

# The Devniad Book 57b

un zine de Bob Devney  
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## **Firenze!** by Ann Paterson

*[Editor's note: My father's beloved sister, Ann Devney (now Ann Paterson) was once a Radcliffe classmate of Ursula K. Le Guin. Obviously they put something extraordinarily literary and perceptive in the college water supply back then.*

*This is taken from a recent letter home from Aunt Ann, who spent 2 weeks this November with my aunt Joanne Devney, soaking up art, culture, and torrential cold rains in the sunny city we know as Florence but which those stubborn Italians can never seem to spell right.]*

*Buon giorno.*

Among the classes we attended in Italy were two on learning to speak Italian. I went to the first, in which I learned how to ask the hotel desk clerk, one Franco, for my room key in Italian. Franco speaks English better than I do, so the logic escaped me.

I passed up the second class, but Joanne went. And spent two hours conjugating verbs. I was glad I spent my time in a more worthwhile manner — window shopping.

Unfortunately for our purposes, the Italians close everything up from 1 p.m. to 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. while they eat and rest, leaving hapless tourists with their noses pressed against the shop windows or staring at the outside of museums.

[Nevertheless] we had a great time.

The lectures were mostly on art with a couple on Italian society and politics thrown in. I feel I understand what's going on over there now. Their government is almost or maybe more corrupt than ours.

We might do well to adopt some of their attempts at campaign reform, for instance: no TV ads during the last 6 weeks before the election. And although they may continue polling for their own benefit, the polls cannot publish the results of said polls during the last 3 weeks before the election.

Make sense? I thought so.

The paintings and sculpture were overwhelming. One feels almost like genuflecting in front of Michaelangelo's David, who dominates a whole hall — much larger and more impressive than I expected.

On the other hand, Donatello's two Davids are much smaller than I expected ... and more revealing. There was some discussion in class here in Framingham [before we went over] about Donatello's Davids' sexual orientation. After looking at slides in class, no conclusion was reached.

But I'm here to tell you that after seeing them in the flesh (so to speak), there's no doubt whatever — they're gay as your hat.

I can hardly wait to get back to class next week and break the news.

Joanne has had almost no religious education and was rather done in by the onslaught of Madonnas. See one, you've seen them all is almost her feeling, and after looking at room after room after room of Madonnas I'm almost inclined to agree.

Gallery fatigue sets in after 45-50 minutes, I find. One night after a particularly church-crowded day, one of the gentlemen in our group said wearily, "I'm all Virgined out."

Italian weather is strange. More variable than even New England. Starts out raining, then clears up after about an hour ... weak

sunlight for an hour or two, then a drizzle, then a downpour, then sun again.

The only really bad day was in Pisa, where we all became drowned rats. Unavoidable deep puddles led to soaked shoes and feet, which means misery when you have only one pair of shoes.

However, I finally found a use for the bidet in my room. A foot bath! Lovely hot water forestalled a cold I felt coming on.

I told my dinner companions about it that night and though they all looked rather startled, one of them told me a few days later that she had gone right up after dinner and stuck her feet into the bidet.

Note about Pisa: Guide pointed out a particular spot from which to take pictures — it is called "The Japanese Spot." Because "We all know the Japanese know all about photography and when we noticed that there were always a lot of them there taking pictures, we checked it out."

Sure enough. Stand there with arm outstretched and you are holding up the Leaning Tower.

You may have noticed that our Beloved Leader [*this would be William Jefferson Clinton, about whom Aunt Ann and I agree to disagree*] was in Florence the same time we were. You know that I loathe him, but I was truly surprised at the level and magnitude of contempt in which he's held, at least by every person with only one exception in our group of forty. [*One may be tempted to edit this to "group of forty rich old Republicans, surprise, surprise," but refrains out of nepotal politesse.*]

Our lecturer was 3/4 hour late one day, and when someone asked, "Held up because of Clinton?" she said, "No, I think it was Hillary's hairdresser or something." Laughter all around.

We weren't personally disturbed except for having to walk 15 extra minutes in a downpour to get into the back door of the Uffizi because Clinton et al. were in the vicinity and all streets were blocked off. We were just grateful that he didn't want to go

into the Uffizi, as we would have been out of luck.

