

The Devniad

Book 62

un zine de Bob Devney

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Bookbits

If you are what you eat, I'm in big trouble. I'm much more comfortable with a formulation such as, you are what you read. So even though myriad other fanzines help keep us all up on how many books we really should be getting to, every once in a while I like to do some reviews regardless. Here goes.

If you notice a persistent theme of sex, sex, sex frolicking through many of the following selections, who're you going to blame, little old me or all those perverse, pandering panjandrums of publishing?

Malcolm Gladwell, ***The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*** (2000 hardcover, Little, Brown and Company, 279 pages, \$24.95)

Intelligent pop sociology that may actually have a point. I have no idea if Gladwell, one of my favorites among the newer crop of writers for *The New Yorker* magazine, is a science fiction fan — but it certainly seems like it. You sense a real SF sensibility at work here in attitudes like: Let's question old assumptions. Step back and look at the big picture. Cherish some conclusions for their sheer neatness.

The neatest ideas here (not necessarily Gladwell's own, but grounded in current research by a number of social scientists) are that social change behaves like an epidemic. Also that such change is contagious; that little causes can have big effects; and that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment: the Tipping Point itself.

Additionally, Gladwell teases out three principles. The Law of the Few says that in a given process or system a few special people (Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen) start and accelerate the change that will

affect large numbers of their fellows. The Stickiness Factor means that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable and impactful. The Power of Context claims that the key in getting people to change their behavior sometimes lies with the smallest details of their immediate situation.

This all sounds pretty dry. But in fact the book is juicy with clear, really cool examples — including how AIDS caught fire; how teenage Micronesian suicide became a fad; how Peter Jennings' microsmiles maybe made millions vote Republican; how the producers stuck generations of kids on TV's *Sesame Street*; how the Gore-Tex people rendered their company culture porous to ideas (hint: it turns out 150 people is the effective upper limit for a cohesive social group); why Paul Revere succeeded while fellow traveler William Dawes failed; how New York City's crime rate plummeted (murders down two-thirds, felonies cut in half) due to something called the Broken Windows Theory and a campaign against graffiti; and how to cure teen smoking.

I'll single out two of my favorite bits. Gladwell reports a number of those horrifying psych/soc experiments that prove such awful things about us as a species. Including one where they told students at Princeton Theological Seminary to prepare an impromptu sermon on a given theme as they walked through the alley to the next building. But in that alley, the researchers planted a supposedly unconscious man, coughing and groaning. Turns out the context that tipped people into unhelpfulness was not their assigned sermon subject, but whether or not they were told they were late. You can guess the rest. "On several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable

of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way." Ouch.

And for posterity, I'll reprint a lost moment from SF history. Gladwell mentions it in illustrating the personality of a Connector — that rare person who maintains many friends or acquaintances in multiple strata of society, and links the rest of us stay-at-home types together. He's talking about a particular Connector he found in Chicago named Lois Weisberg.

"Once — and this would have been in the mid-1950s — Weisberg took the train to New York to attend, on a whim, the Science Fiction Writers Convention, where she met a young writer by the name of Arthur C. Clarke. [Gladwell must be talking here about 1956's Newyorcon, the 14th World Science Fiction Convention (for writers *and* fans), where Clarke was guest of honor]. Clarke took a shine to Weisberg, and next time he was in Chicago he called her up. 'He was at a pay phone,' Weisberg recalls. 'He said, is there anyone in Chicago I should meet. I told him to come over to my house ... I called Bob Hughes. Bob Hughes was one of the people who wrote for my paper [an underground weekly cleverly called *The Paper*].' Pause. 'I said, do you know anyone in Chicago interested in talking to Arthur Clarke. He said, yeah, Isaac Asimov is in town. And this guy, Robert, Robert — Robert Heinlein. So they all came over and sat in my study.' Pause. 'Then they called over to me and they said, Lois ... I can't remember the word they used ... It was something about how I was the kind of person who brings people together.'"

I'll leave it to you to think about who in your circle is a Connector. Of course, it's obvious to me immediately that half the members of NESFA are Mavens. As is, *ex officio*, just about any decent fanzine writer.

Malcolm Gladwell talks down to us a bit too much from time to time throughout his book, particularly in prefaces and conclusions. Some of the material seems a degree too buffed up, repetitively presented, and simplified for my taste. I can't quite put him in the first rank of science writers for an intelligent lay

audience along with stars like Stephen Pinker, Stephen Jay Gould, David Quammen, or dare I say Neal Stephenson?

But everyone reading this fanzine should find much enjoyment and an equal serving of information in *The Tipping Point*. And more than that, perhaps all you Mavens will find inspiration for action in its closing words: "Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place — it can be tipped."

William Barton, ***When We Were Real*** (1999 paperback, Aspect/Warner Books, 337 pages, \$6.99)

Call it a picaresque novel of a rather sad boy at "the other end of history" who grows to be a depressed though certainly sex-happy soldier and sometime rebel, gripped in the jaws of his rearing (under a crushing matriarchy) and of powerful militaristic corporations that soullessly rule a galaxy of potential immortals. Got all that?

Barton writes like Joe Haldeman with a hard-on. Or a frankly more accomplished, more serious Catherine Asaro on downers. How about Iain Banks with a lot less ironic distance? Forget comparisons: He's a first-class talent with his own voice, and *When We Were Real* was definitely one of the best SF books written in 1999. Wish I'd seen it before I picked my Hugo nominations.

There's not much sense in my going on and on about this one. You've got to read it to appreciate its own strong, strange flavor.

Though I'll tell you one more thing:

There has never been another science fiction novel so fascinated by vaginas.

Peter Abrahams, ***A Perfect Crime*** (1999 paperback, Ballantine Books, 367 pages, \$6.99)

A smart, intense mystery about Francie Cullingwood — a smart, intense Boston art appraiser suffering the pangs of the love that dare not speak its name. No, not that love, another kind.

