

The Devniad Book 51a

un zine de Bob Devney
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Dark Victory?

There's a telling scene early in Thomas Harris' new book *Hannibal*, the sequel to his great psychological thrillers *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*. In the charming, bloodstained old city of Florence, monster/genius Dr. Hannibal Lecter attends a grisly museum exhibition. But he does not go to look at the displays.

"The exposition of Atrocious Torture Instruments could not fail to appeal to a connoisseur of the worst in mankind. But the essence of the worst, the true asafetida of the human spirit, is not found in the Iron Maiden or the whetted edge; Elemental Ugliness is found in the faces of the crowd."

By the end of *Hannibal*, it's got to occur to any thinking person that, in reading this book, we're taking our own places in that ghastly and morbid crowd. And how does that make us feel about ourselves?

This thing is very very dark indeed. In fact, it makes *Silence of the Lambs* feel like *Mary Had a Little* etc. It's very unusual for me to be spooked by a book. But some of the stuff in here, horrible imagery and situations delivered with great craft, really bothered me. Got to me, and stay with me.

I suppose it is a great book, like its predecessors. You know, it's curiously hard to get my critical mojo working when I'm this scared and depressed. It will definitely add a few images to your memory banks that won't be fading out anytime soon. Whether you want them to or not.

It's not even the doings of Dr. Lecter or Harris' new victim/villain, the faceless Mason Verger, that bother us most in *Hannibal*. It's what happens to Clarice Starling, his FBI agent heroine. Seven years have passed since her ordeals in *Silence*, and those years have not been kind.

"Starling was weary of technique. Faith in technique is the religion of the dangerous trades. To go up against an armed felon in a gunfight or fight him in the dirt you have to believe perfect technique, hard training, will guarantee you are invincible. This is not true, particularly in firefights. You can stack the odds in your favor, but if you get into enough gunfights, you will be killed in one.

"Having come to doubt the religion of technique, where could Starling turn?"

Good question. This weariness comes to be profoundly shocking to us, because it not only shakes the foundations of Starling's character, it repudiates what we identified with in Harris' previous books: The good guys/gals may be beset with bureaucracy and ignorance, and their triumphs are never anything like painless or pure. But with their terrific techniques and neat tricks, their weapons of technology and insight supporting their characteristic determination and weary, tormented nobility, they deny to madness and evil any final victory.

As you turn the pages of *Hannibal* and become imbrued with its dark spirit, just try to hold that thought.

The Neverending Ender

Orson Scott Card has put the first four chapters of his upcoming book, *Ender's Shadow*, on his Hatrack River site: www.hatrack.com/osc/books/shadow00.shtml

It takes some of the same story told in the original, classic *Ender's Game* and tells it from the perspective of Ender's friend Bean.

Writing sages always advise that your characters should *want* something. In this book so far, Card obeys with a vengeance.

He's beginning with the lives of some street kids in the edgy urbopolis of a rotting future Rotterdam. These kids want to live. They want to eat. Most of all, he shows us, they want to belong. Desperate to be loved.

You worry that a sequel to a beloved original will be a hurried ripoff. Or a somewhat unwelcome thickening or overcomplexifying of what had been beautifully simple — that's a criticism that some have leveled at Card's other Ender afterbooks, *Speaker for the Dead*, *Xenocide*, and *Children of the Mind*.

On the evidence of the first chapters, that's not what's happening here. Take a look.

Stop and Smell the Flowers

SF writer Raphael Carter must be a mystery fan too. Like me, he apparently loves Rex Stout's 1930s-1970s detective series featuring Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. And since he's also a serious and gifted nature photographer, Carter has created a one-of-a-kind photo essay on his Web site showing off "Nero Wolfe's Orchids."

This site is a fascinating look for fans of the Wolfe books. And a perfect example of the way the Web has expanded the "publishing" resources available for very specialized niche interests. Here Carter can widely distribute a document for a very small interest group with color photography at reasonable cost.

The site's at:

www.chaparraltree.com/essays/wolfe.shtml
1

Our Man in Honduras

Our nephew Jarrod Ferrara sends another dispatch from the Peace Corps front in Central America.

For my closet philatelist friends, the postage stamp he used shows an attractive, youngish woman named "Mary Flake de Flores," who's apparently "la Primera Dama de la Nación" or First Lady down there. And I thought my "Emmet" was an unfortunate middle name ...

Jarrood naturally remains shaken by his father's death up here in April.

"The nights have been tough ... I miss him immensely."

But he's now back in-country, has finished training, and is installed at his first posting, at a place call La Florida de Opatoro. (May be on the western border with Guatemala, near the city of Santa Rosa de Copán. Anybody out there have a better atlas than mine?)

His specialty is health education, and apparently the people in the town's health center (or *Centro de Salud*) have made him feel welcome. Which is good, because he's actually housed right there.

"I'm living in, get this, the cholera room ...

"... It's a sweet set-up really. The room is huge, with hardly anything in it, big windows with screens (although not in the best of shape) on two of the four walls, letting in a lot of light in the daytime. And its own bathroom."

