

The Devniad

Book 73a

un zine de Bob Devney
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FlimFan

Note: a strenuous San Francisco vacation (which I may yet write about) and various crises at work (which I won't) and home (double ditto) have preempted my original plans for this lead story. So this time, let's just focus on the flix!

EXCELLENT:

Conspiracy (on HBO cable)

There are three secrets for an actor playing a truly evil character: understatement, understatement, understatement. That lesson is superbly embodied by almost every member of the cast, and most especially taken to heart by director Frank Pierson and writer Loring Mandel, in this amazing docudrama. It's the most chilling movie of the year so far.

You wouldn't think this material would be that promising. It's simply the story of a business meeting in a big house. You go from the first opening of the curtains by household servants, through some details of cleaning and cooking, into the arrival of the participants, then the back-and-forth of the meeting itself, closing with the staff's cleaning up afterward.

This meeting is attended mostly by high-level government and military bureaucrats, so as you'd expect the surrounding are plush (a quietly elegant mansion on a lake), the refreshments are first-class (wine, liquor, fine food, cigars), and the atmosphere is cordial yet businesslike.

But the time is the winter of 1942; the setting is a Berlin suburb; the meeting's organizers are SS-Colonel Adolf Eichmann and his boss, SS-General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German secret police; and the only surviving copy of the meeting's

summary will come to be known as the Wannsee Protocol.

Main agenda: the bureaucratic coordination required for a final solution of the Jewish question ...

The genius of this movie is that the drama is not focused on that awful agenda. We don't see camps or chimneys, deathbound trains or millions of starving skeletons. Neither do most of the participants, except perhaps dimly.

Instead we see handsome, assertive Kenneth Branagh (in one of the best roles of his distinguished career) as Heydrich. The alpha Nazi in the room, he assumes control of the project by force of personality and quite admirable intellect, skillfully playing the others to consolidate his position and gain ascendancy for his plans. We see Colin Firth as a senior government lawyer (most of the attendees are lawyers — surprised?). He's more anguished about how the SS is demolishing the wording of laws he's written than how they're dismantling the idea of civilization in Europe. And we see Stanley Tucci in a slyly underplayed masterpiece turn as the efficient Eichmann. A trifle enigmatic even to his own colleagues, he's above all a man who knows how to throw a party — and run a meeting.

We see the personalities, the shifting alliances and dominance games, that are characteristic of meetings everywhere, of meetings we may have attended ourselves. And we hope to find a reason that, living in that world, we wouldn't have shown up for this one ...

Final note: The actual English translation of the Protocol is on the Web in various places, such as www2.h-net.msu.edu/~german/gtext/nazi/wanneng2.html. Read it first for history, and to deepen (and

darken) your understanding of human possibility. Then see the movie, and appreciate what a masterful job the moviemakers have done in clothing these bare bones with coldly convincing reality.

GOOD:

A.I. Artificial Intelligence

Just saw this star-quality effort last night. Started by Stanley Kubrick, finished by Steven Spielberg, based on a screenplay by veteran British SF writer Ian Watson from the 1969 short story *Super-Toys Last All Summer Long* by even more veteran Brit SF luminary Brian Aldiss — let's assume most readers of this fanzine will see this movie over the next few weeks.

In an unusual move for me: beyond the category you see above, I'd like to reserve my comments until next ish. Because I need more time to think about it. I want to go back and read that short story. And because this looks like one that will be more fun to discuss with spoilers than tantalizers.

Go. See. Then let's talk.

BAD:

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider

Based on the immensely popular video game and starring Angelina Jolie as the world's most famous two-gun blimp-breasted archaeologist, this might have been a fun flick.

Instead, it's like bad Bond on estrogen. You get all the gritty realism of 1999's Smith/Kline *Wild Wild West*, together with the tight plotting and scorching class consciousness of 1998's Fiennes/Thurman *The Avengers*.

