

The Devniad

Book 60b1

un zine de Bob Devney

25 Johnson Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760 U.S.A.

e-mail: bobdevney@aol.com

For APA:NESFA #358 March 2000

copyright 2000 by Robert E. Devney

Why Are You Looking Here?

Much of this fine fanzine is usually produced during my lunch break at work. Which accounts for its choppy nature and generally frenzied air, as well as the faint, ghostly fragrance of grape jelly that the most sensitive among you may have intuited hovering o'er all.

However, March has been so frenzied that I managed far fewer free times at lunch than usual. So there's no big essay or anything this time.

Shame, really, because I was going to tell you about how (and why) I'm learning Turkish. Oh well, next *ay, efendim* ...

It's All Done With Photons

A guy in work (Craig Sullivan) says he read somewhere that if you put up two big mirrors and step between them, then look in one, you'll see only a finite number of reflections. A rather low number, too: on the order of 100 or so, he remembers. He says it's not a matter of images' becoming too small to distinguish, either; there's a specific optical principle involved.

Since, according to another principle, Olson's Observation (named after its originator, NESFA's Mark Olson), "Fans know everything" ... how about it, friends? Explain the matter to me.

Our Man in Honduras

Recently, our nef Jarrod Ferrara checked in from his Peace Corps health station in La

Florida de Opatoro. Again, that's a hill village in the La Paz district west of the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa. He answers my comments and questions re many a traveler's and exile's (and fan's) favorite topic: food.

"Next time in Beantown I'll have to check out this place Marche Movenpick. It sounds really cool.

"As far as restaurants down here in Hondu-land, they are a bit, how shall we say, behind the times. Any place called a *restaurante* will have an actual menu. They don't exist outside of urban areas. Since tipping isn't customary down here (except in American-style joints like the TGI Friday's in Tegus), service sucks. Everywhere else there are what are called *comedores*.

"A *comedor* is just a place with one or more tables, in one room of a house usually. There is no menu. You get whatever is being cooked that day. Many times there will be chickens, dogs, sometimes even pigs running around on the dirt floor.

"Needless to say, one must be careful about the choice of *comedor*. I often eat at a *comedor* here in Florida (one of two) ... It's clean, and the woman who cooks is really friendly and knows what I like to eat.

"The most typical of Honduran meals is the *plato típico*. As the name would suggest.

"It generally consists of rice, beans, corn tortillas (eaten with virtually every meal), shredded cabbage or lettuce with a few slices of tomato, maybe a little avocado, cheese, and maybe *carne asada* (grilled [roast?] red meat), and also an egg, scrambled ...

"I just realized I forgot to include fried *plátano* [banana] in the *plato típico*. The *plátano* thing doesn't always do it for me ... Of the food in general I can't complain,

although it is not at all rich in flavor. It's quite basic ..."

Of course, Jarrod, I wonder what the typical Latin American envoy might write about our menu in the U.S.? Perhaps something like this:

"The *plato típico* consists of *el mac grandioso*, a greyish, perhaps pre-masticated plop of former cow lips burned a darkish brown-black, overspread by a thick slime of bright orange, extruded rubbery sap — yes, the infamous *queso americano*. And did I mention their version of *papas fritas*? Sweet milk of the Blessed Virgin! Those pale tan wands of grease that once were proud potatoes haunt me still ... Plus these people have a sweet tooth the size of Mount Aconcagua."

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

Well-met at last year's World Fantasy Con, fledgling New Mexico writer **Yvonne Coats** is definitely on the wing.

"Penguin Putnam/Roc Books has released *Treachery & Treason*, edited by Laura Ann Gilman and Jennifer Heddle. My story is the first one in the book, which I'm told by more experienced writers is 'good.' If you're curious enough to read it, please let me know what you think."

Yvonne, I'd say first place and last are the two power positions in any anthology. Let's be on the lookout for *T&T*, friends (which Yvonne further notes we'll be glad to know is a \$5.99 paperback also featuring Esther Friesner, Ann Bishop, Dennis McKiernan, Irene Radford, William Dietz, Scott Edelman, Karen Haber, and more! whew) so we can say we caught her on the rise ...