Plus our boy has his own "PC-issued mosquito net, for those unfriendly and unwelcome visitors that come in the night."

Always a dedicated worker, Jarrod's burning the midnight oil — almost literally.

"There is no electricity here, which is a pain ... I'm writing this letter by candlelight. Sort of a romantic notion, but let's be honest, a lamp would be ten times better ... [Though] As one guy told me the other day, it's sort of nice (*bien tranquilo*) without lights ..."

I'd complained earlier that, as his editor, I'd like more local color. (Now, how about names, guy? Little stories about characters you meet?) And stuff on some of my favorite subjects, language and especially slang. Less surly than many foreign correspondents, he complies; his dispatch

ends with "some cool '*hondureñismos*' for Bob."

Such as "*bolo* — drunk or a drunk person; *encachimbado* — really pissed off; *cerdo*, *chanchito*, *coche*, *curro*, *trencho* — all mean pig; *cabrón* — asshole, dickhead; *púchica* — wow! shit! oh my! God! (very common)."

Púchica, Jarrod, it sounds like quite an adventure! Why, if I were 20 years younger, I'd ... well, I'd take a book out from the library on it anyway.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

Man, if your mailbox ever gets that empty feeling, just write a fanzine issue in which you mention both 1) a *Star Wars* flick and
2) gun control.

This one last time, I'll include a bunch of your more colorful opinions on gun control. But guys and dolls, please: no more. As of this issue, I officially surrender, and can't see printing any more about it. Consider me convinced of all your points of view simultaneously.

Some last salvos, then, plus welcome opinions on other cool stuff:

Besides making some calm, reasoned arguments in favor of a certain degree of gun licensing, training, and "appropriate restrictions as to age and mental fitness" but not too much, **Eric Knight**, SF fan and law enforcement officer (which you might consider a scary combo if you didn't know Eric) makes a point he claims isn't funny:

"I will simply remind all (without humor) that Ted Kennedy has killed more people with his car than I and all my gun toting friends have combined ..."

Sorry, Eric, despite the fact that I may like his politics probably better than yours, I laughed. So shoot me. No, wait, I take that back.

Artist **Cortney Skinner** chides me for not printing or responding to his earlier letter supporting historical arguments that the Founders were encouraging gun ownership. ("They owned, maintained and kept their own arms in their home.") Just got flooded with similar material, Cort; still love you, as I'll prove by printing some of your *Star Wars* comments a ways below.

In a huge missive, among other things fan **Gary Dryfoos** was intrigued by **Fred Lerner's** thesis that fans resemble those reading, talking, traveling, letter-writing nuts the colonial and Revolutionary War leaders:

"This is the most novel take on a historical matter I have come across in awhile. I could be convinced. Especially if someone were to write a "Murder at the Continental Congress."

He also takes a shot at the gun thing:

"Those Colorado kids or good ol' Chuck Whitman, with a muzzle-loader, would've been knocked down by a mass of people before the third shot. Parsing the grammar or the vocabulary of the 2nd amendment for ultimate guidance about dealing with Glocks and Uzis is at best a spectacular example of double-think.

"But you'd better not publish this or your lovely publication will fall down one of the black holes of debate."

Too late, Gary. But I'm calling "time" with this ish.

Gary also makes some claim to being the Kwisatz Haderach:

"[My] little brother swears that, twenty-odd years ago, in a city far far away, as we were leaving the theater after seeing *Star Wars IV* (i.e., the first one), I turned to him and said something like, 'Yeah yeah, it's all that hero myth stuff. Just watch: Leia turns out to be his long-lost sister, Darth Vader's his father, and he grows up to rule the galaxy.' Well, I'm two-for-three so far."

Movie critic and "Scanners" stalwart **Dan Kimmel** topped Chris Benitz's long, closely reasoned letter in support of gun rights (mentioned last ish) with an even longer,

closely reasoned, historically exhaustive, Supreme-Court-citing missive in favor of gun control. (Of course, I lean more to Dan's side anyway.) A few tiny excerpts from his blazing argument:

"... If you're interested in learning more on the subject, go to the library and search for the Sept. 21, 1995 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, where historian/writer Garry Wills does a number on the so-called 'standard modelers' who want to turn the Second into an individual right to any gun you want.

"... No gun law has EVER been struck down by a Federal court for violating the Second Amendment.

"... Do people have a 'right' to machine guns, bazookas, and tactical nukes? Some gunners actually argue that they do. They should be ignored — but remain under close observation. As for the rational ones, once they concede that they do NOT have that expansive a right, it follows logically that they do not have the 'right' to any and all guns ...

"... My advice would be to stay away from the Second Amendment in your 'zine and stick with safe topics: like politics and which religion is the one true faith."

Amen, brother.

From Etobicoke, Ontario, ace letterhack and old *Proper Boskonian* colleague **Lloyd Penney** has got my number, for sure.

"Many thanks for issue 49 of *The Devniad*. I receive more and more apazines that are also meant as genzines. Why duplicate efforts, I guess."

He's also got a query for all you SMOFs.

