

The Devniad Book 67c

un zine de Bob Devney
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What If We Didn't Give An Issue and Nobody Came?

Due to various distractions that arose hydra-headed in my so-called life, I missed an ish last month. Sorry. It won't happen again. (At least this month.) Now initially, I was afraid this might lead to catcalls and taunting, or at least hectoring inquiries from a few impatient readers.

But actually, nobody said a thing.

Let's ponder the logic here. Say. What if I *didn't* do *even more* issues? Might I finally win a Hugo? You know, like when toilet paper rips where there aren't any perforations ...

Oh come, come, Bob, be brave, he said (to himself, anyway). You've always known the bottom line: If the international space consortium ever puts out an open call for experienced orbital station workers, fanzine editors could fill the quota nicely.

We already work in a vacuum.

Upbound Train

Esteemed *Devniad* Information Technology Advisor Dr. Robert Kuhn, my brother-in-law, uttered a striking complaint during our annual Anti-L-Tryptophan Stroll after Thanksgiving dinner. It went something like this:

"The trouble with literary science fiction and fantasy is that it isn't literary enough to qualify as literature, and it isn't fun enough to be enjoyable as science fiction or fantasy."

I probably made some properly jocose response, such as, Gee, you want some cheese with that whine, bro?

What I should have done is hold up Andy Duncan's new book and intone, "Thus I refute Kuhn."

The volume in question is the author's first short story collection, *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories* (Golden Gryphon Press, 2000 [at 3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, or visit www.goldengryphon.com]; 292 hardcover pages, \$23.95).

With Andy — he's a friend of mine and of *The Devniad*, so for purposes of full disclosure I'll use his first name — you get a very satisfying mix of entertainment value and clear, hardworking prose. He's a good writer; he gives you a good read. That's first, that's obviously paramount with him, and that's why just about anyone reading this zine would love this book.

But in addition, these workmanlike values are sustained by high literary purpose. Obviously, Andy's carrying some of the same freight as genre authors from Poe to Manly Wade Wellman to Stephen King to Howard Waldrop, plus the writers of about a million movies. (No wonder I like this dude.) But it's clear this Carolina boy's also hitching his caboose up close to such first-class Southern Rail passengers as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and, yes, Twain and Faulkner.

What do I mean? (And where do I get this stupid choo-choo metaphor?) Consider the opening lines of the title story:

"Everybody else got off the train at Hell, but I figured, it's a free country. So I commenced to make myself a mite more

comfortable. I put my feet up and leaned back against the window, laid my guitar across my chest and settled in with my hat tipped down over my eyes, almost. I didn't know what the next stop was but I knew I'd like it better than Hell."

One paragraph, but we're already well and firmly along for the ride.

We know we've entered an extraordinary and damned (excuse me) intriguing situation. And even better, we're in the company of an extraordinary character. One paragraph, devoted on one level mostly to physical action ... but we've soaked up that the speaker is from the American South; somewhat uneducated; a musician; rebellious to his very soul; and an alert man of action.

We know that last because of the sly, lovely use of that seeming afterthought "almost." The narrator wants to appear unconcerned, but he's sharply on the lookout for what comes next.

So are we.

Let me just say that, on first reading this story in its original *Asimov's* appearance, by the end of the first page the beauty of what Andy was doing had me almost literally breathless. By the end of the tale, it was clear what short story would head my Hugo nominations that year.

And remember that "Beluthahatchie" was the author's *first fiction sale!* (Which some other people admired too — it made the final Hugo ballot.) Apparently this guy sprung himself straight from the brow of ol' Apollo.

Even the earliest story in the collection, 1993's "From Alfano's Reliquary," is promising without being in the least juvenile. For instance, at one point it casually mentions that an early Pope, Stephen, "... carried on an interminable secret conversation [with the Holy Roman Emperor], employing a corps of exhausted messengers who struggled back and forth over the mountains. Some of Stephen's most telling points went over precipices and had to be repeated."

This slightly gruesome playfulness is evident in several other of the collection's lighter-side entries, including "The Premature Burials," where true love endures even unto — and, yuck, into — the grave. It drips as well off the opening of "Grand Guignol," spoken by the perhaps overdramatic director of the old theater of terrors in Paris:

"Charles is my friend, my brother, my right arm, my most valued assistant, my comrade in glory and trial since before the Armistice, and to say anything against him is almost more than I can bear — but today he brought me a sack of eyeballs of which, before God, not one was usable. Stress? Love? Syphilis? Who can say? I am saddened beyond speculation."

You can see immediately why Duncan says this story is his "love letter to community theater in Greensboro, North Carolina." I guess.

The excellence doesn't end there. "The Executioner's Guild" is an absolutely masterful novella about the preparations for an execution in a small Mississippi town in the 1930s. A 1999 finalist for the Nebula Award, it's as well-observed as Faulkner and more pitiless, if not quite as famous (yet) as another little stab at a related theme, Stephen King's *The Green Mile*. I have reservations about another long work, "Fortitude," starring General George Patton — the ending particularly doesn't work for me. But Jesus, the scene where Patton, years later, confronts a protesting Depression-era worker who'd saved his life in World War One! Masterful.

The first Duncan story I read, another Nebula finalist, is here too, of course: 1996's "Liza and the Crazy Water Man." It tells the tale of the 1930s singer from the hills whose voice literally may be too good for us, and the big-hearted young record producer who pursues her. "Liza" takes the time — and has the spirit and skill — to show us young love, instead of just telling us about it. I cry glad tears every time I read it.