MIT fan **Gary Dryfoos** joins the small, sick clot of perverts who, like me, thought David Cronenberg's art horror film *eXistenZ* was a weird little wonder:

"Even if you don't like Cronenberg, or find him hard to take, go see it. I don't particularly 'like' Cronenberg films, but with a movie like this, that's entirely beside the point. In fact there's even a scene in a Chinese restaurant that's as close an emotional analog to watching one of his films as I can imagine.

"And only a week later I went back and watched *Hudsucker Proxy* again. I don't know who this Jennifer Jason Leigh person is, but I'm in love with her. If people aren't comparing her to De Niro or even Alec Guinness for her ability to disappear inside a character and yet keep her own vital energy, it's because she's making it look too easy."

Gary also agrees with **F. Brett Cox** about a soothing little flick called *Happiness*.

"I was so weirded out by *Happiness* (I'd had absolutely no reviews or advance warning of what I was getting into) that I never even noticed that most of it was filmed in and around my hometown of West Orange, NJ (once better known as the location of Tom Edison's labs and first movie studio, of late simply as where Tony Soprano lives).

"My brother had to ask, 'Didn't you recognize the parking lot where Doc Maplewood enjoyed his magazine as the one right near the Bagel Box? Didn't you see Livingston Center? Didn't you recognize the location of the fantasy shooting sequence as Verona Park?' I had to confess I hadn't. Some films just beat on you too hard to notice that stuff. I'll probably watch *eXistenZ* again someday and realize it was filmed in my living room or something ..."

Still haven't seen *Happiness*, Gary, although I hear it was indeed eldritch. But if you cast your cursor back to my Jan ish, you'll see *eXistenZ* came in at #7 of my favorite movies of the year. And one that I'm still talking about to people. The NESFA crowd was going to screen it recently at a party I couldn't attend. However, I did warn them not to schedule a meal during the film ...

Yes, Jennifer Jason Leigh has also been on the radar for awhile. You've got it exactly

right about her disappearing fearlessly into her part. Snap recall of some of my favorite roles for her besides *eXistenZ* would be in *Miami Blues*, *Rush*, *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, plus two primo Robert Altman flicks: *Kansas City* and *Short Cuts*.

Always a most fell honor to hear from **David, Dark Lord Langford**. From his crag o'erlooking the scream-scoured roasting pits of Reading, U.K., His Hugoness fondly recalls Anthony Villiers' way with neckware (in the Alexei Panshin novels):

"I remember, I remember. What I liked was it's always being called a *drapeau* (French: flag, standard, ensign, streamer, colours), making it seem infinitely more exotic than a mere tie. Just as Gene Wolfe's lovely 'future' weapons like the *korseke*, *contus*, *fusil* and *jezail* would lose something if referred to as blasters and zap-guns.

"Your whole article about the SF ties that bind may be in line for a small Avoiding The Obvious Award (designed in fetching dayglo with appliqué naked woman) for failing to turn from artists and writers to editors, and specifically David G. Hartwell."

Dave, all I have to say is Aaarrrrgggghhh. Forgetting David Hartwell, SF's Plaid Master of *basse couture*! His ties are indeed of the most shuddersome. I deserve to be strung up by Isaac Asimov's bolos ...

Alabama's own **Andy Duncan** improves upon our lists of scripts we pray Disney doesn't option:

"Awhile back, in the wake of *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, I brainstormed with a group of friends trying to come up with potentially even *worse* source material for Disney animated musicals. Our short list included *Lord of the Flies*, *Go Ask Alice*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*."

Andy was also struck by our observation that you never see zippers on the pants SF illustrators put into their pictures; it's almost as if the men of the future had no ...

"Generations of male comic-book superheroes were similarly, uh, challenged. The in-house censors at the Golden and Silver Age comics factories typically were vigilant that no hint of genitalia be visible in their heroes' crotches. Usually the artists tried to disguise the resulting neuter effect by giving the heroes trunks to wear outside their long johns. One sad exception was Captain Marvel, who for some reason had no such camouflage. According to an old-timer interviewed years later by Jim Steranko, the artists, when tipsy, were wont to taunt the Big Red Cheese by chanting, 'Captain Marvel has no balls at all / No balls at all / No balls at all / Captain Marvel has no balls at all' — and so on. (Repeat, presumably, until one passes out in the inkwell.)"