This guy Abrahams certainly knows how to write a sentence and pace a scene. Those are no small gifts; doubt I find one new

mystery author a year this good. I'm less certain about the overall story here:

Francie's weird genius Boston Brahmin husband is drawn a lot less convincingly than she, and speaking of convincing how many coincidences can we be expected to take?

Still, there are interesting things said here about sex, radio psychologists, killer tennis, the role of the PC in breaking up marriages, how short a time it's been since nice girls eschewed tattoos, why brains are no substitute for personality or indeed sense, outsider sculpture, and did I mention sex?

Smarmy little closing coming up: A *Perfect Crime* may not be perfect, but missing it would be a real crime.

S. M. Stirling, ***On the Oceans of Eternity*** (2000 paperback, Roc, 630 pages, \$6.99)

When it comes to military SF, my adult liberalism battles it out with my *Sgt. Rock*-ridden boyhood. With books like this, the cool army stuff usually wins. It doesn't hurt that Steve Stirling is a strong writer with a killer narrative drive, plus he gives great research. *Oceans* is third up in the series (first *Island in the Sea of Time*, then *Against the Tide of Years*) that poses a question you may not have previously considered: What if the entire island of Nantucket plus a nearby Coast Guard training schooner were mysteriously transported back to the Bronze Age and decided to jump-start world technocivilization a little early?

Certainly not a lot of thought is given to an important counterquestion, If you had it to do over, would you do it again? There's a basic assumption here that 1990s America's technological progress is the way to go.

And even if the heroes might have liked to think things through a little more, onrushing plot circumstances — notably the evil plots of a bunch of escaped island renegades — soon enmesh them in a series of globe-spanning wars and arms races. In other words, lots of exciting fight scenes. Battlegrounds this time range from what will be Troy to what will be Greece and

Spain to what will be northern California, dude.

But Stirling has certainly read Jared Diamond and Peter Farb and William McNeill as well as John Keegan. Warfighting aside, he also works in convincing sketches of current thinking about civilization-building, as well as plenty of fascinating details on farming on Long Island, carving canoes in California, and building sewers in Babylon.

He even has one really memorable character, Commodore Marian Alston-Kurlelo of the Coast Guard of the Republic of Nantucket: a strong, *katana*-wielding, gay African-American warrior woman. Marian is the island's master strategist and La Suprema of its armed forces. And escaped from her commander's closet in the uptight late 20th century Coast Guard, here and now she finds true love partnered with a bawdy blonde tribesbabe from ancient British astronomer people. Same folks who threw together a little open-air observatory called Stonehenge.

Which points up an area where you'd think the series couldn't deliver one usual alternative-history pleasure: familiar faces. You can't have any fun like with James Joyce, Vladimir Lenin, and Tristan Tzara all meeting when they lived in Zurich, for example. (See Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties*.) Thirty-five hundred years ago was a long time, and we just don't have historical memory of particular individuals of those long-ago days.

With the exception here of one tough, resourceful tribal king from the Greek island of Ithaka. Clever guy, strong fighter and sailor, bit of a schemer, name of Odikweos?

Stirling finds a way to tweak that particular pleasure center of the history fan further anyway, though, with everything from portraits *à clef* (the geopolitical strategist Ian Arnstein looks an awful lot like SF alternative history writer Harry Turtledove) to funny name games.

For instance, the chief villain so far, who tries to set up rival totalitarian empires in first Britain then Greece, is a cruel renegade adventurer named William Walker. (As he

proved with his Draka series, by the way, Stirling has a gift for the dark side; Walker and his crew are quite satisfactory bad guys. Although the Big W's got some changes coming in this episode.) And you know you're in for some *impi*-ish fun the minute you see the major battle of an Asia Minor war shaping up at a place renamed O'Rourke's Ford. (Confused? Go rent Michael Caine's first movie, the fine 1964 flick *Zulu*.)

Altogether the best work this writer has done, the series reads less like pure powerporn than his Draka books. And using the resort island of Nantucket as your central setting may well be one of the cleverer ideas any author ever had ... about how to claim your summer vacation as a tax deduction.

**Journey to the
Center of the Solar System**
by
Dr. Stephen Kennedy
Devniad Science Advisor

Preface

Bob Devney asked that I write a review of a recent trip to New York City to see the Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History. I went on the trip at the request of my girlfriend Janet. Note: When they were young, Janet's brother Paul nicknamed her "Janet from Another Planet." I sometimes have to agree with his assessment. Be warned.

Before I talk about this year's trip, let me mention that last year, in May 1999, Janet's club also chartered a bus to NYC. I had wanted to see the American Museum of Natural History, so I went along. After doing a few tourist things like going to the top of the Empire State Building, we visited the museum.

It had long lines like other New York attractions. The museum was impressive — the thing that sticks in my mind was the

amazingly large size of the reconstructed dinosaur skeleton, I want to say it was reconstructed bones of a brontosaurus-like animal, some kind of a giant Jurassic herbivore, stretching to fill up a building the size of a gymnasium. On this 1999 trip, there was really too much to see in the half day we had set aside for the museum. And the fact that the new Rose Center had just opened, coupled with my teaching astronomy classes for the past year [*Steve is a physics/astronomy instructor at UMass/Dartmouth*], made going back to the museum quite attractive for this year's trip.

For our May 2000 trip, Janet had the foresight to call ahead for tickets to the Rose Center — which is recommended, since it is generally sold out a few weeks in advance. (Don't have their phone number handy, but see their Web site at www.amnh.org/rose/spaceshowtickets.html.)

The bus trip

I was somewhat cranky due to sleep deprivation when we got on the bus at 5:30 AM, and told Janet that I would *kill* any of her friends who tried to get me to play one of their anti-bus-boredom games. I was at least civil when the self-appointed cruise director started a bingo-like game; I smiled politely, shoved my cards at Janet to play for me, and attempted to nap.

