriarty. *Blackie’s Galaxy*, by E. E. Smith. *Kkatt-kkiller*, by C. J. Cherryh. *Groac Gets Even*, by Keith Laumer. *Scream, Leap, Let’s Eat* by Larry Niven. *Bugged*, by R. A. Heinlein. Oh, and of course *Shire on Fire*, by J. R. R. Tolkien.

To go back to Jan: Some neat writing in your article on the Best SF of 1998, Paul. Especially liked the way your end looped around to tie to the beginning. See, somebody’s appreciating this stuff.

Your advice to start reading Sarah Zettel with *Reclamation* came a little late; I’d already started *Fool’s War*. However, that second book was pretty good; must go back for the first if it’s even better.

And from Feb, thanks for the agreement on my best-flicks list. *Shakespeare in Love* did even better than we thought at the Oscars, eh? And about all the World War II combat vets in your family: my father’s brothers served in Burma and India, which haven’t gotten as much attention as WWII European theater ops lately. And your grandfather and his eight brothers certainly trumps my two. About that “fictional memoir” of the Battling Giguere or whatever that you’re writing: sounds interesting. Better hurry, though; my sense is that interest is intense in that period right now, but the market is peaking.

To Mark Olson

Again, I too am sky-high on *A Deepness in the Sky*. Loved the discussion you and I and Leslie Turek had about it at the last Other Meet. Agree with you that it's great, and who cares about details like the Spiders' managing to pack way too much progress into those measly 35-year wake-ups of theirs?

John Clute has a very interesting (what else is new?) review on this in the March 22 *SF Weekly* online (that's ish no. 101, at www.scifi.com/sfw/issue101/index.html).

You both pick up very perceptively on some issues underlying Vinge's text. I love when that happens. As for instance, when you say it's "obliquely hinted that the interaction between physics and computation is so intimate" that the computation barrier causes stuff like no-FTL, not the other way around. And Clute's whole essay is an argument that goes "outside the box" of this novel, arguing that the book packs a tremendous punch of dramatic irony to which a reader is totally oblivious unless he or she has read *A Fire Upon the Deep* — and realizes that these poor struggling things are trapped just inside the Slowness.

Boy, for an action/hard SF/space opera entertainment, this thing is pretty easy to review as a novel of ideas, no?

Thanks also for your Jan discussion, re *Elizabeth The Movie*, about the evolving nature of treason ... from a crime against a monarch's person or personal interests to a crime against the state. Had never thought about the amount of obvious-at-the-time truth in Louis' *L'état c'est moi*. But to channel George Flynn for a moment, you had it Louis IV. There's one Roman numeral missing there; check The X-File.

Agree with your good recommendation from Feb on John Barnes' *Finity*. But I was hoping that someone highly science-minded like you would take a run at evaluating the particular specialty of the astronomer hero: a brand of probability analysis that I hadn't run into before. If it's just stage carpentry, it was damned convincing from my cheap seat. Anybody have an opinion on its reality?

Poul Anderson's *hommage* to Kipling's *Kim*, titled *The Game of Empire* — somehow this one escaped me. Love *Kim* and *Citizen of the Galaxy*, of course. Must go get *Game* at once. Thanks millions, Mark. [Oops, after checking my stash, turns out I already own it but have never quite got to it. It's only since 1985 ...]

And speaking of the Heinlein book, thanks again, Mark, for that fascinating analysis of the shaky, or actually breaky economics behind its interstellar slave trade. You're right, slavery just couldn't have existed in that *Citizen of the Galaxy* civilization. But damn, it made for an exciting, romantic story!

Great San Diego trip report, too. If La Jolla isn't a beach because it's really just "a basalt shelf with waves breaking," how about our own Marblehead — featuring, like, a million cobblestones with waves breaking? And so the Quail Botanical Gardens in Escondido are the best you've ever seen; must challenge my friends David and Pat Rice in St. Louis, who think *their* Botanical Gardens merit the palm.

Sounds as if you liked the Hotel Del Coronado out there. If you'd like to see its Mad Ludwigian towers again cheap, just rent a 1980 video sleeper called *The Stunt Man*. It's about a movie being shot on that location, and shows lots of great hotel views — I remember wanting to stay there while I was watching the movie. Great, tricky thriller too: Peter O'Toole plays a bit of a Mad Ludwig director, who kind of blackmails a fugitive Steve Railsback into doing dangerous stunts for him. One viewer's tag line: The Greatest Movie You've Never Seen.

To Ray Bowie

Sorry to overtake you in APA page count. Some of my friends would say it's just like me, racing a guy in a wheelchair ...

Hope I know you well enough to make that joke, Ray. Even though we've never met. (If not, I apologize on the spot.) But having our zines side-by-side for a few years does breed a kind of rough familiarity, doesn't it?

And thanks for your kindness about the fan writer Hugo. My blushes, Watson.