And that's about it. I had a grand time, learned a lot, was overcome by the beauty around us, enjoyed the company, the food ... and yet was *so* glad to get home.

## Word from All Over

For my copycop friends, a copy editor at *The Washington Post* named Bill Walsh has a neat site called The Slot. At, simply enough, [www.theslot.com](http://www.theslot.com). (In newspaper slang, "the slot" is the copy editor's desk.) It includes *The Curmudgeon's Stylebook*, which he positions as his own personal supplement to *The Associated Press Stylebook*.

This a great reference/entertainment site for anyone who writes for a living, newspaperperson or no. It's a font of good, useful English style and usage advice — as well as the vividly written spleen depository of a gleefully judgmental son-of-a-bitch.

*The Devniad* has officially adopted (in the e-mail incarnation, anyway) Walsh's policy of forgetting about all accent marks because "English is a language without accent marks, even when it's borrowing words from languages that do have them." And besides, how do you accomplish them easily or simply in broadcast e-mails?

I've also been won over by his preference for ending a sentence with a period, even when the last term in the sentence is a Web or e-mail address. "By all means try to avoid the issue by rewriting where possible, but readers who think e-mail addresses can end with periods aren't likely to get far enough in the e-mail process for it to matter."

Of course, since one's positions on certain copy editing questions can be as personal as one's choice of favorite Le Guin novel or Heinlein juvenile (*The Dispossessed* and *Citizen of the Galaxy* being the correct choices here), Walsh sometimes gets across my bows.

I don't agree with his period after all bullet items, for instance. And on my sacred final serial comma, Walsh bows to "AP's disdain for the practice, which must save the entire newspaper industry, oh, at least a hundred bucks a year in newsprint." But even he must admit that "the serial comma is sometimes necessary even in AP style — you should use it if any item in a series already contains the word 'and' (or 'or,' as the case may be): *He had toast, juice, and ham and eggs for breakfast.*"

And if you don't agree, you'd better come armed with solid experience and good arguments, or Walsh will have you for lunch.

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

Fine fantasy writer **Jeffrey Ford** started out a tad miffed with me:

"Your review of the [World Fantasy] Con is interesting, but you have me quoted in it as saying something about islands in the Pacific ocean with fresh water pools. I know I never said anything of the sort for the entire weekend. Don't mind you quoting anything I actually said, but try to get it right. Thanks for the copy of the zine."

But maybe my reply helped: Dear Jeffrey Ford, on second thought -- and a second's thought is obviously what I needed to contribute to this, and failed -- the "J. Ford" whom my notes have giving the remark in the WFC Cartography panel about "magical" freshwater springs in the Pacific must have been John M. Ford, NOT Jeffrey Ford.

I'm VERY sorry about this, Mr. Ford. Here we just met and already I've screwed up big-time. Obviously no one cares more about what words are attributed to him than an author, and I did not get this right. In fact, I managed to spit on the hem of not only your garment, but also those of John M. Ford and the Goddesses of Fact-

Checking, Professionalism, and Truth Herself.

Aaarrggghhhhhh.

Ford then replied:

"I've decided to forgive you already since later on in the zine I read that you described me as 'youngish.' This, I have to say, is far more generous than I deserve since, in reality, you could have written, 'That fat old fart Ford,' and I wouldn't have had much to quibble about. Thanks for the generosity of perception. Finished reading *The Devniad* last night and enjoyed your work. Keep sending them, but please, it is important for you, not for me, that you quote precisely."

Noted, Mr. Ford. Sorry again.

Meanwhile, his fantasy peer **Patrick O'Leary** writes in a happier mood in re my review of Luc Besson's movie epic about Joan of Arc:

"Just saw *The Messenger* so while it's fresh in my mind... This [review] is funnier than shit. Especially The Langford thang and the Neiman thing.

"I was moved by the battle scenes too. And I too expected more — having really liked *The Fifth Element* (nuts but cool) and *La Femme Nikita*.

"But, dude, trust me. You simply must rent *The Passion of Joan* — the newly restored 1928 Dreyer silent. It is a revelation."