One para last ish, with an allusion ("death a la Duncan") to the 1927 demise of famous dancer Isadora Duncan (when her long scarf was caught in the wheels of her roadster), had for our friend a chilling effect:

"At the risk of airing my typical self-centeredness, I confess this off-the-cuff joke briefly made my blood run cold. I feared I was living a fannish version of Rene Clair's *It Happened Tomorrow*, about the guy who reads his own obituary in tomorrow's newspaper. Then I realized, with a shudder of relief, you meant that *other* Duncan. (Among many!)"

Fear not, Andy. When you go, you'll be the first to know.

Fanwriter **Evelyn C. Leeper** sees synchronicity surrounding last ish's article on why I won't stop wearing a tie to work:

"I went home last night and the new Lands' End catalog (April 2000) had arrived. The cover? A naked (from the waist up, anyway) Dilbert setting fire to his tie.

"Are they getting advance copies of *The Devniad*, or what?"

"... Oh, one more comment. Perhaps the string/bolo ties are so popular because they don't pick up all those stains you were talking about. Also, they're easy to pack or stuff in a pocket without worrying about wrinkles. I usually take one with us when

we travel in case we happen to go somewhere requiring that Mark wear a tie. If not, I can always wear it as jewelry."

Or if your shoelace snaps, your belt breaks, or you happen to need a tourniquet ...

Ernest Lilley of *SFRevu* is always so fashionable! and now we know why:

"My grandfather, whose collection of narrow ties and bow ties I acquired after his passing, was very clear on the difference between work and play clothes. During the day, he'd wear a wool three piece suit, often with a bow tie, but on the weekend he would kick back in the jeans of his generation, tan khaki work clothes.

"I don't always dress up for work. It would scare the scientists, for one thing, but I miss the division of work and play that clothing denotes.

"The act of taking off one's tie, and slipping into comfortable clothes after a day at the grindstone becomes a blessed event that wearing comfy clothes all the time robs you of ... Of course, dapper lads like we look *good* in ties."

Ern, it's no good sucking up. You still wouldn't catch me wearing stuff my grandfather passed on. Aside from his blue (eyed) genes, of course.

Amigo **James Stevens-Arce**, intrepid ad man on the exotic island of Puerto Rico, takes up my challenge about not reading enough mysteries where the hero is an intrepid ad man on the exotic island of Puerto Rico:

"Okay. Here goes. But if this sucks, I'm putting the load on you."

I was searching for a new and improved way to say "new and improved" when she slithered in through my door in a dress that clung to her curves tighter than a Firestone Radial XT-2000 grips a stretch of PR 52 in the eyewall of a hurricane.

"They're casting the beer commercial down the hall," I muttered. I loathe interruptions when I'm zeroing in on synonyms.

"I'm not here for my fifteen minutes of fame on Newton Minow's 'vast wasteland,'" she whispered in a voice that caressed my brain like the warm Caribbean Sea laps the golden sands of crescent-shaped Luquillo Beach at the foot of the El Yunque rain forest. "I'm here for you."

With that, she slipped her tongue into my ear and I was off on an adventure wilder than any this grizzled old Puerto Rico-based freelance copywriter ever dreamed, outside of the direct mail campaign I'd once put together for new and improved Metamucil.

Bravo, Jim! Your copy moved me.

I'd say Elmore Leonard better quit his day job ...

Leading letterhack **Lloyd Penney** signals from Ontario that even Canadian prisoners aren't always happy in their work:

"I work in the creative department of a big printing plant in Mississauga, just west of Toronto, and I am the proofreader/supply clerk. In other words, I am on the bottom rung of the ladder, and am regularly treated like crap. Just today, the assistant boss demanded I get him a coffee, and I refused. Needless to say, the resumes are everywhere. But at least, the attitude here is casual, so I am here in a Denver Hayes casual long-sleeved shirt, and a pair of Rustler jeans, and runners. My previous job demanded that I wear a white formal shirt and tie, with dress pants and good shoes ... and I was treated like crap there, too."