About *The Guns of Navarone*. It came out when I was 9 or 10 years old. I'd just read the neat book (by Alistair MacLean, kind of a British Tom Clancy in his day) about these WWII commandos attacking two huge naval guns on an island in the Aegean (like I knew where that was) and was wild to see the movie. Finally screamed and begged loud and long enough that my parents took me to the drive-in. Problem: the movie started late, and went on for close to 3 hours. Apparently I dozed off in the middle. But it was a good one: Gregory Peck, David Niven, Anthony Quinn, Stanley Baker — glorious! I do remember waking up for the end, to watch those honking big cannon tumble down the cliff into the grapejuice-dark sea ...

And for 11 years, I never feel asleep in a movie again, until *Last Tango in Paris*. But that's another story.

Noticed in the Feb ish you mentioned here and there what added up to a whole list of writers you really like: Leinster and Clement. Kim Stanley Robinson and Connie Willis. Cordwainer Smith and Michael Swanwick. Just stop a moment and think about the tremendous range of writing styles that's represented there. Boy, we SF readers are large, we contain multitudes.

To Joe Ross

Thanks for the interesting piece on NESFA's shall we say ergocratic (noun: ergonocracy?) voting system, and its salutary effect in preserving the club's cultural values. (Which I'd define as hard work, decency, and a fanatical devotion to The Skunk.) Unlike some other organizations to which I've belonged, NESFA is surprisingly un-self-reflective. But I do enjoy the occasional foray into navel-gazing. Since I'm a fairly new member — only active, if you can even call it that, since 1995 — it lets me find out about cool scandals of the past. For instance, what is "the 1975 Crisis"?

Nice quotes from all over, Joe, as always. Hate to say it, but the one from Dan

Quayle was even actually witty: "If Gore invented the Internet, I invented spell-check."

Very cogent Jan article, wearing your *chapeau d'avocat*, about the legal process of discovery and the aims and forms of a civil deposition, in regards President Clinton's perhaps perfectly legal machinations in particular. I haven't heard it put so concisely and well in over a thousand talk shows. Sounds like you agree with me that the Supreme Court should have been benched for allowing a sitting president to be civilly (well, actually pretty uncivilly) sued while in office. Didn't they include language indicating they didn't think it would unduly distract him from the duties of the office? Bzzzzt, wrong. And Justice — or these justices, anyway — seemed blind to whether the process just might be open to political abuse.

To Mark Hertel

Re your Feb comments on Vinge's *A Deepness in the Sky*, I rate it higher than you do. It certainly delivered plenty of what I keep reading science fiction for.

Agreed that the Spiders aren't as appealing as the Tines in *A Fire Upon the Deep*, and the Tines' pack-mindedness is perhaps more original, convincing, and interesting than the Spiders' cyclic Rip Van Winkle act. But that's holding them to quite a high standard: the Tines were among the best aliens to appear in SF since the Niven/Pournelle Moties.

The Spiders are still pretty fascinating, though, no? Especially the tension underneath the narrative, wherein our cozy identification with them in purely human terms slips every once in a while and we get a little flash visualization of furry backs and clacking legs and rows of big black beady eyes and we reflexively want to just *step on*, say, the heroine

To Sharon Sbarsky

Nice job on your Feb obit for fan Gary Louie. You have to work hard to keep a friendship alive these days, and yours with

Gary was bi-coastal to boot! But it sounds like you both felt the other was worth it.

Interesting phenomenon, really, these intense friendships fans can form when they meet only for a few frantically busy con days per year, or less. I've been trying to think of historical analogies.

Gypsies at a crossroads encampment? Caber-tossers at the gathering of the Highland clans? Amish barn-building volunteers? Mercenary soldiers meeting at war after war? Carnies uniting to bilk fresh unsuspecting strangers?

Or there's a woman I know who's a contract worker for FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Administration. Whenever there's a major flood, hurricane, forest fire, or other example of the wrath of God, she and a nomadic coven of other public relations practitioners fly in, set up an instant office in some unused aircraft hangar, and start cranking out press releases.

uninformed with your comments on splitting the infinitive, amen, sister!

To Tim Szczesuil/Margo Skinner

Nice cover in Feb. In fact, if it was actually a portrait of Tony Lewis, a great cover.

If it was a portrait of somebody else, good cover.

To Nomi Burstein

So in Jan you hadn't quite finished Richard Rhodes' 800-page book *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*. Assume you have by now. How did it come out?

I bought this book several years ago, but it was ruined by water damage in my cellar before I could read it. I've never had the heart to buy another copy.

Before you ask yourself, didn't this moron inquire about water problems before buying his house, you bet I did! And we had no trouble at all for the first 13 years. Then, the course of some underground river must have shifted. Or an interdimensional portal to some vast Waterworld opened up just underneath my basement floor ...

To boldly go to another matter: in enthusiastic agreement tempered only by fear of censure from the verbal infixively