And Southern fan, writer, and bon vivant **F. Brett Cox** also likes quotes and movies:

"Thanks for the new *Devniad*. I was happy to read your World Fantasy Con report, since I didn't make it to Providence. I really wanted to, especially since the new *Century*, containing one of my stories, was debuting there, but time and money just didn't permit.

"Also enjoyed the movie reviews, as always. The only one you reviewed that I've seen is *Sleepy Hollow*. I enjoyed it, but the movie couldn't seem to make up its mind whether it wanted to be a brooding mood piece or a whiz-bang slasher movie. Johnny Depp ruled, though."

Sorry you couldn't make it to the WFC, Brett; it was pretty cool even for me, and I'm sure you would have had entree to even more activities of the, er, smart set.

The part I liked about *Sleepy Hollow*, between your really apt phrases "brooding mood piece or whiz-bang slasher," was certainly the former. Enough slashers, Hollywood has got; wish Burton would cultivate his own dark garden exclusively.

New friend **Yvonne Coats** (you meet the nicest people at World Fantasy Convention banquet tables) writes from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

"I found it [*The Devniad*] enhanced WFC for me because there were quotes from panels I missed — always a problem when there's multi-track programming — and sometimes hilarious, sometimes insightful, sometimes just plain 'out there' comments from people you met in the halls, over dinner, etc. This must be a lot of work for you, and now I can see why you've been nominated for those Hugos!"

My blushes, Yvonne!

"I'm rather sorry that until WFC you were just a name on the Hugo program for me, but I enjoyed our conversation at the banquet. I knew talking was going to be difficult when I noted our table's proximity to the musicians, but we were with Marc Guillotte and his wife, and finding four seats together wasn't exactly easy. WFC neophytes that we were, we didn't realize how early we needed to show up for the banquet.

"I was disappointed Sean Stewart's *Mockingbird* didn't win the Best Novel award. [*Me, too!*] There was something very fresh and fascinating about it, which made me laugh repeatedly but still had serious intent ...

"As for my personal writing endeavors, I'm still working on a novel that Pat LoBrutto at Bantam invited me to send. PLoB judged the science fiction/fantasy/horror novel contest sponsored by the Southwest Writers Workshop, a multi-genre writers organization with about a thousand members, based in Albuquerque.

He picked my novel as one of the three winners, and now I'm trying to finish the bloody thing. Exactly when it went from being my pet project to bloody thing-dom is something of a mystery.

"If you're curious about my embryonic writing career, I'm prepared to bore you at length, but at this point I'll just say that I've been writing for three years, after a lifetime of loving SF and fantasy. I sold a short story last year and another this. The first, 'Some Enchanted Evening,' was published in *MZBFM* in May '98, and won the Cauldron award for that issue. The second, 'Where the Advantage Lies,' will be published in March in Roc's *Treachery and Treason*. It's the lead story, which everyone keeps telling me is A Good Thing.

"My husband *is* a fan, so I am lucky in that (and many other) respects. He's already clamoring for us to register for WFC in Corpus Christi. This is more remarkable when you discover that he had never read SF or fantasy until he met me six years ago, but he discovered the field was intricate and rich beyond his ability to imagine. He is in the process of devouring my library, and he haunts the SF/fantasy section(s) of the local bookstores almost as much as I do. And, practical being that he is, he points out that now that I'm a writer, things like WFC are tax-deductible ... though not his attendance, airline tickets, etc."

Good luck on the writing career, Yvonne. And let me just say that I envy you a spouse who likes SF. Although the opposite does have its advantages. For instance, Queen Maureen will never wrestle me for the new ish of *Locus* or blow our money on a hall costume trying to look like the Alien Queen.

If your life seems hectic this season, try being a fan and a serving, seagoing U.S. Navy officer, like my good friend **E.J. McClure**. Her latest dispatch from atop the engineering department aboard the *U.S.S. Hue City* somewhere south of here:

"Thanks for sending another glimmer of light and sanity into the Navy madhouse. We are in full swing of our overhaul ...

where the contractors jackhammer up the PRC laminate decks. The dust and noise are incredible. Still no water, no sewage, no firemain, no ventilation and no A/C ... Most of the doors are off for sandblast and powdercoat. Fresh paint everywhere (sometimes in catastrophic combination with decking work). God, I can't wait for this to be over.