And as a Groucho and urban legends fan, naturally I've got a soft spot for the short story "Fenneman's Mouth" — concerning a crowd-pleasing use of near-future video technology. It's the only thing here close to SF. Andy usually favors the fantastic touch, and often goes light even on that. He early learned a most useful lesson: a question can be more powerful and disturbing than an answer ...

Andy Duncan has the mainstream writer's interest in a character's interior life. Coupled with the speculative fiction author's interest in weirdness, history, large themes, and special powers. Plus the journalist's deep-down habit (doubtless learned in his years as reporter and editor at the Greensboro, North Carolina *News & Record*) of illuminating everything with just the right details, and plenty of 'em. (In his nice, juicy serving of afterthoughts at the back, he boasts of researching reams of notes about 1930's Charlotte, South Carolina, for "Liza," and building *every single one* into the story. A reporter's fondest dream, right after a whiskey IV and X-ray eyes ... And don't worry, the story's enriched, not ruined, by the way he does it.)

I won't try to vie with Michael Bishop and John Kessel any further in praise of Mr. Duncan. Excellent writers themselves, they write the extensive foreword and discursive afterword here respectively, and seem mighty impressed, the both of them.

Let's end with this: There are several excellent books of shorter fiction out this year in our neck of the woods, from the stellar Dozois, Hartwell, and Datlow/Windling annuals to collections from Terry Bisson, Robert Charles Wilson, Jane Yolen, Michael Bishop, and Darrell Schweitzer, to name just the ones I've seen. (And let's not forget those nonpareil Michael Swanwick, Hal Clement, and Eric Frank Russell collections from NESFA Press!)

But for me, *Beluthahatchie and Other Stories* is the most exciting fantastic literature collection of 2000. Because besides all the reading pleasure it will provide you,

it proves Andy Duncan is an assured, mature artist — with his best work still ahead of him.

This guy's riding a first-class ticket on the talent train, and he's hellbound for glory.

The Wind from Some Burning Issues

by Yvonne Coats

[From the great Southwest, writer Yvonne Coats dangles the forbidden fruits of the WFC before me, and I bite. A thousand thanks, Yvonne. And readers, note she is in no way responsible for the smart-ass title I slapped on above.]

Here's a rundown on this year's World Fantasy Convention, which I'm sorry you couldn't attend, Bob. There's far more here than you'll want to use in your newsletter ...

[Hah! Little does she know my insatiable appetite for long con reports. After all, I'm a long-time fan (is there any other kind?) of Evelyn Leeper ...]

We had a glorious time at World Fantasy 2000, and the weather in Corpus Christi was fantastic (we'd been worried about the temperature and humidity). The days were warm and humid, indeed, but the breeze — heck, the *wind* — off the bay kept us comfortable during the brief periods we actually managed to get out of the hotel. Nighttime temperatures were consistently in the low 70s, which meant we slept with the sliding glass balcony doors wide open. Our room faced the bay, with a view of the *U.S.S. Lexington*, permanently harbored here.

This aircraft carrier is pretty impressive during the day, but at night it's lit with brilliant blue-purple spotlights, making it the flashiest object in the bay. We didn't do many tourist activities, but we did walk down to the Water Street Oyster Bar one

evening for a fine meal. My husband, Mike Collins, finally stopped complaining about being able to get a good fish dinner within spitting distance of the Gulf. We walked back along the bayfront and came across the Selena monument. There were plenty of the subtropical plants we'd expected: sago palms, azaleas, bougainvilleas, hibiscus. It is strongly reminiscent of Florida here, only with a lot less traffic and, apparently, cooler temperatures in the fall and winter.

It must not get *too* cold, though, or the hibiscus and bougainvilleas wouldn't be so huge.

So that's the travelog. Here's the convention report. We went to quite a few panels and some of the readings. Some of my favorites were:

Day of the Undead: The Evolution of Vampires with R.L. Conrad, Scott Cupp, K.W. Jeter, Nancy Kilpatrick, Yvonne Navarro and Fred Saberhagen. Vampires were portrayed in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* as evil monsters, yet cinematic adaptations of the novel have made the Count increasingly sympathetic and romantic. Modern-day vampires, such as Nancy Collins's China Blue and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's St. Germain, are being portrayed as outright heroes. What happened? The panel discussed, as one would expect, the genesis of the vampire legend, then went on to talk about its permutations in the past 20 years or so, with much speculation about the reasons for this.

Politics and Horror with Stephen Dedman, Jo Fletcher, Graham Joyce and Gordon Van Gelder. Does the world's political situation affect the popularity of the horror genre? Does horror fiction itself espouse a particular political view? A recent *F&SF* editorial presented the theory that the popularity of horror fiction in the U.S. is tied to the political leanings of the current president. What's going on here? This was especially interesting because the only U.S. panelist was GVG. Dedman is Australian, Fletcher and Joyce are from the U.K. In a recent editorial in *The Magazine of Fantasy &*

Science Fiction, GVG pointed out that since WWII there has been a strong correlation between politics and horror in the U.S.; Fletcher and Joyce claim the same with respect to the U.K. Dedman says that since literature is partly state-supported in Australia, this correlation is even more clearcut.

Basically, when Democrats (Liberals) are in office, horror loses ground to mysteries. When Republicans (Tories) are in power, horror makes a comeback. They had statistics to back them up, and the whole thing struck me as bizarrely wonderful. But don't anyone start voting for this year's presidential candidate based on their reading preferences, please!

Fantasy Mysteries with Lillian Carl, Carole Nelson Douglas, Ray Vucevich and F. Paul Wilson. Learn about the modern-day successors to Randal Garrett's *Too Many Magicians*. This panel was about genre-crossing, starting with the great Randall Garrett's alternate histories of a Victorian era without Victoria (the Plantagenets rule the world), where magic is science, with clearly defined rules and outcomes (the catch is that one must have magical talent) and science is dangerous, unpredictable and tightly controlled.

Matching Narrative Structure to Story with John Crowley, Stephen Donaldson, Ellen Kushner, Connie Willis and Gene Wolfe. A single series of events can be told in an infinite number of ways. The panelists discussed choices one makes in picking the right structure. These panelists are mostly high-powered speakers with strong opinions and strong desire to express them. It was also the most well-attended panel I sat in on, with people standing along the walls in the huge room, which probably held nearly 200 chairs. It was fascinating to hear how differently each of them works — some are meticulous in every detail, while others are definitely seat-of-the-pants writers.

Instilling a Sense of Wonder with John Crowley, Charles de Lint, Bradley Denton, Charles Vess and Walter Jon Williams was a lively panel which attempted to identify that special feeling unique to our genre (or is it?)

and the sense of amazement that comes from reading a special story or viewing a certain piece of art. After talking about works they'd read that transmitted the sense of wonder to them, with a sidebar about how much more easily they'd had this experience as children, they came to a rough consensus that the writer can only write about things which move him/her, with the hope that at least some readers will experience the same sense of wonder. A particularly good comment was made by Walter Jon Williams: "I think the power of suggestion trumps the power of description every time."

The Day of the Dead in Literature with C. Dean Andersson, Alexa deMonterice, Anne Gay and K.W. Jeter discussed the difference between Halloween and the Day of the Dead, and how the latter is celebrated in Mexico. This is *not* a scary holiday, but a humorous festival where you party in the graveyard and talk to departed relatives.

History into Fantasy with Greg Keyes, Tim Powers, Delia Sherman and William Trotter talked about alternate history, using characters out of history, and inserting one's story into the unrecorded periods in a famous person's history. There were fertile and devious minds on this panel.

How to Read a Modern Fantasy Novel with John Douglas, David Hartwell, Donald Maass, Michael Moorcock and Gene Wolfe was, thank somebody, *not* about its declared topics, but *was* intriguing. This panel of two editors, a major agent and two well-known writers was a major find. They did discuss the Harry Potter phenomenon (less so than last year in Providence — I guess everyone is getting used to it), and Michael Moorcock summed up by saying, "You can't go far wrong with a naive main character ... it doesn't challenge the reader's viewpoint."

Myth as the Basis for Novels with Jane Lindskold, Graham Joyce, Nina Romberg and C. Dean Andersson got off to a rocky start but soon turned into point/counterpoint discussion between Lindskold and Joyce, with intelligent interpolations by Andersson, all of whom have thought about their material to an

impressive degree, but in very different ways. If you've read Jane Lindskold's *Changer* and *Legends Walking*, you have a sense of the breadth and depth of her knowledge of world mythology, and her ability to synthesize these and turn them into characters and situations that move the reader. Graham Joyce works in a very different way, using only European fantasy motifs (so far), combined with modern characters in ways that by turns stimulate, frighten and amuse. You can see what I mean by seeing what he did with the seemingly innocuous Tooth Fairy, in his book of the same name.

I attended a few readings, by SF/fantasy poets Keith Alen Daniels and David Lunde, GoH K.W. Jeter, and Michael Moorcock, all of which were grand. Mike reports that Connie Willis and GoH John Crowley were also very fine readers of their own work.

We also went to artist GoH Charles Vess' slide show and talk. His illustrated version of Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* is worth buying — and we're bringing back a copy. When I asked Vess to sign it (Gaiman was not at this year's WFC), he drew me a quick sketch and then signed it — Vess is a class act, very friendly and impressively knowledgeable about fantastic art.

And to the GoH interviews. Crowley was cerebral and informative (he talks very much like he writes, which was impressive), and Jeter was equally informative but also very funny. It may have helped that Joe Lansdale interviewed Jeter: He could make Bob Dole (or Al Gore, for that matter) sound funny.

The awards banquet was fun, in part because of Toastmaster Joe Lansdale, who started off by making everyone say 'Howdy!' Why? Because "you're in Texas, dammit!" ...

Let's conclude with one last quote, which I didn't hear but had repeated to me by Jamina Fritts, one of my Albuquerque

writing group members. S.M. Stirling said during the How Much Research Do I Really Need to Do? panel, "Writing a good short story is like stuffing a cat into a bottle without hurting the cat."

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

The timing this time means there are not one but two missives from Ontario fan and lucid letterhack **Lloyd Penney**. So we actually get Penney's two cents worth. Starting with promising Hugo stats from the latest World Science Fiction Convention:

"... Nomination does a lot for the ego. Guy Lillian and I formed our own little support group at Chicon ... We discovered the full nomination stats on the back of the Chicon newsletter ... and found that both Guy and I received 17 nominations each, good enough to finish sixth, and only seven nominations off the ballot. We plan to charge for next year, so watch out everyone!

"... Robert Sawyer is, unfortunately, completely correct when he says that Canadian SF is shunned by the few big publishers in Canada, and McClelland and Stewart comes to mind immediately. The publishers seem to agree with the newest ruling of the Canada Council on the Arts ... SF is an American art form, not a Canadian one, and therefore shall not receive any funding from the Council. Arts funding is drying up everywhere, but this is the newest excuse to refuse funding, and frankly, the SF community here is PO'ed about the whole thing ... I guess M&S and the rest of them are still looking for the Great Canadian Novel, and assume they won't find it in the sci-fi ghetto, even if it's the Canadian ghetto.

