

# The Devniad Book 56b

un zine de Bob Devney  
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## **Orbita Dicta** **Heard in the halls of** **the 25th World Fantasy Convention** **Rhode Island Convention Center** **and Westin Hotel** **Providence, Rhode Island, U.S.A.** **November 4-7, 1999**

*Briefly, this was a smoothly run con with 915 working fantasists and fans. Its faery court of panels, parties, meetings, shows, bookstalls, dinners, corridorcons, and other serendipities bemused us through four dazzling days at a very attractive convention center and hotel in what's become a nice little city, then suddenly and silently vanished away ...*

*More than most I've attended, also, World Fantasy was a parfait. A sweet thing — with layers. There were enough professional writers, artists, editors, publishers, and agents in attendance (a third to half of the total) that I felt as a fan I was on the gooey underside. The pros had their own con, twittering on somewhere over my head much of the time. Tor Editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden talks about this feeling: everybody's at the Cool Party and you're not. (Like he has to worry these days.)*

*Still, there remained plenty of downstairs fun to be had amongst the rude mechanicals.*

*As usual, here's a portrait of one man's con, pieced together by what one observer heard and recalled, handicapped only by both attention and retention deficit disorders. My comment, context, or calumny precedes in brackets each quote.*

*[I've just arrived at registration Thursday afternoon, but seems con-runners like Co-Chair Davey Snyder and consort have been here awhile]*

Chip was out on the loading dock at 9:00 a.m. It was *cold*.

*[In the Westin hospitality suite, newish fantasy nova Patrick O'Leary drops casual ref re his recent visit to Gene Wolfe's house, and a children's book, with dragons, that Wolfe is working on]*

So Gene Wolfe says to me, "Patrick" — I was blown away right there just to have Gene Wolfe address me by name — "Patrick, it's probably going to be really awful, but I'm having *such* a good time writing it!"

*[Since my beloved brother and constant con companion Michael couldn't make it this year, NESFAn Paul Giguere sided me to dinner; but you bet Michael wouldn't torment me by saying this at a place called The Cheesecake Factory]*

A few weeks ago, I finally made my goal weight!

*[Gordon Van Gelder, editor of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, ranges widely re The Evolution of Published Short Fantasy]*

I think the Brothers Grimm carved out as much fantasy territory as Poe or any of the other predecessors.

... Fantasy stories can show up in any venue, and I've never felt they had the same kind of genre baggage *[as science fiction]*.

... Another big influence: Ovid. I can't tell you how many transformation stories I see.

*[Van Gelder's worked on some monster projects]*

I was the U.S. editor for Clute's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. I haven't proofread every word on all 1032 pages, but I can tell you that Neil Gaiman's birthday is *not* "1950 dash Frankenstein."

*[And speaking of transformations]*

On slipstream panels, I always say that literary slipstream writers tend to be more influenced by Kafka than anyone in the genre.

*[Writer/columnist and prominent Providencian Paul Di Filippo responds]*

Even to mention a figure like Kafka is to point to the dominance of fantasy in mainstream literature in this century.

... There was a time when ghost stories were what most people wanted to read. For instance, M. R. James seemed to specialize in them. And you mentioned Henry James. Now you may see them, but they're kind of musty.

That sense of tropes going in and out of fashion intrigues me.

*[Di Filippo thinks the author of Serial Killer Days is good at cool black fantasy — and draws inspiration from a killer source]*

Or take David Prill. Now, his major influence is R. A. Lafferty.

... Imagine an alternative publishing world where they *boasted* of having the new Lafferty!

*[Van Gelder keeps eyes on the prize]*

Remember when Frederik Pohl put that blurb on Delany's *Dahlgren* that said, "In the tradition of *Dune* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*"? And someone asked him what tradition was that?

He said, "Fat science fiction novels that sell well."

*[Let's end with two insightful Di Filippoisms]*

Is magical realism just the label that the literary world slaps on fantasy novels they approve of?

... I've never seen anything in print on this, but I'm sure Jack Vance ingested everything of James Branch Cabell's before he ever set pen to paper.

*[In the panel on The Year's Best Fantasy, Locus editor Charles N. Brown reports only on books at least two people in his office wanted on the list]*

... *The Marriage of Sticks*, by Jonathan Carroll. Brilliant book, I think his best.

... *The Shadow of Ararat*, by Thomas Harlan. It looks like a big fantasy novel, but it's really a big historical novel with magical elements ... Very good too.

... Probably the best horror novel this time: *Mister X* by Peter Straub.

*[Editor Jo Fletcher's got summat lighter in mind]*

*The Fifth Elephant* — the best thing Terry *[Pratchett]* has written in years!

*[The British Fletcher thinks Harrymania's potty]*

Diana Wynne Jones has been doing everything that J. K. Rowling is doing, but for 20 years ... Though your *[U.S.]* covers on the Potter books are much better than ours.

*[Editor David Hartwell gives the big picture]*

But to give them their due, the Harry Potter books are the largest bestselling phenomenon in the U. S. since *The Bridges of Madison County*. And that's saying a lot.

*[Providence's — perhaps the world's — most prolific SF reader, Don D'Amassa, singles out one of his picks from earlier this year]*

I'm a big fan of *Unknown*-style fantasy. So I like Robert Sheckley's book, *Godshome*. It's about a guy who brings an ... unusual deity back to Earth.

*[Fletcher's asked around]*

I polled my British colleagues for recommendations. One winner is definitely *Gardens of the Moon*, by Steve Erikson ... For instance, the battle scenes are fabulous. He gives good death.

*[Hartwell delivers the good/bad news]*

There are actually very few trilogies being published these days ... It's all *series* books now. It doesn't end, except in relation to its particular plot.

*[But there's a wider world out there, he adds]*

If you want to broaden your horizons, try any of those Dedalus books: *The Dedalus Book of Spanish Fantasy*. Or *Portuguese Fantasy*, *Austrian Fantasy*, *Polish Fantasy*,

*Dutch Fantasy* — there are about 40 volumes or so.

[Hartwell on why fashions come and go, while we hunger always for the new]

The more you read in a certain genre, the more deadened you become to its effects.

[Fletcher's felicitated for her friend]

Your *Publishers Weekly* just picked Steven Jones's latest *Mammoth Book of Best New Horror* as one of the best books of the year — of any type. That's astonishing.

[Hartwell cuts discussion short]

The best fantasy short story of the last 6 months is "The Chop Girl" by Ian R. MacLeod — it's in the December *Asimov's*. A straight fantasy, believe it or not.

[Brown on what's up from one of my new faves]

Sean Stewart's next book is *Galveston* — out next month, in some ways it's better than *Mockingbird*.

[I try to describe to various people, throughout the con, the aforementioned virtues of *Mockingbird*, which I thought this year's freshest novel nominee for the World Fantasy Award]

It's like a much smarter combination of Anne Rice and Erma Bombeck.