Since I've been short-sighted enough to put several people from my office on this mailing list, I wish to state categorically that I feel absolutely no solidarity with Lloyd. Oh well, at least he gets to hobnob with the stars:

"The X-Men movie is being shot in various places around Toronto. Patrick Stewart has been here and there, enjoying the restaurants and shopping while he isn't being Professor Xavier ... Also, the movie that was supposed to be partially shot in space [announced in the Feb ish] now won't touch hard vacuum at all. I read that negotiations have broken down, and Mir will stay unvisited.

"Coming up in May ... Yvonne and I will be FanGoHs at V-Con 25, the annual convention in Vancouver. Rob Sawyer and Spider Robinson will be ProGoHs, so we will be in good company. Also, the end of this month is the voting deadline for the Hugos, and the Auroras, too. I have some hopes for the Auroras, and I hope to

improve on the nine nominations I got for the Hugos in 1999."

Just as long as it's not at my expense, Lloyd, hint hint. Remember, it's an honor just to have your admirers say they *would* have nominated you for sure if they'd remembered to vote.

FINAL NOTE: Anyone have the e-mail address of **Mark Rich**, the Kornbluth King? He gave it to me at a con last year for the second year in a row, but for the second year in a row it seems to be the wrong one ... Or is he just trying to tell me something?

FlimFan

EXCELLENT:

Mansfield Park — In no other Jane Austen movie I can name does even a wicked stepsister type cast her eyes up and down a new man's figure while distinctly licking her lips. Or rehearse the heroine for a play and start coming on all sapphic, with lines like "No one but a woman can teach the science of ourselves." Yet here the lickerish Maria (Embeth Davidtz) does all this, and more. Plus did I mention the heroine Fanny (Frances O'Connor) has fleas and scratches herself? Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* is like *Sense and Sensibility* meets *Trainspotting*. As you may have suspected by now, it's hardly a faithful retelling of the novel. Rather a racy, sensual, modern reinterpretation of the story, with the character of Fanny Price's owing much to Jane Austen's own character as read by Rozema in the writer's letters and early journals. So Fanny's not like other Austen heroines: her independent streak is wider than her romantic one, taking as its motto one of Austen's more famous lines, which she half-whispers upon the stairs: "No man dies for love but on the stage, Mr. Crawford." On the other hand, the flick's whole feel, frankly, owes more to the heated romanticism of the later Bronte sisters than to Austen's quieter and more crystalline wit. But as with some retelling of Shakespeare playing Shylock as a day trader, the work is strong enough to stand the test. As is the cast. Frances O'Connor especially shines with the beauty and intelligence of a young Barbara Hershey in the role of the poor girl nestled uneasily in the bosom of rich relations. Who doesn't want to face, but must, the eternal Austen problem, never more starkly set: upper-class English society was a fairly rigid dance. And if you found yourself without a husband when the music stopped, well — the music really stopped. My favorite Austen movie is the austere, dark, quieter *Persuasion*. But this hot tale makes a fitting bookend, way at the other end of the emotional spectrum. There's

startlingly ugly imagery here. Of slavery particularly; the family's rich facade hides its wealth's origin in the bloody torture, servitude, and degradation of plantations in Antigua. Or as when suitor Henry Crawford (Alessandro Nivola) is served something disgusting for dinner upon Fanny's mother's literally maggot-ridden table at poverty hall: a burnt lump of mystery meat covered with vile dark sauce, which he must eat with a dirty fork. (At least English cuisine hasn't changed much.) At one point another suitor, the sensitive Edmund (Johnny Lee Miller), reads from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* a passage about trying to free a caged starling: again, much here is concerned with slavery and frustrated escape. Rozema is not subtle, but she's dramatic and effective. And an artist of slow-motion sensuality. Horses' hooves scything through the grass ... girls playing the glass harp in the conservatory ... and one of the most beautiful dance scenes in movie history. Dancers' bodies swaying, swooping, turning as the camera slides slowly by in rhythm, and the music swells in comment. The director even pays tribute to her author's feelings by showing us the sensuality of *that* creative act: we revel in the physical joy of writing, riffling the thick, creamy paper, cutting the leaves, sharpening the pen ... Did I like *Mansfield Park*? Reader, it ravished me.

