

The Devniad

Book 66b

un zine de Bob Devney
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For APA: NESFA #364 September 2000
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She'll Fly Away

Queen Maureen has taken up flying.

Apparently it's been a dream of hers since girlhood to learn how to pilot an airplane. After nineteen centuries, sorry, years of marriage, few things surprise me anymore. So naturally I'm sympathetic, supportive, and ready to do anything I can do to help except ever actually go up with her.

It's not fear of her flying skills. Heck, I let Maureen drive me around in a car. How much worse can she be in a plane? Maybe that didn't come out right. Anyway, my reluctance is because I can get motion-sick just taxiing down a runway. As her co-pilot, I'd be so miserable I'd probably try to grab the stick and fly into a mountain just to make it all *stop*.

Buoyed by my support, Maureen's still investigating the subject and trying to find a flight instructor. Chief finding so far: the Royal Exchequer's gonna take a big hit. The costs of instructor time and plane rental for the 50 to 150 hours it takes to get even the lowest level of pilot's licence apparently mount up quick.

To paraphrase William F. Buckley's definition of ocean yacht racing, it seems sport flying resembles standing in front of a big fan tearing up thousand-dollar bills.

As part of her research, and as something we could do together anent her new hobby without packing airsickness bags for me, Her Majesty and I recently attended a fly-in at Mansfield Airport, a small field in a nearby Massachusetts town.

A fly-in is an airshow that can't afford the Blue Angels.

Basically, they fly in various special aircraft and line them up next to the airport office, along with a number of regular planes whose owners keep them at the field. You can look at, touch, and in many cases climb into them all. There's also a little row of vendor tables selling flying books, videos, tee shirts, and other memorabilia. (This part of it was a lot like the dealer's room at any small science fiction convention, although few — in fact, none — of these vendors were selling *Buffy* or *X Files* action figurines.)

At this show, you could also take a free ride in a biplane (the line was so long and the day cold enough that we didn't bite) or make a \$50 donation and get a fast and I'd imagine extremely terrifying trip in a plane that did aerial acrobatics. I passed on that one, thanks. The aerobatic plane and a few others, including a helicopter, also put on solo overhead exhibitions at various points.

Strolling around the field, I once again proved the aptness of Yogi Berra's aphorism, "You can see a lot just by looking."

One major observation: at least in this end of the business, the cockpits are small. I mean, practically *jockey* small. You can see why, say, Orson Welles, John Candy, and Chris Farley never teamed up for an Air Force comedy.

And the planes are really beat-up, too. You know Luke's sandblasted 2-metre T-16 dune floater in the first *Star Wars* movie? The one he used to "bullseye womp rats" in back home? Well, some of these planes look almost that hard-used. Maureen showed me a battered Cessna 152 in which she'd had a training flight. Stooping to peer into the coffin-sized cockpit, you could see the

lettering was rubbed off half the indicators on the instrument panel.

There's a confidence-builder for brand-new flyers.

Another little surprise: gazing behind the back seat of one of these little flying flivvers, I noticed the aft compartment had a sticker on it: "Max luggage capacity 100 lbs."

Uh-oh, I sense turbulence ahead: Maureen packs more than that to go to the *mall*.

As an SF fan, I'm familiar from accounts of the early space program with the feeling that every ounce counts. Those NASA boys were trying to hoist life support and a science payload from Cape Canaveral to the Moon. But to get a set of Samsonite to Nantucket?

There were several experimental planes and other exhibits scattered around the edges of the field, with sightseers poking around in them. Some of the experimentals were what are called ultralights. You can see that the dream of Daedalus isn't dead yet. Although judging by the flimsiness of these strap-on finned-lawnmower-looking things, some of these flyers soon may be.

Serious note: Of course, I'm greatly exaggerating the dangers of flying. Sure, there are all the statistics about how many more millions of miles you fly in an airplane than in a car before you get the first bad accident. But I'm also aware that those books are a little cooked: planes fly a lot more miles in an average trip than a car. Basically, seems like I've got a lot to learn about this whole flying thing before I come to any firm conclusions.

Not that my ignorance is unique. One guy at the fly-in, who'd done some lobbying for sport flying interests, told me he'd once had a short, confusing conversation about proposed airport legislation with someone from Senator Ted Kennedy's office.

"She was the Senator's transportation specialist, for god's sake. Well, she may have known buses and trucks, but not flying ... 'What? Most airports have no control

towers? You mean you people fly around up there without anybody *controlling* you?"

I laughed like this wasn't news to me too.

One exhibit over to the side seemed to be a military personnel carrier or recon car. At least, it was painted in olive drab with a coupla guys in fatigues lounging around next to it. I never got over to see what possible connection a tracked armored vehicle could have with an airshow. Unless — maybe it mounted an antiaircraft cannon?

There's a confidence-builder for brand-new flyers.

We did see an extremely sleek little number goes through its cloudsplitting paces overhead. The announcer called it a Yak. A Russian-made single-engine low-wing craft, it's apparently one of the world's finest aerobatic airplanes. Helps that its main spar is made of titanium. Apparently it stands up to *g* stresses a little better than the average aluminum/tissue paper blend they use on passenger planes for the flying public.

This particular crate had some sort of cybernetic symbiosis going with a pilot who I think was the New England aerobatics champion.

The guy could obviously make that thing do anything he wanted. What he chose to urge it into involved maneuvers known by names such as hammerhead stalls, butterfly rolls, outside rolls, and tail slides.

I won't describe most of these in any detail, because I can't. My eyes kept closing involuntarily.

But I did get a slit-eyed view of a tail slide. That's where you take the plane almost straight up up up until it just can't *take* it anymore. And it gets slower and slower until it kinda reaches a peak, and pauses. Stalls, in other words. Then it starts to ... you guessed it, *sliiide*.

Baaaackward ...

There's a confidence-builder for brand-new flyers.

Before attending, I'd vaguely imagined all flyguys would look like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. Young, sleek, rather stylish, wearing \$2000 goatskin leather jackets, etc.

Not quite. Most of the vendors and many of the pilots at this show were big on gray hairs and tattoos. Tee shirts and nylon windbreakers were the uniform of choice, some of them rather tattered. Perhaps at this level you spend all your money on aviation fuel, bribing FAA airworthiness inspectors, and, I dunno, high-priced airport lounge vending machine peanut butter crackers.

These people may resemble SF fans in another respect too: both devotees of a cult that has lost much of its youthful wildcatting glamour. Like us, they must ask themselves: where will the young folks come from?

Although in the case of flying fans, perhaps they really *will* drop from the skies ...

For now, Queen Maureen is still touring various local airports. She's taking intro flights with various instructors, trying to pick the best combination of instructor, plane, and airport to appoint as her Royal Air Force establishment.

Not sure at this early point how this will change our lives. Many intriguing questions remain.

Will my motion sickness mean I can't share much of Maureen's new world? Can she fly my brother Michael and I to the upcoming science fiction Worldcons in Philadelphia, San Diego, and Toronto? Will she take to wearing silk scarf and goggles around the house?

Should I up her life insurance?

Your Assignment Next Time

James Stevens-Arce, ace e-mail correspondent, good friend to *The Devniad*, and the best science fiction writer in Puerto Rico, has just published his first novel,

Soulsaver, with Harcourt. I promised Jim I'd mention it in this month's issue.

When I wrote to him, I actually meant I'd write a review of the book. However, excrement eventuated, and while I've started the novel, I wasn't able to finish it by this deadline. So far so good, certainly: it's a fast and furious satire about a fundamentalist religious dictatorship set in a futuristic dystopian San Juan, and how often do you see one of those?

Tell you what: why don't you all — every reader of *The Devniad* — just buy the hardcover this month? That way, you'll really be able to appreciate every subtle nuance of my full review next ish ...

(Hope *this* makes up for missing that deadline, Jim.)

Caution: Science Fiction May Lead to Harder Stuff

[From an article by Geoffrey Wheatcroft on Kingsley and Martin Amis in *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2000 — see www.theatlantic.com/cgi-bin/o/issues/2000/09/wheatcroft.htm]

“... As the years go by, the letters display Kingsley declining into querulous, dyspeptic dislike of any serious contemporary literature at all. Some of his shafts at highbrow affectation were well aimed, but his contempt for Martin's literary heroes, Nabokov and Bellow, was pure blindness. He became a science-fiction fan, rarely a good sign; by the 1960s he was, quite absurdly, acclaiming Ian Fleming as a great writer; and by the end of his life just about the only living novelist he could bear to read was Dick Francis.”

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

NESFAn **Mark Hertel** had agreed to accept my Hugo at Chicon in case I (hah!) won one. He sent this report instead:

“Actually, I went to the ceremony (I missed the reception) and [Mark’s wife] Lisa went to the party.

“I pretty much had the worst convention/vacation. On Wednesday I twisted my ankle and couldn't walk Thursday or Friday. The Hugo packet wasn't at registration and they hadn't heard that they would even be getting the packets. I got a call at 10:30 PM from Team Hugo on Friday night, telling me that I should go to the green room and get the packet. On Saturday I could walk, so I went to the green room where they didn't have the packet. I then tracked down the Hugo rehearsal and got the invitations (though still not an organized packet).

“I was a few minutes late for the start of the ceremony, but otherwise it was an enjoyable evening.

“Sunday was pretty good, but Monday morning I woke up with my foot in incredible pain again. I didn't really leave the room until the afternoon. On Tuesday, I got sick with something that gave me an incredible headache and made me nauseous which carried over into the flight home ...”

Mark, my ghod. Sounds like it was a good thing I didn't go, or I would have been struck down by the plague at least.

Well, thanks for arising from your bed of pain and doing the noble deed. Better luck next con — to both of us.

For another view of the same events, let's turn to NESFAn **Lisa Hertel**:

“Mark went to the ceremony while I babysat; when he returned, I went to the Hugo L/o/s/e/r/s/ Nominees Party to pick up your nifty parting gift (a beer mug, courtesy of MilPhil). I had fun introducing myself as Bob Devney (whilst wearing my badge). Comments ranged from ‘I see you've been to Sweden’ (wish I could remember who said that!) to ‘Bob, you've changed!’ We also have a pin and some lovely paper remembrances for you.

“Mark didn't get to the pre-ceremony reception (he was at dinner), and during the ceremony he found himself in (Campbell-winner) Cory Doctorow's assigned seat (thankfully, it didn't matter). I suspect he never expected to have to limp up on stage anyway ...

“Next year in Philly?”

Lisa, next year in Philly, *maybe* ... Opening guns have sounded as I begin negotiations with Queen Maureen.

Writer/movie critic **Dan Kimmel** was one of the few who acceded to my earlier request for quotes from Chicon, another science fiction Worldcon I couldn't make:

“According to one of the newsletters at the con you're looking for quotes. The only quotes I have to offer, alas, are mine, but you are welcome to them, so long as it is understood I am sending them to you at *your* request and am not trying to use any influence to get major publicity through an appearance in *The Devniad*.

“In any case, I finally got to do a few panels at the Worldcon level this year, and moderated the panel on the best SF films of the '90s. During a discussion on Disney animation, someone remarked about all the toys and games and other product tie-ins that come with each film. I said that I understood that marketing was part of the game ‘but whose idea was it to do a Hunchback of Notre Dame backpack? What were they thinking?’

“Later, during a discussion as to whether the trailer for *The Sixth Sense* gave away too little of what the movie was REALLY about, another member of the audience kept insisting that the person speaking not ‘give away’ the ending. After two or three times of this I interjected, ‘I'll give it away. It was the sled.’ I'm pleased to report that the savvy con audience got the reference.

“Actually the best line I *heard* rather than said came from [NESFAn] Deb Geisler. I told her that while I'm a pre-supporter of the Boston bid, I was staying at the con with a friend running the Charlotte bid. Feeling a bit guilty, I decided on the only possible

solution: I signed up to 'pre-oppose' Charlotte. (They said I could contribute and not be listed as a supporter, but I told them I wanted to do this right.) When I told this to Deb she said, 'Now you're a fan.'

"Scary."

Dan: wear that propeller beanie with pride.

Is my favorite aunt **Ann Paterson** just echoing my regard, or did she really like those Readercon quotes?

"I loved this issue ... full of interesting, amusing, and thought-provoking remarks — or maybe just musing-provoking remarks.

