

The Devniad

Book 68

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Kick Kick Think Think.

The new Chinese movie *Wu hu zang long*, known in English as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is the *Star Wars* of martial arts fantasy/romances. Beautifully shot, with production values fully up to any A-list standard you can name, it takes a genre usually associated with low-budget Hong Kong schlock or cult films and does it up big, smart, expensive, and loaded with elements that can appeal to more mainstream Western audiences.

These elements include surprising subtlety and intelligence. For movie buffs, their presence can be at least partly explained by the presence of Ang Lee and his long-time writing partner James Schamus. Lee is a graduate of such fine Taiwanese films as *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, as well as more Western venues such as the sets of *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Ice Storm*, plus New York University. Not far underneath the surface here are similarities to director Lee's earlier triumph in the West, one of the best of the Jane Austen pics.

As in Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, this movie is concerned with the stresses of sisterhood. The search for soulmates. The war between duty and freedom.

Unlike in *Sense and Sensibility*, the fight scenes kick ass.

We begin with a fairly familiar setup in bygone China. Superlative fighter/mystic Li Mu Bai is weary. He has found that the result of all his years of martial arts training in the wizardly Wu Dan school and all his battles against those who would use martial

arts for evil was "not enlightenment ... Instead, I was surrounded by an endless sorrow." He talks tiredly of the underworld life of a wandering fighter. "Giang Hu is a world of tigers and dragons ... full of corruption."

Li is played by a famous face: Chow Yun Fat. With the shaved head he adopted playing opposite Jodie Foster in *Anna and the King* — and without the twin blazing automatics he flourished in John Woo's Hong Kong shootemups — Chow appears here with pared-down passion.

His weariness extends even to the maguffin, a 400-year-old sword known as Green Destiny. Along with his warrior life, Li wishes to renounce it: "Too many men have died at its edge."

Also far from her 1997 role as the Bond Girl in *Tomorrow Never Dies* is Michelle Yeoh, who plays Yu Shu Lien. A strong, sad, thoughtful woman warrior, Yu is an old comrade of Li's who seemingly still hopes to be something more.

Then the sword is stolen by a ninja-like assassin/thief, and the fun begins.

We know that some of the story at least will be the familiar one of the old master fighter lured reluctantly out of retirement for one last adventure, one last showdown. And some of it a love story between Li and Yu.

But there's more.

One big surprise that's obvious pretty early: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is mostly a woman's movie.

Michelle Yu definitely scores more screentime than Chow Yun-Fat. And an important subplot involves the struggle of a high official's daughter, Jen Yu (played by

impressive 21-year-old newcomer Zhang Ziyi). Foreordained to life as a dutiful aristocratic wife, Jen is attracted by the lure of the free, wild existence she imagines Michelle Yeoh's character Yu possesses. In an early scene between the two, we're definitely in the kind of women's world that Ang Lee seems to know so well.

Hair is combed. Tea is taken. Confidences are sought and exchanged. And important revelations result ...

This movie's thinking about the relationships between people is flavored with a gentle maturity. As when a wise older master speaks of why Li and Yu haven't gotten together despite their obvious and mutual attraction: "When it comes to emotions, even great heroes can be idiots."

But hey, let's get back to the fighting. It's great, choreographed by the same martial arts coordinator as *The Matrix*, Yuen Woo-Ping.

The first fight of many, conducted to an intensely effective accompaniment of rapid-fire drums, is a stunning running battle of blazing blades, blows, and kicks through shadowy courtyards — and then, in this movie's most astonishing and memorable action trademark, over the moonlit tiled rooftops.

It seems, you see, that even gravity yields gracefully to truly masterful technique. Like guided missiles of grace, the gifted fighters here are so advanced in their secret disciplines that their leaps elongate themselves into something else entirely. They literally fly.

Of course, movie effects buffs will realize that, like some missiles indeed, the actors are actually flying by wire. Perhaps the most important line in the credits is one for "wire removal and digital effects."

It may not quite look like real flying. But it looks really fly, bro ...

However, the action sequence are not just exciting: they're truly moving too. For instance, no movie has ever possessed a

more sublime fight scene than the astonishing Battle in the Treetops.

I'll remember the sights of that conflict forever. Deep within a lovely forest, tall green-festooned bamboo trunks bend slowly back and forth. Two figures in flowing white robes flit from branch to branch, swaying as the trees sway, gravely exchanging blows.