VERY GOOD:

Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter Jr. — It's a documentary by the great Errol Morris about a nebbishy engineer from Malden, Massachusetts, who designs electric chairs for a living and is capable of droning, right into the camera, statements such as "I would rather not be electrocuted in ... Virginia or Alabama." But Morris's deadpan fun turns serious when it turns out the guy is also capable of "expert" Holocaust denial ... Don't have time now, must try to do justice to this weird, disturbing film next month. But if it shows up in your town in the meantime (hah!), go see it and let's talk.

High Fidelity — Most romantic comedies are chixflixx. They care too much about what women want to really resonate with most members of the disloyal opposition. But director Stephen Frear's *High Fidelity* (like, say, 1985's *The Rachel Papers* or Rob Reiner's early minor classic also starring John Cusack, 1985's *The Sure Thing*) is that *rara moviola*, a good guycentric relationship comedy. Even rarer, one where the women are neither more nor less stupid or mixed up than the men. Based (with surprising, well, fidelity, despite a setting change from London to Chicago) on Nick Hornby's trif 1995 novel, the movie stars Cusack as Rob, thirtysomething prepostadolescent owner of a crummy Chicago cult record store. Rob is being dumped by girlfriend Laura (get it?), smartly played by Danish import Iben Hjejle, because "You're the same person you used to be, and I'm not ... You haven't changed so much as a pair of socks since I knew you." Pathetically, Rob interviews old girlfriends to see if he can break a pattern his own *mother* describes as "You meet someone, you move in, she goes." This gives the movie an excuse to bring on a delightful little roster of surprise celebrity guest stars. And the flick is also clever at varying scene and action, giving visual life to huge chunks of face time as Cusack spouts hip, hilarious Hornbyisms at us. But *High Fidelity* has something else great going for it: that record store. As with our own beloved NESFA clubhouse, the smeary, poster-packed windows and battered paintwork of Championship Vinyl resound with obsessive, pointless debate. In this case, about pop music instead of science fiction — but the rhythms and personalities are cut from familiar grooves. For the aging crew at the store echo that credo of all fringe fans: "What matters is what you *like*, not what you *are* like." (Banner for the clubhouse wall, anybody?) Rob constantly has to tell obnoxious, motormouthed clerk Barry to stop browbeating timid, nerdish Dick (Todd Louiso): "How can it be 'bullshit' to state a *preference*?" But Barry, in a star-is-born performance by the amazing Jack Black, is

relentless, as in his dismissal of the compact disc: "A cruel trick played on all the dumbasses who got rid of their turntables." Keeping in mind certain people we've all known, you've got to admit: now *that's* high fidelity ...

MUSICAL NOTE: When depressed, Rob puts on Bruce Springsteen's "The River." Excellent choice, lad. Lots of similarly choice cuts on this soundtrack, from The Kinks, Dylan, and The Velvet Underground to The Beta Band's hypnotic "Dry the Rain" — although one disappointment is Rob and Laura's meeting melody. "Their song" is something safe and familiar from Marvin Gaye. The book makes a much hipper choice from the catalog of minor 1960s soul singer Solomon Burke. I'm spinning *The Very Best of Solomon Burke* right now, and the movie missed a good bet: this stuff is *tasty*. Plus, the liner notes aver that, besides his avocation as the Bishop of Soul, Dr. Burke also enjoyed roles as "minister, mortician, businessman, father of 21, etc." I love that "etc." So would my fellow fanboys at Championship.

