

The Devniad Book 76b

un zine de Bob Devney
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Beamup or Letdown?

A mental patient at a New York City psychiatry hospital presents with a perhaps not-unprecedented claim: he's not really human, he's a visitor from the planet K-PAX. Trouble is, as Dr. Mark Powell (Jeff Bridges) admits to a colleague, the patient, who claims to be named Prot (Kevin Spacey), is "the most convincing delusional I've ever come across."

So the new would-be SF hit *K-PAX* will shape up as a battle of wits between the alien and the alienist. Is he crazy — or is he just K-PAXian?

In a movie year filled with big disappointments, I was really looking forward to this flick. But sadly, for this viewer at least, it never really lived up to its premise — or its promise.

Director Iain Softley, who made 1997's somehow sexy, intelligent Henry James adaptation *Wings of a Dove*, has some interesting material here, in a screenplay by Gene Brewer and Charles Leavitt from Brewer's novel. And an absolutely stellar cast.

Jeff Bridges has been uncrowned King of the Underplayers since well before 1991's *The Fisher King*. Here his Doctor Powell is nicely muffled, both for professional reasons — you can't appear too judgmental or you won't draw the patients out — and as a personal failing, which is distancing him from his wife and kids. Although we don't automatically give our hearts to any passing shrink, we feel an immediate rooting interest in having this big, smart, handsome guy get back in touch with his pretty, caring wife (Mary McCormack) and winning kids.

Also, we don't know for quite a while just how convinced he's becoming of the truth of Prot's story. It's a sneaky, subtle, good performance.

Kevin Spacey has made a career keeping us curious about what's behind his knowing little smile. In a way, he's been this same slightly amused alien observer with hidden resources in just about every movie he's graced. It works very well here too. Walking with his hands at his sides, tilting his head, always with that little parentheses of a grin — Spacey's Prot watches the doc, the other patients, and a Gray space alien balloon floating above the street with the same unusual quality of attention. If we weren't taken by the previews on TV, 10 minutes into the movie Spacey has *us* convinced. (And by the way, *Devniad* Science Advisor Dr. Stephen Kennedy points out that even the actor's *name* was made for this role.)

But how does the story itself do at persuading us to one side of the question or the other?

Quite convincing — and cool — are things like the patient's correction of Dr. Powell's rudimentary summary of Einstein on *c* velocity limitation, or just his crunching through bananas with the peels on. Plus Prot's statement that there are no families on K-PAX, perhaps because "the act of reproduction is very unpleasant," involving, among other things, serious pain and "a very bad smell."

However, experienced SF readers may hold these things to a higher standard than Hollywood believes will be true of the moviegoing public. When Prot proclaims that Earth is a "Class BA dash 3 world" or avers that his planet is circled by "seven purple moons," part of us is supposed to

go, oooohh. Instead we mostly think, arbitrary and unconvincing.

You get the impression that the moviemakers believe some of these evidences are more persuasive than they really are.

K-PAX is a nicely shot film, with special thought given to lighting. The filmmakers are integrating the visuals with the narrative here, usually a great move. Prot says he travels between planets via a beam of light. Also, he has unusual eyesight, is an attentive observer, etc. So we're constantly having our own attention drawn to light shafts, lens flares, glowing flowers, dust motes, prisms, lit-up glasses of water, and rivers by moonlight.

However, all this care and visual sensitivity gets precious and overdone after a while. To the point where, like the prism shining in Jeff Bridges's eye, it's actually kind of irritating.

And speaking of irritating, here's a main problem. For far too much of this carefully made, intelligently acted movie, we're not on Earth or K-PAX. We're on Planet Hollywood, a place that can be very hard to believe in.

It's where a ward full of colorfully differentiated mental patients unanimously takes shines to their newest member. And where he can reach each of them, perhaps even impel them towards a cure, in a way *no other human* has been able to do. (One working title for this script certainly must have been *One Beamed Over A Cuckoo's Nest*.)

It's a place where the patient even shows the psychiatrist he should spend (guess what) more time with his family. A place where brilliant astrophysicists examining an anomalous thinker gather in a glamorously beautiful planetarium (actually the upper sphere of New York City's new Rose Center for Earth and Space) with a skyscape projector on which to inscribe luminous orbits of great white eye candy ... instead of in, say, a conference room with a whiteboard and some markers not quite dried up yet.

Oh, and a place where a psychiatrist takes a transcontinental plane trip to investigate the possible site of traumas to one of his (Medicare-funded, remember) patients. And where once there, when asked about a possible crime, the sheriff doesn't just *tell* you about it. He says, "I want to show you something," and drives 30 miles in the middle of his working day to the most remote yet extremely photogenic property in his parish for more revelations.

Although I do want to compliment the moviemakers for the best backwards lyric-fitting in the history of film. That's where, over a party scene, Elton John sums up an important plot thread with a song he wrote 29 years ago: "I'm not the man they think I am at home, Ah no no no, I'm a Rocket Man ... "

So is he or not? Is *K-PAX* a story about astronomy or psychiatry? You'd have to go see it to find out, which may prove a somewhat disappointing experience.

It's not that the filmmakers don't present a good balance on the question. In fact, to the extent that ultimate questions are unresolved, that's interesting. But compared to the space stuff, the psychiatric part just isn't enough *fun*. And the movie has an intelligent story structure, but too many dumb details and incidents along the way, put in for cheap thrills, showy visuals, and other compromises guaranteed to please us primitive Earthlings.

More FlimFan

VERY GOOD:

Happy Accidents — This fine little indie film is billed as "a time travel relationship comedy," which sounds just about right. (Thanks to the *real* NESFA movie fans, Claire and Dave Anderson, for putting me onto it.) *Happy Accidents* stars the ever-interesting Vincent D'Onofrio (go rent *The Whole Wide World* right now, or at least right

after you read this review) and the at-last-interesting-again Marisa Tomei (she's wandered in the wilderness since *My Cousin Vinny*, and it's great to have her back again in something really good.) Big, shambling, friendly Sam Deed (D'Onofrio) is a slightly odd guy who soon confesses to his new love interest, cute little Ruby Weaver (Tomei), that sometimes he's awkward because "where I'm from, courting rites are really abbreviated." And where's that? Dubuque, Iowa. Although [SPOILER WARNINGS] not *her* Dubuque. Turns out he last saw Iowa (on the Atlantic coast, by the way) in the year 2439 ... Now, Ruby's long been a sucker for strange, needy guys, but she's sick of it. (Great bit I'm afraid many women may recognize: Tomei sits at a table with her arms over her head and moans, "Why are they always *drawn* to me?") Yet this one came back through time just because he saw a *picture* of her, and what girl can resist lines such as "I feel like my whole life has just been a journey into your arms"?. But can she trust him? And there are larger questions for the audience: if you were Sam, how would you *prove* you were a time traveler? The movie posits that you couldn't bring any artifacts back, and it won't stoop to cheap tricks like knowing the details of 400-year-old stock transactions. Nevertheless, for us SF fans, it suggests a pretty neat way. And for us romantics, what's interesting here anyway are the feelings, not the technology. *Happy Accidents* is not perfect — there are some obvious actor's improv moments that get a little too juicy, for instance — but it will leave you almost perfectly satisfied.

DECENT:

The Others — Nicole Kidman does a credible job in this stylish tribute to Victorian ghost stories, set in an isolated house on an isolated island during World War II. It uses all Hollywood's high-tech effects without losing that dark, misty period chill.

Joy Ride — With fine director John Dahl of *Red Rock West* and that sublime contemporary noir classic *The Last Seduction*, this movie should have been wonderful. But

although Dahl uses every bit of craft he's got, it still remains a mad-killer-in-truck-chases-careless-youngfolk horror flick. Steve Zahn still gives a very good performance, though, as the nervy young no-good who starts the wheels of terror rolling with a thoughtless prank. Kids, next time sit back and keep quiet until we get there.

BARELY DECENT:

American Pie 2 — Everyone in America under 25 has already seen this and its prequel at least once. So go, fellow geezers, if only for anthropological interest. And reflect that the *Pie* movies aren't anywhere near as mean-spirited as an earlier generation's dumb vulgar teen losing-your-virginity comedy. Oh, so you thought I'd *forgotten* how you snorted Pepsi and malted milk balls all down your disco shirt that night in 1981 at *Porky's*?

DISAPPOINTING:

Hearts in Atlantis — The three young friends having significant, somewhat dangerous adventures in the last summer of their childhood before life rips them apart and leaves the most artistic one (here named Bobbie Garfield) to be retrospectively sad about the others years later — we've seen it all before in that much better film *Stand by Me*, adapted from a better Stephen King short fiction, "The Body." In fact, when you get your first sight of Bobbie's slim, handsome, solemn, crew-cut best friend Sully (Will Rothhaar), you think, "Christ, they dug up River Phoenix!" ... Hope Davis was by far the most interesting thing in this movie. (This role surpasses her terrific take on the fatigued yet somehow perky patient in *Mumford*.) As Bobbie's widowed mother, trying to get by on barely more than a widow's mite, she gets a lot of automatic sympathy from us early on; getting him a library card instead of a bike plays well with at us moviegoing bookaholics — until we find she's always got money to spend on a pretty dress for herself. Victim? Bitch? Maybe just a human being? Director Scott Hicks, Davis, King, and veteran screenwriter William Goldman

keep us guessing all along ... Anthony Hopkins is competent but no more as the sad old guy with perhaps some secret power who befriends the lad, but looks haunted and is being hunted by someone, or something. And let history record that the role of Bobbie is overplayed by a hatefully fake little eager-beaver named Anton Yelchin. Yelch is right.

From Hell — This lush recounting of the Jack the Ripper story has an over-the-top visual attack and air of contained hysteria that's reminiscent of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Although the Hughes Brothers (Allen and Albert), who co-directed this, never manage even the few moments of greatness that distinguished Frances Ford Coppola's similarly uneven 1992 horror flick. This baby is way overdone. Still, it hits a lot of the historical high points. *From Hell* slags together several of the best-known theories on the identity of the savage killer of prostitutes who terrorized the streets of London's Whitechapel slum in 1888. Was the Ripper a butcher, a Jewish tailor, a surgeon, a policeman, or even perhaps a prince of the realm? You do get to find out whodunnit here, although the expressed motivation for the crimes sounds crazy to me. (Perhaps not surprisingly.) And you'd think having a murderer whose eyes actually *change color* when he gets murderous would help the police along a little, but no ... The flick's too heavy on the dark atmosphere and melodrama which went over better in the original graphic novel by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. There are more graphic if quick visuals of the actual mutilations than I recall seeing before, garnished with verbal descriptions from sickened peelers and morguemen. And there's a real heaviness to the set pieces, like the lobotomy with Victorian instruments, or the shot where the camera eyes takes in a busy London street scene, then descends through the very cobbles to an underground temple from which evil Masons influence the Empire ... The casting is OK, with one exception: A woman in her late 20s who'd arrived in London from starvation in Ireland at age 8 and presumably lived the life of a

Whitechapel prostitute ever since would *not* look like Heather Graham with a smudge on her face. Johnny Depp as the druggy but brilliant police inspector just did this sort of role in *Sleepy Hollow*; little new here. Ian Holm as the aging surgeon who helps the policeman is brilliant when he's contained and subtle, but the moviemakers force him over the edge too, which really doesn't work. But Robbie Coltrane as big, cynical, surprisingly decent Sergeant Godley is great as usual, perhaps the most interesting character in the movie. You straighten up and start to smile whenever he comes onscreen, which is not otherwise a reaction you get much here ...

NAKEDLY BAD:

Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back — When I'm this disappointed in a series I'd loved, perhaps it's best I remain just, you know, Silent Bob.

Ghosts of Mars — Director/co-writer John Carpenter is up to this old tricks in this Red Planet blast-the-zombies fest. Really old, really tired tricks. Not even Natasha Henstridge as an expressionless druggie cop named Ballard who looks good in coveralls can redeem the flick's ridiculously macho attitude, clumsily handled flashback-happy narrative, head-throbbing 70s score, or dismal dialog (of the Gene Simmons-like native Martian murderous zombies: "They won't rest, short of the destruction of any invading species!"). Early on, the movie makes a stab at some futurespeak suitable for the stated date, 2176 A.D.: a sergeant advises her squad, "I want you all jack-ready and double-tough!" But when antihero Desolation Williams shows up, Ice Cube plays him word perfectly as a 1990s LA gang leader, complete with epithets like "scumbag" and the apparently *ever*-popular "muthafucka." Please. I did like the bit about the Terran settlers' having evolved a matriarchy, so smooth ladies' man Jericho (Jason Statham) can try to tumble Ballard's walls with smooth lines like "There aren't many of us breeders around. I hate to miss a chance to give it a go." Give this one a miss,

though, and go rent *Escape from New York* (1981) or Carpenter's masterpiece, 1982's *The Thing*.

Bobbing for Silver

Argentus, a good new fanzine by Chicon stalwart and fellow Hugo fan writing loser Steven Silver, has much cool stuff to offer in its first ish, including a predictably somewhat alarming article by Dave Truesdale ("Thoughts on the State of Short Science Fiction") and a fascinating hope-springs-eternal piece by Steven himself, already a *Jeopardy* veteran, about his almost-appearance on another TV quiz show ("I Wanted to Be A Millionaire"). Although I'm usually much too lazy to write for someone else's fanzine, Steven sucked me in, too, along with first-class SF flick fans such as Dan Kimmel and Mark Leeper, with a beautiful idea: write a review of the imaginary movie that might be made from an SF/F book you like.

Check out the results on www.sfsite.com/~silverag/argentus.html, where a note gives you a reasonable choice: "*Argentus* is available either as a downloadable .pdf (Acrobat) file or in hardcopy form by sending \$3.00 or 'The Usual' to Steven H Silver, 707 Sapling Lane, Deerfield, IL 60015-3969."

An Agarose By Any Other Name

Sometimes, I guess, the fumes just go to your head.

Below are examples culled from a site called Silly Molecules, containing the actual names that working (or, anyway, playing) scientists have derived or invented for stuff they've found. As a mere English major, naturally I can't vouch for authenticity here.

But having met some scientists in my time (you know who you are), I believe them all:

Angelic acid ... Anol ... Apatite ...
Arsole ... Betweenanenes ... Clitorin ...
Constipatic acid ... Dickite ... Erotic acid ...
Fucitol ... Moronic acid ... Ununinium ...
Uranate.

And there're more! The full moly is exposed at www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/Chemistry/MOTM/silly/sillymols.htm.

Quote of the Month

"Those who know history get to watch other people repeat it."
— Bruce Sterling, Viridian Design speech, October 1998 (see www.viridiandesign.org/viridiandesign.htm)

Backchat

on *APA: NESFA* #376,
September 2001

To Anna Hillier

Thanks for the info on the classic 50s SF films the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics is running. Of course, *Destination Moon* just won the Retro Hugo at the Worldcon. Amusing to contemplate that, say, the *Star Wars* flicks or last year's *X-Men* will look at least as dated and kitschy a mere 51 years from now.

To Pam Fremon

Loved your *Globe* clipping about Rick Mercer, the Canadian TV comic who videotaped ignorant Americans answering wrongheaded questions about The Big Blank Up Top. (Should Canada become part of North America? Does it really need a navy, being landlocked? Should it stop marooning oldsters on ice floes?) At first I hoped he was just interviewing yuks like Jay Leno's clueless mallsters, but no: two state

governors, students in Harvard Yard, and (ouch) a history professor at Columbia ...

Note to Canadian fans listening: Torcon should acquire Mercer's TV special for the 2003 Toronto Worldcon. