

The Devniad Book 58b

un zine de Bob Devney
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Fave Flicks of 1999

It's subjective, it's opinionated, it's too elitist for many, too middlebrow for some — it's my entirely personal list of the movies that moved me most in the pretty fair cinema year just past.

1. **Being John Malkovich**

I could have enjoyed a whole movie just about the flailing career and obsessive artistic quest of doomed loser Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), who laments, "Nobody's looking for a puppeteer in today's wintry economic climate." Or about working on that surrealistic Floor 7 1/2. But then you get this giant other wonderful thing about really getting into the head of actor John Malkovich. No, *really*. Director Spike Jonze and writer Charlie Kaufman don't let their neat SF idea just lay there: they keep developing the premise in weird, unexpected, and quite satisfying directions. Their great, cool, fresh little independent flick supplements our good old *sensawunda* with a hip, postmodern *sensadabsurd*.

2. **Wandafuru Raifu (After Life)**

If you could take only one memory with you, what one life moment -- trivial or profound, happy or sad -- would you choose? That's the central question of this quietly magnificent, completely unflashy fantasy by Hirokazu Kore-Eda (*Maborosi*). Answers: An older woman recalls a childhood dance recital. A geezer confides that "for men, it's when you're doing it." A salaryman had a life so dull he can't decide. All teenieboppers pick a trip to Tokyo Disneyland. A middle-aged man had a life so painful, he asks: "You can forget? Then

that really would be heaven." A young rebel refuses to decide at all ... And how about you, my friend?

3. **Three Kings**

This fast, frantic war-comedy-with-a-conscience was directed by David O. Russell (*Flirting with Disaster*). Its soul father is Robert Altman's masterpiece *M.A.S.H.* Its story of a Green Beret (George Clooney) and three young reservists (Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube, Spike Jonze) going after Saddam's gold at the close of the Gulf War consistently messes with our expectations. Unless you expected an "assmap" (don't ask), yelling, cows on land mines and other even more senseless death, then even more heroic sacrifices, captives on cell phones, footballs loaded with C4, blood-sepsis cartoons, kinks and chaos, bunkers and berms and blood -- *Three Kings* is one flick that feels fuckupedly authentic.

4. **The Sixth Sense**

Supernatural movies we've had with us since Melies' short *Le Manoir Du Diable* in 1896. But it's rare to find a Hollywood ghost story truly driven by character and ideas. Or one with a new idea about how to scare us. Whenever 9-year-old Haley Joel Osment talks to child psychologist Bruce Willis about his ghosts, he ... *whispers*. This is brilliantly simple and effective. Willis is dead-on in his most restrained, intense performance ever. And Osment is a real find — the rare child actor who deserves that second word. Speaking of promising young careers, I'm getting a sixth sense that newby writer/director N. Night Shyamalan has even greater things ahead.

5. **American Beauty**

Sharp satire, a dark portrait of suburbia, but also an added mystical sweetness that takes you by surprise ... *American Beauty* is about a 42-year-old guy named Lester (Kevin Spacey) who feels "sedated" all the time, and tries to wake up. Spacey is as usual great, but Annette Bening as Lester's frozen, ambitious wife also stands out; Queen Maureen laughed harder at Bening's big sex scene than at any other similar moment in years. Outside of real life, of course. One of the most visually gifted films in 20 years, this only slightly imperfect flick is the kind of story F. Scott Fitzgerald might be telling now ... if he woke up.

6. *The Thin Red Line*

Poetic, intimate, mystical, intense; windy, slow, and shot with greatness, this brave adaptation of James Jones' novel about the World War II battle for the Pacific island of Guadalcanal focuses not on soldiers but souls. You feel director Terry Malick's attention on a series of lyrical interior monologues ... nature shots ... flashbacks ... reveries. There's more here of Virginia Woolf than Stephen Ambrose. Like *American Beauty*, *The Thin Red Line* is stunningly photographed, and the folds of land in the island's grassy highlands — I'll remember the struggle pictured there forever. And John Savage's character, back from a firefight trembling, thrusting torn-up handfuls of grass at white-faced infantrymen, crying: "That's us! That's us!"

7. *eXistenZ*

Hard to say much about this quietly freaky, subversive flick, because that would ruin the nasty little surprises. It's written and directed by Canadian art horror genius David Cronenberg. It stars Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jude Law. It's set slightly in the future. It involves playing a virtual reality game named "eXistenZ." It draws many parallels between games and movies; Leigh's character talks dreamily and passionately about the elements of game style: "Jagged, brutal cuts. Slow fades. Shimmering little morphs." Oh, and there are mutant amphibians ... I'd say *eXistenZ* is

a jewel. A nasty, slimy, slow-growing little organic jewel in the forehead of an imaginary toad in an imaginary garden.

8. *Magnolia*

(See rave next issue.)

9. *The Castle*

It's like *Dumb and Dumber Down Under*, or *The Full Monty* without a full deck. Shot in 11 days on a frayed shoestring by Aussie TV showmakers, this lowbrow flick made lowbrow me laugh more than any other movie this year. Tow truck driver Darryl Kerrigan and his not-so-bright brood have built a proud, happy life in their ramshackle home. Built over toxic landfill in a Melbourne suburb, *chez* Kerrigan offers no view but its backyard jumbo jet runway. Yet the family spends the flick mounting a spirited (if clueless) defense against the airport seeking to evict them ... The damn thing's hilarious. My party of five all guffawed our guts out.

10. *The Blair Witch Project*

One report on the Internet said that about 60 percent of viewers hated this champion cheapo flick, thinking it a lot more stupid than scary ... On the other hand, count me into that frightened 40 percent. I thought the movie's premise was a simply brilliant judo move to turn bad film quality and inexperience into strengths, not weaknesses. You watch what three novices purportedly filmed as they stumbled around in the Maryland woods, getting increasingly lost and frantic and cold and hungry and perhaps hunted by something inexplicable. Personally, I was at least tense and anxious, and often flat-out scared, throughout the entire thing. *Witch* worked for me.

Also worthy this year: *Election*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *Tarzan* (animated), *Ravenous*, *The Matrix*, *Toy Story 2*, *Life Is Beautiful*, *Rushmore*, *Dogma*, *The Green Mile*.

And for comparison's sake, here are the top ten picks from another SF fan who also does a little movie reviewing:

Roger Ebert, 1999

1. *Being John Malkovich*, 2. *Magnolia*, 3. *Three Kings*, 4. *Boys Don't Cry*, 5. *Bringing Out the Dead*, 6. *Princess Mononoke*, 7. *The War Zone*, 8. *American Beauty*, 9. *Topsy-Turvy*, 10. *The Insider*.

And here the top ten picks of mah fellow Americans, by bucks (all below per the Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com):

U.S. Box Office, 1999

1. *Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace*, 2. *The Sixth Sense*, 3. *Toy Story 2*, 4. *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, 5. *The Matrix*, 6. *Tarzan*, 7. *Big Daddy*, 8. *The Mummy*, 9. *Runaway Bride*, 10. *The Blair Witch Project*.

And finally, the year's cash cows worldwide:

Worldwide Box Office, 1999

1. *Star Wars: Episode I — The Phantom Menace*, 2. *The Sixth Sense*, 3. *The Matrix*, 4. *Tarzan*, 5. *The Mummy*, 6. *Notting Hill*, 7. *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, 8. *The World Is Not Enough*, 9. *Runaway Bride*, 10. *Toy Story 2*.

Solace Creeps In On Little Cat Feet

Let's take a slight intermission in all the hip movie talk for some raw sentiment and perhaps a deep good thought.

My Aunt Ann says her cat Tigger, now a sullen 1000-pound geezeroid hairball (sorry, Aunt, just my impression) once taught her something. Before Tigger, you see, she'd had another beloved cat, Diana. Diana grew old and died; Aunt Ann grieved deeply.