I'll remember the sounds of the battle forever too. Yo-Yo Ma's cello (*told* you this was a classy production) sobs with wonder; the flute wavers. Through those witchily waving treetops, the wind blows.

As does our mind.

Don't get the idea that the whole effect here is unrelieved solemnity. The translation seems far from the crude usual, but cultural and linguistic gulfs between Chinese and English still yield some moments of most piquant amusement. As when two forest ruffians are easily vanquished by a mysterious stranger. They assume this is the hero they've heard about: "Are you related to Li Mu Bai?" The scornful reply: "He is my defeated foe!" Another time, Li himself waxes sadly philosophical: "Even if I was banished to the darkest place, my love will never let me be a lonely spirit."

And the motivation for one key betrayal is revealed to be a bad case of martial arts technique envy: "I never improved, but your progress was unlimited!"

The New Yorker's great cinema critic Pauline Kael once summed up the essential action — and attractions — of many movies in the title of her book *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. This one's more like *Kick Kick Think Think*. It alternates stately, contemplative or conversational scenes with wild flurries of action; at 119 minutes it even sometimes feels a little long. And NESFAn Leslie Turek, who attended the preview screening I saw, termed the flick "really silly," which doesn't sound promising for the rest of my SF-loving friends. Just the fact that it's in Mandarin with English subtitles will doubtless lose it a big chunk of Western audience, too.

But I stalwartly maintain that a lot of science fiction or especially fantasy fans should love this movie. The silliness is partly our relative unfamiliarity with the conventions of the genre — and partly that it really is kinda silly in spots.

If you require third-party validation to break down any resistance you might have to seeing this one, so far it's won People's Choice at the Toronto Film Festival, Best Cinematography from the New York Film Critics' Circle, and Best Foreign Language Film from the U. S. National Board of Review. I see this morning that that young Roper guy on the Ebert show named it his Best Picture of the year, period. Plus it was nominated for Golden Globe awards for Best Director, Best Original Score, and Best Foreign Language Film. And hey, SF movie mega-maven Mark Leeper really liked it too ... My brother Michael frowns on this kind of appeal as credentialism. I say you might need the reassurance, so why not supply it if I believe in the movie myself?

This flick's charms are manifold.

There's what I believe is an obligatory scene for this genre, as one fighter takes on an entire two-story inn/restaurant full of scores of hapless opponents.

There's the romance of young Lo (Chang Chen), the dashing, long-haired rider of the wide open deserts in the West. The government wagon trains that must pass through his territory are fearful of his wild bandit gang's depredations; they call him Dark Cloud. How cowboy-and-Indian is *that*?

There's the poison called Purple Yin. Like some scenes in this movie, it goes straight to the heart.

There's one protagonist's climactic fight: not some showy battle with a colorful enemy, but a stock-still struggle to stay alive against the subtle encroachments of the poison within.

And there are the absolutely breathtaking landscapes: forbidden cities, barren deserts, limpid lakes, wondrous waterfalls, fey forests, misty mountain gorges ...

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is set in a dream of Old China. And I for one was reluctant to awaken.

This One's A Saver.

Young Juan Bautista Lorca's got to step on it. They've got another SID (self-inflicted death) victim in the back of the truck, and as everyone in Puerto Rico knows, "A corpse will keep barely half an hour in the van." By the very image of the Stuttering Digital Jesus on his dashboard, he and his partner need to get the body back to the resurrection center.

"Soon as she's prepped, they'll thaw her out, repair the damage, and resurrect her, good as new and ready to stand trial for trying to kill herself. Then, once she's atoned for her sin and been brought back into the Fold, she'll be sent home to her family. Susie Saved."

Thus begins this fine first novel by the man his friends (which includes yours truly) consider Puerto Rico's greatest SF author.

Soulsaver by Jim Stevens-Arce, a coming-of-age satire/cautionary tale set in a 100-years-from-now religious dictatorship, will make old fans think immediately of Robert A. Heinlein's story "If This Goes On ..."

Eldfen will also realize I mean that as a considerable compliment. Although the Heinlein classic went easy on the edgy humor that's such an important element here, both share as narrator a naive young true believer who sees too much of the man behind the curtain and gradually comes to question Church teaching. Another resemblance: said Church's slick, sick marriage of tent-show revivalism with high-tech-presentation skill. (Since Jim Steven, like me, is in the ad business, his feel for this stuff rings especially true.)

Like Heinlein's young John Lyle, before long Juan Bautista is embroiled in a revolt. Trying to recruit him are underground rebels known as the New Christers, led by two miracle-working children who may be the true reps of God on Earth. Their revolution is most assuredly a political one, too, since church and state aren't exactly separate anymore. In fact, the world is ruled by the Christian Alliance. Which includes Christian Jews, Christian Muslims, Christian Buddhists ... you get the picture. I mean icon.

Now, I'm not sure I buy every bit of this story. Such as the amalgamation of perfervid Latin American Catholicism with revivalist American Protestant fundamentalism, and its apparently effortless and total worldwide hegemony; the amount of money the Church must be spending to cryofreeze and revive what are hinted to be millions of suicides per year; the speech by the dictatorial Shepherdess near the end; or the amazing scope of young Juan Bautista's naivete.

But I believe the colorful glimpses of the life and history of Puerto Rico itself; the daily routine of the Suicide Prevention Corps of America (SPCA, get it?) or Cuerpo Antisuicida de America; and especially the horrifying portrait of its truly original setting, the rotting Greater San Juan Metroplex, 2099.

Bits of description of this all-too-apt hellhole are scattered artfully around the narrative. Sometimes there's a little contrast to strengthen the message, as when Juan Bautista visits a ruling-class enclave:

"Farther down the coast, the ocean is brown from raw sewage and dumped chemicals. But this is a protected beach, reserved for tourists and high church folk ... The tang of sea salt cleans my lungs, and when I look straight up, I can barely make out the smog. It is good to be alive."

Many of his countrymen don't agree. Because, as his more cynical, veteran partner Fabiola says, "It's a hard, harsh world, overcrowded and dying ... It's not a world people want to live in."

But it's certainly a world you'll want to visit. I hear *Locus* included *Soulsaver* among their notable books of the year, and there's been some interest from Hollyweird, so you may see even more of it in the future.

One great gift to its future screenwriters may be its dialog. Stevens fills the book with short conversations and an apt, kicky slang. I wish more SF authors would pay attention to this.

Our hero's relentless use of one slangform in particular — eponymously personifying one's mood (when Juan Bautista is pleased, he announces, "I am Howie Happy," and when his partner Fabiola looks sad, says, "You look Trudy Troubled") — is quickly rather annoying. But then, Juan Bautista is meant to be an annoying young man ... Convincing future slang is tough to do; Stevens succeeds nicely. And that goes for most of the rest of this fresh, fascinating novel as well.

Call me Robert Raving.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

When it comes to my fanzine issue irregularity, **Ernest Lilley** of *SFRevu* has been there, suffered that:

"I think folks are generally amazed that we keep publishing at all, because so many manage one issue, or one web page and then run out of steam.

"So if you miss an issue, a) they kind of expected it all along, b) there's an aching void in their lives they just can't quite name, and c) the rest of us don't want to wake you if you've fallen asleep ...

"It's a long line to the Hugos."

Thanks for the encouragement, bro.

Fan **Dan Reid** is apparently a fellow Duncanista:

"... In light of your rave review of Andy Duncan's book, I will point out that it (along with [Michael] Bishop's *Blue Kansas Sky*) was first available to the general public at

Trinoc*con 2000, last Sept. 29-Oct. 1. I was proud to help set up the arrangements with Golden Gryphon to get the books to the con where both authors were in attendance (at my invitation). At one panel somebody held up Andy's book and said 'It's finally in the dealers room' ... at which point one guy immediately jumped up and ran out. He was back in about 2 minutes with the last copy they had at the con.

"Hope to see Andy in two weeks at Chattacon."

Envy you that, Dan. Say, I know, how about spoiling your whole con taking notes and then send me copious quotes?

Usually stalwart *Devniad* fan **Gary L. Dryfoos's** faith in me is apparently not unbreakable:

... I did *not* read your review of *Unbreakable*, because these days I trust absolutely NO ONE IN THE WORLD AT ALL without exception, when it comes to not blowing the important bits of movies. (The day before seeing *The Sixth Sense* I absently scanned a review ... though they didn't completely blow it, they were close enough. Acckkk! You'd think after what *Newsweek* did to the original *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (go and look it up) all those years ago, I'd have learned to Trust No One before this ...

"Are you familiar with *The Bear Comes Home* by Rafi Zabor?... It is quite wonderful. And that's not just me, as it won a PEN/Faulkner award (which I believe is even cooler than winning a Penn/Teller award).

"The Bear of the title is, in fact, an actual bear. A not-too-large brown bear, who just happens to be able to talk, play jazz saxophone (alto, with influences of Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, and Jackie McLean), quote Shakespeare, and suffer all the aches of a soul confronting the Ursine (or Human) Condition ...