"Some words for Cecilia Tan ... in Toronto, which has the largest Gay Pride parade in the world, even bigger than San Francisco, there is still a lot of harassment of the community from the police. Recently, at a private lesbian club in the downtown area,

nearly a dozen male cops raided what was called the Pussy Party, not to arrest anyone for what they might call indecent acts, but to enforce the fact that the party needed some kind of permit to take place. They didn't need any kind of permit, but there were the cops anyway ...

"I must assume from your note that Brian Cholfin has printed up some of R. A. Lafferty's fine works. Dan Knight and his United Mythologies Press of Weston, Ontario has also been a champion of Lafferty's work, and last time I talked to Dan, I believe he had seven or eight chapbooks of fiction and criticism ...

"Nalo Hopkinson is a sweet lady, and had her SF life changed with her Campbell win last year with *Brown Girl in the Ring*. There has been acclaim for her second book, *Midnight Robber*, but I fear the Campbell win will be a curse. At Chicon, a first ... for two years in a row now, a Torontonion has won the Campbell. First Nalo, and this year, Cory Doctorow. (I am a little surprised that Nalo knew about the old, fannish Carl Brandon hoax. Good for her! For the record, when Nalo is not writing, she is a dancer, and has performed on some of Toronto's best stages.)

"Bob, I would like nothing better than to come back to Massachusetts for a convention ... Unfortunately, February 2001 will be a con-heavy month. Near the beginning of the month will be Astronomicon 2001 in Rochester, NY. Chairman Wayne Brown has assembled an all-black guest list, including Samuel Delany and Nalo Hopkinson. Wayne has planned this to take advantage of Black History Month in February, and to encourage everyone, regardless of colour, to enjoy SF. (However, showing the black community, especially black youth, that SF is cool, and not just a white interest, will go a long way to changing an observation many fans make, that fandom is extremely white.) And then, near the end of the month, Ad Astra takes place. The meagre paycheque only goes so far, so these two conventions will have to do. I will get to a Boskone one day ...

“Chicon was a good time, but Yvonne and I didn't see much of the convention. She was in charge of the three Torcon bid parties, so I was in charge of heavy lifting and fetching... And yes, we won. Torcon 3 will take place the end of August 2003, and our guests are George R.R. Martin, Mike Glycer, Frank Kelly Freas, Spider Robinson and as GoHst of Honour, Robert Bloch, who was the GoH at the other two Torcons. The convention chairman, Peter Jarvis, is now designing his committee's structure, so we're still pretty early on in preparations. The Board of Directors has decided to restrict who gets to relay information about the convention, so any other questions you may have about the convention can be answered at www.torcon3.on.ca.

“... We are planning to reintroduce a relaxicon to Toronto, and we are already in the initial planning stages for the 2001 World Fantasy Convention ... We'll be operating the green room.

“... At Chicon ... we asked many people to bring us beer, and with the help of some corporate donations, gathered together about 1500 bottles and cans ... Once we figured we'd never dispense it all at our parties, we started hauling it to other parties. Twenty-four bottles to the gay/lesbian party, 24 more to the Charlotte party, 48 to the party down the hallway, 36 to the Japanese party. The next night, two litres of saki and a case of Asahi were our reward as the Japanese came for a return engagement. We made LOTS of friends that weekend. Never underestimate the power of a free beer!

“Andy Duncan remembers Leslie Nielsen as the Swamp Fox! So do we. The CBC has a great show called *Life and Times*, which is, to me, a superior version of A&E's *Biography*. One show interviewed Leslie Nielsen and his older brother Erik, who at one time was the deputy prime minister of Canada. Both of them grew up in Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory ...”

Lloyd, thanks again for trying to inject into *The Devniad* a lonely modicum of actual SF fandom news, together with your patented level-headed take on other stuff. I

hate to give anyone but me a whole page here, but this month both you and the other Yvonne forced me.

Increasingly telegraphic editor **Ernest Lilley** of *SFRevu* writes to answer a crack I uttered last ish:

“I vigorously deny that I simply read *The Devniad* for ego-scanning.

“Too vigorously by half.

“I read it for the articles.”

Ernest: funny. I read *SFRevu* for the sex.

From the Left Coast, artist/new media type **Cort Skinner** contributes memories of shooting the 1986 flick *Sweet Liberty* that still bug him:

“I was one of many uniformed living history types that the movie company hired for our expertise in 18th Century field tactics ... plus we brought our own ‘wardrobe,’ ‘props,’ and firearms as well as a completely authentic 18th century military camp set up.

“... I remember the shoot, which took place Near Sag Harbor, Long Island, for the ticks. During the battle scene, at the end of every take, the troops would line up in single file for a ‘tick check,’ each man checking the one in front of him. We'd pick all the ticks off, put them into our musket muzzle, and then blast them into another dimension during the next take.

“The movie itself, even though it had Michael Caine, Alan Alda, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Bob Hoskins was not very good ... I think it was my fault.”

Cort, I thought your characterization as the 34th man from the left, faintly visible under Caine's left armpit, brought extra revolutionary flair to the flick. Seriously, I'm so envious nevertheless. Dude, you're literally a part of movie history!