"First of all, congratulations on the Hugo nomination! I had to download Hugo ballots from the Aussiecon 3 website. We purchased memberships through our credit card ... or so we thought. They seem to have lost our request for supporting memberships, and they aren't extending eligibility for voting to this year's *and* last year's Worldcon membership. Could you ask those in the know in the APA if this is a WSFA rule the Australians are violating?"

And Lloyd takes time out to send a spray of bullets south of his border:

"After the shootings in Littleton, CO there were others in Taber, Alberta and in Conyers, GA just the other day ... Canada has extensive gun controls, and a new national gun registry. Resistance to this registry comes from the four Western provinces, those with much larger gun-loving populations than elsewhere in the country. Modern American society seems based on war, violence, rule of the weapon and might makes right. Modern Canadian society is based on peace, negotiations and goodwill, but violence washes over our borders regularly, and Taber is the newest example."

Ouch, Lloyd. Ya got us.

Friend **Charley Sumner** is a fellow fan of "the works of the great Thomas Harris ... A couple of months ago I went to the Brooklyn Museum of Art (where the painting of the Red Dragon resides in the book) and the story was with me the whole way. Damn, those are good books. I'll be starting on *Hannibal* shortly."

What'd you think, Charley? Brrrr, huh?

"On a related note, have you read the Alex Cross novels by James Patterson? They start with the pretty good *Along Came a Spider* and include *Kiss the Girls* (made into an OK film with Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd).

"They're interesting books and really come across as poor man's Tom Harris novels. They're fun, but clearly derivative of Harris' work. In fact, there's a scene in one of the Patterson books that has a sort of cameo appearance by Harris, so I think he knows about their similarities ... "

I read *Kiss*, Charley, but not the others; agree about the so-so quality. But which one has the Harris cameo? You've got me interested.

One of my oldest and wisest friends, **John Vaughan**, is another Harrishead.

"I think it was in *Silence* he wrote one of my all time favorite lines which explains so much human behavior on a day-to-day

basis, something like: 'We lust first after that which we know.' (Hannibal was suggesting looking in the vicinity of a victim for a psychosexual killer.)

"On a broader scale, you can save a species with that line, if you let yourself think about it."

Looked up Lecter's exact line, John. "We begin by coveting what we see every day." (Thomas Harris, *The Silence of the Lambs*, p. 209 in the 1988 hardcover.) But as far as letting ourselves think about it — that's not always the wisest course with a comment coming from Dr. Lecter ...

John also pokes fun at the dialects in *The Phantom Menace*.

"I agreed with your *SWEIPM* comments. The pod race was the best ... [But] the bad guys that took over Naboo were ridiculous — I spent the time wondering what dialect Lucas was going after with, I thought they were trying for Japanese/Italian and, that Binks guy was Jamaican/Squiggly, I think."

And in the next episode, Hawaii/Fonzi?

Fan and bookseller **Michael Walsh** of Old Earth Books advises a unique buying opportunity for a few select (rich) fans:

"Since you like Mr Harris so much ... Madison Avenue Bookshop in NYC has signed copies of *Hannibal*. 212-525-6130.

"Oh, they don't take credit cards. Cash, checks, in-store credit. Very carriage trade."

Fan **Tom Jackson** found *The Phantom Menace* mixed, but a blessing.

"... The visuals are great, and allow me to overlook some minor problems in the film — you know, like the acting, the screenwriting, etc. I can't argue with the people who complain that the new movie is dumb, but I thought the other *Star Wars* movies were dumb, too. I can't imagine why anyone, anywhere, would read a *Star Wars* BOOK.

"A friend of mine who I'm going to see at a convention in Tulsa in about three weeks told me he was going to avoid seeing *Phantom* for a few weeks — so that when he

is at the convention, he will be the *only* person who hasn't seen it."

Cort Skinner weighs in again, this time on my wordhead snobbery and other phantom menaces.

"And another thing ... I'm taking offense (with a smile, now) at your entering *Star Wars: TPM* in the Art Show ... because it wouldn't make the cut for a bookstall.

"... You've strongly suggested that art/illustration has less artistic value than the printed word, or that it caters to *only* the visual ... [P]lease, don't make visual art the poor cousin of the printed word because once it enters through the eyes it goes to a different part of the brain.

"I admit that, in most SF art shows, the 'illustration' must exist in tandem with its book, or at least was created because of the book, and therefore may have at best a symbiotic and at worst a parasitic relationship with the book.

"BUT there will always be (due to the ability of the artist to create it, or despite the ability of the Art Director to destroy it) actual, true art which transcends the limitations of its birth, and exists and pulses and glows on its own without the viewer needing the 'crutch' of having to know the book wherefrom it sprung."

Beautifully said, Cort. But I'll enter a plea of not guilty. I said "the central joys of these flicks are visual and kinetic, not, ah, scriptural." Isn't it obvious, though, that I really kinda love them anyway? Many deep thinkers about film say it's at heart a visual medium, that words get in the way. Think it's to my credit that I adore movies anyway. Ashamed to say I often don't have time for the Art Show at cons; too busy with panels and conversation. (Force-feed me a guided tour next con we attend together?) But in talking about these movies, the stuff I love about them is *absolutely* the visual stuff.