Jolie plays a poor little Brit billionaire bimbo whose father (Jolie's real-life dad Jon Voight, who overacts in several flashbacks) was "lost in the field" on a archaeo-illogical quest when she was little. So she grew up sad and a little lost herself. The only compensations: she's rich, beautiful, and wedded to a life of globe-trotting, tomb-raiding, and wearing skin-tight ultrafashions wherever she goes. She also enjoys flirting

with romantic rogues who may work for the enemy; exercising with her killer spider training robot; and — in the Great Hall every evening — a bout of bungee ballet before bed.

But into each life a little global conspiracy to take over the world and tamper with the very fabric of time itself must fall. So she's attacked by this Illuminati ninja strike team and must go to Cambodia and Siberia to find the, you know, before the, oh what's the use? The plot is offensively idiotic beyond even the usual for this stuff.

Look, there are some compensations.

Jolie takes the camera and keeps it, her lips almost always curled in a slightly contemptuous smile that I find inexplicably fascinating. Personally, with Jolie (can I call her Angelina?) I'm not above exclaiming 'Those lips! Those eyes! Although this flick frequently comes close to obscuring both by the upward bounce of Those breasts!

And bounce around she does. The advent of every stunt sequence is announced with a drum-machine-fueled baseline of generic rock, soon joined by Jolie's vocal accompaniment of athletic huffs and grunts as she crouches, rolls, pulls up, gets down, spins and kicks and so on. That stuff isn't bad.

And I like the mystic way the little native girls — or self-induced avatars of her unconscious, or her earlier self? — always pop up at each location to warn of impending danger.

There are also several nice bits of set-building and business: especially a huge pendulum/battering ram, a bell you ring to break the ice, and the climactic orrery to end all orreries.

But you just can't escape (or follow) that stupid plot. And the character writing is beneath contempt as well. I can't think of another movie that provides the protagonist with not one but two comic-relief sidekicks ... and fails to make either one funny. At all. Even once.

Now back to that bad writing: If you've got a central maguffin that's a mystic metal triangle, and it's separated so that the whole

cast can spend the whole movie trying to reunite the pieces, how many pieces should it be separated into? I say again, it's a *triangle!*

If you guessed two, I'd forget about pursuing that geometry degree, but you've got a great career ahead of you in Hollywood.

And one final note for our friend Lara: The next time you're in a time storm where action is slowed to a crawl for everyone but you? And somebody has previously thrown a knife at you, it's hanging in midair, and you want to turn it back onto its dispatcher. Since you've got all the time in the world — reach up and grip it by the *handle*, not the blade, OK? Ouch.

Evolution

Apparently the science of Hollywood hitmaking stipulates that ontogeny recapitulates, not phylogeny, but *Ghostbusters*.

[And now, a word from my sister Darcy, inspired by a book that takes the lid off the secret working lives of restaurant chefs]

***Kitchen Confidential* Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly by Anthony Bourdain**

A mini-review by Darcy Devney

As any bibliophile in a loving relationship knows, one of the pleasures of reading is to look up from the book and read aloud to your life partner. What you chose to share is indicative of your character, I think.

I am easily amused and tend to read the funny parts aloud to my husband, Bob Kuhn, whereas he reads, scornfully, Things the Author Got Wrong. Recent examples included cookies in England in a Regency novel and humans' being attracted to alien pheromones.

Be careful not to abuse this privilege of excerpting aloud. Since I read about twice as fast as my husband, I have driven him to distraction by interrupting him "Every other sentence. I've been on the same page for 15 minutes!" he says indignantly. And sometimes — as with Bill Bryson's Australian stories [*In a Sunburned Country*] — I have to stop reading it to him, since Bob keeps declaring that Bill is a lying bastard.

There were laugh-out-loud parts of *Kitchen Confidential*, but even I (not particularly prissy, I would have said) was reluctant to speak some of the more salacious — and downright disgusting — sentences out loud. Yep, this author is a potty mouth.