GOOD:

Forgotten Silver (video)— When this documentary of a forgotten but brilliant New Zealand film pioneer (who it turns out invented color film, talkies, etc. years before those Hollywood guys) was shown in 1995 on Kiwi TV, 80 percent of the audience polled thought it was a true story. Well, it isn't. (As far as I know.) But with interviews from real people like critic Leonard Maltin and actor Sam Neill, a smart, solemn narration by its director Peter Jackson (who's now making *Lord of the Rings*), and absolutely wonderful use of the same black-and-white archival shots over and over again, they can be forgiven for (mis)taking this sly, intelligent mix of *Zelig* and *This Is Spinal Tap* for real. One thing is was was real funny. Special thanks to NESFA's Madame Librarian, Claire Anderson, for letting me borrow the tape without even an Anderson Club Card.

Mission to Mars — A little way into this flick, an overhead shot of a footprint in

garden soil transits to another overhead showing a little recon crawler drone, making a track in cracked, reddish “earth” as a title reads “13 months later / Cydonia, Mars.” What does this tell us? First, this is that difficult-to-get-right genre, the near-future space exploration movie. Second, the director has seen *2001*. The latter perhaps being the reason that ... he doesn't really get this one quite right. But close enough to make it enjoyable anyway. *Mission to Mars* is more earnest and good-hearted than director Brian De Palma's previous work such as *Mission: Impossible* or *The Untouchables* or *Snake Eyes* would predict. In fact, under all its well-done special effects and cool camera angles, *Mission to Mars* is a somewhat corny and finally rather romantic story of loss and recovery. The basic plot: around the year 2020, mission goes to Mars; meets mysterious catastrophe, contact lost; another mission is sent to search, recover, perhaps rescue the survivors. Much of the dialog is tired, as when the Von Braunish planning chief (Armin Mueller-Stahl) objects that a proposed scheme would work “on paper, yes. But those stresses have never been tried in space!” Or when mission commander Tim Robbins displays a jut-jawed reaction to an in-flight crisis: “C'mon, people, let's work the problem.” Wouldn't NASA have come up with any new jargon in 20 years? Also old-fashioned is some of the musical accompaniment. There are unexpected touches like the zydeco accordion riffs over the model rocket launch at the opening barbecue. But even on Mars, just as in any earthbound crisis, trouble brings on big, boring organ chords. However, overall, there's plenty to like about this movie. Such as the casting of Gary Sinese, who's lost his fellow-astronaut wife, who still burns with mission fever, but never loses those dark circles around his eyes. Or the neat skydiver linkup of the crew clumping together via reaction nozzle in an impromptu EVA. Or the zero-gravity model of DNA's double helix, floating in midair and made entirely of M&Ms. I'm touched when the commander and his wife (Connie Nielsen) do a graceful zero-G

dance. (Although frankly, with a married couple on board, I was hoping for that pioneering zero-G sex scene ...) I like the plot dilemma that will remind SF fans of Tom Godwin's classic “The Cold Equations.” And although the ending tries for *2001*'s transcendence and misses trajectory by being too simpleminded, I admire the fast-forward historical overview that shows Man's hunting torches become the lights of his cities. And finally, I like very much the early reaction of the commander to the sight of the Red Planet, target of all his efforts over decades, finally looming large in his viewport. Robbins' character says quietly, “Hello, beautiful.”

My Dog Skip — That Skip is so smart, he can probably tell you why I won't have time to get to the review of this fun, good-hearted flick until next month. Yep, here it comes: Arf, arf, arfarfarf rowf arf arf! Good boy!

BAD:

The Whole Nine Yards — What an amateurish mess. We get a big bad clue early on, when Montreal dentist Oz Oseransky (Matthew Perry) realizes the identity of his new next-door neighbor, Jimmy Tudeski (Bruce Willis). Oz flashes onto a 1930ish montage of newspaper headlines showing the guy is actually a hit man nicknamed Jimmy the Tulip. The montage goes on too long, in a style that comes out of nowhere and goes back to the same place. Ditto the movie. Director Jonathan Lynn still hasn't managed a family resemblance to his chuckleful hit from 1992, *My Cousin Vinny*. Matthew Perry is funny sometimes here, but tries too hard. Bruce Willis wears that self-satisfied smirk that can be so annoying. Rosanna Arquette sports a French-Canadian accent so bad it's certain to spark ugly separatist riots. Two bright spots: At least early on, the flick makes good use of the sheer bulk and underplayed comic style of Michael Clarke Duncan as a Mob enforcer. Duncan was the humungous prisoner in *The Green Mile*, and here Perry has an amusing running gag of smacking into his bulk and bouncing off. At another