"I was busy with holiday social obligations last week; the ship's Christmas party was on Wednesday night, and the Naval Base Officer's Ball was last night. Well, I guess I could have 'nuked' this one out in advance ... when all but four ships homeported at a Navy base are underway, who's left to go to the Christmas ball?

"There were 8 women for every guy, and half the guys were from *Hue City*. Admiral X enjoyed himself immensely; how often does a fella get to dance with 4 to 10 women at a time. And he can cut the rug!

"The *U.S.S. John Kennedy* is on deployment in the Med; the wives brought photos of their husbands, and did all the slow dances with their framed photos. Curious tradition ..."

There was more from E.J., but military secrecy forbids me from relaying anything further. That is all.

Constant fan **Gary L. Dryfoos** wonders about Barbara Chepaitis's talking at World Fantasy about the character of Lilith in the Bible:

"Does Lilith even get a mention in the Bible? Where? I thought she appeared only in the Midrash (extra-biblical commentary — you know, kind of like the *Star Wars* books, but with better characters and stories)."

And he liked Robert Silverberg's bit about Dwight Eisenhower's contribution to America's roads:

"The vast interstate highway system gets my vote for the greatest manifestation of the civil imagination into reality of all time.

"A very close second would be DeWitt Clinton, who extended his theoretical grid plan for NYC all the way up from the edge of his tiny village to the woody far north of the island, and then made it happen. And

then, to top that, he connected the finest natural port in North America to the entire Mississippian central heart of the continent, by connecting his Hudson river to the Great Lakes via the Erie 'I've got a mule' Canal.

"Beside these two, most 'planning' is mere handwaving."

Fan and world-class letterhack **Lloyd Penney** pens his usual long, interesting message from Ontario:

"The World Fantasy Convention ... often fans from Toronto will go, especially folks like Raymond Alexander and Don Hutchison, but I've never been to it myself. We might see if we can help out with the WFC to be staged in Montreal in 2001.

Gatherings like this one show me that I am not nearly as literary as I would like to be, for I am as literary as I can afford to be, both time- and moneywise.

"It's *Dhalgren*, Bob, not *Dahlgren* ... but then, when did we read it last, if at all? Some fannish shticks have been founded on the abuse of that horribly large book.

"I see few movies, as well ... fanac takes up a good portion of my time, as does our current Worldcon bid. (Have you pre-supported us yet, Bob? The vote is next Worldcon in Chicago!) ...

"A Vermont Worldcon bid? Hey, I'm interested ... any Worldcon I can drive to, I'm interested. Maybe Fred and Laurie can hold it in Burlington so they can co-opt as many Montreal fans as they can get their hands on.

"Nancy Kilpatrick is correct about mystery conventions. The 1992 Bouchercon was in Toronto, and I remember wondering about similarities between Worldcons and Bouchercons. Yvonne and I were in charge of convention merchandise, and we were also pressed into service in the film ... Once our time was done, we went looking for parties, and all we found was a sedate-looking, invitation-only gathering that wouldn't let us in. The convention floor was quiet, and there were not party signs posted, so we turned in early, shaking our heads that these people didn't know how to party ...

"Speaking of screenwriting ... I was given a copy of the first draft of a screenplay a few nights ago. The writer is Michael Lennick, who worked as the film editor of the movie *Dick* ... Michael's screenplay is based on Rob Sawyer's novel *Illegal Alien*, in which I am a character ... If it's in the shooting script, I may have the chance to play myself in the movie. That takes Tuckerization to the next level ...

"Also, Yvonne and I will likely be in a documentary two fans from the 50s and 60s, Pete McGarvey and Don Hutchison, are making. Tentative title is *Fandom Is A Way Of Life*, and main shooting should take place shortly ... The film will follow our Worldcon bid up to our possible victory in Chicago, but will also showcase ... us. 2000 should be a fabulous year."

Writer/fan/Hugomonster **Dave Langford** shuddered again to read Gordon Van Gelder's quote about being "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."

Says Dark Lord Langford:

"I *did* proofread it, and Neil's (1960-) was correct in the proofs! God knows what hideous whimsy of the publishers caused this to be printed as (1960-FRANKENSTEIN MOVIES). The same unlikely 'death date' afflicted a couple of other people on adjacent pages. Neil's own take on this appeared in *Ansible 119* ..."