Fan **Elsbeth Kovar** has another note on ancient civilizations:

“In case it hasn't already been mentioned, see *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, not just for the history and insight but for a wonderful read. Thomas Cahill's second book in the series, *The Gifts of the Jews*, includes the delightful line:

"... the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, that stupendous wonder of the world, a detailed description of which became the favorite party piece of ancient tourists, thus enabling them to bore their friends to death long before the invention of photography."

"As so often happens, reading even the first installment of *The Devniad* resulted in a number of trips over to Amazon and several books being added to my already massive wish list. (OK, not all of the books are ones that I want, since I've also started to use it to keep track of the ones that I've wished for and then picked up elsewhere.) Adding *The Year 1000* and *Soulsaver* involved wandering off down various country lanes of 'If you like this ...,' more books by the same author, similar books by subject, etc. It's a very good thing that I long ago made a rule that all (OK, almost all) book purchases must be made with cash!"

Elsbeth, remember that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. I read that in a book I bought on credit once ...

From Lafferty Country, fan **Tom Jackson** writes briefly in reply to my questions about one of the genre's past masters:

"I've been a big R.A. Lafferty fan since high school, and yes, we are fellow Oklahomans — fellow Tulsans, even. I've interviewed him more than once, the first time in high school. (The last time was an interview by mail that was published in *Lan's Lantern*, if you remember that fanzine.)

"He used to regularly attend local conventions and was always very nice to fans. I have most of his books — I'm probably missing a few of the small press things. I have heard that he is in a nursing home, but I can't offer further details, unfortunately."

Thanks, Tom. I saw Lafferty once — at Boston's 1989 Worldcon — but didn't have the nerve to approach. As far as I'm concerned, he's one of the most original writers of the 20th century in any literature, so this is one of the sharp-toothed little regrets of my life.

Stalwart NESFan **Chip Hitchcock** provides just what we're all dying to hear, one more political note. To be fair, I should say that he writes in response to an earlier discussion, and with the crystal-clear foresight of November 16, 2000:

"With regard to recent *Devniad* discussion: Vicki Rosenzweig is technically correct that having President and VP candidates from the same state doesn't cost all the electoral votes of that state. However, it *does* cost half, since electors have to vote for one out-of-state candidate. This can get ugly; consider Gore 260 Bush 278 (i.e., he gets Florida and Oregon). Texas has 32 electoral votes. Bush needs 24 of those to get an absolute majority (required in the Electoral College). That means that if Cheney's 'move' out of Texas were invalid, those 24 electors couldn't vote for him, giving him at most 254 (278-24) votes. So the election of the VP would get passed to the Senate, where the quorum is 2/3. The Democrats could easily prevent a quorum — leaving the country to find out just how important having a VP actually is ..."

Chip, whaddya mean *can get ugly*?

FlimFan

VERY GOOD:

The Contender — This immorality tale feels like an emotional metaphor for the scandalous Clinton impeachment, presented with writer/director Rod Lurie's foot stamped firmly on the scales in favor of the Democrats. (OK by me; your umbrage may differ.) After the death of the Vice President, President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges) tries to make history by appointing a woman successor, Senator Laine Billings Hanson (Joan Allen). But Congressional confirmation committee head Shelly Runyon (Gary Oldman) thinks the only thing more wrongheaded and unreliable than a Democrat is a girl. A sex scandal from her college days is dug up. Her position: "I

cannot respond ... because it's just not OK for them to ask about it." So the Capital grilling begins. As the barbed charges work into the body political, previously unruffled White House Chief of Staff Kermit Newman (Sam Elliott) unleashes a torrent of vicious rage: "I want something on Runyon ... Something *embarrassing!* Something *SEXUAL!*" This seems awfully true to life. And it's the kind of thing that might almost give you the idea politics isn't nice ... In films from *Nixon* to *The Crucible*, Allen has played strong supporting roles as disciplined, unhappy ice queens. (In *Pleasantville*, we saw what happens when the ice cracks.) Here she's fully center stage: a principled yet powerful, pragmatic player under inhuman stress. There's a moment when she's being savagely attacked, and we know she harbors a secret, devastating response. But uttering it will make her as bad as her unprincipled accusers, and Allen keeps us guessing as we watch her struggle with it ... Jeff Bridges has a great time combining the good-looking charm of JFK with the smothering, threatening friendliness and obnoxious, alpha-ape earthiness of LBJ. He keeps ordering food for people — then cramming his own decisions down their throat instead. But the most memorable performance may be Oldman as "a second-rate Joe McCarthy." This is a man with the squirmy personal unattractiveness of Richard Nixon and the blind, hyperrighteous meanness of — well, of a House Republican. He's always planting false smears with the press and saying, "Let her deny just *that* part of the story," and we're always wishing he'd just wash his hair. Not that the press comes out any cleaner. Example: a great little expository-lump-free bit showing us just how to ambush a talk show guest when she's at a remote studio. The newsweasels deny Hanson a monitor to view her questioners; we soon see how that puts her at a vicious "sensory disadvantage." ... Warning: *The Contender* features possibly poisonous partisanship, plus very graphic language and even glimpses of some near-pornographic filmed evidence. And the

writing is uneven. Some of its thoughts on politics and, say, Secret Service procedure seem about as accurate as the howlers in 1999's *Elizabeth*. But it shares with that movie a lush, dark-to light visual style and lots of high-key melodrama that's damned entertaining. Add the uniformly great performances and very good direction and cinematography, and *The Contender* becomes a confirmed winner.

Best in Show — Report next month, maybe?