[Hartwell's bullish on Wolfe and that Cisco kid]

Gene Wolfe's new *On Blue's Waters* — it's technically a science fiction novel, but has a lot of the atmosphere of fantasy ... *On Blue's Waters* is also the single best novel I've read this year.

... And in our *New York Review of Science Fiction*, the one that got the most convincing reviews for literary merit was a small-press book, *The Divinity Student* by Michael Cisco.

[D'Amassa on the extinction of the creepies]

Horror has suffered an enormous dieback and gone into the small press.

Which may be the best thing that could happen to it.

[In the Westin's evening hospitality room, NESFAn Mark Olson makes to me his con-runner's moan]

When Tim Powers only decides he's coming 2 weeks out, it's too bad. With an author like that — we could have built an entire program item around him.

[In the panel on Fantasy and Horror in Films and Other Media, Steve Sawicki of the (late lamented?) SFRevu says he's been busy with his new writing partner Barbara Chepaitis]

We've done four scripts in the last 9 months.

[And genre show biz's boffo, per Stanley Wiater]

According to the box office, the last 2 years have been the most successful in the history of the genre ... Just look recently at *Blair Witch* and *The Sixth Sense*.

[Though Sawicki thinks that the media's not the entire message — at least not yet]

This is off-topic, but I don't think the media tie-in section in *Borders* has gotten much bigger lately. I'm not sure that the tie-in thing is any worse for the field than Doc Savage was, than Perry Rhodan was.

[Peter Crowther liked best the title novella in Stephen King's recent collection]

I thought King's "Hearts in Atlantis" was actually magnificent. I thought the rest of the book was getting down to where the real horror is: you can die, or lose someone close to you.

... King once told me that horror is like salt. Everyone needs a little of it in their diet.

[The industry's view of these things can differ from ours, Sawicki says]

*Blair Witch* was an indie fluke. *Sixth Sense* was another fluke, a good one. *The Haunting* was the only planned horror blockbuster this year. And *Hollywood* doesn't think it was a flop. That movie made a lot of

money, and will make more in Europe and elsewhere.

*[So Carla Montgomery: as a game designer, you'd say I should try what PC role playing games exactly?]*

Diablo, of course ... Gabriel Knight, a nice dark one ... Warcraft has a lot of fans too.

*[Crowther speaks of film past and present and to come]*

Lawn Dogs, from a couple of years ago. An exquisite film. Sometimes I like to come out of a movie feeling good, rather than just desperate ...

... I saw *The Iron Giant* on the plane today. It was just one of the best movies I've seen this year!

... The BBC is making *Gormenghast* and *Titus Groan*. Now *that* should be interesting.

*[In the hall, it seems Art Henderson sells bookmen as well as books]*

I think Howard Waldrop would make an excellent guest for Readercon. Or for Boskone. He's only the finest living short story writer in the field. Or out.

*[As I catch the end of the True Grit panel on quests, war, and other macho bulldoo, David Weber hails a fallen word warrior]*

The only person in our times who's captured anything like the *real* character of the Viking berserker was Karl Edward Wagner —

*[Haldeman? Silverberg? knew the man well]*

— Because he was a lot like that himself!

*[Guest of Honor Robert Silverberg muses most amusingly]*

The quest is for the Grail of the Savior. Which doesn't exist.

Wait. I'm Jewish. The *Savior* doesn't exist!

... The real quest is for order, for stability, for structure. That's what fantasy provides, and that's what life often *doesn't* provide.

... The post-existential problem for the writer is that the writer grows older. And

undergoes a new crucifixion every few years. But the reader is always 17 years old

...

*[In the bookshop, at Larry's Smith's busy corner, writer Kathleen Ann Goonan rhapsodically spots her new novel Crescent City Rhapsody]*

Oh, that's a lovely cover. I haven't seen this before —

*[Her editor, Avon's Jennifer Brehl, has the grace to be embarrassed]*

— Oh, didn't I send you one? Sorry. I thought I did ...

*[Fan Joe Petronio handles a copy of one of the Harry Potter books with interest]*

My son David read the first Potter book recently. He usually likes sports biographies — I've never seen him get so involved in this type of genre material before.

*[Brit bookseller Andy Richard of Cold Tonnage Books has just lightened his load to the tune of three new hardcovers (one Banks and two MacLeods) forked over to me]*

I'll put you on the mailing list if you want. But so many people say at cons, "I love your books" —then I never hear from them again. The act of actually ordering through the post seems to defeat them. If they can't see them, hold them in their hands ...

*[Con Co-Chair Chip Hitchcock, ceremonial roll of tape in hand and sticky expression on face, has cause to be a bit jealous of the furniture show running concurrently several floors below us]*

This convention center wants to spend a lot more time satisfying the show that has 100,000 square feet than the one that only has 24,000 or so.

*[In the panel on The Cartography of Fantasy, Robert Silverberg surveys the territory]*

You look at a lot of fantasy maps and you conclude that all fantasy is based in Scandinavia. Because most of the maps have these three peninsulas coming down ...

*[Lynn Flewelling is a fantasy author in the happy position of knowing a friendly cartographer (her husband Don)]*

A lot of maps, including Tolkien, God bless him, have mountain ranges at right angles to one another.

... In my last book, the illustrator took my carefully drawn map and moved everything. Including have a river running over a mountain range.

*[Writer Jeffrey Ford can top that]*

A freshwater spring on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. When you find that in a fantasy novel, the writer usually explains that this is "magic."

*[Silverberg prefers playing by the rules]*

— Tennis without the net up, as Greg Benford says.

*[Don't you just love the crazy stuff you find out at cons? Here from Silverberg, I think]*

In 1920, an obscure guy named Eisenhower took a military column from the East Coast to the West Coast to see how long it would take. It took 40 days ... The same route you can do today in 18 hours with a GTO and enough Benzedrine.

*[Silverberg owns up]*

My greatest mistake in 40 years of writing is in the Majipoor books. I have created the largest inhabited planet in fantasy or science fiction. I have not provided the inhabitants with any transportation more sophisticated than donkey carts. Yet I have cities of 30 or 40 million people ... Why? Because when I wrote the first book, *Lord Valentine's Castle*, I had no idea that I'd be going back and back to Majipoor. As I'm going to do again this Wednesday, I hope for the last time.

*[Writer and toastmaster pro tempore John M. Ford projects from bitter reading experience]*

Generic fantasy maps are in imitation of the map in the Ballantine edition of Tolkien. It's always lettered in uncial, has an

elaborate device to show where North is — and is always a Mercator projection.

*[In the panel on How Does the Magic Work, anthropologist (and hot new fantasy author) Thomas Harlan talks about anthropologist and TV star Branislaw Malinowski]*

He noted that the seafaring people he was working with depended on technology when it could work well. They were very good at making their own boats, for example. They only resorted to magic when they put to sea — when there were so many factors they couldn't control.