But I recommend the book highly. Just don't expect recipes — other than an occasional glancing reference to herbs to use on fish. This chef has no patience for the patisserie, whereas my own culinary specialties all involve dessert.

I was, ironically, also re-reading my copy of Peg Bracken's *I Hate to Cook Book* at the same time, and found the contrast refreshing — sort of like reading *Ms.* magazine and *Cosmopolitan* simultaneously. Schizophrenic or illuminating, depending on your viewpoint.

[Bourdain's] opening chapter reminded me faintly of Gerald Durrell's childhood tales, soaked in wine and song and a very un-American childhood. All too obviously a series of articles, not a book in sequential order, but I'm pretty sure that is how this guy thinks, anyway. And somehow, while reading *Kitchen Confidential*, faintly in the background, I kept hearing a G & S chorus of "I am a Pirate King." Read a chapter and see if you agree.

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

*[Cambridge, MA fan **Charles Sumner** is lost to listmania; check out his sometimes surprising choices]*

I was recently asked to list my favorite SF book and being the sort of person I am, I had to spend far too much time just trying to narrow the list to only 10 books. Having come up with that list though, I decided to add it to the Amazon Listmania section. While there, I added another bunch books to the list (no surprise), including some related books and non-SF works that I had to include on a list of my favorite books.

I make no claims that these are the best SF books of all time, just the books I currently call my favorites. Since I thought the list might amuse you, you can find it at...

[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/
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listmania/list-browse/
-/3SR71R2NCVZQH/
107-9566927-9150102.](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/listmania/list-browse/-/3SR71R2NCVZQH/107-9566927-9150102)

*[Canadian fan **Lloyd Penney** looks to the stars]*

Many thanks for *The Devniad* 71, and congratulations on another Hugo nomination. I gather I almost got one myself...I'll have to tell you about that one sometime ...

Ad Astra has said they do want me to rejoin the committee, and I will, as their dealers' room chief. This is the same position I held when I first joined Ad Astra's committee in 1982, so everything old is new again. Now to see if my previous experience is relevant today. Yvonne will be on the committee again, too, according to the co-chairs, but what she'll do, they're not sure yet. We did run the con suite for FilKONtario again, but have decided no more; we'll still work for the convention on a floating basis. This means we'll take an hour or two at registration, an hour working for convention sales, an hour or two back in the con suite, etc.

Eeriecon was a great time, and for the record, it was in Niagara Falls, New York, not Ontario. The school reunion is in less than 2 weeks, and of course, I am of two

minds about this. I'll have a great time! I'll have a lousy time! The people I want to see won't be there, and the people I wouldn't have ever wanted to see again will be there. Well, everything is paid for, so I'll go and report back. Might even get a fanzine article out of this ...

*[Very veteran fan and writer **Ted White** has a note on my Corflu con coverage]*

This is truly delightful, Bob.

But I thought her name was Zen Green, not Zen Smith....

[Ted, yes, I sat at the banquet next to Jennifer "Zen" Green, not Zen Smith. In what I laughingly call final proofing, I found it, fixed it -- forgot I'd quoted her twice. Naturally, I would pick a nice (and attractive) new fan's name to screw up. Why O why couldn't I have made it Andy Hoople or rich tan?]

Anyway, thanks for the kind word. Have read you and heard of your doings for years, of course, high in the SF and fan firmaments. A great pleasure to finally encounter your earthly avatar.]

[Megafan David Langford is on my unfortunately deserving case as well]

Thanks for further devniansy. Wish I could get to US Corflus. I hope the dread deafness meme isn't being spread by e-mailed *Ansibles*, but ... *[the ish's reference to "Alice Murray, who distributes Ansible"]* ... that should be Janice Murray.

[And about my correcting Chris Logan Edwards on the title of Philip Pullman's first Dark Materials volume, The Golden Compass not Northern Lights]

... The British edition has been titled *Northern Lights* all along.