After about 6 months, she got another kitten: Tigger. But she still mourned the loss of her old favorite companion.

Then one day she watched the growing young kitten in the yard. It was batting at imaginary butterflies. Playing strong and free in the sunshine. And a thought came to her, full formed: "Tigger deserves his day in the sun, too."

As the generations roll on, we all lose friends and companions that mean much to us. How can we deal with that? Guess there are worse prescriptions than time, sunny days, and kittens.

Being Darth Vader by Charles Sumner

Constant Devniad correspondent Charley Sumner appears to have mixed up two movies. I've always said a fecund confusion is one hallmark of the creative spirit.

Craig Schwartz, an unemployed puppeteer, takes a job as a file clerk on level 1138.5 of the Death Star. While filing the blueprints of the station, he inadvertently uncovers an access hatch that puts him into Darth Vader's brain for fifteen minutes and then dumps him in a trash compactor on the detention level. Fascinated by his vicarious ability to use the Force and command legions of stormtroopers, he begins to spend more and more of his time in Vader's head.

As Vader, Craig meets Leia, a young Princess being held captive by the Empire, and falls in love with her. When he enters Vader's brain to see her again though, he's forced to watch while she is tortured to uncover the location of the Rebel Base. Determined to find a way to help Leia, Craig eventually develops the ability to alter Lord Vader's actions and, in doing so, allows some Rebel spies to escape the Death Star with the princess.

Craig's actions come back to haunt him though, as his world falls apart in the explosive finale.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

To start my Penultimillennium off on the right wrong foot, so-called friends **Evelyn C. Leeper** and **Cassandra Boell** both felt called upon to e-mail taunts about the timing of last month's electronic edition. Which it just so happens I broadcast while hunkered in the bunker at 10 minutes to midnight on New Year's Eve. Hey, how do you know I wasn't having a big party in there?

OK, I wasn't. But I could've.

Independently, both geniuses wobbily set down their champagne jeroboams long enough to slur out the same supercilious socialite suggestion: "Get a life, Bob!"

Right. This from a pair of *fanzine readers*

...

Let's continue with more good news from Alabama's answer to Ben Affleck, writer/lovebird **Andy Duncan**:

"I was tickled to see our engagement/wedding news in the most recent installment. Yes, the phone has been ringing off the hook, as hopeful guys make Sydney better and better offers, but she persists, foolish girl, in spurning them and sticking with me. I am not worthy, but I'm thrilled to take advantage of her delusion — I hope it lasts for decades and decades!

"As if that weren't enough news from our household: My first book, a collection titled *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories*, will be published by Golden Gryphon Press a little more than a year from now. It'll include new stories as well as the Hugo-nominated title story and other 'old' favorites (if stuff as far back as *Starlight 1* in 1996 counts as old), plus dueling introductions by Michael Bishop and John Kessel. We're hoping for a Bob Eggleton cover, so cross your fingers on that. I am, needless to say, thrilled, and once it's published I will Travel Far to flog it, read from it, take questions, sign autographs, etc. — so pass the word! (Let's hope I have a better salary by then, so that I can afford to travel farther than, say, Birmingham.)

"Will we see you at the Chicago Worldcon? As Syd already told you, that may be our first opportunity to see you, alas. Unless you take a wild notion to come to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in Fort Lauderdale in March — a great time is had by all, there'd be no shortage of quotable quotes, and we'd do all we could to show you a good time. Well, maybe not ALL, though I suppose I shouldn't speak for Sydney. She handles her own negotiations!"