Unbreakable — This flick makes it official: *The Sixth Sense*'s young writer/director

M. Night Shyamalan is not just a one-shot wonder. Though his latest, with Bruce Willis as a repressed security guard who survives a serious accident and Samuel L. Jackson as the comics art gallery owner who thinks there's more to the guard than there seems, does repeat several tricks and tweaks of that earlier quite wondrous flick. For instance, on the evidence so far Shyamalan (that's pronounced shy-ah-MEL-in) has a fondness for obsessive belief systems; hidden internal logics; kids and their father figures; flashbacks; distant marriages; nicely composed scenes shot through doorways; and attempted reconciliations in nice restaurants. Also, the pace here for at least the first half is unduly solemn and slow, with way too many pauses and shots of Willis just staring. It's like, Harold Pinter Does *The X-Men*. But when Hitchcock or Polanski pull something similar, we call it a master's style ... In his first scene, as an ordinary if somewhat seedy-looking guy riding a train, Willis pulls a shabby trick that makes us ask whether he's any kind of hero. Which turns out to be quite the question. Jackson brings his patented arch-intensity to the role of Elijah Price, a semi-recluse who attacks life with a steely mindset to offset a crippling birth disorder: his bones are so fragile, they shatter at the least stress. "They call me Mr. Glass at school — 'cause I break like glass." Elijah has what for me is a brand-new insight about comic books: "I believe comics are a last link to an ancient form of passing on history ..." For years,

brooding and planning, he's watched the news of a sad chain of local disasters. Because Elijah awaits "a very specific combination of words: "There is a sole survivor. And he is miraculously unharmed." Does Willis's David Dunne truly fit the bill? Elijah has questions for our hero. "How many days of your life have you been sick? ... Why is it that of all the professions in this world, you chose protection?" The answer to that last one will have security guards all over America sitting taller in their cinema seats tonight ... The storytelling and patient character-building here are first-class. For instance, there's a touching bonding scene in the guard's basement, as he and his son discover just how far his powers extend. Of course, possible superherohood is strictly a business for the boys; they conspire to keep it from Mom. (She's the luminescent Robin Wright Penn, who dims her light considerably to play pained and wary in a small but crucial role.) It's concentration on telling the story through even small details, such as certain things about Samuel Jackson's character — watch his hair, his clothes; think about his whole affect — that helps *Unbreakable* gather force and meaning right to the end.

GOOD:

Meet the Parents — Just as a con man's victim must possess a touch of shady complicity, a farce like this cannot succeed unless its hero cooperates in his own humiliation. Male nurse Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) is urban, ironic, Jewish, a bit of an underachiever, and not above stretching the truth to make himself look better. A first weekend with his girlfriend's humorless, Protestant, successful suburban parents is the supreme test of such a man. Greg fails this test with every fiber of his being. Asked if he'd feel uncomfortable saying grace at dinner, he reflexively lies — and seconds later finds himself intoning stuff like "Oh dear God ... You are such a sweet lord [agonizing pause] of hosts" and somehow working in the word "smorgasbord." This small genetic defect in his social skills keeps combining and recombining catastrophically, turning what he hoped would be a winning weekend into a nightmare of flammable cats, burnt altar offerings, acid interrogations, septic lawn showers, and black-eyed brides. Stiller has played this same neurotic tons of times now, and he's good at it. Though this one's not up to his two edgy, unpredictable comic masterpieces, *There's Something About Mary* and *Flirting With Disaster*. Compared to those over-the-top projects, *Meet the Parents* is a pure product of the Hollywood factory, directed by Jay Roach, who did the two *Austin Powers* pictures and knows how to keep things moving. But on those terms it succeeds very well. (This is apparently a remake of a 1992 indie flick wherein co-screenwriter Greg Glienna played the lead; might be interesting to study the contrasts.) Robert De Niro lends the right scary intensity to the father, who ill disguises his *ex officio* hostility to this latest daughter-raper. When Greg murmurs he prefers dogs to the father's beloved cat, because dogs are friendlier: "You need that assurance do you, Greg, from an emotionally starved animal?" Later, the pool volleyball scene will rate high on the cringeometer for anyone who's ever been picked last for any team. Which I

take to be just about every reader of *The Devniad* ...

DECENT:

Pay It Forward — Theoretically I like movies about schools and teachers. But too often I find myself muttering, why do teachers always have to be the ones to learn lessons? And why do guys who use the occasional big word and dress neatly (Kevin Spacey) have to be loosened up by casino barmaids with sleazy pasts and hearts of gold (Helen Hunt)? ... This movie has another sure, true performance by Haley Joel Osment, who was so astonishing in *The Sixth Sense*. He plays a kid who asks a question in class that could change the world. I also like seeing real life in the empty-feeling suburbs of Vegas, America's fastest-metastasizing city. And director Mimi Leder, who did 1997's shrill Clooney/Kidman actioner *The Peacemaker*, has found a way to be interesting while playing it a lot quieter; she's also got a decent visual style ... But despite all this and some cool talk about what's really going on in the classroom (Spacey particularly has some good dialog to his kids, precariously traversing the "hellish shaky bridge" of 7th grade: "You can't drink, you can't vote, you can't even go to the bathroom without a pass from me"), the coincidences and plot manipulations in *Pay It Forward* left me wanting to stay after and learn something more.

PRETTY BAD:

The 6th Day — Report next month, maybe?