In fact, sounds below like you love them a little less:

"... *SWTPM* was *commercial* art ... art in thrall to \$\$\$\$\$. If anything, it was less than the sum of its parts due to Lucas' inability to inject value or content into the movie.

"The designers, animators, set designers, set constructors, propmen, painters, illustrators, CGI animators composer, musicians ... They did THEIR job ... but Lucas as the Art Director managed to blunt the entire project, and despite the astounding talent he had around him in the artistic, musical and acting trades ... he only made a carnival ride."

My former PR colleague **Susan Lilly** always leads a lively life of the mind, her keen interest in fine books, movies, and theater seemingly undiminished by the slings and arrows of outrageous office life. And her vacations aren't too shabby either.

She writes from the tumbled old Italian hill city of Sienna, which I know only from my box of crayons.

"I wanted my review of *Tea With Mussolini* to be written on a postcard from San Gimignano; however, I never made it there. This is the next town over, which has a very funky striped cathedral and a famous annual horse race around the main square ... Anyway, my expectations for the film were high given the cast [Judi Dench, Joan Plowright, Cher, Maggie Smith, Lily Tomlin], but I ended up being disappointed ...

"I've been touring Rome, Venice, and Florence and rented a Tuscan farmhouse for a few days ... *Ciao, Susan.*"

Cara Susan, haven't seen it yet myself. But my Aunt Ann Paterson, who's sort of you but (even more) grown up, found *Tea* less bitter ... but she did demand lots more of her fave *La Dench* (ghod, what kind of Continental poseur am I becoming?). Of course, AA's jetting off to Florence in the fall, so she was ripe for a Zeffirelli flick anyway.

Meanwhile, for my vacation I think I'll trudge over to Mansfield, Massachusetts for a frappe ...

And another former coworker, one-man PR giant **Michael McWilliams**, has discovered a forgotten "gem":

"You, as one of SF fandom's leading arbiters [my blushes, McWilliams], should

be most interested in this: a recording of a certain actor who played a TV starship captain ... in what has to be one of the most inane, fatuous, insipid recordings of all time...

"Yes, that's right: I have the full CD quality sound file of our hero — William Shatner — chewing up the studio as he renders 'Lucy in The Sky With Diamonds' for the ages. This is from that golden time back in the late 60's and early 70's when record-industry pinheads thought it was a swell idea for third-rate TV actors to give their fans a little something more to fuel their enthusiasm ... (I've fondly recalled the time when Letterman played it as a surprise for Shatner, who did NOT respond well to the ridicule.) Bill is in full "HAM" mode on this.

"May the force be ... uh ... something that helps you live long and prosper."

Meanwhile, *SFRevu* editor **Ernest Lilley** pays my last ish his highest compliment.

"Imagine, writing so compelling that even the lack of my own name anywhere in it fails to keep me from reading the entire thing.

"Good points re: *Star Wars*. I shared your cringe when that mean Jedi tried to swindle the nice slave merchant. Also cringed at: aliens with really hard to understand accents, 9 year olds courting 17 year old princesses (it's in there), virgin birth of Anakin, the princess's SR-71 Silverbird, the difference in technique between Jedi and Sith (none when the chips are down), the aggressive multiculturalism of the Jedi council, and the Wilton Parmenter imitation done by Jar Jar ... There are many lessons to be learned in this movie. Let's hope kids miss all of them."

Read more of Ern's *Menace* misanthropy in his review in the June *SFRevu* at: www.sfrevu.com/3-06/contents.html

Fan writer **Guy Lillian** of the great *Challenger* zine — who was in Boston for 36 hours this month, and got to see two of the area's best sites, Old Ironsides and Pussywillows (gracious Natick estate of

NESFA stars Tony, Suford, and Alice Lewis) — shares some of my reaction to *Hannibal*:

"Me, I'm not exactly depressed, but astonished, horrified, 'freaked' — yes. [Scenes in the book] undercut the very foundations of my expectations and many of my connections to sanity. I revisit some of their images in my sleep: I'm with Steve King's review in *The New York Times*: It was horrid past belief ... and effin' *b*r*i*t*i*i*a*n*t*. I'll exult in *CHALLENGER*, due sometime before the millennium."

Would love to see that King review. Anybody got a copy?

And — just heard this morning that King was seriously injured yesterday, swiped by a van. Anybody get Dr. Lecter's number?

Fan writer **Evelyn Leeper** (longtime Hugo nominee and one of my deadliest friendly rivals] seems to have thought *Menace* was both good and original, but the part that was good was not — well, you know the rest:

"Yes, the sets and design and architecture are fabulous — and they were when Jim Gurney did them for *Dinotopia*. (See <http://www.dinotopia.com/parade.html> for Gurney's comments.)"

I advised her to also take a look at a little comparison **Gary Dryfoos** put up: <http://web.mit.edu/dryfoo/www/watcit.html>

She responds:

"Actually, if you go to Blackpool Studios homepage, they say their image is from Gurney. I don't see anything that says they did *SWEI: TPM* ... However, the images in *SWEI: TPM* do bear a strong resemblance to Gurney."