"The book will be especially sweet to confirmed jazz fans who also like fantasy, but those innocent of the great American artform also report enjoying the book."

Gary also spun some fantasy about my suggestion there might be an SF story in the Jewish tradition of the Tzadikim, the Thirty-Six Just Men who hold the world together:

"Only problem with that is, unlike say, the Justice League of America, or the X-Men, or even the League Substitute of Heros (and whatever happened to them?) in most versions of the legend these saintly folks not only don't know who the others are, each is modestly unaware that he is one ... There's a very funny story in there somewhere anyway: '... As the holy scrolls in the far corner of his desk began to glow, Reb Schmucl knew that the President, or possibly the Mayor of Lvov, would be calling momentarily with a desperate plea, a job for The Tzaddikim!'"

Gary, about *The Bear Comes Home*: I saw the author talk about it I believe on public TV's *The News Hour*, and noted it seemed like a good 'un. When it comes to books I should read, thanks for adding to my piles, uh, adding it to my pile.

All the way from just across the road from Brisbane in Queensland, Australia, new reader **Erika Maria Lacey** jumps right in with veiled threats:

"Too bad nobody jumped up and down and threatened you with dire consequences for having not put out an issue of *The Devniad* when you were supposed to. Now that you have mentioned it, however, should you do so in the future you will most likely incur the wrath of everyone on your mailing list. Be prepared!

"... One of the things that I keep hearing about *Unbreakable* is that it resembles *The Sixth Sense* very closely. Not having seen either — even though 6th sense is now on video — I can't rightly judge. It may simply be people repeating the same things over and over because they heard someone else say it (just like I did right then)."

Not that Erika seems the kind of person who's likely to follow the crowd much. Read all about her fascinating girlhood aboard a small yacht cruising round the

world at:
www.uq.net.au/~zzelacey/grail/travel/
index.html.

New Mexico writer/fan **Yvonne Coats** apparently blames overdoses of turkey and candy corn for her (and probably my) recent brain clouds:

“Thanks for the recent issue of *The Devniad*. I had thought something was missing in Thanksgiving, but become increasingly confused from about Halloween through the holiday season ... Despite your professed appreciation for *long con* reports (a form of editing phobia?), I'm sorry to have taken up quite so much space in the last issue with my WFC report. This con will have to hold us for a while since the Keeper of the Exchequer (also known as Cheap Mike, my spouse) has decreed that we shall go to no out-of-town cons next year. *Sigh*.

“At least Albuquerque has its own con in August each year. In a shameless plug for same, the GoH in '01 will be Sarah Zettel, the Toastmaster is S.M. Stirling, the Artist GoH is Lee Seed. There should be another 18-25 writers also present ...

“Welcome to the Third Millennium.”

Yvonne: August in Albuquerque, O joy.

Anyway, to we old souls, one *kalpa* seems so much like the next ...

FlimFan

Oh Ghod, no time this month for more than a listing. Well, next month is the annual flix pix, so maybe we'll revisit.

VERY GOOD:

The Legend of Drunken Master
Proof of Life

GOOD:

Bounce
How the Grinch Stole Christmas

DECENT AT BEST:

The Legend of Bagger Vance ***What Do Women Want***

Backchat **on APA:NESFA #366,** **November 2000**

To Anna Hillier

Your comment that the fungus investing the Mir orbital “comes in colors of green and black” sent me to my display of flags of the world to see if the colors had any vexillological import. Although several flags have green and black, it's always mixed with other colors. However, the flag of Libya is a solid and indeed rather fungal green ... Then it hits me. Who flies a black flag? Pirates. Let's watch closely, people, for any hint that Mir isn't actually coming down after all, but has been taken over by Libyan space pirates.

To Joe Ross

Thanks very much for reprinting the language of the 1996 Delahunt decision, wherein the Massachusetts Supreme Court decided that indented chads should indeed help decide a close Democratic congressional primary election. Hadn't seen most of the actual text before. My favorite paragraph, which I'll reprint again here because it bears repeating (though now it comes under the heading of flogging a dead candidate), and also so I can find it later:

“It is, of course, true that a voter who failed to push a stylus through the ballot and thereby create a hole in it could have done a better job of expressing his or her intent. Such a voter should not automatically be disqualified, however, like a litigant or one seeking favors from the government, because he or she failed to comply strictly with announced procedures. The voters are the owners of the government, and our rule that we seek to discern the voter's intention and to give it effect reflects the proper

relation between government and those to whom it is responsible.”