"If I remember correctly ... *Round The Bend* was your Dad's favorite Nevil Shute. I would be very hard put to decide on one favorite.

"I don't think you watch *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, but last week one question confirmed my determination to name you as my 'Phone a Friend' line when I appear. Question: 'What is the name of the Sci-Fi fiction award?' (P.S. Contestant got it right.)

Aunt Ann: so what was that answer?

NESFAn **Tony Lewis** also sent in some choice Chicon quotes:

"Unnamed by request dealer — 'The better the program and convention, the worse sales are. Sales at Chicon were great!'

"Japanese couple filling out pre-supporter forms, to Tony Lewis holding their baby—'Ha ha, you want grandchild.'

"In a Chicago taxi — Driver: what city you from? Us: Boston. Driver: you want I drive on sidewalk to make you feel at home?"

Oklahoma fan **Tom Jackson** sends his usual cogent comments:

"I didn't read Tony Lewis' original comment about the 'Dark Ages,' because of course my only exposure to your apa is through your comments to the contributors, but he is quite correct that the Romans had a rather poor record for technological innovation and that Europeans after the 'fall' of Rome did advance in agriculture and technology.

"For example, the invention of hay, the development of the heavy plow and the new use of rye as a cereal crop all made it easier to support larger population densities north of the Mediterranean. Because of these advances, you can argue that the German conquest was beneficial to civilization in the long run; Western Europe eventually surpassed the Eastern Roman Empire in power and wealth, although it took several hundred years for that to come to pass.

"It is true that the victory of the German tribes did a lot of damage to classical literary culture, because it eventually eliminated the Roman aristocracy that supported and patronized it. But it's also true that although the Germans in the west conquered Rome militarily and politically, Roman culture 'conquered' the barbarians to a large extent. Germans who had previously been Arians or pagans, such as the Frank and Visigoths, adopted the Roman religion, Roman Catholicism, and Latin didn't exactly become an extinct language.

"I voted for you for 'best fan writer' and would like to see you win, but Dave Langford is not a bad writer to lose to."

Tom, you were missed at Readercon. About the fairly brightly lit Dark Ages: For the last few months, have kept *The Year 1000* as my "coat-pocket book." You know, the one you keep to read in a restaurant when your wife or friend is 10 minutes late? It's a short, clearly written, entertaining look at daily life in England 1000 years back, which means it tells me about the end and the consequences of the period you and Tony are talking about. You mentioned the cultivation of rye: the book is good on the hallucinogenic properties of light cases of ergot poisoning. And it actually makes you glad so many of the peasants inadvertently got to bliss out for a bit, particularly in late summer when the human-food harvest was not yet in and practically the entire population except the rich was scraping the bottom of the flour barrel with hunger ...

As Johnny Carson used to say, fascinating stuff!

By the way, Tom, you mention "the Frank and the Visigoths" -- would the former be anything like The Donald?

I love Langford too, so it's hard for me to work up some faneds' outrage at his long Hugo streak. But thanks much for the vote from one of you few, you happy few, Tom.

Been meaning to ask you — do I recall correctly that R. A. Lafferty shares with you the joy of being an Oklahoman? I used to worship the man. Only met him once, up here in Boston for the 1989 Worldcon. Last I heard, he was in a nursing home. As a local fan, do you have any local knowledge about him? Ever meet him? Know anything of his present plight?

Famous fan writer **Evelyn C. Leeper** has various, well, ishes with last ish:

"With all due respect to Moorcock, I think it's not unreasonable for a kid to read a book just to get a good story. Or even an adult. Heck, when I'm drained and exhausted, I'm not looking for great prose — give me a story that carries me along.

"Speaking of space movies, Mark and I both recommend THE DISH, an Australian film about the radio telescope in Australia used to transmit the live footage from the Apollo 11 moon landing. It didn't have a US distributor when we saw it at the Toronto International Film Festival, but it then placed second in the People's Choice Awards (behind Ang Lee's CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON), so it wouldn't surprise me to hear it had been picked up.

"I can also report that SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE was every bit as good as I had hoped it would be and will be on my Hugo ballot. I haven't decided whether CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON is fantasy or not — certainly the martial arts sequences are fantastical, but is that enough?