Instead of getting *The Devniad* ready for press, spent some of this morning reading the June 1999 ish of *Mimezine Retrozine* by Australian fan **Terry Frost**. As usual, it's a rollercoaster read. Terry won the 1995 Aussie fan writer award, knows his way around both a sentence and a titillating congoing anecdote. From the Baltimore

worldcon last year, you may remember him as the young DUFFer. If not, think Dennis Miller crossed with **Patrick Nielsen Hayden** hard-fried and over.

I believe one of Terry's wild notions here deserves wider currency:

"If you're gonna stand out from the fannish crowd in Melbourne, you have to have just one simple thing: discernible muscle tone ... Fans just don't understand health or how to acquire it — you can't do exercise while drinking coke and scoffing chocolate cake."

Applied to worldwide fandom as I'm sure Terry wouldn't hesitate to do (slurp slurp), this view seems (gobble gobble) unnecessarily harsh. Where's (gulp gulp gulp) his *data*?

And anyway, where would he find a control group? Around here, buff types would include, well, oh yeah, **Joe Petronio**. Hey, and now maybe **Paul Giguere**, after the Year of the Great Diet! And that's probably about it. Sorry, **Tony Lewis**, cardiac-unit-induced fitness may not morally count ...

This issue — which also as usual has a fair amount about Terry's bonobo-like sex life, which he talks about almost as much as he talks about bluenosed snoopies talking about his sex life — doesn't seem to be on Terry's home page yet, at www.netspace.net.au/~hlector/

But the ish itself gives an e-mail address where you can doubtless beg info or a copy: Gavrillac@netscape.net

Fan **James Marshall** thought I went too far by intimating that, like Jake Lloyd, Mark Hamill can't act.

"Oh, come on. Let it go. As far as I'm concerned, Mark Hamill is the only actor (aside from consummate professionals Alec Guinness and Peter Cushing) who didn't 'phone in' his performance in the original *Star Wars*. Yes, he's a bit light in the talent department (after his performance on *The Muppet Show*, I know why the word 'ham' is in his name), but enthusiasm counts for a lot in a space opera."

In other news: from Puerto Rico, SF writer and bon vivant **Jim Stevens-Arce** found a great general-purpose Web site called Refdesk from whence you can get just about anywhere.

"If you could use a site where you can go to find links to just about any information you might need, you might want to bookmark this page:" www.refdesk.com/

FINAL NOTE: Man, this excerpting my newly extensive correspondence is hard work. And perhaps ultimately frustrating for all parties involved: letter writer, letter editor, letter reader ...

Don't want to stifle people writing in. But I've got to ask myself, is all this really healthy for a personal fanzine? If you're tuning in to hear *my* voice, it's getting drowned out this issue for sure.

And you know, reading all this over, on the gun battle we're just carrying into our SF/F fan lives the opinions we've cultivated in the outside world. And perhaps were handed down at daddy's knee ... or on mom's firing range. What's uniquely fannish about all this talk? Except that it's loud, voluminous, and includes mucho historical analyses, most from secondary if not eleventhary sources.

For instance, not one correspondent mentioned the single unique and rather strict gun control regulation observed just about universally throughout the fannish world: the Weapons Policy ban at cons ...

From "Deep Thoughts"

by Jack Handey

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

"It's fascinating to think that all around us there's an invisible world we can't even see. I'm speaking, of course, of the World of the Invisible Scary Skeletons."

FlimFan

EXCELLENT:

The Castle — It's like *Dumb and Dumber Down Under*, or *The Full Monty* without a full deck. Shot in only 11 days on a frayed shoestring by popular Aussie TV showmakers known as the Working Dog or *D-Generation* crew, this shamelessly low-brow flick made low-brow me laugh more than any other movie so far this year. Tow truck driver Darryl Kerrigan (Michael Caton) and his not-so-bright brood have built a proud and happy life in a cast-off bit of Melbourne suburb. Their ramshackle home, built over toxic landfill, offers no view but the jumbo jet runway abutting the back yard. Yet a man's home is his castle, innit? The Kerrigans spend the movie mounting a spirited (if clueless) defense against the corporation seeking to evict them to allow airport expansion. We probably laugh more *at* than *with* the characters here — but their simplicity does win our hearts. These working-class heroes love their neighborhood and each other; can every *Devniad* reader say the same? And be afraid, friends and family: I'm adopting Darryl's catch phrases, like "He's dreamin'" and "*This goes straight* to the poolroom," *straight* into my idiolect. In any case, the damn thing's hilarious. My party of five all laughed our guts out. My and my sister Darcy's greatest guffaws were elicited by the Kerrigan's well-meaning but downmarket lawyer, Dennis Denuto (Triel Mora), whose legal ineptitude is exceeded only by his helplessness in re office machines; a visit by opposing counsel finds him bent over, poking with despairing fury at his copier and crying things like "*What fucking F3, you bastard?*" And when the film has the litigants approaching the Australian high court? And the camera zooms in on lawyer Denuto's frightened face as the dim narrator announces proudly, "Dennis was stoked!" ... followed closely by Dennis whimpering, "I'm shitting myself"? My brother-in-law Bob, a native Aussie himself, nearly followed suit.