Which nap was cut short by the fact that, out of the cards of 40-plus people on the bus, mine won. Collecting my valuable keychain prize, I thought that *now* I could rest — until another game started up. Guess the Mileage to New York required that each contestant put her or his guess on a piece of paper and put a dollar in the kitty, with the jackpot to be divided between the club and the lucky guesser. I did so, then hoped again to snooze.

But no. The cruise director then passed out a trivia test. The person to get all the answers right first, or, if not, the most answers right was to be the winner.

Suddenly I noted that one of the five other men on the bus (the attendees were mostly Lady Lions) was cheating. The rules,

as explicitly stated, were that no one was to start until all received their test.

I was outraged. Regis would never allow this! My competitive juices were now flowing.

I got my trivia test. I waited for the official start time. I tore through the questions. Just as I was about to pass my test to the cruise director, The Cheater passed his in first, edging me out at the tape. The cruise director went over The Cheater's test, and noted that he had multiple wrong answers out of the thirty questions. She then went through mine. I had one wrong. *[Steve later administered that one to Your Editor, who did just happen to know that four, not three, Steve, American presidents have been assassinated (so far): Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, Kennedy.]*

Now she had to go through all the answers of the rest of our apparently trivia-challenged bus mates, who also didn't get them all right.

I WIN AGAIN!!!

By this time we had stopped at a McDonald's, where I had the first Egg McMuffin of my life, sans the piece of ham-like food substance. It actually wasn't as bad as I had imagined it being ... We were ending our trip. One last chore. Who got closest in the Guess the Mileage contest?

I WIN AGAIN!!!

I imagined the rest of the bus hating me, with the (possible) exception of Janet, as I collected my eighteen wrinkled one-dollar bills and stepped off into the Big Apple.

New York, New York

The bus let us off near Times Square at 48th Street and 7th Avenue at around 9 AM. The bus driver cautioned us about being back by 7 PM because he could only live-park for 3 minutes.

My goal was the museum, which was (and still is) on the west side of Central Park around 81st Street, about an hour's walk. Janet's goal was to see someone famous.

We walked up to 49th Street. Since the streets of New York are essentially a Cartesian coordinate system, it was obvious

that we were going in the correct direction. Janet still had the need to ask for directions.

She asked a police officer, "Is this the way to Central Park?" His flippant response to her: "I don't know, I'm not from around here." She insisted. He repeated: "I don't know, I'm not from around here."

With this crazy cop and all the winning on the bus, the thought that we were in a parallel universe did cross my mind. But I explained to Janet that the officer was just joking with her and to follow me, this was the way to Central Park and the museum.

We got to Central Park. I saw Mickey Mantle's Restaurant. I had a flashback to last year's trip: We had eaten there. They had charged \$50 for two burgers and two beers. I didn't want to go there again. Ever.

We crossed the street. We were on the west side of Central Park, going toward the museum. It was a perfect springtime Saturday in New York. Horse-drawn cabs, roller bladers, runners and bicyclists were all circling the park. We crossed the street again. A glint of recognition crossed Janet's eyes as she scanned the sidewalk ahead. "Who's *that*?" she asked. Another trivia question. I looked, said, "That's Imus ... you know, that guy on the radio."

Janet had found her famous person.

Don Imus is with a young woman — his current wife, I think? We saunter past them. Oh no, Janet is *stopping and turning* ...

"IMUS!!!!" she shrieks.

I keep walking as if I don't know Janet.

As I look back at Janet and Imus from a safe distance, I notice that Imus has a pained look on his face as he says something to Janet. I wait for Janet to catch up to me and pray that we don't see any more famous people.

The Museum

We arrived at the American Museum of Natural History. (See www.amnh.org.) Going in the front entrance, we saw the long lines that were there last year. *[Wow, guess those were long lines!]* We asked for the Rose Center, and were instructed to go outside and around the corner.

The first thing you notice upon seeing the Rose Center is a four-story-high opaque sphere enclosed by a cubical glass building. Upon closer inspection, the astronomically aware individual realizes that there are other, smaller spheres surrounding the large one, and that the large sphere represents the Sun while the smaller spheres represent the planets of our solar system.

The sizes of the planets are to scale, but the interplanetary distances would require hundreds of miles to maintain the scale, so this is not done. People actually don't realize how big the Sun is. If the Earth were at the center of the Sun with the moon still orbiting it (impossible for quite a few reasons but let's pretend for the sake of demonstration), the Moon's orbit — about 200,000 miles — would reach less than halfway to the surface of the Sun, which is more than 400,000 miles from the center.

Janet's calling ahead for tickets worked out fine. We got in a line with only one person in front of us, picked up the tickets, and got into the museum right away.

Underneath the sphere was the Cullman Hall of the Universe, the main exhibit area. (See www.amnh.org/rose/universe.html.) It contained a number of demonstrations that basically presented the information of an introductory astronomy course.

At first it appears that the giant sphere is a big waste of space, but there are two theaters *inside* the sphere. In the lower level is a black hole exhibit with narration by Jodie Foster. In the upper sphere is a space show narrated by Tom Hanks.

This latter is an Omni theater-type screen which recreates the night sky with computers and real data. The viewer is taken on a trip to the planets, then to the Orion nebula and star-forming regions, then out of our Milky Way galaxy, then out of the local group of galaxies, then out of the Virgo supercluster of galaxies ... to so far out that superclusters just look like faint lights.

Some trip.

Just outside the large sphere is the Heibrum Cosmic Pathway

(www.amnh.org/rose/cosmicpathway.html). It consists mostly of various images tracing the evolution of the known universe. This is somewhat interesting but no reason to make the trip to New York.

I generally liked the Rose Center. I thought the exhibits were well done and of interest to the average museumgoer. My only major criticism was that too much square footage was given to Earth geology, while very minimal solar system planetary information beyond the superficial was presented. With spacecraft from Earth going to all the major large known bodies in the solar system, except Pluto and Charon, and landing on three extraterrestrial bodies and imaging their surfaces (the Moon, Venus, and Mars) — an emphasis on this, rather than Earth geology, would make much more sense.