So follows here a triple-dipped quote of Gaiman's from that zine:

"I hope it's not a prediction of things to come: 'Mr Gaiman did not die, exactly, but many bits of him have attained a virtual immortality starring in Frankenstein Movies. Mr Gaiman's right hand is on the shelf in the castle in *Frankenstein Has Risen Up Again*, and his stomach is attached to the monster in *Scary Terror of Frankenstein*. His arms and kidneys were in the 'organ donor' scene of *Frankenstein Goes Disco Mama*, but wound up on the cutting room floor ..."

Writer and fine long-distance friend **Andy Duncan** has more to offer on Robert Silverberg's quote about how "In 1920 ... Eisenhower took a military column from the East Coast to the West Coast to see how long it would take. It took 40 days ..."

Says Andy:

"It actually was worse than that, Bob. I thought you'd like to see this passage from *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life*, by Tom Lewis (Viking, 1997):

[OK, all the rest here is a quote from that book, and damn quotes within quotes:]

At 11:15 on the morning of July 7, 1919, at a spot known as the "Zero Milestone" just south of the White House grounds in Washington, he [Eisenhower] joined the army's first transcontinental trip by car and truck.

After numerous speeches from senators and the Secretary of War, a three-mile caravan of army motorcycles, cars, and trucks, along with 260 enlisted men, 35 officers, and a 15-piece band provided by the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, set out for Union Square in San Francisco, three thousand miles away. Red, white, and blue bunting draped the trucks and cars. Banners on the sides of the trucks proclaimed MOTOR TRANSPORT CORPS MOVES THE ARMY and WE'RE OFF FOR FRISCO. Eisenhower, who had volunteered "partly for a lark and partly to learn," carried the lessons from the journey with him to the White House ...

It took sixty-two days for the soldiers to cross the country; they had averaged but five miles an hour. Some days they covered as few as three miles. Breakdowns and accidents were frequent; one truck rolled into a steep ravine in the Sierras. Eisenhower described the trip as a journey "through darkest America with truck and tank." Road conditions, he said, ranged "from average to non-existent."

Bob Devney again: Sounds about like a NESFA housemoving displacement party.

## FlimFan

### EXCELLENT:

**The Green Mile** — I knew *Shawshank Redemption*. *Shawshank Redemption* was a favorite of mine. And, friends, this is no *Shawshank Redemption*. Even though both are from prison stories by Stephen King, and both written and directed with craft and great fidelity to King's work by Frank Darabont ...

*Shawshank*, released in 1994, was one of the most memorable films of the decade. This one's merely very good.

It's set mostly in Depression-Era Louisiana, where state penitentiary guard Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) tries to do an ugly job with decency. He runs E Block, the death house. Much of the story concerns a new arrival, the humungous black inmate John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan), who's been convicted of child rape and murder but seems simple-minded and indeed amazingly good-hearted. (Where's DNA evidence when you need it, dammit?)

Oh, and there are not one but two good villains: "mean and stupid and careless" guard Percy Wetmore (Doug Hutchison), and living-argument-for-capital-punishment inmate "Wild Bill" Wharton (Sam Rockwell), both in performances that should make them widely hated for the rest of their careers. In a good way.

Similarly, relative newcomer Duncan does a moving job showing us the miracle of gentleness inside Coffey's intimidating bulk.

As for Hanks: you know how movie stars like to make grand entrances? Tom Hanks and these particular moviemakers are smarter than that. We first see Hanks here *standing at a toilet*, his face contorted in agony from a bladder infection. Voice from outside: "You all right in there?" "For a man pissing razor blades, yeah." This sets up a scene of exquisite relief later. And hands Hanks our sympathy immediately, beginning to build his image of humanity. Later, some gentle sexual humor establishes

the deep love between Paul and his wife (Bonnie Hunt).

*The Green Mile* has and takes the time (it runs over 3 hours) to build place, character, and story from small things done right.

There are effortless period details, from old trucks to Moon Pies to an inmate's reading the new ish of *Weird Tales*. Nice visual sense, too: green hills, the curve of a staircase from above, light through an arched window, the baptism of the dripping sponge on the head of the man in the electric chair ...