GOOD:

Nothing Hill — While it doesn't take romantic comedy to the heights of mod classics like *When Harry Met Sally* or *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, this *Hill* is worth climbing into your car and driving to the mallplex for. Director Roger Michell, who did my 1995 favorite *Persuasion*, spins a pleasant and fairly funny fable about wry London bookshop owner William (Hugh Grant) and his unlikely relationship with the world's most famous movie star, Anna (Julia Roberts). Roberts is properly pretty, self-assured, and tremulous by turns. She also gets to make us think (don't worry, it's only for a minute) about the downside of her career ("I've been hungry for a decade") and the fact that stars are human too ("I'm also just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her"). Grant retains his title as the charming Duke of Diffidence, and gets a good number of laugh lines that he puts over quite well. But the whole thing might have stayed a tad insipid if not for William's family and friends. I love it when the unspeakable Spike (the "masturbating Welshman"), played by Rhys Ifans as all dirty feet and peekaboo ass-crack, tries to play counselor to his horrified flatmate William: "C'mon ... open up. This is *me*." Tim McInnerny — Lord Percy in the mid-80s Brit TV gem *Black Adder*, you know, the tall silly one? — is tremendous as the tall, silly best friend. Gina McKee as his wheelchair-bound wife in my opinion steals the movie from Roberts for class *and* looks. And you've got to like Emma Chambers as William's ditsy sister, who, on first realizing the identity of her brother's new date, responds simply, "Holy fuck!" This bomber-crew of supporting actors, though reminiscent of the gang in *Four Weddings*, nevertheless puts things over the top for me. Although it might have been even better if they'd made this more like real life. You know, the actress turns out to be a neurotic, shallow, faithless pain while he's a totally original, synergistic folk/country musical genius. Ooops. Sorry, guess I'm still more upset than I realized by the way Roberts dumped my man Lyle Lovett ...

Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged

Me — I enjoyed this one with a huge crowd of kids, many of whom looked like they must have donned false mustaches to get into this PG-rated flick. But enjoy it I did, I'm ashamed to admit: it seems to have unlimited jokes and energy. More even than in Mike Myers' first comic turn as Austin Powers, the randy little British spy from the shagedelic 60s who awakes from suspended animation in the more PC 90s. The plot this time — oh, who gives a toss? It's mostly bathroom jokes and penis gags, baby, and don't tell me they won't get to you. (Say, with penis jokes thrust to the forefront in movies and even on TV, can vagina jokes be far behind?) Anyway, *The Spy Who Shagged Me* boasts better jokes and fewer duds than the *Airplane* or *Police Squad* series. Like them, this is low parody, but it's fully and skillfully packed for maximum payoff. If this stuff were easy, don't you think every *Saturday Night Live* alum would be doing it? For instance, the villain Dr. Evil's new midget clone (Verne Troyer) is not awfully politically correct. But Myers, fellow writer Michael McCullers, and director Jay Roach shrewdly give him lots of screen time; and there's something beautiful, for instance, about his Lunar judo moves against the spacesuited Powers. (Of course, you know his little limbs can't possibly produce the leverage effects his throws demonstrate. Although it's on the Moon, so would he exert six times the leverage? No. But it's funny anyway.) Although beautiful is not quite the word for the huge new Scottish villain, Fat Bastard, or his (unfortunately) unforgettable greeting on arrival at Dr. Evil's HQ: "Where's your shitter? I've got a *turtle head* poking out." But elsewhere, this thing occasionally winks over the head of its target audience of 12-year-olds, as when Dr. Evil admits what he envies in Powers: "He has libido ... what the French call 'a certain I-don't-know-what.'" And there are the sly allusions to other movies: my favorites were when Dr. Evil tauntingly throws a globe of the world at Rob Lowe's head, as in Robert Duvall's basketball scene with Michael O'Keefe in 1980's *The Great Santini*. And most of all, when Dr. Evil's malfunctioning

chair begins spinning out of control. "All I asked for was a *frickin'* rotating chair." And then, as its movements grow wilder: "The *power of Christ* compels you! The *power of Christ* compels you!" An allusion to another case of demonic possession, remember, in *The Exorcist*? ... And I've never seen anything quite like the whole redickulous daisychain of scenes where the next word is said after the scene cut, and becomes the first word of the new scene. Every single one of them a synonym for "penis." You know, pecker, wang, willie, johnson, Woody Harrelson? There's even some cleanly funny wordplay; for instance, Dr. Evil's world domination schemes have names like The Alan Parsons Project, while his Lunar bases are named Moon Unit Alpha and, inevitably, Moon Unit Zappa. Which reminds me, SF fans. Of course you realize: as much as *Men in Black* or the upcoming *Wild Wild West*, this is *completely* a science fiction film. With wild wild SF stuff such as suspended animation, cool retro time travel tech, while-you-wait cloning, Moon bases ... and most unbelievable of all, nerd sex mojo.