And here's more from Andy, about another wild woman:

"Gary Dryfoos asks whether Lilith, the femme fatale of Hebrew mythology, actually is mentioned in the Bible. She is, but only once, at Isaiah 34:14, as part of a general bad-times prophecy: 'Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, / goat-demons shall call to each other; / there too Lilith shall repose, / and find a place to rest.' This is from the New Revised Standard Version; most English translations substitute something less supernatural (and less Jewish) for the Hebrew 'Lilith' — 'night creature,' 'night monster,' 'great owl,' etc. All the other Lilith appearances are extrabiblical — in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Talmud, etc. Hey, I like that word: extrabiblical.' Feel free to use it yourself. For an interesting Web discussion of all things Lilithian, start at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/topics/lilith/>. I like the word 'Lilithian,' too. Again, feel free."

The Chicago worldcon isn't looking too practical for me, Andy, sorry to say. We'll just have to cherish our faint memories of what each other looks like a little longer. (Of course, don't worry, I have a nice clear sharp image of Sydney ...)

Sign me up today for two copies of *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories*, though. As you know, I think you're one of the very best and most interesting younger writers — hell, let's just say writers, period — in Our Thing today. So I'll be lending out my spare copy fast and furious — fastly and — a lot.

Although again, what's it with you and big, hard words, guy? Lilithian, extrabiblical, Beluthahatchie: with that title you may

spend 2 of your 3 minutes for book tour appearances on, say, *The Today Show* explaining that the stress is on the second and fourth of five syllables.

From the address you love to say out loud — Etobicoke, Ontario (c'mon, everybody!) — fan **Lloyd Penney** sends multifarious thoughts:

"Many thanks for issue 57 of *The Devniad*. This ain't the first loc of the year ... the Y2K bug seems to have been effectively swatted. It cost enough, though ...

"More and more of Europe is adopting English as their everyday language. Most of Scandinavia speaks it, Holland speaks it, many large cities will usually speak it. This means that some kids grow up in their own country not speaking their own language. Holland had to pass a law that forced immigrants to learn some Dutch so they could participate in the everyday life of the country. This actually might be a good idea ... Toronto has whole neighbourhoods where not a person around knows any English. I would think that if I were to move to another country, I should have at least a smattering of that country's primary language ...

"I'm a professional copy editor and proofreader, and I've been on Bill Walsh's site. I shall be kind to him by calling him an opinionated bastard. I think that if you borrow a word, borrow it whole, accents and all. With the newest version of Word, it is now very easy to broadcast documents saved in a Text Only format. It's easy to insert symbols and accented letters, and Word now allows you to launch the document as an e-mail. If I edited as I damned well pleased, as Walsh does, I'd be unemployed and probably unemployable ... Oh, by the way...έçñµß. That's for Bill.

"That 1992 Bouchercon hit an attendance of 1500 people, unheard-of for Bouchercons previous. Up to that point, it was the largest Bouchercon, but money-wise, it flopped ...

"Haven't seen *Galaxy Quest*, and I'm not likely to ... if I want to see dorky *Trek* fans, I'll go to the local con. However, a friend in Montreal sent me an e-mail and attachment ... he's already designed a *Galaxy Quest*

trading card based on a fictional episode. I want to collect them all!

"One movie I have adored has been *Bicentennial Man*. Robin Williams knows how to push my buttons, I guess ... I've written up a review; look for it in a future issue of *The Geis Letter*.

"I often have time at my dull, boring job to write these locs, and have done so today. The boss is considering taking away my computer and telephone, asking out loud, what on earth do I need those for? The resumes are sent outwards every evening on a regular basis, so wish me luck."

So Lloyd, a fellow editor and copycop! I knew I felt a deep bond between us. Let's duel sometime about whether "online" should be hyphenated ...

But let me get one thing straight. Going to a fun flick like *Galaxy Quest* is dorky, but collecting *Galaxy Quest* trading cards is cool? When you eat watermelon, do you throw the red stuff away and just gum the skin?

The unfoolable Dr. Foos (fan **Gary Dryfoos**) emits a stream of consciousness initiated by Tom Hanks's urinarily challenged entrance in *The Green Mile*:

"Hey! Let's have a whole film festival of just movies with pissing scenes. We can include this one, and the first *Austin Powers* movie, and ... ask your readers to name some others.