On the plus side, the space show seemed to make the strongest impact on people. Even Janet thought it was cool.

The food court was of good quality with reasonable prices (for New York). I paid for lunch with my \$18 winnings.

After the thrills at the Rose, we toured the main museum for a little while, but had to leave to make our schedule. We returned through Central Park, ate at the Stage deli, and caught the bus back to our part of the galaxy.

Quote of the Month

"The future is here already. It's just unevenly distributed."

— *William Gibson, in an advertisement for Anderson Consulting*

Let's Watch That Personal Grooming, Gramps

"An 82-year-old great-grandfather with snow-white hair and hearing aids in both ears shuffles down the steps of the shooting range."

— Lead sentence of a story on leadership lessons at a counterterrorist school, in the biz mag *Fast Company*, June 2000

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

[From Detroit, genre jumping genius

Patrick O'Leary says *I've got the wrong guy camera left, back row, hiding his Manson lamps behind dark glasses at the International Conference of the Fantastic in the Arts class photo on the cover of the May Locus:]*

"No that wasn't me poolside at the ICFA. I missed *[that photo party]* again. Maybe next year. Or maybe I haven't learned the secret password/handshake that gets me invited.

"I have no shit to sling about what was a delightful weekend. I *almost* got up the courage to tell Octavia E. Butler how much I love her work. Almost. I read some poems and a short story that went over well.

"Heard some real kickass readings. Kelly Link read a motherfucker of a story. Sean Stewart read an excerpt from *Galveston* — he is a superb reader. And Candace Jane Dorsey read something original and mind-blowing as she always does."

[Patrick also displays a charming modesty for a guy with two great novels pubbed and one in the publishing oven:]

"I said hi to Neil Gaiman! I said hi to Neil Gaiman!

"I bought John Clute a drink!

"I sat next to Liz Hand!

"I was telling Gene Wolfe the other day — *I was telling Gene Wolfe the other day!!* — how I always feel like a fan at conventions. 'Yabbada yabbada yabbada' whenever I'm close to writers I admire. 'You're well beyond a fan, Patrick,' he said. Why? Because people like my stuff? No, I'm not.

I'm a drooling toe scuffin 'Aw shucks, hey there's Harlan Ellison!' kind of guy."

[Harlan Ellison? Where?!!]

*[While from Cambridge, MA, fan **Charley Sumner** sends fond wishes on my Hugo nomination:]*

"Congrats on the nom. Will you be going to Chicago? Marsy and I are planning on attending and will try to rock the vote ...

"I'm not usually one to push websites on people, but I thought that you and *The Devniad* readers might be interested in checking out www.yourdictionary.com. *Your Dictionary* is an excellent portal to language reference sites on the web. It features a wide variety of links for guides to over 200 different languages (yes, including artificial ones like Klingon) as well as a multitude of specialty dictionaries (e.g. law, medicine, slang, dance, history, and 13 different on-line cooking dictionaries), thesauri and other tools. It also has a collection of pages devoted to linguistic oddities like the history of the riddle about the third English word ending in "gry" and an article on the world's longest city name, which may not be in Wales as long suspected.

"While I'm on this topic, I also wanted to point out one of my favorite new words, 'retronym' (recently featured in a *Jeopardy* Tournament of Champions question). A retronym is used when an old term needs to be better defined because of a new thing that supersedes it. For example, the term 'acoustic guitar' did not come into being until after electric guitars grew popular enough to necessitate a way to differentiate which kind of instrument you meant when you referred to a guitar ('manual typewriter' and 'whole milk' are two other examples)."

[Charley, doesn't look like I'll make it to Chicago. Sob.

I've long loved and used Your Dictionary site under its previous name, A Web of Online Dictionaries. Where else are you going to go for bon mots in Manx, Maori, and Mapudungun? (Although be warned that, dammit, the last is translated only into Spanish, not English, which

can really cramp your style anent that monolingual vacation in southern Chile.)

Not to keep our readers in suspense, Your Dictionary points out Guinness allows the longest name may be Krungthepmahanakhon amornrattanakosinmahintarayudthaya mahadilokpohpnoparatajathanebureerom udomrajniwesmahasatarnamornpimarn avaltarnsatitsakatattiyavisanukramprasis, the burg known to those in a bit more hurry as Bangkok. I like their comment too: "The translation here is pretty much the unabridged history of the city rather than a word."

"Retronym" also came up in Devniad 44, wherein Leah Smith explained the concept at Ditto ditto.]

*[From the Yellowhammer State, writer/fan **Brett Cox** taps out a message about Happiness:]*

*"I would disagree ... with Dan Kimmel's evaluation of *Happiness*. It is not a loathsome film — it's a film about loathsome people. The actor who played the child molester did a brilliant job of portraying a character who may be loathsome, but is not a monster. He's just the guy next door. And that's the scary part ..."*

*[While MIT fan **Gary Dryfoos** says he's "playing with meta-levels of the comment-zine universe," all I have to do is put my comments in brackets and let all of his run free, nyaah nyaah; so here goes, this is all the G Man no matter how cruelly he tries to deceive you:]*

Here's me, doing you, quoting me: (Can't wait to see how you'll sort this out!)

*While copping a *mea culpa* on one of my ever-so-rare errors, I quoted a famous aviator: "In the immortal words of Wrong-Way Corrigan: 'Oops.'"*

Is there nothing my readers don't know? Correspondent and bon vivant Gary Dryfoos writes to point out that Wrong-Way Corrigan wasn't as confused about his destination as popular history would have it:

"'Oops' my apse. Douglas Corrigan knew perfectly well from the moment he took off in Brooklyn in July of 1938 that he was headed to Ireland, not back to California. Official refusal of his plans for a trans-Atlantic flight in a ten-year-old single-

engine rattle-trap inspired a brilliant Gaelic-logical end run around the aviation authorities. Upon arrival in Dublin, he blamed his compass, and claimed to be surprised — as if seeing water below him for 28 hours wouldn't have been kind of a big clue. I dearly hope that before his 1995 departure from this plane of existence, 'Wrong-Way' remembered to file an official flight-plan to the infernal regions."