Backchat

on APA: NESFA #s 363-365,
August through October 2000

To Tom Endrey

AUG: Always much enjoy your forays beyond accepted science, archaeology, etc., into the often-scorned fringe. Get much the

same kick reading about that stuff as I did touring the American Visionary Art Museum near the Baltimore worldcon in 1998. You may recall I wrote about it at the time: a whole building full of paintings, sculptures, textile pieces, and other less classifiable works by various cranks, crackpots, eccentrics, nutballs, and cuckoos — or at least that's how much of the ordinary world or the art establishment would have characterized them at first glance.

That museum, however, was in the vanguard of a movement to reevaluate the work and its creators. They put this stuff into a new aesthetic category, calling it visionary or Outsider Art, and it's getting more respect now. Maybe what you're so interested in should be called Outsider Science.

About validity: I try to keep my mind open but not empty. Obviously distinguished elderly scientists have been wrong frequently, whereas some very exciting, romantic, crackpot theories that sound way too good to be true are scoffed at first but eventually win acceptance. Like "birds are dinosaurs" — although actually, that one's just been challenged again from a fresh direction. Or, better related example, the Alvarez theory of how meteor impact really ruined the dinosaurs' day.

To Joseph Ross

AUG: Your stories of fixes and bits of old computers have given me a revelation. Even more than solid-state ignitions etc., this is why the American amateur car mechanic culture is disappearing as a widespread preoccupation of many males. We're all inside tinkering with our PCs.

OCT: Yes, one does feel that our old ideas of superheroes would take some updating in the modern world. For instance, I'd purely love to see Superman trying to change clothes in a cell phone booth.

Hmmm, better make that Supergirl.

To Tony Lewis

AUG: Impressed by your comment on the Napoleonic era lead figurines done by

the late Mike Gilbert: "his uniforms were quite accurate." Of course, I must defer to an elder with contemporary knowledge ...

SEPT: Thanks for being one of the few loyalists to send me some Chicon quotes.

About my suggestion that Harlan Ellison write an intro for NESFA's possible Gerald Kersh collection, you assumed I was joking. Always the default assumption about me amongst my friends and family, alas.

OCT: I like your word "outfarming," as in a "typical Norton outfarming," *To the King a Daughter* by Andre Norton and Sasha Miller. You can't just say "sharecropping," because that would indicate a separate story by Author A set in Author B's universe. Whereas this seems more in the realm of a collaboration between Author A and B where B does all the work (OK, except for worldbuilding) and A gets the first credit and probably quite a few of the dollar credits too. Perhaps also "slavecropping?"

To Chris Logan Edwards

Great to see you at Readercon, guy! I've started *Cerebus*, as you recommended: looks like it's going to be a wild ride.

AUG: I've scanned the Peter Biskind book *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* several times, been very tempted: your review puts me over the top. I love Altman, Scorsese, Coppola, and even Friedkin, so how can I avoid buying a book about their neurotic excesses in 70s Hollywood? Of course, I'm hip to the view that indiscipline is a necessary angel of creativity. Which is a fairly mysterious process all around.

For instance, as Steve Martin says David Mamet remarked while they were working on *The Spanish Prisoner*, "No art is created in the conscious mind."

Put *that* in your narghile and puff it a piece ...

To Elisabeth Carey

AUG: Your review of Aldrin/Barne's *The Return* mentioned Easter Island. Just the other day, I read that the place has been renamed, presumably by its native people, as Rapa Nui. So let's get that memorized, people. Sheesh. Next they'll be renaming, I

dunno, Ceylon, Burma, Greenland, Washington National Airport, or Route 128.

SEPT: Hope you haven't overlooked the unsanitary possibility that the reason your cat Aquavit preferred your leaky old kitchen faucet to your nice tight new one is she was drinking out of it.

OCT: Tragically entertaining, your account of how a reorganized Lexis has sloppily but unapologetically racked up scads of errors in their published database of New Hampshire's law codes, causing agita and lucubration for you and other legal kleagles. Gee, another case where the benefits of a corporate takeover are staggeringly unobvious to anyone but managers and investors.

To Paul Giguere

AUG: You thank Mark Hertel for all his hard work in 9 years as APA:NESFA collator. Not sure I've publicly mentioned my own heartfelt gratitude. At Arisia one year, Mark and Ken Knabbe tag-team-taunted me into fanwriting, and so was extruded the very first *Devniad*, the January 1995 issue. (Appearing in February 1995, natch.) Since then, Mark has regularly put up with my pounding into the Other Meeting hours late with my ish still steaming. From the copy shop, I mean. Not only that, but he's cheerfully suffered all the usual collateral collator damage, such as copier fume cafard, stapler stomach, button pusher's twitch, etc. Mark is a Caliph Among Collators; the redoubtable Pam Fremon has some big curly slippers to fill.

SEPT: I'd thought my suggestion to get Harlan Ellison to intro a proposed NESFA Press Gerald Kersh collection was both wicked fun *and* actually a promising thought, but I guess the NESFA Press Czar would knout me if I ever even bring it up again (It wasn't me this time, Tony) ... Glad you did, though, Paul.

OCT: For once, not sure I can agree with you, guy. Specifically about rating Kage Baker's *Mendoza in Hollywood* a "good read." Impressed by the first two of the series, I thought *Mendoza* a mess. The idea of future-schooled time agents touring the southern

California wilderness pointing out future movie star homes was great, but that shallow-draft fun was swamped by the characters' all-too-serious angst and moral miserableness. Also: after all the centuries we've spent together, Mendoza herself is really getting on my nerves ...

To Pam Fremon

AUG: Consistently printing your zine on purple stock is actually a convenient aid to finding it for comments, Pam, thanks. And I guess producing something called *Saga of the Crying Purple Gorilla* on yellow just wouldn't make it.