"Or hey, how about just an 'Enter Tom Hanks, Pissing' Film Festival? We can include *Green Mile* and *A League of Their Own*. Maybe there are others — I don't know as I never saw, say, *Turner and Hooch*."

Pissah idear, Gary.

Since I go to so many movies that some question my sanity, my friends try to relieve the pressure occasionally by going to one I haven't seen. Like keen Cambridge (Mass) area SF and flicks fan **Charley Sumner**:

"Being in the mood for a trashy SF action thing with lots of stuff blowing up this weekend, I went to see *Supernova*. And was pleasantly surprised to discover that the film is almost nothing like the promos that MGM is releasing for it.

"It's actually a not half-bad thriller. The film certainly leaves a lot to be desired, but the terrible advertising and the title (we went through about 80% of the film before even the vague threat of a supernova became apparent) will probably give this a faster death than it deserves. James Spader and Angela Basset are both pretty good, the directing is actually pretty interesting, and the SFX are well done. I have a suspicion that it's one of those films which could have been a sleeper SF hit if the studio hadn't decided to market it towards the teenage action film crowd, it definitely felt like there were some good character moments that ended up on the cutting room floor.

"My 2 cents are to catch this one in a matinee before it slips away ... It may not be a *good* movie, but it's not nearly as bad as it would seem from its ads, and it does have its moments."

Sorry, Charley, I still haven't caught this one. But another friend, budding SF artist Christopher Sullivan, delivered this shorter but not sweeter review of *Supernova*: "It sucked."

Any other opinions?

FlimFan

EXCELLENT:

The Talented Mr. Ripley — Patricia Highsmith, who created the title character for the 1955 novel upon which this movie is based (and liked him so much she did four more), once said, "Neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done ..." The trick with this story is getting the audience to agree with that. No problem for talented writer/director Anthony Minghella, in his first flick since *The English Patient*. *Ripley* is the story of a twentysomething young climber who's gifted with a little musical ability; a talent for "forgery and lies"; and slightly geeky/creepy looks which, since he's played by Matt Damon, we suspect might clean up well. He leaves New York,

where he's a nobody going nowhere fast, and tries living large in Italy by insinuating himself into the lives of a rich young n'er-do-well and his writer girlfriend (Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow, in two performances that match Damon's for intelligence and interest). But things go wrong, and then Ripley's real talent surfaces: a fiendish gift for improvisation. Just as Highsmith planned, we quickly forget about justice and start taking a gruesome relish in Ripley's cold career: oh boy, how can he possibly get away with it *this* time? Soon we're at the point where the playboy's annoying friend (the talented Mr. Philip Seymour Hoffman) isn't on the screen

5 minutes before we're hoping *somebody* hurries up and kills him. Like *The English Patient*, this thing is lush, with arrestingly photographed images, layered relationships, and pretty people in beautiful locations. And the scenery certainly makes you understand why Ripley would do almost anything to keep on living in early 1950s Italy with a little money. A few random points: reviewers have talked about the homoerotic subtext here —don't know where they get that "sub." Nothing too subtle about it when one character challenges another to choose sexual sides: "You wanna play the sax or the drums? Which is it?" But as that illustrates, this is one good, literate, witty script. The intelligence shines in lines like "Why is it when men play they always play at killing each other?" Or when a character describes his class at Princeton: "The cream of America: rich and thick." I'd call *The Talented Mr. Ripley* rich and smart instead.