[Thank you, Ding-Dong Dryfoos.]

*[First Harlan Ellison is calling me, now another giant of late 20th century fantastic literature, **Michael Swanwick**, is practically calling his lawyers on me in re my adumbration of a brouhaha at Bucconeer:]*

"Sir: This is yellow journalism at its shoddiest. It is not true that at the 1998 Worldcon, John Kessel and I 'practically got into a wrestling match over definitions.' There was another panelist in between us. Rather, we practically started slamming each other over the head with folding chairs over definitions. Get your facts right, man! Cordially ..."

[Michael, I can visualize how folding chairs can go over heads, but how can folding chairs go over definitions? Please clarify. Bewilderedly ...]

*[Canadian fan **Lloyd Penney** has comments on everything from giant rodents to British food, if that's not a tautology:]*

"I've seen the capybaras at the Toronto Zoo. You wouldn't think that something the size of a German shepherd would be as jittery as a gerbil, but they are. If their brains are the size of lemons, then those lemons must have been well-squeezed ..."

"A shame that the world is wild enough to make a fantasy writer like Madeleine L'Engle despair. To me, that is why fantasy and science fiction are vital in this crazy world. The answer lies not in escaping reality, but taking a vacation from it from time to time ... The constant battering of a harsh reality blunts the mind, and a good book or story sharpens it again, and allows you to better handle that reality."

*"... I think most Canadians are avoiding the sub movie *U-571*. What happened in this*

movie, the theft of a German U-boat, actually did happen in WWII, but it was a Canadian crew that did it 2 years before the US entered the war. However, the American movie machine is not going to make a flick about heroic Canadians, and a good story line is a good story line, and yet another part of Canadian history is co-opted ...

"Coming from a family with a Scottish mother, I got to enjoy some foods you might call British grub ... sausage rolls, square sausages (a cube of minced, seasoned beef with a hard-boiled egg in the middle), Scotch meat pies, Ayrshire bacon, Melton Mowbray pies ...

"On May 25, Yvonne and I fly out to Vancouver to be Fan GoHs at VCon 25. We'll be sharing the jet with Robert J. Sawyer and his wife Carolyn Clink, and we're sharing the GoH slate with Rob and Carolyn, and Spider and Jeanne Robinson. Vancouver fandom is still recovering financially a disastrous Westercon some years ago, but it does seem to be on the rebound ... The chairman of this VCon, Graeme Cameron, tells me that pre-registration is at close to 200, nearly double that of the VCon of just a couple of years ago ... The Sunday of the con is also our 17th wedding anniversary ... And then, on the second of June ... I turn a decrepit 41. Time is a harsh mistress, so don't tell my wife ..."

[Lloyd, telling wives about dominatrix mistresses is not an office for a friend.]

*[I still owe writer/fan **Rick Heller** apologies for slightly overestimating his wordage yardage]*

"The count on my story 'Loyal Puppies' is 7800 pages — I mean, words. If you didn't happen to catch it in printed form, it's available on my web site: www.neurosf.com."

[Rick, I'll catch it, doggone it.]

*[Like many SF fans and serious Hugo voters, Southern fan **Tom Jackson** is working to see how the reading he has stacked up stacks up:]*

"I have read neither the Stephenson opus nor the Vinge, so I can't take sides over who should win, but I will read them soon — I've

started my annual mad race to read all the fiction on the Hugo ballot. (I'm most of the way through *Darwin's Radio*. Four more to go.)

"P.S. Is your wife really down on your fannish activity, or is that just a running joke?"

[Tom, more like a running sore. When she's sore, I'm running! Oh, I could go on like this all night. There's a lot of love in this room ...

Actually, it all has a serious basis. Queen Maureen puts up with a certain amount of fannishness from me, but has no trace of such interest herself. "Love me, love my perzine" only gets a guy so far ... and obviously, I can't make as many cons as if I were married to, say, Janice Gelb or Liz Hand or Evelyn Leeper or Kathe Koja or Sydney Sowers Duncan or Barbara Chepaitis or Brenda Clough — hey, this is kind of a fun exercise! Can't you see a calendar emerging from this: The Babes of Science Fiction? Closely followed by my agonizing public execution ...

FlimFan

EXCELLENT:

Joe Gould's Secret — If you're a crank, misfit, has-been, might've-been, would-be, never-will, or God-knows-what, have I got a movie for you! It's the true story of a gifted journalist — Joseph Mitchell of *The New Yorker* — and a gifted loon. (Make that sea gull.) Joseph Ferdinand Gould was a doctor's son from Norwood, Massachusetts, and a 1911 Harvard graduate. But when Mitchell found him among Greenwich Village's plentiful cranks, misfits, etc. and profiled him in 1942, "Professor Sea Gull" had long been one of the Village's most prominent bohemians: a homeless drunk who "looked like a bum and lived like a bum," often flapped his rags and shrieked like a gull — and labored incessantly on a rumored 9-million-word literary masterpiece, his *Oral History of Our Times*, with the respect and support of such luminaries as Ezra Pound, William Saroyan, and E. E. Cummings. (I also like one of