Nice clear thinking on why young readers love Harry Potter versus someone like Diana Wynne Jones — a contemporary-world setting, more supportive adults, etc. Let's face it, it can be hard even in retrospect to see why the bestseller lightning strikes one writer and not another. Would love to see even more extensive discussion of this, with Rowling compared/contrasted to a host of earlier YA fantasy writers.

OCT: Your continuing chronicles of your almost continual trips to Sweden continue to fascinate. The repetition leads to even odder than usual mental effects when reading your stuff: "Gamla Stan, I know that one! The Old Town island in Stockholm. Now where have I heard of that before? Oh. In Pam's *last* trip report ..." Several people in my office laughed when I shared your bit about ordering that "traditional Swedish dish, Hawaiian pizza."

To George Flynn

As usual, you've corrected my golden words with infuriating validity. The ones that hurt aren't the typos, since I'm so often consciously choosing to write more material rather than proof the final additions, as the deadline to race out to the collation party looms (and, usually, passes ...) What really hurts is telling the whole world I'd forgotten *Finnegans Wake* takes no apostrophe. Sigh. If we were still doing this on typewriters, I'd call it an example of ribbonrun.

Glad to hear you placed Duncan's *The Executioner's Guild* so high in your Hugo

nominations and Locus voting. Beautiful, isn't it? See my review elsewhere here of Andy's collection containing that story.

OCT: Know what would be fascinating, George? Something from you on proofreading. You know: Proofing Without Tears. Twelve Common Proofing Mistakes. How to Proofread an SF Story. Or maybe just, Flynn on Fuckups.

And every ish, Catch of the Day — your best proofing triumph since last time.

To Richard Harter

Welcome to the APA! Although I gather from internal evidence and the lingering glow of your legend among senior NESFAns that in this regard you may be a recidivist.

Thought I'd heard a rumor that Dr. Anthony Lewis, distinguished NESFA Press Czar, was once known as The Evil One. Thanks for keeping the flame of embarrassment burning bright.

So you now reside in South Dakota. Lessee — that's west of Dedham, right?

To Lisa Hertel

Thanks for the report on the baby, the bid, and the Jewish New Year. I'd vaguely heard of the Thirty-Six Just Men who hold the world together, but your little capsule description of the Tzadikim put it all together for me. Could easily be an SF story in there, no? (Nu?) The world is threatened by calamity or moral crisis, and the Tzadikim gather from all unlikely places and walks of life to cope.

Please see my comments to Paul Giguere re your harried hubby.

About your finishing your APA on a laptop in the car on the way to the collation's being "worse than Bob Devney" — I'll file this under Any Publicity Is Good Publicity.

To Mark Olson

Told you you'd love Lacey's and Danziger's *The Year 1000*. You're exactly right about its level: more meat than most popularizations, more zip than most scholarship. And it's succinct as hell. Those 230 pages just fly by. Anybody interested in

the history of England, the history of Europe in that period, or in how good we have it now should pick up this one immediately.

Which is what it sounds like I should do also with Dudley Pope's *Decision at Trafalgar*. I like Age of Sail history, and have read other Pope stuff; don't know how this one got by me.

So your and Priscilla's bibliomania has reached the grand proportions of 13,000 books and 3,000 magazines. Eat your heart out, Erasmus.

OCT: Beautiful summary of Vernor Vinge's cool career. NESFA Press should publish a collection of Vinge's backlist just so your piece can become front matter.

Agree completely — David Crystal's 1995 *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* is superb. One of the most browseable books I've ever seen.

To Art Henderson

Many thanks for the beautiful little tribute to Carl Barks and capsule history of Scrooge McDuck. I remember him and Gladstone Gander and Gyro Gearloose and the Beagle Boys quite well — but had completely forgotten that most formidable of duck-billed Italian sorceresses, Magica De Spell!

Gladstone, the world's luckiest duck, contributed my first intimation of the immense philosophical difficulties in conceiving of someone as unfailingly lucky. Basically, the entire universe must conspire to do you good. (See the most intriguing character in Larry Niven's *Ringworld*, Teela Brown.) Luck is the most potent but least showy of all the superhero superpowers, isn't it? Only in adulthood would the full impact of Gladstone's puissance hit me, when I contemplated how he would drive downtown into a jam-packed metropolis — and always zip without pause into a suddenly opened parking space at the front door of his destination ...

OCT: Horrified about Becky's injury. Great to hear she's recovering nicely from her torn foot ligaments and — neat technical phrase that's new to me — "avulsion fracture." Hmm, the forcible tearing away of

a body part by trauma or surgery. So could you say something like, "Lorena Bobbit regarded her husband's sleeping form with a look of extreme avulsion"?

"Brother Robert the Chronicler?" Sounds like I'm some long-dead celibate religious fanatic/court propagandist ... Of course, again, any publicity is good publicity.

Glad you finally met Andy Duncan. Really envy your witnessing Andy upchuckling John Kessel's birthday roast at Trinoc*coN. Their great skills as writers aside, for personality alone they've become two of my favorite stars on our little aliens-and-rubber-chicken circuit.

To Anna Hillier

Thanks for the Chicon report. I'll take my Worldcon experience any way I can get it, even vicariously. Glad you've forgiven Mr. Strauss for his Filthy Pierre nickname, and can now appreciate his piano playing.

So now that you've been to your first Worldcon, are you going to hit them all? Next year Philadelphia, then San Jose, then Toronto, then ghod willing Boston ...