Star Watch

Matt Damon, Jude Law, and Gwyneth Paltrow all shine in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. But let's single out also the smaller-scale but also accomplished work by extraordinary new Australian actress Cate Blanchett. Maybe you already know her. Blanchett's first movie only came out in 1997, but she's already created a whole company of complex, completely different, and absolutely memorable British and American

women, starring in *Oscar and Lucinda* and *Elizabeth* and illuminating minor roles in *Pushing Tin* and *An Ideal Husband*. In *Ripley*, her vulnerable heiress Meredith is the perfect American innocent abroad: rich, sheltered, arrogant yet not entirely sure of herself. The character is wholly believable, and damned charming. Despite saying things like "If you've had money your entire life, and you despise it — which let's agree that we do — then you're only really comfortable around other people who have money and despise it too."

Magnolia — No time to do justice to this excellent movie now. Go see it and we'll talk next ish.

VERY GOOD:

Galaxy Quest — A flick about cheesy old SF TV actors kidnapped into space to save civilization (well, a civilization) for real. A surprisingly skillful, funny, make that *very* funny, and warmly affectionate tribute/trashing of said cheesy old SF TV shows. (OK, *Star Trek*.) It's helmed by Dean Parisot, a former TV director who did 1998's *Home Fries*, and written mostly by Robert Gordon, whose previous credit is the so-so 1997 Meg Ryan/ Matthew Broderick flick *Addicted to Love*. (But whose current project is *Men in Black 2*, scheduled for sometime in 2000.) They show a real affection for the material. And for us out there in the con audience — I didn't know there were that many pasty-faced pudges in California. As one Internet fan notes, this flick is "beautifully overacted." Tim Allen makes a bonfire of Shatnerian vanities as Jason Nesmith/Commander Peter Quincy Taggart. Sigourney Weaver stands out as the low-cut, super-breastoided Gwen DeMarco/Lt. Tawny Madison ... whose reaction to any crisis onboard is to *lean forward*. Alan Rickman as Alexander Dane oh excuse me I meant Dr. Lazarus of Tev'Meck wears the sour'd visage of a one-time Shakespearean who's been forced to declaim "By Grabthar's hammer" one too many thousand times. Tony Shalhoub is wonderfully California-casual as Fred

Kwan/Tech Sergeant Chen. And Enrico Colantoni, who plays the photographer Elliot on TV's *Just Shoot Me*, almost steals the picture with his comic alien stylings as the Thermian leader Mathesar. I didn't even like or watch *Trek* much. But this thing, while about as deep as William Shatner's talent pool, kept me and my friends laughing hard for an entire evening's stardate. See it before it drops off the sensor screen at your neighborhood multiplex. Surprisingly highly recommended.

Liberty Heights — more next time, assuming I get my reviewing act together by then.

Toy Story 2 — ditto, hope hope.

GOOD:

Cradle Will Rock — ditto, maybe probably.

NOT SO GOOD:

Man on the Moon — Jim Carrey nails his incarnation of Andy Kaufman, whom all concerned would hate to have remembered as "TV's Latka Gravis. You know, on *Taxi*?" Which is tough, because that's how we'll continue to know him, despite all this film can do. *Man on the Moon* is intermittently entertaining, with a first-class director (Milos Forman of *Amadeus* and *The People vs. Larry Flynt*) and a number of other good performances to back up Carrey's fairly amazing star turn. And it has the courage to tell us, the audience, that our love for an artist's simple stuff is middlebrow, in fact simple-minded. Somehow, though, we're not real grateful. When it's showing us he's just a big misunderstood kid, we're thinking he's perverse, spooky, and alienating. The film's mercilessly hammered point: Andy Kaufman was not a comic but an insanely great put-on master and performance artist. This succeeds halfway. We come away convinced he was not a comic, all right. He was a weirdo.

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #355, December 1999

To Tom Endrey

My Web site is moribund; please don't tell anyone where you found it. Basically my computer pro bro-in-law Bob Kuhn put it up for me gratis in one rushed afternoon session two years ago, then we both got busy and I haven't added a word since. I keep promising to learn how to put it up, update it, and maintain it myself.