But there are problems here too.

For instance, some effects struck me as a little stale, like one two many mystically exploding light bulbs, a la *The Natural*.

And after a while, we start to greet any small unkindness of Hank's character with relief (he interrupts John Coffey, or smiles nastily at the villainous guard Percy). Because he's actually *too* good.

OK, it's a fantasy: things in this movie are hard, but we imagine the real world of Death Row, Louisiana, 1935 was harder still. And there comes a point — when Paul persuades his men to undertake a strange and perilous mission outside the prison — that just flat feels wrong. These hard men in these jobs in these hard times just wouldn't have done it this way.

And toward the end, you get a really major chunk of Hollywood self-servingness. In the novel, at a certain point one of the condemned men asks for a last meal. In the flick, besides the meal he shyly admits he "ain't never seen me a flicker show," is shown an Astaire musical, and soon is singing under his breath, "Heaven ... I'm in heaven." Well, no, not quite yet; but if you'll wait a bit ...

Maybe, after all, my main problem involves the story's supernatural elements. With a story and characters this strong, do you really need them? More specifically, can't we find a character Christ-like without insisting on putting our fingers into his very miracles?

I found myself wishing they'd just told a story about this place and these people and left it at that. It worked for *Shawshank*.

**Being John Malkovich** — Before we even *get* to the title stuff, this great little independent flick develops at least two other cool, fresh story ideas. There's the obsessive artistic quest of the doomed loser puppeteer Craig Schwartz (John Cusack) — I could have enjoyed a whole movie just about his flailing career. As he laments, "Nobody's looking for a puppeteer in today's wintry economic climate." (Which point is made even more directly when he tries to pick up a woman in a bar: "So, tell me about yourself." "Well, I'm a puppeteer — " "Check!") And we can see why as we watch his really quite beautiful yet inappropriately explicit street-theater classic, *Abelard and Heloise*. So this is great. And then we get to the part where he goes for a day job, and ends up working at the wonderfully surrealistic Floor 7 1/2. If you thought *your* job was oppressive and left you no room to grow ... Anyway, he's at work one day when he discovers this — when he ends up going through this — see, there's this *tunnel* or *portal*, and you end up in the head of this actor — well, it's a bit hard to describe, really. Let's just say that Schwartz realizes the ultimate ambition of every puppeteer: "Getting inside someone's head, seeing what they see, feeling what they feel ... [although] after about 15 minutes, you're spit out into a ditch beside the New Jersey Turnpike." The movie answers several questions you may have had. What's it like to be (somewhat) famous? People come up and say, "You were really great in that movie where you played a retard." What happens when a man goes through his own portal? Why, Malkovich Malkovich is what happens. (Think the Bizarro World, only strange ...) It showcases some good, quirky performances: from Cusack; certainly from Malkovich — in fact, this movie may explain why he's always wearing that little smirk; from Orson Bean as the mad, kinky, carrot-juice swilling Doctor Lester; from Charlie

Sheen in a cameo as himself, who's apparently much like we thought (witness his love advice to his friend Malkovich: "Maybe she's using you to channel some dead lesbian lover. She sounds really hot. Can I have her when you finish?"); from Carmen Diaz as Schwartz's wife, almost unrecognizable under a huge brunette sheepdog haircut ... And from the indie queen Catherine Keener (George Clooney's ex-wife in last year's *Out of Sight*), who's delightfully direct and amoral as the girl everybody wants — and incidentally as the business brain behind the little moonlighting biz they name John Malkovich Inc. Whose motto is perfect for these striving, selfish, unsatisfied times: "Be all that someone else can be." Director Spike Jonze (who played the dim bulb in *Three Kings*) and writer Charlie Kaufman have created a film that's certainly science fiction or at least fantasy. And they have the rare virtue of taking an SF idea and not letting it just lay there: they really do keep developing and exploring the central premise in weird, unexpected, and quite satisfying directions. But are they our kind of people? Not exactly. Guess I'd say our good old *sensawunda* is obsoleted here by a hip, postmodern *sensadabsurd*.