"THE SHY STEGOSAURUS OF CRICKET CREEK seems to be out of print. Maybe some publisher who reads this will pick it up.

"I think a low point (of some sort) was reached with the novelization of the Branagh version of FRANKENSTEIN, which was

listed as "Leonore Fleischer's MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN." I suppose it could have been worse — perhaps as "Leonore Fleischer's 'Kenneth Branagh's MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN.'"

Evelyn, on Michael Moorcock's shortness with that youngster at Readercon who read "just to get a good story" — well, of course that's a vital and pleasurable part of almost anybody's reading experience. Certainly any reader of SF or fantasy. Stuff that offers no more than just a cracking good yarn — Hell, Moorcock's *written* plenty of those.

But let's imagine expanding on his one-word negative answer. Try this: In contrast to plenty of cons where "a good story" is the highest and in fact pretty much sole aim of the literature being celebrated, Readercon and a few other sercons try to look at what *else* good genre fiction might offer.

On that wonderful Frankenstein title stuff — can I quote you? If so, how?

From Alabama, writer **Andy Duncan** summons up some childhood ghosts:

"I'm pleased to hear that others so fondly remember Eleanor Cameron's Mushroom Planet series, and Walter R. Brooks' Freddy the Pig series. Wonderful stuff! Wish I had copies of all of 'em, but no reprint would be quite the same as those worn hardcovers I checked out repeatedly as a kid from the public library in Batesburg, S.C. — dog-eared, with rounded corners, dust jackets long since torn away, and generations of childish scrawls in the margins. Much loved, much handled copies, indeed.

"Oh, and as for Gary Dryfoos' question, all I know is that John Sutton played the villainous Col. Tarleton in the 1959 DISNEYLAND miniseries 'Swamp Fox' — starring, as the heroic Revolutionary guerrilla leader Francis Marion, none other than Leslie Nielsen, who — ye gods! — sang the theme song, too. (Could a PriceLine commercial be far behind?) Needless to add, if Disney had hoped for another Davy Crockett, he was disappointed!"

Andy, you're right about the lure of the library book. A college girlfriend gave me an ex-library hardcover of *Freddy the Detective*, and I still remember her fondly even though she later dumped me for a Harvard man.

Since nobody could answer his question about who played Col. Tarleton in some other movie than *The Patriot*, let's go back to the oracle himself, M. I. T. fan **Gary L.**

Dryfoos:

"It's Michael Caine. As actor Elliott James, in *Sweet Liberty*, a movie about turning a history prof's book on the American Revolution into a movie."

Thanks, Gary. Heard about that one, but never saw it: sounds like it might be worth a hike to the video store.

Last ish I mentioned hearing it was technically unconstitutional for Governor Bush and Secretary Cheney to run for Pres and VP when both resided in the same state, but fine fan writer **Vicki Rosenzweig** sets me straight:

"It's not, actually.

"What the constitution says is that no elector may vote for a presidential and a vice-presidential candidate from his/her home state. What this means is that, if Cheney's 'move' to Wyoming doesn't stand, and the GOP wins Texas, the Texas votes for VP would have to go to someone other than Cheney. In that scenario, they'd probably pick someone they admired who lived in another state, as a way of honoring/flattering that person.

"In practice, what this means is that (a) in a close race, it could mean a president and VP from different parties (which hasn't happened since 1864, when it was deliberate), and (b) therefore, most presidential nominees pick VP candidates from some other state. But it's not illegal to have a president and VP from the same state."

Thanks for the civics lesson, Vicky. So much for getting my political insights from TV, the Internet, and those alien voices in my head.

From New Mexico, fan and writer **Yvonne Coats** has some good news:

"Thanks for the past several issues of *The Devniad*, which I always read with enjoyment and not a little envy at all the cons in relatively easy reach of folks on the east coast — they're thin on the ground in the west, with the nearest cons, after the local Bubonicon, in Denver, Tucson and Phoenix. I also admit to envying your last name;

The Coatsiad just looks, and sounds, silly.