Gould's poems, a short ditty he recites onscreen, entitled "My Religion." "In winter I'm a Buddhist, / And in summer I'm a nudist!") In the movie, Stanley Tucci plays the reporter as a quiet, reserved Southern gentleman, while Ian Holm gives one of the greatest and certainly showiest performances of his career as the nutty professor. They meet; Mitchell expresses interest in doing a short piece on Gould; and the prof soon has him in what I'll call a Reverse Heisenberg hold (you know, where the observed has an effect on the observer?), continually introducing the hapless journalist as "my biographer." Holm is brilliant. As reading Mitchell confirms, the real guy was considerably more emaciated. Balder. Dirtier. Toothless. But Holm seems to catch the man's true-to-life spirit: the tantrums, slyness, and self-importance; the manic highs and paranoid lows; but also the knowing humor, the deep-down dignity, and a brand of honesty that can scorch all we middle-class types sitting comfortably in the theater. When a waitress scolds him for emptying a bottle of ketchup over his charity meal, Gould shouts, "When I'm hungry, I don't *have* any self-respect!" ... Visually, Tucci's movie perfectly captures the 1940s. His camera loves the city, its facades and its faces ... Although the focus is on the colorful Gould, we gradually realize that Mitchell is a pretty interesting character himself. He's an acknowledged prose master with an important job; always meticulously dressed; husband to a beautiful, intelligent wife, the photographer Therese Mitchell (played luminously here by Hope Davis in a way that makes us wish we saw more of her); father of two smart, lively little girls ... Why is he so drawn to Gould and other outcasts? Tucci plays a withdrawn, tasteful, somehow sad man, and he's that kind of director too. All three of his movies have probed the personality of the artist: the wonderful *Big Night*, less successful *The Imposters*, and now this very fine film about not one but two beset artistic souls. There's a hidden theme here that, while present in the movie's first words, emerges gradually, subtly, is never quite

spoken. Although it's all pretty obvious in retrospect. Particularly when — well, let me say I have a shameful affection for a story that waits to deliver a surprise ending only in the footnotes afterwards. In its minor psychological/literary way, this one's a doozy.

NOTE: This fine flick is based upon two memorable articles in *The New Yorker* magazine: "Professor Sea Gull" (1942) and "Joe Gould's Secret" (1964). Along with lots of Mitchell's other first-class prose, they're both collected in *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories*, a 1993 Vintage trade paperback you should run out and hunt down right now.

GOOD:

Time Code — When I say this is an experimental film, please don't reach for your gun. It's actually kind of fun. And it's got some notable talent behind it. Such as director Mike Figgis (*Stormy Monday*, *Leaving Las Vegas*), who employs not one but two seldom-seen techniques. First, he splits the screen into four quadrants, shot with four cameras. This takes time getting used to: you're always seeing four images in the square, and as you watch the action in one your gaze often flicks to check one or more of the others. (Tip: try to get enough sleep the night before.) But Figgis helps greatly with one big hint: the quadrant where he wants your attention has its soundtrack brought up, with sound from the other three ramped down. For me, though, the daring move is his second departure from the norm: those four handheld digital cameras each runs for 93 minutes, with no cuts. So the whole movie is one or I guess four continuous takes. Cameras move from cars to streets to offices to bedrooms, actors come in and out talking and gesturing and behaving badly, all in effect "live." The logistics must have been UNbelievable. Inevitably, there's a loose, improvisatory quality to the acting (some good, some bad: Holly Hunter was pretty disappointing, for instance) and few really great, beautiful shots, because you can't stop to light anything or to retake. The story? Actually a

fairly amusing self-satire on what I'll call the cell phonies of Hollywood (hey, that's not bad; remember, you heard it here first — oops, just went to the net and got hits on that phrase from last year; OK, you heard it here eighth). Most of the plot revolves around the actors, directors, executives, and other drinking, drugging, adulterous, and self-involved types parading in and out of a small Sunset Boulevard film production company named Red Mullet. (Also the name of the actual company that produced this film, har-har.) The firm is currently considering such sleazy/artistic properties as *Bitch From Louisiana* and what sounds like a ripoff of *Being John Malkovich* called *Time Toilet* (don't ask). I like Stellan Skarsgard very much as the bad-boy head of the company. Particularly in his late scene offering the usual devil's bargain to a young director: "I'm sorry. This is the most pretentious crap I've ever heard ... We'll do your crap, and then you'll do our crap. And that will be the deal." Also effective is his tightly wound, bearded partner (Xander Berkeley), and the smiling, coke-dealing security guard (Danny Huston) who makes sure during earthquakes or other disasters to comfort the prettiest women first. Including of course Salma Hayek, who's great as a two-timing actress. Jeanne Tripplehorn as her jealous lover must do too much screaming early on, but she holds our eye when she quiets down and lets us see how deep betrayal can cut ... And Golden Brooks is also a scream as a young African-American vp-in-charge-of-sistahood, Onyx Richardson, who bristles with lines like "You only think blacks are commercial when they're shooting each others' brains out" ... A tag line on the film's Web site claims that it's "a story that could only be told in four dimensions." Well, no. Ultimately, I'm afraid, we might very well enjoy this little tale a little more without the distractions. But there *could* be a story like that someday, and *Time Code* takes a worthy shot at showing the way.

DECENT:

Gladiator — "Joey, do you like movies about gladiators?" Even if you do, you might let this one live with only a mild thumbs-up. Because it's not what you think. Granted, there are some exciting-enough arena combat scenes, with swords and chariots, trapdoors and tigers, dust and leather and gore — I had *heard* the expression "a mist of blood in the air," but never actually *seen* it before — but not as many as you might think. And the action in what fights there are, with lots of digital effects piled on, is more impressionistic than clear-cut. (Although the cool opening — a winter battle against the German barbarians — has the added thrill of being unexpected. Until now.) The real struggle preoccupying moviemaker Ridley Scott rages in the heart of the Roman general Maximus (Russell Crowe), who as the story begins in 180 A.D. is raised high by one emperor, then brought low by another. He becomes (surprise surprise) a gladiator, but fights to hold onto his honor and serve Rome though all seems lost. It's like a movie where Senator John McCain becomes a professional wrestler but mostly keeps brooding about the people's need for campaign finance reform. Crowe does a nice job playing down, depressed, but determined throughout the movie. He's got enough presence to make us believe he can butcher guys three times his size just with speed, discipline, and dirty tricks he learned campaigning. Joaquin Phoenix is properly self-tortured as Commodus, a second-rate Caligula who, historically, actually *did* enjoy playing gladiator in the Coliseum. Although speaking of professional wrestling, you'd think his crowds would notice the fix was in. My favorite character is probably Proxima — Oliver Reed has the right battered old face and brutal manner to run his own gladiator school. He died during the filming, but goes out with some good lines, reminiscing about golden times in the arena: "The *silence* before you strike. And the noise afterwards." Director Scott joined my personal pantheon with his immortal *Blade Runner*, so we know he can make dark

action movies. By all the gods, I'm decadent enough to have mildly enjoyed this one.