point, while the foreground dialog was boring us, I got two genuine laughs from Duncan's throwaway lines in the background, at a airport rental counter: "Full-size car, please ... I don't need no insurance." And as the dentist's new assistant, who turns out to have her own quirky agenda, Amanda Peet (of TV's *Jack & Jill*) is also excellent. She throws herself into the most interestingly conceived role in the movie — throws herself grinning widely and winningly. *The Whole Nine Yards* could be her breakthrough; just wish it treated her better. In one scene, we linger on her naked and certainly quite pleasant breasts for several minutes. Can't believe I'm saying this, but this nudity is completely gratuitous ...

Romeo Must Die — Would you order something off the menu that read "hip hop chop socky"? Then stay away from this ultimately fairly boring fiasco, whence a Hong Kong martial arts master (Jet Li) teams up with an African American entrepreneur princess (Aaliyah) to discover the secret origins of the war raging between their fathers' respective crime families on the waterfront ... all in a wilted salad romeo-and-julietted up in fair Oakland, CA, where we set our scene. (Even *that* is really Vancouver, BC.) Very disappointing. For instance: Delroy Lindo (the black gangfather here, and a scene-stealer in recent flicks like *A Life Less Ordinary* and *The Cider House Rules*) has one of the great faces in today's movies. But if you give him nothing but stupid clichés to mouth, we start losing interest whenever that face appears on the screen. Like here. And Jet Li! He made a very effective villain in *Lethal Weapon IV* — I kept rooting for him to whip Gibon's and Glover's butts — but his performance here has little kick. Even the martial arts scenes share two dismal qualities. Either they have little funny bits, in which case Jackie Chan has done it far more effectively before. Or they show what could have been really beautiful, breathtakingly acrobatic moves from the quite capable Li — but all sliced, cutaway'd, and edited to the point where we know *John Candy* could've been faked up

to deliver that same running somersault spin kick. All except a little bit with a chainlink fence, where for one moment I genuinely caught my breath ... Too little, too late. And one last thing: it strikes me as a really bad decision to rip off the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* — but decide on a small twist, wherein you leave out the romance. Hello? Moviemakers, take note: Shakespeare got immortal voltage by telling the tale of two star-crossed *lovers*, not two star-crossed fairly friendly acquaintances who find each other mildly amusing ...

Backchat

on APA:NESFA #357, February 2000

To Mark Olson

Almost wish you'd stop reviewing great books from the old days, like *Three Hearts and Three Lions* by Poul Anderson. It's almost worse than when you review great new books. Because with a new book at least we can pretend we might disagree with you, dislike it, and so refuse to add it to our backbreaking piles of things to read real soon. With something like *3HA3L*, there's no escape for the desperately overbooked.

To Art Henderson

And you, you tempter! You had to perpetrate such a lucid, interesting, in fact persuasive paean to DVD players and why I absolutely must buy one if not two, also real soon. What exactly do you have against my staying married?

About my filmgoing frequency, I see a movie almost every single Friday night, usually with *Devniad* Science Advisor and Faithful Flickoneer Dr. Stephen Kennedy, at one of two nearby suburban cineplexes. About 10 or so other nights per year, I manage to drag Queen Maureen to a Saturday flick at same. Add maybe another 10 or 20 midweek flixpeditions into Boston, Cambridge, or Providence, often with my siblings, and the score is perhaps 75 or 80

theatrical releases per year. Plus a good number of cablecasts and a few video rentals, of course. Hey, NESFAns Claire and Dave Anderson probably see that many from Southeast Asia alone, plus others that puts their score at, I dunno, a bazillion a year. Now *those* two are flick fans!

How about you? How many DVD rentals or buys a year, for instance ... if the answer won't have Becky reaching for the andirons.