[Dave: We all wish you could get to more U.S. Corflus, and other cons too. Your appearance here is just a Dawn Ages legend to younger Boskone attendees. Or would be if we had any.]

As to Alice Murray when it should be Janice Murray -- as you indicate, I'm sure Jean Weber got it right and I misheard, misscribbled, or most probably misremembered. Fresh meat for your signoff: Bob Devney, hero distributor. Me dog. Arrrrggghhhhh.]

*[Well met at this year's Boskone, **Bonnie Black** is proving an asset to the lettercol]*

... I just thought I'd let you know that both MaryAnn [*Johanson, the Flick Philosopher*] and I are currently scheduled to come up to the Readercon in July and I'm hoping we'll see you and your delightful family there. We can discuss books and movies at length ... I'm submitting something to the writers' workshop this week, and we'll see if I get in this time.

Meanwhile, MaryAnn and I were in Balticon ... There were some really fun moments: like the *MST3K* takeoff, complete with 'bots and the movie was: *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I'd forgotten how much nothing goes on in that movie! And the writers made the most of it (if that's not too paradoxical). The costume display was great — and the MC was a lot of fun in his "Dracula" costume, complete with fangs, but he was such a sweet older guy that he certainly had no menace. In between the costume display and the presentation of awards, they had an auction to benefit Reading Is Fundamental — auctioning off all kinds of bizarre and yet, strangely attractive items ... a good many of them drawings, prints and sketches of the late Robert Sacks, obviously a BNF who had a goodly SF/fan collection. The auctioneer had plenty of personality too. Maryann and I both wound up spending Douglas Adams amounts (\$42.00) ...

Maryann was scheduled on about 15 panels having to do with movies and/or SF representation in film, TV and radio. She had some interesting and challenging exchanges with Jack L. Chalker and John Norman (I had a bit of an "exchange" with John Norman myself at one of the last panels on Monday), though I have no actual quotes for you ... I did a little writers' workshop kind of thing in the morning, which was extremely well-run.

We party-hopped as well. (I kinda like the "Goth" parties. The clothes are so gorgeous). And at the Pop Tart Cafe, discovered a few new card games that were the rage of the con — Fluxx and Chrononauts. Like all the best games, the

rules are simple — with infinite possibilities. I'd really love to get together with you guys and play a few rounds. I think you'll get totally hooked, like we did [join ussss] ...

[Bonnie, thanks for the con report. Next time, more dirt I mean details on items like confrontations with Chalker and Norman ...

I'll definitely see you guys at Readercon, my brother Michael probably, Darcy and Bob probably not, sigh.

As to whether you'll inveigle us into cardplaying -- my resistance is high. Bulwarked by the fact that I suck at cards, can't bother to remember the rules, and demonstrate all the strategic foresight of Civil War General John Sedgewick, who was peering over the ramparts at a nest of Rebel riflemen when, urged to keep his head down, he uttered his famous last words: "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dis-."

Backchat

**on APA:NESFA #372,
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To George Flynn

If I haven't asked you this already, here's a good place to do so: as a pasha of proofreaders, have you read "The History of Punctuation" by the great Nicholson Baker? He's one of my favorite living writers, a crazy obsessionist with a crystalline prose style. I just found out the above marvelous punctuation essay is reprinted in a 1997 trade paperback collection, *The Size of Thoughts*. Whoosh. Raced out and got it at the speed of thought.

To Tony Lewis

Your fine review of Alexander Bevin's *How Hitler Could Have Won the Second World War* answers the title's question early on, saying, "by not being Hitler." Unfortunately this reminded me of the episode of TV's U.S. Presidential drama *The West Wing* entitled "Let Bartlett Be Bartlett," which immediately got me thinking about a spoof we would call "Let Hitler Be Hitler." Let's

see, Leo is Martin Bormann, Toby is Himmler, Josh is Bormann, Sam is Speer because they were both the only good-looking guys at the top, Toby is von Ribbentrop, C. J. is Goebbels, and the gang gets together and decides to just let Der Fuhrer go with his good natural instincts and forget playing to pesky political constraints (like international sensibilities, the rule of law, or common humanity). Hey, isn't that just about what happened?