DECENT:

The Mummy — Guess what time it is at the desert archaeological site when the Egyptologist runs out of his tent to yell, panic-stricken, at the heroine: "NO! You *must not* read from the Book!" That's right: half-past Too Late. But this movie *knows* you know that already. It also knows that you'd kinda enjoy a good revenge-of-the-mummy flick anyway. One with nice modernized special effects and production values; some pant-by-the-numbers excitement; a rugged guy (Brendan Fraser) who's handy with pistol and wisecracks; a spirited gal (Rachel Weisz) with big hair, eyes, cheekbones, and chest; and a nice nasty juicy mummy (Arnold Vosloo) back from the dead and dead-set on world conquest. So that's what you get here. Sort of a second-rank — not second-rate, mind you — Indiana Jones clone. With occasional flashes of more than that. There's a really good beginning, for instance, where we see pyramids baking in

the desert sun ... then pull back to a Sphinx that looks a lot *fresher* than we expect: in fact, the paint and gilding still glisten with newness. And then we pull further away to show a bustling city surrounding these sites. Writer/director Stephen Sommers has taken us back 3000 years just like that, with a real *moviemaker* move. And once we flash forward to the present, or rather to our main setting in Egypt 1923, you'll also enjoy Sommers' nice taste in classic mummy-movie dialog. Like when they see the inside of the coffin lid: "My god, these marks were made with *fangernails* ..."

SCHEISS:

The Thirteenth Floor — You know how some European movies give us "American" settings where the relationships between people are a little too hierarchical, and rich people are too aristocratic, and policemen a little too autocratic? Well, this is another one. Some of my hostility toward this movie is based on parochial irritation with German writer/director Josef Rusnak, who tries for Los Angeles und gets Berlin, but sunnier. The plot concerns a new virtual reality technology under development at an LA firm. (Actually, it's a multibillion-dollar cybercompany ... that apparently employs one security guard plus three scientists. None of whom talk like they've ever had a technical thought in their lives.) Try out this VR program by laying down in The Room of Stupid Blue Lights and you're transported to 1937 Los Angeles. But did the movie have to reek of 1937 melodrama, too? All the characters do here is shift motivations, strike poses, and assume attitudes. Particularly the star, hypermasculine stubbled hunkboy Craig Bierko. Adequate as the good-looking hit man in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, here he utters not one believable line. Also, this flick wastes the talented Armin Mueller-Stahl as the enigmatic corporation chief, who's got an awfully strong German accent for somebody named Hammond Fuller. And Vincent D'Onofrio also gets ill-used as arch-geek of an advanced VR project that he's never bothered, it seems, to try out. Yes, there's one nice visual effect: blue lightning

roiling on the eyeballs during VR transfer. And after I learned the big plot secret, for a few minutes I charitably ascribed the transparent falsity of the movie's world to purpose-built mood-setting. But no, it's just dreck.

GRATUITOUS SF NOTE: For me, the best thing about this movie was the research it led me to. Seems *The Thirteenth Floor* is based on the 1964 novel *Simulacron-3* by Daniel F. Galouye. The invaluable John Clute's article in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* reminds us that that Galouye (1920-1976) was a New Orleans-based SF writer of the 50s through the early 70s, whose most popular novel was his first: *Dark Universe*, published in 1961. Clute terms *Simulacron-3* "in a sense ... a novel-length reworking of Fredrik Pohl's 'The Tunnel Under the World.'" Clute also supplies a valuable clue for why *The Thirteenth Floor* was ever made; it seems the protean German boy-genius movie director Rainer Werner Fassbinder filmed the book for German TV in 1973 as *Welt Am Draht* (*World on a Wire*). Cool title. OK, end of lecture. Maybe Fassbinder's version had some juice and originality; not this one.

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #348, May 1999

To Ray Bowie

Your lifetime summing-up last issue struck me as one of your best pieces ever, guy. You gave off vibes of having attained some kind of happiness, however hard-won.

My big 304-page *Hammond Atlas of the World* (1993) puts Deltona, Florida, where your childhood friend Carl lives, about 25 miles north and slightly east of Orlando — say halfway between Orlando and Daytona Beach. So you can be pretty sure he's been to Disney World a bunch of times; I hear it's quite accessible to wheelchairs.

To Tony Lewis

Very interesting, chockfull contrib last time! Thanks.

So Alice just turned 20? Congrats to you all! Especially Alice and Suford, of course — just read Ted Chiang's beautiful "Story of Your Life" in *Starlight 2* last night, so I'm feeling really sentimental about mothers and daughters. In fact, I may cry.

Regarding that cardiac ablation procedure (among others) you just undersuffered in the hospital — I know they can't use major sedatives while they're burning your heart, but how about Tums?

Regarding your report that the Canadian government disregarded the groundswell of popular support for naming the new northwest territories "Bob": put me down as bitterly disappointed. Hope this isn't a bad omen for my Hugo bid.

On one last and apparently seriously sensitive topic: what if I *did* want to know about 1975?

To Joe Ross

Thanks for the reunion-induced memories of your legal education and even more important life as a college radio DJ. Flanders and Swan and Tom Lehrer — heady stuff in these days when airplay satire means Weird Al Yankovitch.