*[Guest of Honor Patricia A. McKillip looks back]*

When I read Tolkien as a teenager, I went looking for the magic in history books, and it wasn't there. Where I found it was in very early poetry: the Eddas, the Anglo-Saxon poets ...

*[Truth demands consequences, according to Guest of Honor Charles de Lint]*

I like to make sure that the use of magic has consequences ... sometimes a huge sacrifice.

... Frazer *[that would be Sir James George Frazer, author of The Golden Bough]* had these Laws of Magic. The Law of Contagion: objects in contact tend to remain in contact. The Law of Sympathy: you pour water on the ground, you can bring rain ...

*[Thomas Harlan has deep ambitions]*

I like to write where the way the world — our world — actually works is more exposed ... Are you drawing aside a veil on the way the world actually works?

*[While de Lint wants character, not chiromancy]*

What I'm interested in is not the magic but in how ordinary people *deal* with the magic as it complicates their lives ... I wouldn't make a good scientist, because I don't want to take it apart.

*[Writer J. Gregory Keyes figures, what the hex?]*

One of my favorite facts is that etymologically, the word "science" comes from the same root as the word "shit." It's

from an Indo-European word meaning to cut or divide. I won't get into how shit is involved there.

... I don't believe in the magic in my books ... But I grew up on a Navajo reservation, where rocks and trees talked. Although not to me.

... One main event in celebrations with the Miss Choctaw Beauty Pageant in Mississippi are Choctaw stickball games. And I've played on these Choctaw stickball teams. Where they have these guys supporting the other team by throwing hexes at you ... One time, after the game I got really sick, my throat closed up — and my teammates were like, "Well, they got you."

*[From the audience, someone questions the very basis of modern American civilization]*

You could consider TV commercials magic spells. Because they tell you that if you buy this, suddenly these other good things will happen to you.

*[Fan Julian Yap in the crowd knows a study ...]*

There was a story in the *Journal of American Medicine* where there was a significant result: people who, unknown to themselves, had other people praying for them got better 25% more often than people who didn't.

*[In the crowd, someone shows signs of crabbiness]*

Although the people I work with make fun of my reading science fiction, they all read their *horoscopes*.

*[As hordes of perceptive fans flock to his reading, Patrick O'Leary catches sight of this reporter's hulking presence (in the front row, waving) and warns his agent Susan Ann Protter, whom he calls "the Jewish godmother I never had"]*

There is a journalist in the room. Ix-nay on the ecrets-say.

*[O'Leary warms up his audience]*

My first novel was *The Gift*, and no one but me calls it a science fantasy.

... I'm reading today from a novel not yet published, *The Impossible Bird*. It's a science fiction about death. You see I really narrow my topics.

... I write early in the morning. I write late at night. Anytime I can. It's what's I do instead of living.

*[In the panel on When is Humor NOT Funny, I feel writer Alan Dean Foster's pain]*

One of the biggest problems when I'm writing is to resist making *everything* funny ... you just gravitate toward the humor in things.

*[Fun fantasist Esther Friesner warns us guys to don armor]*

Yes, the fourth *Chicks in Chainmail* book is coming out —

*[Editor Laura Anne Gilman makes a gay riposte]*  
— so to speak.

*[Friesner thinks success breeds simulacra]*

There are probably a million writers out there right now typing *Harriet Porter and the Sorcerer's Rock*.

*[Lorna Edwards, Art Henderson, Becky Henderson, and Terrible Tony himself reported this scandalous exchange in the bookshop: as bookseller Becky Henderson bends over (in tight pale slacks) to attend to the bottom shelf, NESFAn Tony Lewis comments]*

That's vaguely obscene. And you know we don't allow vagueness around here.

*[At the Union Station Brew Pub, dining with NESFAns Deb Geisler and Michael Benveniste, Paul Giguere makes one too many mentions of his single state, causing Deb to quote something said of Miles Vorkosigan in Lois McMaster Bujold's recent A Civil Campaign]*

"We've got to get the little git laid."

*[In the convention hall, fan/bookseller Michael Walsh's eyes glow with the light of other days]*

The first World Fantasy Convention 25 years ago was in the Holiday Inn right up the street here in Providence. It was a beautiful convention. There were people like

Robert Bloch, Fritz Leiber, Joseph Payne Brennan — you'd turn the corner and there'd be 300 years of professional writing standing there in conversation.

*[NESFAn Lisa Hertel has heard tell too]*

Stu Schiff of Whispers Press says there was a *food fight* at the second World Fantasy Convention. The banquet just had appetizers! And there were big lines even for that. So people in the front were throwing food back to people behind ...

*[In the Westin hospitality den, NESFAn Ann Broomhead demonstrates her offhand acquaintance with the hottest SF novel of 1929]*

Gernsback was right. He had a scene in *Ralph 124C41+* where there was a kind of TV with 500 channels and nothing on.

*[You hear that writers (and readers) like to drink; quite so, according to hospitality head Gay Ellen Dennett as early as Friday night]*

They've drunk us out of house and home already. My order today increased by \$750 from the initial order, which was already quite a lot of apple juice, lemonade, iced tea, coffee, and so on. Tomorrow I'll order more.

*[In the WFC mass signing, where a veritable shooting gallery of authors lines up at little tables, I've brought no books to autograph — but then spot Thomas Sullivan and go over with a copy of the current half-read book in my bag, his World-Fantasy-Award-nominated The Martyring; he finds it a happy coincidence]*

Thank you. That delights me. Like the time I had a guy cleaning my chimney, and I went to his house and saw a book of mine on his coffee table.

*[If you've never heard of The Martyring, Sully wouldn't be too surprised]*

It was written as horror and published as a mystery and Barnes and Noble shelved it as I think science fiction.

*[Writer/critic Greg Feeley has no trouble recalling the story I refer to as "your microscope thing"]*

"The Weight of Ayre." I think it's my favorite of what I've done. I put an *absurd* amount of research into that one novella. For instance, I wanted to read van Leeuwenhoek's letters.

So I learned to read *Dutch* for it.

*[Stopped in the hall by a mutual friend and told I collect con quotes, fine fantasist Nina Kiriki Hoffman responds by handing me a tiny plastic rodent figurine and the strangest quote of the con]*

I have mice.

*[NESFAn Leslie Turek's found a princess in disguise]*

I've been working with her for 3 days, and only now do I find out that Catherine Petrini, who's been helping us with Registration, is a closet author. She's written about 20 kids' books — including some Sweet Valley Highs. Of course, Joe Rico immediately tried to get her to tell which character in Sweet Valley High would go all the way.

*[Ambushed on the Westin stairs, author William R. Trotter talks about also being a computer gaming columnist]*

My kids love it. Because we get sent all these free software games. "Hey Dad, the UPS truck is here!"

Of course, I do have a minor but I hope respectable career as a horror writer ... but none of my fucking *books* made it here to the convention. So at the signing, I had a line of index cards with titles on the table: "These are my virtual books that aren't here, so I'll do a virtual signing for you."