If you're interested in putting one up for yourself, my understanding is that, if you've got 1) a later-model computer that can run MS Word 97 or 2000, plus 2) an Internet service provider (ISP) that will give you server space, it's fairly simple to produce something decent. The later versions of Word actually convert text into HTML suitable for the Web, and your ISP usually gives you basic software to actually upload your finished site to its server, from whence all the Web can feast.

But I've gotten the idea before that you like to lag far behind the tech curve where it's less expensive, Tom. Think Web-building software might be harder to find back there. For instance, I'm afraid my 1995-vintage 150 MHz PC might run Word 2000 a little slowly, even with my 96 MB RAM.

Others in this APA are far better qualified to answer. Like Leslie Turek, who's got her own nice and simple site up. Or you could go to a NESFA friend who's also a pro, like Sharon Sbarsky (any other volunteers?), for something really nifty, although I assume you'd pay Sharon. For you, Tom, only \$1,000 an hour ...

About that Cat-in-the-Box experiment you propose: I'll leave it to Elisabeth Carey to scratch your face.

Interesting stuff about PhilCon, and then about scouting a retirement site in Charlotte, NC. Does this mean you'll be acquiring a Southern accent to go with your New York/Hungarian?

So hot water and big towels are almost American exclusives thanks to our world-

beatingly cheap energy prices? Never thought of it that way. Thanks again for your seasoned internationalist views.

To Tony Lewis

About catching my *Ralph 124C41+* misdating, thanks to you and our other Argus, George Flynn.

I like your story of the guy in New Orleans who knew you were a Boston pedestrian because you looked carefully both ways before crossing a one-way street. Of course, a Boston *driver* would have looked carefully both ways before driving the wrong way down a one-way street.

About Worldcon bidding: gee, you seem a little sour about Charlotte, NC. But even the scantiest scan of their visitors' bureau Web site (www.charlottecvb.org/index.cfm) would inform you that the Queen City has grits, stock car races, and an airport known near and nearer as "the international gateway to the Carolinas." I suppose Natick can do better?

To Lisa Hertel

Thanks for the glimpse of your family history. You think *you* had trouble following chronology and relationships, how about *us*?

Sounds like your Yaffa Eliach's *There Once Was A World* stands as a good survey of life in one shtetl in comparison to Roman Vishniac's 1983 classic *A Vanished World*, with its haunting photos of Eastern European Jews before WWII — most of the ones I remember were of urban dwellers, not village people.

About Judaism being "the most consistently persecuted religion in Western history" — well, at first that sounds like a given. But thinking about it, I'm not so sure. Allow me to stick my blundering lapsed-Irish-Catholic hand into this dark dynamite box and, you know, light a match to illuminate some stuff.

First, isn't most Western persecution of Jews in recent times more *racial* or *cultural* prejudice than *religious* prejudice? The Jew-bashers I've encountered rave about supposed personality traits or secret

hegemonies. They could care less about candlesticks at Christmas.

And anyway, wouldn't the most persecuted religions be those that were persecuted into nonexistence? All efforts of Adolf and his sympathizers to the contrary, there are maybe 14 million Jews in the world today. But have you talked to any Anabaptists, Arians, or Zoroastrians lately? Or met Mormons who can practice polygamy without hassle, or santeria priestesses who can slaughter a goat in peace without weirding out the abutters? When it comes to thy neighbor's religion — as Sartre said in a different connection, hell is other people.

And if we are indeed talking about a *race* or *culture*? Again, the list of persecuted peoples is as long as human history, and thousands of cultures have gone to their graves with the help of homicidal neighbors.

Here's what I'm saying, Lisa. Why fight for first float in the victim parade?

The religion of Israel is one of the most successful faiths in world history. Of the current biggies, it's older than Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Bahaism, Jainism, organized Shintoism — older than all but Vedanta Hinduism and Chinese folk religion ...

Maybe your enemies are just jealous.