DRECK:

Battlefield Earth — Not far into this miserable clusterhump, we're ready to surrender if it means the battle (the movie) will be over quicker. Look, instead of my usual thoughtful review, I'll just spew. You know, like these movie guys did? ... SPOILER ALERT: This whole movie isn't just spoiled, it's *carrion!* ... OK, it's the year 3000 and Earthguys are primitive slaves and fugitives (not enough food but they have big fat *horses?* in the *mountains?*) getting stomped by nasty alien Psychlos. Huge, cruel beings from a civilization advanced far beyond our own except for dentistry ... Hero Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, the bravest, smartest, luckiest man who ever lived, is abysmally played by Barry Pepper. Looks familiar. Ah, the sniper in *Saving Private Ryan* — knew as soon as I zeroed in on his face. John Travolta stares up at us from the bottom of this toilet as the alien security boss. His performance as Terl makes Travolta's Barbarino look like Olivier's Hamlet. Anvil shoe lifts, eighty pounds of makeup, fake shoulders like boulders — all it does is underline what a high, light little *voice* Travolta really has ... Hurl invents diabolical ploys like, I promise I won't kill you. I said *I wouldn't* kill you. I didn't say *he* wouldn't kill you! Ha ha ha! Whatever. Just somebody kill me now ... Did enjoy the aliens' language, though: like bulldogs throwing up ... Interesting SFX approach here for a wannabe SF action blockbuster: Hey, if everything's real *dark*, we can spend *shit* on the effects budget! ... Hurl's equally clever plan: To teach this stupid human a lesson, let's give him our language and all our technology and then dump him in a remote place with a bunch of his rebellious cohorts pretty much unsupervised ... Leading to the inevitable human battlecry: Hey, we've got 7 days to save the planet! Hey, lucky we found these 1000-year-old Harrier hoverjets lying around, ready to start at the touch of a button. Hey, learning combat flying is a snap: "It's like breaking a

horse!" ... Coupla days up from cavemantitude, where they considered a lighted log a wondrous gift from the gods, these dudes are deploying tactical and nuclear explosives with lines like, "Yeah, let's blow the dome!" ... Never believed I would find myself saying this, but L. Ron Hubbard's book's gotta be better than this.

Backchat

on *APA: NESFA #359*, April 2000

To Leslie Turek

Much enjoyed your Vienna trip report, especially the stuff on the Spanish Riding School. My sister Liz feels that one of the most unforgivable horrors of World War II was that it might have caused those horses to miss a meal ...

Remember reading Mary Stewart's *Airs Above the Ground* when I was a kid, but had forgotten that it was the name of a class of dressage maneuvers. Wonder when "Levade, Courbette, and Capriole" will show up as questions on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*

To Elisabeth Carey

So don't be coy: regarding your new duplex in Lawrence (congrats, by the way), what's *wrong* with the mysterious "tenant in side A"?

I too have suffered from The Great UPS Runaround. You're right, getting them to divert the package to your office is the best solution.

Or you could just hire a butler.

To Joe Ross

Thanks for one of the most bizarre factoids in world history: Hedy Lamarr invented the spread-spectrum concept now used in cordless phones. Top that, Howard Waldrop!

I miss Dan Quayle. Not since Yogi Berra has there been such a master of the malaprop, as you remind us with one from Dan's good old days: "Republicans

understand the important of bondage between a mother and child.”

And that’s a classic Woody Allen quote you’ve captured, too, about wanting to achieve immortality through not dying. For me, though, it’s hard to top his explanation of how he cheated on his metaphysics exam: “I looked into the soul of the boy next to me.”

To Mark Olson

Thanks very much for your encyclopedic answer re the number of reflections between two parallel mirrors. Once again, your prose was a model of apparently effortless clarity. I almost got about half of it.

Thanks sincerely for the Hugo nom note, too, Mark. So you think I’m too self-effacing about actually trying to win the fanwriter prize. Guilty, with an explanation. Sure, I’d like to win, and hope that all reading this vote for me because they think I was the best fanwriter of 1999. The trouble with politicking is that I always think I’m encouraging people to concentrate on the first half of that sentence at the expense of the second. If I win that way, what good is it? ... Unless you just meant that I should get going, do more distribution, go to more cons, get the stuff up on my fossilized Web site, and so on. In which case, instead of high-minded moral anguish, I fall back upon my tried-and-true laziness defense.

Re the Brian Greene book on string theory and your comment, “I don’t know what strings are made of.” Strings are made of twisted plant fiber.

To Ann Hillier

Thanks for the astronomy bits, as usual. Not sure about that Mars movie chronology you copied, though: several of them seem to have nothing to do with Mars. I can see *The Martian Chronicles*, *Mars Attacks*, *My Favorite Martian*, etc. But my memory says the extraterrestrial settings and/or creatures of *Alien*, *My Stepmom Is an Alien*, *Independence Day*, *Contact*, and *Men in Black*, for instance, are not only not Martian but not even of this solar system.

To Tony Lewis

At MiniCon, why do you think the Gordon Dickson talk was so poorly attended? He’s certainly known to all older fans, and still on the shelves in Borders with material that isn’t too challenging, such as the Hoka stories, for younger fans. I know he’s a local author there — do people feel they’ve been there, done that? Certainly at Boskone, Hal Clement still gets much respect and a decent attendance, right?