So Al Gore *did* help invent the Internet? I'd ask for details to help browbeat the uncompassionate conservatives in my office, except I'll bet this issue will be drug up and chewed over about 50,00 talk show hours in this upcoming election ordeal.

Your quote from Catherine Zeta-Jones ("The only thing better than sex is sex with chocolate on top") was quite timely, since I just saw her in *Entrapment* last night. She is indeed enthrallingly beautiful. However, watching her do splits, lifts, and slides to slip through a lattice of laser beams, you've got to believe that the amount of chocolate she eats in a year wouldn't last the con suite at Boskone 40 seconds.

To George Flynn

I love that detail about the last known native speaker of Vegliot or Dalmatian, the old Romance tongue of the Balkan Adriatic

coast, dying when blown up by a mine in 1898. Some things never change. Interesting that a linguist is trying to reconstruct it by teaching his girlfriend.

I'd love to learn a little of the language myself ... but not too much. Then I could modestly observe that "my Dalmatian is a little spotty."

About your learned disquisition on the history of the word *lofgeornost*: so it's related to the surviving English words "love" and "yearn." Fascinating, Captain. Say George, what's your education? Formal? In-? I'm somewhat handy with a dictionary myself, but you're on a leaf by yourself, sir.

To Mark Olson

Another clear, brisk, fact-filled, no-nonsense set of book reviews. Can tell you read a lot of Heinlein when young, Mark. Did you deliberately set out to become his ideal of The Competent Man, or did it just happen?

Admit I haven't read through my copy of Fred Lerner's *The Story of Libraries*, but I've dipped in, and so far totally agree with your positive assessment. Have some idea that Fred has had trouble getting this book reviewed — a damned shame. Deserves a wide readership. For instance, by every reader of *The Devniad*.

To Leslie Turek

Sparkling opinions and nice writing last time, girl. Especially your take on our entropic last half-century: "You raise a generation like my father's in depression and war, and you get a pretty decent bunch of people. You raise a generation in peace and influence, and you get drugs and school shootings." As Keanu Reeves would say, "Whoa!"

Loved your thorough, thoughtful first installment on your childhood memories of Bridgeport, CT, and how relating to your grandparents there informed your recent visit to the ancestral homeland and the village of Torisky and the city of Levoča in Slovakia. Truly cool.

To Paul Giguere

Hope you enjoy Geoff Ryman's *253: A Print Remix*. One of the best books I've read in years. I've got his *Was* around somewhere in my book-crammed hovel here; your pointer increases my resolve to get to it soon, or before I die. Whichever comes first.

Your grandfather's life sounds an amazing story; can see why you'd think it would make a good novel. Good luck with that. At the risk of offending, not sure that your tentative title, *And in this corner ... Jerry Valle*, would urge me to pick up the book from a store display or catalog. First, I'd think it was about the 50s-60s lounge singer Jerry Vale. Second, it's not punchy, strange, or poetic, which I'd say are three proven ways to go with book titles ... survey your own shelves for titles of good modern novels.

Given his varied background as you outline it, how about stuff like *Immortal Valleger* (assume you'd change his name slightly) or just *Valleger* or *Embattled* or *Titanic Child* or *The Titanic Kid* or *The Ring Man* or *Slammer* or *Grappling* or *Holds and Throws* or *Marksmen* or *The Armsman* or *Any Friend of Jack's* or *Both Sides of the Line* or *Trooper* or *The Real Trooper* or *The Holstered Gun* or something odd and intriguing and meaningful wrung from a saying of his or a phrase in his letters?

To Tom Endrey

Fascinating look at the comics a bright kid read growing up in Hungary! And using them to learn English when you came to America — of course, it's obvious when you say it. I've had the thought kid's books might be a good way to learn a language (picked up a child's picture-book primer last year to help me restart and improve on my tiny knowledge of Spanish), but I'd never considered comic books.

About my interest in swearing: "swear words" have several interesting features for the student of language. In the old days, they were hard to find authoritative info on, since many weren't written down. They form a small, cohesive body of study. They possess many similarities across languages. Where they diverge, that's interesting too —

and you can learn a lot about a culture from studying these differences. (What's a culture find most juicy: religion? animals? bodily elimination? sex?) Plus they feel like they're forbidden, and thus fun to acquire.

To Elisabeth Carey

You've put your finger on quite a few of the most infuriating aspects of David Weber's Honor Harrington books. "Deck-stacking" is indeed a good description of his approach to portraying his villains as rapists, murderers, and liberals (in what he would consider descending order).

Oh well, I'm rereading the Hornblower series anyway, which leaves Weber far in its wake. Hull down, dismasted, and burnt to the waterline.

To Anna Hillier

So you attended the 50th anniversary of the MIT Science Fiction Society, a venerable legend in Northeast U.S. fandom. George Flynn I know, but, although the name rings a faint bell, who's Robert Weiner?

Maybe you can explicate at Readercon. Glad you're allowed to linger a little longer than at Boskone, where you only had those couple hours Saturday. Wonder if you can make up for Boskone by meeting up with Tom Endrey. Although I'm not sure he usually goes to these: Tom?