"Here's my good news: At 5:55 a.m. Sunday (still can't believe I picked up the phone) I got a call from Ireland. Last summer I entered the first James White Award contest, and the call was to tell me I'd made the top 5, to request e-versions of my story to send to the international team of judges (James Bacon, the contest administrator, mentioned 5-6 names, but I only retained Dave Langford, David Pringle and Morgan Llewellen — hey, it was early!), and to ensure I'd be available by phone to attend the ceremony announcing the winner on 10/22. Wish me luck!"

Yvonne, best wishes for a win. And if you're looking for a fanzine name, possibilities seem rife: *The Coatshanger*, *Smarts of the West*. Or for a horror letterzine, *Yvonne To Drink Your Opinions* ...

FlimFan

EXCELLENT:

The Exorcist 2000 — You know the story, right? If not, let me proceed to spoil everything for you. Movie star Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn) on location in Washington, D.C., has a 12-year-old daughter Regan (Linda Blair) who starts acting funny. Then crazy. Then scary. After blowing through lots of doctors and tests to no avail, Mom at last turns to a bright, intense (but troubled) young priest/psychiatrist, Damien Karras (Jason Miller). Driven deeper into desperation, Karras reluctantly calls in an older priest,

Father Merrin, to perform the old and half-forgotten Roman Catholic ritual of exorcism. All hell breaks loose ... This new version of the 1973 classic adds 12 minutes of new stuff, including Regan coming backwards and upside down the stairs like a spider. Nothing vital's added, but the flick's overall effect stays strong. Not many horror movies to this time had received this kind of first-class writing and direction, from William Peter Blatty and William Friedkin respectively. They both knew the secret that Stephen King would learn in a few years: ground your story thoroughly and precisely in a detailed, familiar modern reality, and then bring on the horror ... Watching it again, on the big screen with a perfect digital print and crystalline reproduction of the soundtrack (an extremely important element of this film's impact), I do have some new thoughts ... First of all, what exactly does the title suggest? The movie in my memory should be called *The Exorcism*: it's the story of an event, not a person. But this time around, although he has less screen time than the mother, the daughter, or the young priest, it seemed to me interesting to think of this really as Father Lancaster Merrin's story. The Swedish actor Carl Adolf ("Max") Von Sydow, who stars as Merrin, was born in 1929, so he was only 43 at the time of filming. However, he plays the taciturn, towering Jesuit priest with the unreliable heart and absolutely certain spirit as around 75 going on 5000. (At 2 1/2 hours a day, Von Sydow probably spent more time in makeup than Linda Blair.) This guy has gone more than one fall before with the Devil, and knows his adversary well. The movie's best dialog contrasts this deep surety versus his younger priest/psychiatrist colleague's shallower faith in science. When Merrin walks in and just wants to get to it, Karras wishes to brief him first on the case's clinical history. Merrin looks at him straightly, firmly, and answers "Why?" A few minutes later, Karras tries again: "I think it might be helpful if I gave you some background on the different personalities Regan has manifested. So far, I'd say there seem to be

three. She's convinced — " Merrin interrupts: "There is only one." ... Now, if this were an early scene in the movie, you'd root for young Mr. Science and think the old man was a blind fool. But by now you've seen some really freaky stuff, and witnessed about 20 scientific types and their high-falutin theories go down in flames. Your own nerves are shattered. Frankly, you cling to Merrin like a drowning rat to a rock. Especially when he gets more forthcoming with his own expertise: "The demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us. But he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is psychological, but powerful. So don't listen. Remember that, do not listen." Fabulous stuff! ... *The Exorcist* is a masterpiece, and a landmark. But there are also some awkwardnesses here: Lee J. Cobb's movie-loving, avuncular detective is a complete waste of time. Linda Blair as the supposedly 12-year-old victim plays the first half of the movie as sunny, affectionate, and uncomplicated as maybe a 6-year-old, just to hype the contrast with her (literally) twisted, masturbating, vomiting vessel of Satan later. After the movie came out, child-welfare advocates were relieved to learn that much of the sick stuff was done with shots of doubles and dummies plus 54-year-old Mercedes McCambridge's whisky-cured cigarette croak on vocals. (Esoteric sidebar: she's coyly credited as "Pazuzu (voice)" on IMDB. Elsewhere on the net, this is identified as the name of a "relatively obscure Sumerian demon of pestilence, specifically the demon of the hot south-east wind that carried disease." But a surviving statue looked really bad (good) to the filmmakers, and the rest is movie history.) And Friedkin can be absolutely shameless in getting his effects. There are actually what seem to be subliminal demon faces flickering in at least three scenes. And the arrival of Merrin, a tall dark figure with big dark hat and shadowed features, looming out of the conveniently foggy night surrounding the house, is pure old-fashioned Hollywood frightflick hokum. Extremely effective, in fact masterful hokum, however.