#### VERY GOOD:

**The Cider House Rules** — "Goodnight you princes of Maine, you kings of New England." Thus old Dr. Larch (Michael Caine) bestows his final blessing every night on the kids in the boys' dorm at the poor but proud orphanage high up on the hill above the world in St. Clouds, Maine. One of those boys grows up to be Homer Wells (Toby Maguire, the young hero of *Pleasantville*), a bright and good-hearted youth whom the Doctor trains as his assistant and comes to love, unspokenly, as his son. When Homer leaves to see the world below, everybody's sad. But he must see the ocean (and another movie besides the orphanage's one spliced-up copy of *King Kong*), find love (with the stunning Charlize Theron, woo woo), work as an orchardman picking apples, and



deepen his understanding of the real rules of human behavior in the cider house before he can put what he learned in the orphanage to best use. Based on a book by John Irving that channels Charles Dickens and updates him for our time (or in this case, the 1930s and 40s), this is one old-fashioned movie. It's directed by transplanted Swedish talent Lasse Hallstrom, who's made two great flicks (*My Life as a Dog* and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*) and two pretty confusing messes (the Julia Roberts/Dennis Quaid romance *Something to Talk About* and the Holly Hunter/Richard Dreyfuss disaster *Once Around*). I put this one in the good category. Obviously, this orphan stuff can be emotional dynamite. One false note, one too-obvious tug on our heartstrings, and our hearts turn to stone faster than Newt Gingrich's. But this movie found the right tone to keep me, at least, thoroughly plucked. As when the younger orphans speculate that King Kong looks tenderly at Fay Wray because he hopes she's his mother ... You see quite good, understated performances by Caine and Theron especially; I wasn't too taken by Maguire's *Candide* act. But the film's got interesting things to say about family, abortion, responsibility, knowing your business, and betrayal. Some material may play a bit too obviously like Greek tragedy in a cider house. But the message still rings true. The rules posted in the cider house were not made by those who live there; in a plug for situational ethics, they must make up their own. You know, like all of us?

### **Backchat**

**on APA:NESFA #354, November 1999**

#### **To Leslie Turek**

Your orienteering experiences sound wonderful, you fit *fatale* you. Wish I'd been there to join the applause as you leapt gracefully across that boulder-strewn stream like a balletic gazelle. Maybe we could, like, fake up an obstacle course of book boxes in the NESFA clubhouse and all watch you lithely recreate the magic moment?

Thanks for encouraging me to go to Europe. *You're* surprised a man of my obvious urbanity hasn't been, how about *me*?

I don't really need encouragement; I need money. And some new arrangement of our priorities about what to do with it. And some resolution to my deadlock with Queen Maureen. Once we've made more progress on paying off the mortgage, for our next big trip I want to visit the museums of Europe. *She* wants to visit the safari camps of Africa, or at least the cruise ships of Alaska ... So once again, we may compromise on the souvenir shops of Cape Cod.

#### **To Tony Lewis**

I'll miss your list of unusual words. This time, really liked "leripoops," shoes tied to the knee with ribbons or chains; didn't Shakespeare's Malvolio wear something like that? Next thing you know, Nike will discover them for cross-training shoes. And "wordridden," to be awed by a word without understanding its meaning. This explains much of the appeal of William F. Buckley, no?

About the usual cockeyed, wrongheaded cover they put on Lois McMaster Bujold's *A Civil Campaign*: well, perhaps this is one of the reasons she's agreeing to a NESFA Press edition or editions of her books. Won't be hard for us to do better than Baen.

#### **To Jim Mann**

Great to see you and Laurie at both World Fantasy and then at Shawmut Terrace! Much better than my usual annual sightings of Manns.

Like you, I'd just reread *Galactic Patrol* (in Michael Walsh's beautiful Old Earth Books reprint) and been struck by that same smoke-em-if-you've-got-'em scene in the academy commandant's office. Wonder what retrospectively politically incorrect judgment this year's novels are letting themselves in for if they get reread 60 years on?

#### **To Chris Logan Edwards**

Welcome to the APA! Hey, what a delightful surprise to find you here, instead of behind your book dealer's counter at some convention, or holding forth with wit and learning at a room party ... I was going to say that you were one of the nicest bookdealers I know, except I just ran through the list in my mind (could have just looked at *The Devniad* subscription list, it's lousy with you people) and realized that you're *all* among the nicest people I know. Like teachers, nurses, and librarians — like giant elephants on the Great Turtle's back — you hold civilization up.