*[In the panel on the new Gothic genre, writer Thomas Roche looks for the woman]*

Joyce Carol Oates would be considered the queen of this new genre ... and Kathe Koja. Her best stories have all these internal conflicts that are echoed in external conflicts.

... For me, Gothic is about *perversion*. Oscar Wilde, Ambrose Bierce, later Shirley Jackson, certainly Bram Stoker and so on. I can't help wondering if the Gothic insight has something to do with taking the existing social order and perverting it.

*[Brit author Freda Warrington internalizes]*

In the 50s and 60s, writers lost the understanding that the horror was reflecting the creature in ourselves.

*[Saturday morning, I take the self-guided H. P. Lovecraft tour with Joe Petronio — but without my notebook, so all of Joe's insights and my natterings are lost in the eldritch mists of deep unrecorded time, except one nattering when Joe asked what I was writing on a scrap of paper]*

That standing in H.P. Lovecraft's driveway today we see a Sable wagon, a new silver Lincoln, and a Volvo 850 ...

*[In the bookshop again, news highlights from intergalactic bookworker Barbara Kuenzig]*

There are several authors you just can't find in any quantity in the secondary market: de Lint and Octavia Butler, for instance. People hold onto their copies for dear life.

... Oh, by the way: my husband John was recently named Artist of the Month by the Manchester *[New Hampshire]* Art Association. *[Artist Guests of Honor Diane and Leo Dillon put on a great and good slide show/retrospectivathon; Leo on first influences]*

We had some early success with this kind of 15<sup>th</sup>- century German woodcut style. So in the early days, everything we *did* was done in 15<sup>th</sup>-century German woodcut style.

*[Leo continues talking into the 1960s and a fateful encounter with an imp named Ellison]*

So at this point, we meet Harlan. This crazy man ...

We did the cover of his book *Gentleman Junkie*. And apparently Dorothy Parker read it, and said, "I never look at paperbacks, but I was attracted by the cover." So she read the story, and thought he was a great writer.

*[Leo on a certain striking line in their cover for Ellison's Deathbird]*

The job was done! We were picking it up, off the board — and we forgot one piece of masking tape. And the acetate tore right through the figure's face.

So we decided to make that rip line into the veil you see here.

*[Diane differs a bit]*

In free painting, our styles *are* different. I tend to stroke, Leo tends to scumble ... We'll switch chairs after a couple of hours and go over each other's work.

*[Leo on interracial coupledness in the 1950s]*

Once we were caught kissing in a doorway in Soho. And a cop stopped us and sent us home.

*[Diane on their famously beautiful cover for Ursula Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness]*

Talk about our inspirations, and obviously, this is Klimt. We've been inspired by sculpture and painting from so many different places and eras.

*[Leo on editor Terry Carr and his paperback originals line begun in the 1960s, the legendary Ace Specials]*

He had a lot of faith in us. But I don't think his using these covers helped him; I think it helped destroy him. People said, who were these crazy artists he had used? We'll never forget him.

*[Leo on the cover for a 1970 Ace Special collection,*

*R. A. Lafferty's Nine Hundred Grandmothers]*

No spaceships, you see ...

These won us the Hugo ... but they didn't sell well. They were a failure.

*[Diane on the carefree life of the working artist]*

Everything is always due tomorrow morning.

*[Diane shows a piece with elaborate wood carving, then a colorful map in low relief made of clay]*

We have elected to show these things today because every single one was a disaster.

... Some angel of darkness comes to us and suggests the *worst* way to do something.



*[Diane on modeling for their own stuff]*

It takes a lot of imagination, though, to change me into a young princess at this point.

*[On their working arrangements]*

We have a brownstone *[in Manhattan]* — my studio's on the top floor, Leo's on the first floor ... We yell up and down the stairs to each other all day long.

*[Leo on their consciously pursued thread of assignments showing cultural diversity]*

In our youth, women were never heroes, blacks were never in the midst of doing great things. We decided to give our lives to do this kind of thing.

*[Diane on one lucky little boy]*

When our son was small, we would stay up all night and tint — so there were blacks and Asians too in his Mother Goose books.

*[Diane on those pesky verbal types]*

Usually we never meet the author. The publisher keeps us apart, and with good reason. Because we don't need somebody looking over our shoulders telling us how *she* visualized it.

*[In the bookshop — again! — Pam Fremon enlivens a slow business day at the NESFA Press table with suggestions for how to handle my fame as a two-time Hugo loser]*

You could do signings — you know, autograph copies of *The Devniad*.

But you could be really truthful for a change. Say things like, "To Roger, who could stand to lose 10 pounds. To Cassandra, come back when you've had a bath ..."

*[When a question of literature goes unanswered at the NESFA table, I decide to prove once again that Fans Know Everything by just calling out to the throng passing by]*

Who the Dickens said, "The law is a ass?"

*[Sure enough, fan James Cambias stops only long enough to respond without a fumble]*

— Mr. Bumble.

*[Ubiquitous bookseller Art Henderson speaks with hushed hilarity of a fabled 1976 collection]*

Arthur Byron Cover has the single best title in the history of the genre: *The Platypus of Doom and Other Nihilists*.

*[In the panel on Shadow of the Torturer: The Writer as God, Kij Johnson is dogged by memory]*

Look at the John Varley story "Tango Charlie and Foxtrot Romeo." One of the most disturbing things I've ever read — it's his Dead Sheltie story ... In the course of it, he kills I think 72 Shetland sheepdogs. He had just lost his own beloved Sheltie, and he had a lot of pain to work out.

*[For Sean Stewart, you've got to earn your effects]*

In Clive Barker's early book *The Damnation Game*, people are carving flank steaks out of a 2-year-old girl. And you know reading it that the author is a very young man, one who has no children. No daughters.

He doesn't realize everything else in the story is insignificant, and absolutely doesn't have the carrying weight to justify this one moment.

*[Anne Harris agrees]*

You see in post-apocalyptic kind of stuff today the "rape as stage setting" technique. Rape that's only there to show quickly and cheaply how brutal the story's environment is; then the book moves on. But I want to know, what happened to *her*?

*[In the panel on Crossing the Genres Into the Mainstream, writer/editor Kristine Kathryn Rusch likes the idea of leaping the streams]*

That's probably the coolest thing about being a writer: you can change your identity at will.

... Although there's Steve Donaldson, coming from fantasy and all those Thomas Covenant books. When he moved to science

fiction, a different kind of book, he didn't shed his skin. He shed a whole lot of readers.

*[High fantasy master Guy Gavriel Kay thinks we should be more grateful for what we've got]*

To be contrary to some of what we've said here, the mainstream isn't always so welcoming. A great many writers reap extraordinary benefits from flourishing in the relatively sheltered bay of the genre ... The author who goes to a convention, and gets on a panel, and signs autographs, and appears before his or her public.

*[Writer Bradley Denton shares a secret sin]*

I've never seen books like *Peter Pan* referred to as fantasy novels except by *[waves around the room]* fantasy novelists.