VERY GOOD:

Nurse Betty — Haven't had time to get my notes together on this one, but go see this now if you enjoy dark comedy/dramas about obsession in America. Renee Zellweger plays a shellshocked housewife who loves a soap-opera doctor; Greg Kinnear is the bemused actor who plays the doc, but doesn't know that Renee ain't foolin'. Only Morgan Freeman could have played the hit man who becomes fascinated by her too.

Almost Famous — Despite what many other reviewers are saying, not a great movie. Its visuals are merely adequate, and its truths are neither deep, disturbing, or particularly fresh. But this flick's great fun — warm, witty, heartfelt; rich in acting talent and beautifully remembered period details — and a great example of high Hollywood storytelling craft. *Almost Famous* shows us the coming-of-age of a teenage rock journalist in the mid-1970s, when the music still mattered. At least to young William Miller (Patrick Fugit) and his legendary music critic mentor Lester Bangs (played in what should become a legendary performance by Philip Seymour Hoffman) — a real person, unlike Miller himself, who puts a perhaps thinly disguised face on writer/director Cameron Crowe's own actual wunderkind career. Bangs warns the kid not to get seduced by the musicians and groupies he covers: "These people are not your friends ... Be honest and unmerciful." That's a hard thought to hang onto for a 15-year-old with his first assignment from *Rolling Stone* magazine: the chance to come along for the rising rock star ride on a road trip across America with a band called Stillwater. (Perhaps a mixture of Crowe's real-life subjects Led Zeppelin and the Allman Brothers Band?) Fugit beautifully captures the fledgling writer's mix of innocence and instinctive professionalism. Soon band members are as paranoid around him as, say, science fiction writers around a con reporter: "The little shit is the enemy. He writes ... He's taking notes with his eyes!" Darkly handsome Billy Crudup is

perfect as Russell Hammond, the smartest band member; half new friend, half guarded star. But I also love Jason Lee as the peevisish lead singer, who at one point straightens Russell out: "I'm the front man, and you're the guitarist with mystique!" Delicately beautiful Kate Hudson delivers a career-making performance as Penny Lane the tender-hearted groupie sorry band aid, who provides a sad glimpse of her life between concerts: "If you ever get lonely, you just go to the record store and visit your friends." And as the kid's Mom, who has to drop him off at his big-time journalistic assignment in her station wagon, the incredible Frances McDormand will freak you out ... One of the many moments of this movie that I loved: everybody's on the band bus, all hungover, depressed, angry, and alienated from each other by last night's blowup. The soundtrack is playing Elton John's "Tiny Dancer." Then you notice someone's mouth is moving with the music: it's on the bus's soundtrack too. Soon everyone's singing along and, well, harmony is restored.

BAD:

Bait — The main reason to throw this movie back is you believe only half the main character's performance — and absolutely none of his chief adversary's or the villain's. Likable TV star Jamie Foxx has the latest look (complete with foolishly hip, ultrathin sideburns) and the right rap for a fast-talking ex-con street hustler. And he actually goes pretty far in giving a realistic feel to this basically lightweight, not very bright guy, at first. I like the way he interacts with his brother, who's even further into the player's life than he is; also the way his straight girlfriend treats him with affection that's worn pretty weary. But Foxx's character hears a jailhouse secret about the location of hidden millions from a big heist, so the feds spring him and set him up as a lure for the fugitive mastermind. Suddenly the movie turns into a big overblown thriller, and Foxx's schmo blossoms into a big overblown hero to match. David Morse plays the head cop, a ludicrously hard-nosed U.S. Treasury agent who has Foxx