To Leslie Turek

I believe your true life's work is staring you in the face. Think about it: with your gardening expertise, language study, and increasing familiarity with your ancestral homeland ... The final clue was a sentence in your latest travel report. You said the resort areas in the High Tatras had at least "a bit of landscaping, which was not something I saw very much of in Slovakia."

You must become the first landscape architect in that benighted place: Slovakia's own Frederick Law Olmsted! You heard it here first. Please remember to write often.

To Tony Lewis

Sorry I missed your trivia triumph at Boskone, O Mastermind. All agree you were spectacular.

I've noticed the thunderous silence about Heinlein's first wife, Leslyn MacDonald (obviously one source for his early pseudonym Anson MacDonald). When I saw that the neato Michael Swanwick/Andy Duncan/Eileen Gunn/ Pat Murphy collaboration "Green Fire" (appearing first online last year with *Event Horizon*, now on paper in the April ish of *Asimov's*) featured as characters Heinlein, Asimov, and De Camp in their younger days at the Philadelphia naval lab during World War II, I thought they might show us something about Leslyn and Bob's marriage, but no go. Oh well, it's a great read anyway.

To Chris Edwards (and Jeff Wendler et al.)

So sorry to miss Hannah, and oh yeah you and Lorna at Boskone. Yes, Art Henderson's quote about a book with the

words "anal" and "planet" in the title would certainly have made *The Devniad* if I'd been around for the con ... Thanks for standing in so ably.

And glad the Mastermind trivia contest I suckered you into went OK for you.

Unlike poor Jeff Wendler, who apparently suffered from at least a couple of misconceived Bujold questions I let slip into the mix. God, I haven't written to apologize to him yet! If you're reading this, Jeff: I abase myself. I cook Peter Weston and all you contestants a delicious meal to atone, but let botulism toxin slip into the mix. Everybody gets horrible cramps and terrible spasms.

All die. Oh the embarrassment.

To Pam Fremon

Massively enjoying your Swedish trip report, ya betcha! Followed your trek avidly in my atlas. Had never heard of the Dala horses, but went on the net and found the motherlode at the little village you mentioned. Cute little beasts indeed.

Told my Aunt Ann, the Traveling Tsarina, about your rave for the Vasa museum. She'd been to Stockholm on a cruise, but this wonderful ship-embedded-within-a-seven-story-museum hadn't swum into her ken. She's immediately started making plans to go back with my Aunt Joanne, who's 1/64th or something Swedish. See what you've started?

To George Flynn

You and Chris Edwards and others are absolutely right: *The Thin Red Line* was a great 1998 movie. I didn't see it until about April 1999, and missed the origin date. Oops.

Sorry also for being forgetful about my own straight line re the burstein as a proposed unit of self-promotional force; thanks for noticing and remembering in the first place. However, you didn't exactly gloss it for my direct, easy recall by talking about the "channeling of Mr. burstein." If

you'd said "the channeling of Mr. roentgen," I still might have thought about the scientist, not the unit. But you know, I kinda hope you won't reply to this, because the effort of glossing the points of the argument over several months' manglements is already making me woozy.

To Paul Giguere

Couldn't read what looked like your two most interesting book reports, because I have both *The Stone Canal* and *Mendoza in Hollywood* sitting on my "soon" shelf and don't want to spoil anything for myself. But as usual, congratulations on your excellent taste in fiction.

Glad to see you're still reading novels at all, since the infernal engines of the effort to get your doctorate must have already started to macerate what's left of your so-called "free time." How's it going, guy? he inquired with admittedly somewhat morbid interest.

To Anna Hillier

Your story about the Finnish St. Urho's banishing the grasshoppers that threatened the wild grapes was certainly the strangest thing in last month's APA. And I say that with all admiration, even awe.

Ghod I love fans and the wonderful things they know!

To Tom Endrey

Thanks for the birthday wishes! By the way, for future blackmail purposes: when's yours?

Wow, new apartment and soon maybe a new computer, new flat screen, and new ultrafast Internet service! Can this be our beloved Tom of old?