... I'll go ahead and confess I did what every writer does now — went on amazon.com and looked up my own.

It says, "If you liked this by Bradley Denton, you'll like these books" — and they were all guys that sell as poorly as mine.

*[During a discussion about political correctness, I sum up with an SF analogy]*

It's as though the rule were, "Only astronauts can write science fiction."

*[Dinner Saturday — when fans Joe Rico, Kelly Persons, and I divert pros Steve Sawicki and Barbara Chepaitis from their plans for elegant Asian food and bundle them into our lowest-common-denominator joint, a Formica-table bar/deli called Murphy's — is nevertheless so charming I can salvage only one enigmatic note representing either Barbara's favorite line from an Animal Planet documentary or her advance planning for Thanksgiving]*

The coatis roll the tarantulas in the dust to prepare them for dinner.

*[I suggest going out for postprandial sundaes, but Imp of the Perverse Joe Rico blandishes, "Why not just order it from room service up here to the hospitality suite?"; eventually, he has this to say about the three freezer-burned ecru lumps sprayed with Bosco that cost me, no lie, \$7.51 ...*

*a 1 hour 20 minute wait ... and untold mental anguish]*

Will you please EAT the damned ice cream!

*[Later, still burping villainous vanillaoid chemicals, I speak with famous (and famously amiable) SF scribe Robert Sawyer, scribble down something he says, read it back to him, and get it so shamefully wrong that we are forced to collaborate on the following official wording]*

To my surprise as a science fiction writer, I'm enjoying hanging out with all these unicorn lovers.

*[In the panel on Mining Shakespeare, Ballads, and the Oral Tradition, writer Debra Doyle goes back to an early oral oracle]*

The basic motif of the *Odyssey* is: "I have to get home" —

*[Fine fantasist Greer Gilman finds a great and powerful connection]*

—Like *The Wizard of Oz!*

*[David Drake brings up an undeservedly neglected writer, Manly Wade Wellman]*

My friend Manly — best known for his John the Balladeer series — he had a lot of actual ballads in there. Some of them, he actually wrote himself.

*[Doyle's roots make a crazy salad]*

When I tell people that my two stylistic gods are the Norse sagas and James Thurber, they look at me kind of funny.

*[Greer Gilman, who I've just realized sports an accent, idiolect, and armamentarium that might make her the long-lost sister of Niles Crane]*

I realized once that Mary Poppins is Artemis, the Protector.

... Notice that Shakespeare does fathers and daughters. He never does mothers and daughters —

*[Writer/critic Greg Feeley thinks the lady doth protest too much]*

— Well, the daughter would be played by a boy and the mother also would be

played by a boy ... perhaps this just wasn't stageworthy.

*[Thinking to whinge, Feeley doesn't seem to realize he has stumbled upon a central secret of properly provocative program panel description drafting]*

The more I pondered the paragraph describing this panel, the more I found in it unexamined assumptions which I did not agree with.

*[Feeley reads a bizarre description of a myth, I think from the Amazon and I don't mean dot com]*

Like this one, most myths are arbitrary and incoherent by the standards of Western narrative tradition ... Whereas Greek myths are much less violent and arbitrary, much more narrative, and have comparatively little of the supernatural about them. ... Greek myths, which we tend to think of as earlier than literature, are in fact the product of a literary tradition.

*[In the hall, fan Laurie Mann must have been hitting the vodka-flavored maple syrup again]*

Hey, you'd be the perfect person to announce the brand-new Vermont Worldcon Bid we just cooked up. You'd give it all the respect it deserves ...

To be on the committee, you have to live in Vermont or have been born there. So the committee is Fred Lerner and me.

This grew out of Fred's looking at the worldcon member map and there's always just one dot in Vermont: Fred.

*[When Patrick O'Leary graciously introduces me to fellow hot youngish fantasy star Jeffrey Ford, I babblingly confess I've actually purchased last year's World Fantasy Award novel, Ford's The Physiognomy, but only an off-price edition and I haven't read it yet; he takes it well, considering]*

Well, I appreciate it anyway. Because I've talked to a lot of people here, and you're the first one honest enough to tell me that. There's a lot of shit that goes down here ...

*[In Sunday morning's panel on Critters in Fact and Fantasy, writer Susan Dexter saddles up]*

You can't stay behind when everybody else is going when you're on a horse. These are herd animals, remember.

*[Dexter on a horse of a different color]*

Zebras are actually the most dangerous zoo animals. They kill more keepers than anything else.

*[At the top of his game after a recent Hugo win, Providence SF/F artist Bob Eggleton demonstrates how he stays that way]*

I do as much research as I can on the animals I'm illustrating. The better you're versed in reality, the better the fantasy's going to be.

... I start always with the eye — that tells everything; that's the area of personality — and I spiral out from there.

*[Writer Sarah Zettel knows how to play Big Bird]*

You have to keep a parrot below eye level, or they think you're an equal, not a dominant.

*[Writer Doranna Durgin can go beyond cats and horses too]*

— And llamas, there are levels of hierarchy with llamas. First there's —

*[From the audience, I get a huge laugh with]*  
— the Dalai Llama?

*[Undaunted, Durgin stretches to hold her hands joined, flat, palms down, high above her head]*

Llama herders learn you have to keep your hands up like this, above their eye level. *[Naturally, at this point there's the flare of a flashbulb going off as I think her husband captures Durgin's special moment.]* Thanks.

*[Is this theory by Eggleton a crock?]*

There's a good chance that the story of St. George and the Dragon is based on a giant, 30-foot sea crocodile.

*[I think it was NESFAn Priscilla Olson who said that editor Teresa Nielsen Hayden said this during the panel on Scams and Scandals]*

It's hard to discover the Muse loves you, but only as a friend ...

*[If the last minutes of the panel on Fantasy Art are any indication, artists still suffer from the Rodney Dangerfield Syndrome; witness Vincent Di Fate]*

In this milieu of fantasy fandom, we artists and professionals may be demigods. But when we go out into the world, we're just some middle-aged people trying to make a living.

*[For Alan M. Clark, success actually isn't relative]*

I go to family reunions and relations come up and say to me, "Are you still painting?"

*[In the panel on Quests of Horror, writer Nancy Kilpatrick seeks a comparison to fantasy]*

The hero in a fantasy often has a choice ... In horror, someone's walking down the street and the pavement opens.

*[Newby writer Paula Guran has a long memory]*

The debate about marketing this genre with the word "horror" goes back to the Hammer films in the 1950s. They wanted to use the word "terror" rather than "horror."

*[Guran laments the absence on the panel of previously announced dark fantasy superstar Tim Powers (whose name dragged me here, too)]*

I wish Tim were here to argue about this. To him, a story must have a supernatural element or it's not horror ... To which I would say, is *Psycho* horror? There's no supernatural element, but feels like horror to me.