Per the priceless Internet Movie Data Base (www.imdb.com), your newfound fourth cousin, James Mangold, directed the movies *Heavy* (1995), *Cop Land* (1997), and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). He also got writing credits on them, as well as on *Oliver and Company* (1988). So writing talent runs deep in your family — but was Mangold ever nominated for a co-author Hugo like his talented Cousin Tony? If you’re interested, there’s a decent photo of him in the archive at <http://us.imdb.com/Gallery?0172493;;2>. Bearded and intense, what a surprise.

Anyway, Mangold has the rep of a talented, serious-enough director, but not of the first rank. At least yet. I’ve only seen *Cop Land*, which was OK but could have been better, considering contributors like De Niro, Keitel, Liotta, Garofalo, even a brief appearance by Edie Falco (today’s Mrs. Anthony Soprano), and oh yes, Sylvester Stallone. Last thought: Cousin Jim apparently took down a salary of \$1.5 million for *Girl, Interrupted*, so if you ever meet for a meal I wouldn’t fight to get the check.

To Paul Giguere

So you may miss Boskone next year because of school scheduling — how about Readercon this July?

Nice to see a young (slim, too) guy like you including so many movies older than you are among the great DVDs/movies. *Blade Runner*, *Chinatown*, and *Casablanca* would certainly appear near the top of my faves too.

One minor cavil: you say 1949’s *The Third Man* was the admirable Joseph Cotten’s “swan song.” Not sure if you really mean that, in which case you’re being pretty

harsh on the rest of the guy's career. Technically, the phrase alludes to the song sung by a dying swan, and so to one's *last* creative work. Of course, as *Brewer's* reminds us: about to croak or not, swans don't sing. Unless you count the whistling swan, which rejoices in the tag *Cygnus musicus*. (With a flourish of apostrophes, I say whistlin' ain't singin'.)

Anyway, Cotten acted in movies and TV into the early 1980s, and didn't actually leave the pond until 1994 ...

To Art Henderson

What a wonderful paean to classical music and to your particular favorites! I knew a little of it, but you're way beyond me, maestro. Thanks for classing up the joint.

Agree on most of your TV show choices. Especially *West Wing*, wherein I echo everything you say, fellow Wingnut. Delightfully liberal, isn't it? But confident enough to sometimes slam its own point of view ... As in the wonderfully concise debate between breezy White House Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) and his ditzily attractive aide Donna Moss (Janel Moloney) about tax relief for a budget surplus. Which debate I've stolen off a great fan Website called An Unofficial Tribute to the West Wing (<http://homepages.infoseek.com/~thewestwing>) and reprint below for posterity's sake. It's the kind of cut-thrust-jape dialog that we fans love most about the show; perhaps it will lure a few more people to see it. But please, no tired political rejoinders ...

Donna: What's wrong with me getting my money back?

Josh: You won't spend it right.

Donna: What do you mean?

Josh: Let's say your cut of the surplus is \$700. I want to take your money and combine it with everybody else's money and use it to pay down the debt and further endow social security. What do you want to do with it?

Donna: Buy a DVD player.

Josh: See?

Donna: But my \$700 is helping employ the people who manufacture and sell DVD players. Not to mention the people who manufacture and sell DVDs. It's the natural evolution of a market economy.

Josh: The problem is, the DVD player you buy might be made in Japan.

Donna: I'll buy an American one.

Josh: We don't trust you.

Donna: Why not?

Josh: We're Democrats.

Donna: I want my money back!

Josh: You shouldn't have voted for us.

And, a little later in the episode:

Josh: Donna?

Donna: Yes.

Josh: How much were the sandwiches?

Donna: Twelve ninety-five.

Josh: I gave you a twenty.

Donna: Yes. As it turns out you actually gave me more money than I needed to buy what you asked for. However, knowing you as I do, I'm afraid I can't trust you to spend the change wisely. I've decided to invest it for you.

Josh: That was nice. That was a little parable.

Donna: I want my money back.

To Lisa Hertel

Great line last time: "Mark is into 'spares,' which is why I knew we'd never stop at one child." Just as long as he doesn't extend that philosophy to women ... or start cannibalizing for parts.

When you say Liana "was born during *Caroline in the City*" — what'd you have her on, the TV tray?

Thanks for mentioning my third-time Hugo nominee status. Some things I never get tired of hearing about ...

To Tom Endrey

Glad you missed me at Lunacon. I mean, sorry I didn't get to see you there, or to go at all (maybe someday), but I'm glad that — well, you know what I mean.

Agree with many of your complaints about stupid plot points etc. in *Mission to*

Mars. But I still ended up liking its affirmative sensawunda spirit more than you.

Think the difference, Tom, is that it gored your oxen about ancient astronauts, Velikovsky, the Mars Face, etc., while I'm not as invested in alternative theories of solar system history. (Mildly interested sometimes, and mindful of the strong interest they arouse in people I respect, including you, my brother Michael, my friend Steve, and another scientist or two — but not invested.) Admit I did find the movie's handling of that last item needlessly confusing. Why bother to put a giant Face on the planet Mars — but it's not *the* Mars Face, and you never even acknowledge the controversy?

Incidentally, just bought Richard Belzer's *JFK, UFOs, and Elvis* on your recommendation, Tom. Looks great. See you on the Art Bell show any day now ...

Interesting that you singled out Gary Sinese for his performance in the 1994 TV miniseries of *The Stand*. Absolutely. That's one of the early roles I always think of when I think about him; would see that one again.

I liked the Zenna Henderson stories a whole lot more than you, too, Tom. Even if I'm not "one of the girls."

I don't remember Henderson's bringing any new SF ideas to the table. But in an era when most of what I was reading was hard/adventure SF, I cherished her stories for their style, their humanity, and their utter differentness in dealing with one of the strangest worlds of all: our own. American small-town culture in the 50s and 60s. No galactic conquerors, no zap guns, no melodrama. Just the high true drama of schoolkids and teachers and housewives and other ordinary folk who weren't so ordinary after all inside, but had to hide that from their neighbors. Henderson's stuff made SF real in a way that most other books didn't.