under high-tech surveillance. This snooper-paranoia stuff worked in *Enemy of the State* because you saw some convincing details and because you believed government geeks might overdose on technology testosterone in just this way. In *Bait*, nothing about it feels real for a moment. One T-man working one case gets a round-the-clock crew of tech geniuses set up in a million-dollar war room? Oh please. Morse's character would have had to fill out paperwork for a thousand years to get a tenth of the stuff we see ... The villain's awfully overdone as well. Played by Doug Hutchison, who did a much better job as the hateful guard in *The Green Mile*, seems he every morning cheerfully downloads the top-secret "overnights" from the NSA and Treasury in his secret computer cave. OK, I did enjoy one later exchange, where Hutchison holds Foxx captive and ready to be interrogated. Villain, musingly: "What are my options? Obviously, there's torture —" Tied-up hero, urgently: "— You're more creative than that!" But ultimately, with director Antoine Fuqua of *The Replacement Killers* in charge, color this one somewhat slick, a little stylish, but ultimately pretty stupid.

AWFUL:

Whipped — Whipped, hell, I'd have to be *flensed* to get me to sit through this loser again. A so-called comedy about four twentysomething friends who enjoy "scammin' hos" (deceiving and seducing women), then find true fulfillment boasting to each other afterward, *Whipped* is not only bad, it's anti-quality in every possible way. Despite a supposedly enlightened ending, it's anti-woman enough to turn Rush Limbaugh into a militant feminist. The writing is scummy, the visuals dull. This "sex comedy" has no attractive nudity or good sex scene. Only a few laughs, and those are — like this film's run, we hope — nasty, brutish, and short. Did I mention the acting is unbelievably amateurish? *Whipped* (presumably a charming allusion to "pussy whipped," for males dancing to a woman's tune) features, as the woman the boys all

fall for simultaneously, Amanda Peet. Warm, funny, and utterly attractive in last year's Bruce Willis/Matthew Perry bomb *The Whole Nine Yards*, here she's sucked down into the slime with the others ... A few samples of the suckiness? Well, the boys' one-for-all motto is "Bros before hos, pals before gals." The "intellectual" of the group (the one who wears glasses anyway) flaunts his pheromones, boasting, "They see me, they smell me, they fuck me." And there's the film's pathetic attempt to top the brilliantly squalid toilet scene in *Trainspotting* by dropping a vibrator into said fixture ... This thing makes *Porky's* look like Proust. Or, wait, a better comparison: a few years ago, writer/director Neil LaBute [see above for his latest, greatest *Nurse Betty*] created a searing, no-holds-barred indie flick on a similar subject, called *In the Company of Men*. Here, though, you're only *In the Company of Assholes*.

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #363, August 2000

To Art Henderson

Thanks for all the additional comments on *The Thirteenth Warrior* flick and its source, Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead*.

I too was quite impressed with Vladimir Kulich as Buliwfy/Beowulf, the heroic head of the Viking band. It's a role that's beautifully written and directed, and he's the right guy to act it. The movie is very smart about showing (not *telling*) us that as a leader, he's more than a big empty horned hat. We see him in the background sometimes, watching the action, thinking, forming his conclusions — then acting on them with firmness and energy. This is a guy who could take that dumb blowhard Conan three falls out of three.

In the strange coincidence category: after your note that Crichton cites as one of his sources for the book a certain eldritch text edited by someone named Lovecraft, I see

that Kulich had a minor role in a recent movie of same: 1994's *Necronomicon*.

To Mark Olson

Re Neil Gaiman's six-episode Brit TV dark fantasy *Neverwhere*, sounds great! Hope NESFA somehow gets a copy we can fight over borrowing. I love that idea that every city has an underworld with a great beast in it, London with its giant bull, New York with its great white crocodile. Think as a foreigner Gaiman got New York slightly wrong, though. Isn't it obvious to all of us it would be instead a Great Black Cockroach?

About the discussion re whether Europe's Dark Age was really so dark — have I mentioned this fabulous book I read recently, Robert Lacey's and Danny Danziger's *The Year 1000*? It's basically a short, tight, well-written account of daily life in Anglo-Saxon England. Which, by the way, sounded fairly dark to me, but as you say well on the upswing from a few centuries earlier. Strongly recommended.

The usual Aarrgggh. No time left. See you next month ...