*[And as to the genre's publishing situation: oh, the horror, the horror]*

We're just emerging from the era of "stealth horror." At Ace for example, Ginjer *[Buchanan]* was buying horror and calling it "dark fantasy" —

*[Writer Jeff VanderMeer says, can the labels]*

— Darrell Schweitzer likes to say that's like the difference between calling somebody a garbageman or a sanitation engineer.

*[In the audience, Florida fan Anne Kennedy shares a cheery little forecast]*

I remember *[film director]* Ridley Scott said that reading was going to be the high opera of the 21st century.

*[Kilpatrick contrasts we ragged, raging fantasists with a more buttoned-up crowd]*

I've gone to *mystery* conventions — and it's a totally different world. Everything starts promptly at 8:30 in the morning. And everybody's in bed by 8:30 at night.

*[VanderMeer provides a good ending]*

Horror quests are more likely to end badly than fantasy quests.

*[In the program room, fan Seth Breidbart issues a typically dilbertian dictum]*

I'm a programmer. The problem in my field is anthropomorphizing the user.

*[Pam Fremon gives me a scare about one of our favorite fellow NESFAns]*

You heard about George Flynn, didn't you? *[Pause for some quite dark imaginings. Next time, try to tell the story quicker, Pam.]* He fell down in the hall here and looks like he broke a finger or maybe a few. *[Later, we find out he'll survive. Live long and prosper, George.]*

*[In the panel on the Wild Man motif, J. Gregory Keyes says it's an old theme indeed]*

What Tacitus sees in the German tribes are traits he thinks the Romans had and have lost.

*[Josepha Sherman speculates that Neanderthals may have been the first Wild Men]*

The very latest findings, from just a couple of days ago: it turns out they lived a lot longer into *Homo sapiens* times than previously believed. And may have just

interbred with *Homo sapiens* rather than being completely displaced.

*[Forget in what context Barbara Chepaitis quoted this Nat Am tale, but it's too cool to leave out]*

The first time she has sex, Old Woman says, "This is almost better than eating buffalo tongue."

*[Speaking of Wild Women: Chepaitis on why Lilith is reviled as a demon in the Bible]*

She wanted to be on top; she practiced contraception; and she knows the sacred name of God.

*[In the light-struck, window-walled grandeur of the convention center's comfy, circular Rotunda hospitality room, NESFAn Joyce Carroll Grace reveals how she saved all our butts]*

I found all these seats to rent for a very good price. Ten sofas, 30 loveseats, 8 coffee tables — distributed between here, the Westin hospitality suite, and the art show.

*[At the Banquet, toastmaster John M. Ford praises our artist colleagues]*

They established that there was more to science fiction cover art than a Hugo sailing past a Nebula.

*[At our table, writer/fan Yvonne Coats from Albuquerque, NM exchanges tips on good stuff]*

If I can blow my horn for someone from our part of the world, Jane Lindsfold does a fantastic job combining all these different world mythologies into her stories. Like Roger Zelazny, whom she knew.

*[Out of a constant stream of interesting subjects broached by the fan on my right, aspiring writer Mark Guillotte — well, see, he happens to be a waiter in this restaurant not far from my house]*

Come to Leon's, on Federal Hill — Dean and Broadway. It's better than Adesso ...

*[Writer Jonathan Lethem reads the award acceptance for the collection Black Glass by Karen Joy Fowler, who's in special attendance elsewhere]*

I've never been invited to a 100th birthday party before, so I thought I'd better go. I imagine it will rock hard and end early.

*[Backgrounding the Life Achievement Award, Florida fan John Coker surveys the recipient's work as a master of pulp horror]*

Hugh B. Cave has been continuously publishing superlative fiction since the 1920s — a distinction *[in our field]* shared only by Jack Williamson ... The total so far is around 40 novels and 1500 stories!

*[When there occurs a minor screwup in the arrangements, Ford masters the ceremony]*

We'll get it right on the night.

*[So Con Co-Chair Davey Snyder, what are your impressions now it's all finally finished?]*

Most of the blurred fragments I remember involve those blessed *fish* of Gay Ellen's ...

*[Back at work after the ball is over, my return from this distinguished literary event is hailed by agency management in customarily clueless fashion]*

Hey, Scotty, Dr. Spock is back.

## Geek Love?

At the World Fantasy con, the invaluable Patrick O'Leary forked over a creased and apparently tears-of-laughter-stained copy of a page from the November 8 *New York* magazine on "50 Ways to Meet Your Lover."

Wherein what to our goggling optics should appear but suggestion No. 4, entitled "Meet A Mate At A Science-Fiction-Fan Convention?"

Which promised that "in exchange for listening to some Kirk-vs.-Picard drivel now and then, you'll beam up a partner who will be pathetically grateful for every bit of attention you give him; won't be spending money on Prada anything; and is unlikely to cheat on you, unless you count Jedi mind tricks. Besides, those computer-programmer

types are privy to those three magic words: *Microsoft stock options.*"

OK, so that question mark in the item subhead is a stroke of genius. But otherwise — as though any femnoid worthy of receiving a fanboy's love plug would be caught dead taking advice from any rag with "New York" in its title except *NYRSF* ...

### **Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain**

The bit last month about the origin of the momentary, circular white flickers in the corner of the movie screen (signals for the projectionist to change reels) aroused more than a flicker of interest in correspondents including **Evelyn C. Leeper**, **Eric Knight**, **Jim Stevens**, **Jim Stevens**, and **Dan Kimmel**. Solid *cinematista* Kimmel had the best news flash:

"This is, in fact, true. However it's also ancient history. Most theaters today use the platter system, where the entire film is spliced together into one big loop. Thus the only time there's a 'reel change' is when a different movie is being shown."

From sunny yet hurricane-haunted Puerto Rico, writer **Jim Stevens** catches an unusually stupid typo: my paean to actor/director Stanley Tucci's "first directing effort, *Big Effort*." As Jim points out, damn him, "Hope I'm not the yotta<sup>th</sup> e-mailer to beat you about the head with this correction, but Tucci's first directing effort (actually co-directing effort, Campbell Scott being the other co) was titled *Big Night*."

Sorry, Jim. Musta been up too late the night before screening Morgan Freeman's masterpiece, *Driving Miss Masterpiece*.

Also, Jim is apparently the only reader of *The Devniad* with any experience of astonishing personal coincidences. Or at

least the only one who read as far as my call for such last month. Saith he:

"About a year ago, I strike up an acquaintance in a chat room for screenwriters and playwrights with an expatriate Canadian woman who now lives in Sydney, Australia. Let's call her Nancy ...

"Two weeks ago, I make the acquaintance of a Canadian indie screenwriter-director who has set up a different chat room for screenwriters. Let's call him Ron ...

"I give Nancy (not her real name) the URL for the new chat room, she visits it, and — this is where the astonishing personal coincidence comes in -- discovers that Ron (ditto) is a guy she went to high school with in Saskatchewan who she hasn't been in contact with since those halcyon days in which, to her surprise and — if subtext is anything to go by — apparent delight, he secretly carried a torch for her.