To Mark Olson

You're right, since I read and loved William O'Neill's *Plagues and Peoples* I should just go out and read everything else he's ever written. At first I balked at your description of him as "one of the best historians" you'd ever read, thinking that what appealed to you (and me) might simply be that he was a great popularizer and very good writer. But thinking more about the original subjects he's tackled, such as plagues and dancing, one realizes he was original enough to merit the whole "great historian" enchilada.

Taking as a challenge your call for a generic-fantasy equivalent of SF's term "space opera," I whiled away some time neologizing.

"Centaur opera" takes cognizance of the original "horse opera," but scans even worse than your "elf opera." There's "elf epic." Or, instead of "Grail quest," "Stalequest"? Or from no root in particular, "dragonbasher"? Or to get literary, the whole school of fantasy could be dubbed "magic unrealism," "infantasy," "elfotica."

I've got it! How about, with a nod to "potboiler," "elfboiler"? A nice thought certainly ...

To Elisabeth Carey

Glad you liked that new collection *The Fantasies of Robert A. Heinlein*. As one of fifty thousand Heinlein-worshippers in SF fandom, must pick it up myself. Of course, it's not the *complete* fantasies, since that list would have to include the novel *Glory Road*. And maybe *Job*, eh? Or a collection entitled *The Sexual Fantasies of Robert A. Heinlein* might just have to pile in half-a-dozen of his later novels.

Anyway, you named some winners in the short work. Like "The Man Who Traveled in Elephants." In his essay "Robert" (it's in Yoji Kondo's *Requiem* anthology of RAH stories and tributes), Spider Robinson says Heinlein told him that story was "my own personal favorite," although singularly uncelebrated by anyone else until Robinson came along.

One of your cavils in an otherwise favorable review of Peg Kerr's *The Wild Swans* struck me as one of those things we've all experienced but nobody ever puts into words — until you, anyway. When a character suddenly takes the chance to leave the streets of New York behind for some fresh scenes in his adventure, you, Elisabeth, wonder about the street guru who befriended him, now suddenly left behind and, you extrapolate, wondering if the hero lived or died. We could just say that heroes are an unfeeling lot. Authors too. But it's more probably a failure of the authorial imagination, like a continuity error in a movie. Where with a better writer, we'd just question our own perceptions.

To George Flynn

Thanks to you and Tony Lewis for pointing out the earlier, original print date (1911-12) for Gernsback's *Ralph 124C41+*. I was relying on the Internet Speculative Fiction DataBase; one of the few times it's let me down. Should have double-checked with the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia*, which has the full story. Or did you and Tony simply recall the actual event?

You (gasp) appear to have committed your own typo this time, George, in talking about my "channeling of Mr. burstein." Unless he's taking the ee cummings route these days ...

So this Italian SF Web page termed your Hugo voting study "una approfondita analisi," which you translate as "a profound analysis." Good thing we aren't relying on my rusty Italian, since my snap translation started with the root "anal" and went from there.

Great story about making up a phony scientist, Claude Emile Jean-Baptiste Litre, to justify using the capital "L" unit abbreviation. Maybe NESFA could do the same for its unit of house-moving effort, the *drew*. Pretend that once upon a time, there really was this supremely messy packrat named Drew.

About whether the English rapist in the new Joan of Arc movie was Dave Langford's ancestor: Welsh, English, what's the dif? [PAUSE FOR FLOOD OF LETTER FROM LEEK-LOVERS EVERYWHERE].

I will point out that Fluellen in Shakespeare's *Henry V* was a Welshman serving in the English Army in France just a few years prior to the right time period. (Joan was probably born in 1412, Henry fought Agincourt in 1415, the rape/murder Joan witnesses in *The Messenger* might have been when she was about 10 (in 1422), the English and the Church finally made things too hot for Joan in 1431, etc.)

Besides, didn't you catch the family totem: a string of interleaved skulls and rockets hanging from the (OK, British) villain's neck?

**Ross, and Paul Giguere. Sorry, friends.
Next time ...**

Agggh! No time for the profound things I meant to say to Leslie Turek, Joe