To Art Henderson

Second your enthusiasms for the last few *West Wings* and for Dire Straits' beautiful little song "Brothers in Arms." Thanks for the lyrics; really tough song to sing, though, at least as I half-remember the tune. I'm also still crazy about several other Knopfler (that's Mark Knopfler, Dire Straits leader) songs with historical resonance, especially "Done with Bonaparte" and title song "Golden Heart," both from his 1996 solo album. Check it out, chum.

To Lisa Hertel

Nicely narrated medical episode. If I ever have to undergo a thyroidectomy while breastfeeding, I'll know all the moves ahead of time. As for the scar, just tell people you went to school in Heidelberg. Seriously, hope you're feeling better, girl.

Your average 2-hour wait at Mass General (a world-class hospital) to get Nursing to do anything must have been extremely frustrating. Probably tracks fairly precisely with the thinning out of nursing staffs in recent years to save money via what I'll call "managed carelessness." Ten or fifteen years ago, your nurse had primary responsibility for, what, 6 to 8 patients per shift? Now it's more like 12 ...

To Paul Giguere

Love Tim Powers's writing, but I'm several books behind with his work and was going to wait on his latest novel *Declare*. However, faced with raves from you and Mark Olson about its thriller-plus-fantastical-elements wonderfulness, I broke down, went out and bought it. Looks great;

will report when I finally get around to reading it.

Glad to hear your dissertation prep is going apace. But if you're at a symposium in Florida mid-July, how can you simultaneously attend Readercon? Sounds like a job for Distance Learning Man ...

To Joe Ross

Thanks for the report on Israel's repealing direct election of the prime minister. You point out that one effect of returning to the parliamentary method is to give less power to Israeli Arabs. Hmmm. Are we sure this was the best time to make them feel *more* disaffected?

To Mark Olson

One high art in reviewing nonfiction lies in encapsulating the content. And at that game, Mark, you're one of the highest artists I know.

In your review of *In Search of Deep Time: Beyond the Fossil Record to a New History of Life* by Henry Gee, you don't just pass summary judgment on the book's contents ("a serviceable exposition of Cladistics combined with some fairly silly polemics against the old-fashioned Linneans"). You also give us three folksy yet crystalline paragraphs explaining cladistics, so clearly that this time it may actually sink in for me. (Evelyn Leeper, I think, introduced me to the term in an article a few years back, but reinforcement was needed to give it some long-term purchase on the slippery slope I laughingly call my brain.) Plus you throw in some pinches of logical positivism definition for spice. As you would say, marvelous.

Which is what you did say about Colin Greenland's 1993 *Harm's Way*, a space opera it seems I must zoom out and purchase.

To Tom Endrey

That CUNY panel you attended on the launch of what sounds like a major new book, *The Art of Richard Powers* by Jane Frank — I'm bitterly envious. Talks by the legendary Jane Frank as the editor, plus other luminaries like Ron Goulart, Vincent Di Fate, and the artist's son, Richard Gid

Powers. You don't even sound that excited about going; I would have been utterly agog.

Loved the guy who did those great blobby abstract out-of-this world egg-shaped things, on SF paperback covers when I was a kid. And as I grew up, kept looking around the SF art field and realizing there was still no one like Powers. His work stated something simple and profound that no one else was saying: Space travel doesn't just get you to a different place, it takes you to a different *reality*. Readercon had a Powers retrospective years ago that really reawakened my interest, but couldn't find a book on him. Thanks for pointing the way.

For other who are interested, I couldn't find a mention on the publisher's outdated site, www.papertiger.co.uk/. But there are copies at Amazon, hardcover, \$28.45 with discount. I'll troll through Readercon first, though: any self-respecting SF bookseller must stock 5 or 10 copies of this thing, right?