"It's a small www after all."

Jim, first of all: thanks for listening.

Second: great closing line. Hadn't heard that one before. Although I fear the exhibit is an upcoming Disney/Microsoft joint venture.

Third: why do I suspect *three* screenplays will arise out of this?

From darkest New Jersey, fan **Jeff Wendler** also has a flick follow-up:

"It is an ill-wind when I disagree with you about a movie, but I think the title of *American Beauty* ( which perhaps is a rose) does not refer to any of the things you stated. Do you think that perhaps those gardening shears were plucking away Spacey's life? And his dreams of the flowers — perfect, youthful, beautiful ... they were in my mind the source of the title. It's a play — the rose is the girl, perfect, and unpicked. He does not despoil it. Um, maybe I am making too much of this."

We all have our little secret obsessions, Jeff. Secret until they're blabbed all over an e-zine like this, anyway ... Still think the identification of the title with the girl is too simple for such a complex work. Sure, that's part of it. But I feel the moviemakers

reaching for something larger here, too, no? Maybe the beauty is the way that solid middle Americans like Lester (Spacey) still have the capacity to blossom into something a little richer and stranger, rather late in their season. So there's still hope for you and me, buddy.

From Tuscaloosa, Alabama, lovely and talented poet/seer/siren **Sydney Sowers** has news that should fill the bars with drunken, depressed male SF fans from here to Luna City. Her escort, astoundingly talented but otherwise totally unworthy SF/F writer **Andy Duncan**, apparently has had fun storming the castle, and she's finally let down her hair.

"Hey, Bob! We continue to enjoy *The Devniad*, and are sorry that (as we say down here) Dave Langford keeps whupping your ass. I do have some news for you. I thought you'd like to know that the talented Andy Duncan has finally wised up and proposed to me. Wedding probably sometime this spring, unless we get enough of our pennies rolled up to do it before then. We're on the job market, too, hunting for academic positions up and down the east coast. I refuse to go to places like Idaho and South Dakota. Wish us luck! We hope to make WorldCon 2000, but that may be it for any con outside the Alabama/Georgia area for us this year. We love Readercon, but it's a mighty far piece for us to come, so I don't know. We'll see."

Turning from Beauty to The Burstein, stalwart writer/NESFAn **Michael A. Burstein** apparently decided it was cheaper to have *me* publish his whole damned APA comment ...

"Your discussion of how to abbreviate liter reminded me of a similar thing that happened in my life. I recently went over the galleys of my new story 'Escape Horizon,' which will be appearing in the March 2000 *Analog* with a Bob Eggleton cover (plug plug). Anyway, in the story, I have a character use the very proper metric unit of force, which is the Newton.

"Except in the galleys, it came back as the newton.

"I have always been taught that derived units named for scientists are capitalized, which is why we refer to the kilogram with a small k but a Newton or a Joule with a capital N or J. But before I made the correction, went to the textbook I'm using in the physics class I'm teaching — the brand new 5th edition of *Physics* by Douglas Giancoli.

"Lo and behold, he refers to the newton with a small n, but abbreviates it with a capital N. So you could refer to 5 newtons or 5 N, but apparently, we no longer refer to 5 Newtons.

"I am shocked at the disregard modern science now apparently has with the scientists we once chose to honor.

"... You might want to pick up the Jan 2000 *Analog*, the special 70th anniversary issue, which features a delightfully witty Probability Zero story 'Whose Millennium?' by some author you know."

Michael, thanks for the really quite interesting LOC. Entertaining too, watching you artfully insert not one but two plugs.

This trend of lower-casing units derived from proper names indeed seems dis'ful. For example, I understand the American National Standards Institute has been negotiating with the SI crowd about a proposed new unit of self-promotional force. But it now appears this will have to be downstyled, and simply referred to as the burstein ...

## FlimFan

### EXCELLENT:

**Three Kings** — This fast, frantic war-comedy-with-a-conscience was directed by David O. Russell, who also did 1996's top comedy *Flirting with Disaster*. But despite our expectations from the ad campaign, this story of a Green Beret (George Clooney) and three young reservists (Mark Wahlberg, Ice

Cube, Spike Jonze) pulling a caper to go after Saddam's gold at the close of the Gulf War is not a trifling comedy/adventure. Yes, there are laughs and whoops to be had. But there's way too much dead silence in the theater — as the audience is moved or horrified by events on-screen — to be comfortably classified as either. The obvious plot connection is to 1970's *Kelly's Heroes*. But the soul father here is Robert Altman's 1970 masterpiece *M.A.S.H.* We're off balance right from the opening, when Wahlberg's character calls, "Are we shooting?" and fires at a distant figure on a hilltop — then we're standing around peering down closeup at his victim, a harmless-looking dead kid. The sight has the alienating suddenness and banal reality of the shooting of the woman engineer in *Schindler's List*. But a few minutes later, we're jerked back into big laughs by the phenomenon of something the film calls "the assmap." (Don't ask.) And so it goes: jokes, yelling, cows on land mines and other even more senseless death, then even more heroic sacrifice, captives on cell phones, footballs loaded with C4, chaos, blood-sepsis cartoons, bunkers and berms and blood — the movie felt fuckupedly authentic. A horridly funny, politically correct language lesson on what the troops should call the Iraqi enemy ("dune coon" and "sand nigger" are no go; "camel jockey" and "towelhead" are OK) is balanced by perhaps the central surprise of the movie, as a bunch of faceless refugees and even an Iraqi military interrogator turn into real people, with intolerable problems we internalize and real faces we care about. At one point, going into an Iraqi torture chamber, you see a clip of Rodney King on TV in March 1991. And believe it or not, this movie has a message. And believe it or not, that's it: "Can't we all get along?"

**VERY GOOD:**

*Dogma* — It's a fantasy, in fact billed as a "comic fantasia." I'd say definitely a Hugo contender. Bet it will be the funniest Hugo film candidate all year, anyway. So all my NESFA lit'ry types will now be in good

conscience required to go and judge. The plot? A handmaiden of the Lord must stop a couple of angels from entering the doorway of a certain church for the purpose of taking advantage of a loophole in Catholic dogma (the "plenary indulgence thing") and thereby negating all existence. Actually, *Dogma* is two movies. There's the usual pretty glorious id-fest that writer/director Kevin Smith (*Clerks*, *Chasing Amy*) has come to specialize in, with great verbal jokes and slacker-happy slapstick. His specialties are riffs, rants, and rodomontade. These parts are great. Then there are the many long, deeply meaningful conversations about true faith and personal religion — all somewhat reminiscent of those do-good commercials featuring rockers with more *needlemarks* than I have *books* enlightening us that drug use is *imprudent*. Yawn. (Plus the special effects and cinematography are barely adequate: even Smith admits he's "about the least visual director around.") Hey, his audience comes to Kevin Smith for dick, fart, and serial killer jokes. OK, he gives us plenty here. I saw this as a sneak preview, so the delightful casting surprises included — well, if I told you it would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it? Let's just say that a certain young comedian whose last name rhymes with Mock makes one of the more memorable entrances in film history. Yes, the cast includes angels, prophets, demons, the odd deity — and the reincarnated person of Rufus, The Thirteenth Apostle, who like everyone else in the movie is quite a Namedropper: "Did I know Jesus? Shit, the nigger still owes me 12 bucks." Also, the angel who's the Voice of God gets, fairly unexpectedly, many of the good lines. At one point, he drops trou and demonstrates he's "as anatomically impaired as a Ken doll." And when the heroine doesn't exactly know what a Seraphim is, he snaps: "If there isn't a movie about it, it isn't a word." I also liked the proposed Church marketing makeover, with slogans like "Catholicism Wow!," icons like "Buddy Christ," and — my favorite — the mockup of a proposed Catholic breakfast cereal, "Hosties." This movie should offend the less flexible among