To Art Henderson

Thanks for the stockingful of suggestions for Christmas readings and viewings. I especially liked your enthusiasm for Dylan Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*; didn't know it was the very first Caedmon record. The HarperCollins Web site expands on what you said: "Caedmon was founded in January 1952, when Barbara Cohen and Marianne Roney sat with Dylan Thomas in the bar of the Chelsea hotel and persuaded him to record *A Child's Christmas in Wales* along with five of his poems." I don't *think* they mean he recorded them barside.

During my high school years in Foxboro, Massachusetts, my broken little family was too hard up and downright disorganized to own a record player. But I discovered the new library right across Baker Street had a player and a rich horde of records — including another Caedmon: Dylan Thomas reading verse, his own and other's.

A great poet, he also provided my first inkling that you could *speak* poetry greatly. Though DT had odd tastes: would you believe not one but *three* poems by Thomas Hardy? Of course, knowing you, Art, you've probably got "To Lisbie Brown" memorized.

Also "A Broken Appointment," about a guy who was stood up. Which at the time I scarce dared hope someday to be, since it meant that I would at least have made a date in the first place. Can still feel in my bones the throbbing gravity with which Thomas intoned the first line, "You did not come."

There's a sufficiently sappy Christmas lesson here, though. No boy is really poor with a library right across the street.

To Mark Olson

Your comments on the dreadfulness of Robert A. Heinlein's late books like *The Cat Who Walked Through Walls* strikes a chord. I've brooded about it over the years: why oh why did it have to be *Heinlein*, the favorite

of so many of us, who declined so precipitously?

The usual pattern for most good authors with careers of decent length is early promise, glorious fulfillment for a stretch of at least several books, and a long but fairly gentle dotage where their worst crime is repeating themselves. From Anderson, Asimov, Budrys, and Clarke all the way to Silverberg, White, Wolfe, and Zelazny, most have managed to produce later stuff of great value, or at the very least not embarrass themselves.

But not poor RAH. Offhand, I'd say that among major SF scribes only Frank Herbert augured further into the abyss of awfulness in his later books. (OK, and Alfred Bester.)

Of course, by the 1970s Heinlein had developed blockage of the carotid artery to the brain. What was Herbert's excuse?

To Pam Fremon

One of your best contributions yet. Trif list of Christmas movies famous and obscure. Bill Forsyth's 1984 *Comfort and Joy* was indeed both, with Bill Paterson wonderfully forlorn as the Scots disk jockey hero. And who could forget those battling Mafia ice cream trucks?

Also loved your roundup of Swedish holiday customs. Once worked in an office that did a big Xmas — I was going to say cookie day, but that groaning conference table was more like a feasting board. One young writer of Swedish heritage always brought in his dreaded *lutfisk* dish, or maybe some nice *sil*. We theorized that in Sweden, perhaps Christmas is some kind of Satanic holiday ...

To Elisabeth Carey

John M. Ford's new novel *The Last Hot Time* does sound good; must get it. The first part of the story is familiar, though: now where could I have already read it?

To Tony Lewis

Your comment on Nancy Atherton's characters in the Aunt Dimity books stands for so much of what we like in so many

books: “If there are not people like this, then there ought to be.”

Also fascinating details on Heinlein’s family stats. Maybe you should do this for other SF types. Hey, do I sniff a narrowcast NESFA Press monograph? Call it *Star Lines: Genealogical Sketches of Great SF Authors*.

To Chris Logan Edwards

Thanks for the most graphic, clinical eyewitness description of the death of Oscar Wilde 100 years ago. Notice that the account does not include his fine — but perhaps apocryphal? — deathbed utterance: “Either this wallpaper goes or I do.”

When in college, back when this stuff was still not so much talked about, I determined to compile a collection of deathbed accounts, medical explanations, and famous last words to be modestly titled *Devney’s Book of Death*. Then the *Oxford Book of Death* and others got there fuhstest with the wuhstest.

To Paul Giguere

Glad you got *Rushmore* on DVD. Caught a chunk on cable t’other night; I like it more now than when I first saw it in the theater.

There are so many little jokes and character touches. This time I noticed Max’s resiliency. When another kid catches him in a blatantly self-serving falsehood, he pauses, then ripostes: “What are you, a *lawyer*?” And hurries on to some other subject.

We can all learn from that.