Great to see you at World Fantasy, too. Although my memories of you and Lorna are a bit overshadowed by making my first acquaintance with baby Hannah. Who, unlike many babies I've seen, doesn't just look like an undigested lump of protoplasm in a cheesy horror movie. That kid is *beautiful!* No wonder you're trying to get her into the movies already.

Can't wait for your story about starring in *Girl, Interrupted* with Winona Ryder.

Thanks also for your little autobio sketch, Chris. Can tell you were meant to be a bookseller: your older brother leaves you his Harlan Ellison collection and already you're noticing that they're "the Pyramid reissues."

### **To George Flynn**

About dislocating your finger at World Fantasy, then having the emergency room quack stab you with scissors twice: seems we're lucky not to have to add you to the list of 40,000 unfortunates who croak every year because of similar little slip-ups. Can you say "iatrogenic mortality"?

Apparently the ranks of writers and editors are, uh, littered with folks who have had problems with abbreviations for *liter*. Thanks for your own horrible experience.

Remember, the space opera's not over until the fat vorplat kersplaggles.

### **To Mark Olson**

Agree just about right down the line with what you have to say about Orson

Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. Flawed but fun would about sum it up.

Also think you capture the appeal of *A Civil Campaign*: pure Ruritania. I had a great time reading it, but would never nominate it for a Hugo. Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon*, which also has relatively few overt SFnal elements but a strong underlying SF fellow-traveler feel, was just as witty, fun, and amusing, but far more substantial too.

About really cold temperatures: on Mont Orford once in Canada, my friend Steve Kennedy and I went skiing when the sign outside the lift hut stated it was 30 degrees below zero. (But, thank God, windless.) The reason we two fools survived, besides being well bundled up (and maybe 26 years old), is that we were rank beginners, and spent a whole lot of time falling down and struggling to get up. That generates a lot of energy, and kept our blood up. All the experienced skiers spent the day in the lodge slurping French onion soup ... I'm not saying we weren't glad to go in when the day was over.

### **To Paul Giguere**

Thanks for eating those meals with me at World Fantasy! At one point you rescued me from being a very lonely guy ... Also hope you didn't take offense at my little quote about your love life; Deb Geisler seems to think you'll kill me when next we meet. Hey, *she* said it, I just reported it. Which is what we media types always say while we destroy civilization ...

Was all hyped up to grab Robert Charles Wilson's *Bios* in hardcover, based on how much I liked his *Darwinia*. Your review makes me think I might wait for the paperback.

### **To Anna Hillier**

Thanks for your vote on what to call the next decade; you seem to like the "naughts." But I'm getting worried; only a week to go and still no decision from La Academie Ingles on this. Maybe because, unlike the French, we have no such central language body.

**To Elisabeth Carey**

Relieved that you must have finally found Ed Meskys; when I left you in the lobby at the end of World Fantasy after hunting around for him awhile, the issue — and his ride home with you — looked somewhat in doubt. Where did he go anyway?

Very informative review of Nicholas Lemann's *The Big Test*. I saw him give about an hour's talk on the book and its subject (the Scholastic Aptitude Test and American meritocracy) on C-SPAN2's immensely useful all-weekend show *Book TV*. Absolutely fascinating secret history stuff. But I picked up on a little of your objection: he gives the SAT even more power than it deserves in college admissions. (There were bright people in my classes at Boston College who had verbal scores 300 points below mine. Also, of course, plenty with math scores 200 points above mine ... I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours.)

In your comment to Tom Endrey, think you've written the final word on why someone visiting abroad should make an effort to pick up at least a little of the language. Speaking of foreign languages, some of these Internet/fannish initialisms still elude me. What's your "YMMV" mean?

**To Joe Ross**

About noticing that *Analog* and *F&SF* are now carried in the periodical room of the UMass library. I recall that, even in the 1970s, BC's library stocked *Playboy*. For the articles,

for once, I'm sure.

And, wisely, it was on a locked shelf ...