Catholics, cardinals, abortion protesters, African-Americans, cheeseheads, and fans of *Sixteen Candles*. But heretics and ski-ball fans should be in heaven.

**GOOD:**

***Sleepy Hollow*** — It's usually a dire insult to say you spent much of the movie watching the background. But in director Tim Burton's dark fantasies, he and his crew obviously spend so much effort lovingly crafting the world of the film that I'm not sure they'd mind. Certainly the story here isn't gripping; they've replaced Washington Irving's simple tale (featuring a prank played by a rural rowdy upon a credulous schoolmaster over a romantic rivalry) with an overly complex mess of comic Sherlockian detection, lost documents, and serial killing, featuring whiffs of witchcraft, demonic summoning, and ye olde village conspiracy. However, I love the movie's briefly glimpsed New York of 1799, with its hundreds of towering four-story buildings, each emitting its ominous little curl of smoke. And the stagecoach road to Sleepy Hollow; hope Burton's paying royalties to every artist in the Hudson River School. Of course the village itself, built in a dark little style we'll call Burtonian Tudor Gothic. Plus those beautifully creepy Western Woods outside town — Western Transylvania, I'd say. Fresh also is Depp's mostly comic, often quite broad performance as the ravingly rationalistic detective Ichabod Crane, sent from the big burg to investigate a string of decapitations upstate. (Suspicion focuses on the town's leading establishment figures; as the movie's tag line says, "Heads will roll" ...) Crane's frankly more fainter than fighter. Of course, caveat ichoraphobe, folks: this thing does have more gore-spattered faces than the *Fight Club* makeup tent ... Though Christina Ricci's performance is fairly bloodless. Oh, must mention Jeffrey Jones as the most hilariously suspicious-looking of the town's elders, which is saying a lot. (Remember his great vice-principal Ed in *Ferris Bueller*?) Jones's big, darting, lizard-slit eyes would make a chameleon seem open and aboveboard.

**COULDA, SHOULDA BEEN GREAT:**

***The Messenger*** — This retelling of the story of Joan of Arc by the French director Luc Besson stars the beautiful, willful-looking Milla Jovovich, whom he made a star in my favorite film of 1998, SF romp *The Fifth Element*. So I was expecting something moving, miraculous, and marvelous-looking. One out of three is too bad. OK, this movie starts out quite lively, sometimes funny, and often visually interesting. How the grizzled commanders around her react to the charismatic 17-year-old Joan's impetuous, OK, frankly nuts tactical advice is really charming and infinitely watchable. The berserker impatience and spirit she portrays early on are fresh, and the most convincing explanation I've yet seen portrayed of how Joan might have moved men. There's a scene where she's almost literally bouncing off the walls in her wild impatience to get going on her sacred mission to throw the English out of France: "I am the drum on which God is *bea-ti-ing o-out* his message!" And in battle: "**FOLLOW ME!**" she screams full-throated, eyes tight shut. This is marvelous. And the armor, castle, and battles are well worth seeing. (Though was heaving those big stone balls into those chutes really practical?) But this movie bogs down by, say, halfway through. Granted, as *Devniad* Spiritual Advisor Dr. Stephen Kennedy remarks, "The last part of the story is pretty hard to make cheerful." You know, with her capture, interrogation, and burning at the stake and all. I think it was a mistake to full explicate a modern psychological explanation for her personality. (Basically the film demonstrates that two things formed her: early religious mania, and a traumatic childhood loss at the hands of conscienceless, pitiless, raping-and-pillaging English soldiers. Doubtless direct ancestors of Dave Langford.) There's an overwhelming stench of therapy about her last interactions with Dustin Hoffman's interrogator/conscience character. One keeps waiting for her prison cell to spout a nice couch and some soothing Leroy Neiman acrylics.

**The Insider** — Maybe I've seen one too many *The Godfather Meets Godzilla* movies. *The Insider* tells an important true story with style; first-rate acting, direction, and visuals; and rare respect for the viewer's intelligence. Why was I bored too much of the time? Well, for instance, a great thriller needs a great villain. This movie gets your heart pumping just three times: when future *60 Minutes* whistleblower Dr. Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe) faces and is threatened by his former employer, a Big Tobacco CEO (some great moments with the invaluable Michael Gambon). And when the tobacco lawyer tries to shut Wigand up during his deposition, and plaintiff's attorney Bruce McGill browbeats him right back, telling him to "Wipe that smirk off your face!" And last when Christopher Plummer as *60 Minutes* star Mike Wallace turns snarling on some treacherous corporate lackeys. Otherwise, there's just too much soul-searching. I got tired of Wigand's paranoia and whimpering. And Al Pacino's over-the-top dramatics as the producer who supposedly masterminds every good thing that happens in the movie and the case are as phony and self-servingly Hollywoodish as that claim itself. While I'm at it, director Michael Mann has made several of my favorite movies (including *The Last of the Mohicans*), but here his hand-held cameras, jittery movements, lights, shadows, closeups of parts of faces felt slick, manipulative, and getting old. What's the good stuff here? The movie's targets: The Seven Dwarves of the tobacco industry. Its dissection of the industry's essential defense: "We take a bunch of leaves, we roll them together, you smoke 'em, the rest is up to you." And the truth this story showed behind it: "We're in the nicotine delivery business." How Plummer and the script nail Mike Wallace's superciliousness; his patented silken attack-dog style (Wallace begins interview with Hezbollah leader: "Thanks so much for seeing us — Are you a terrorist?"); and his doubts about what he's really accomplished in life: "OK ... I showed them thieves in suits ... History best remembers what you did last." And

worthiest of all here, and still a reason to see the movie despite all I say above, is the final theme, about Big TV News's unspoken sharing of basic business imperatives with Big Tobacco. As the movie says: "Free press? ... The press is free for anyone who owns one. Larry Tisch [*CBS proprietor*] has a free press."

[Aaaaargggh. No time or space again for backchat. Sorry, sorry, sorry, guys.]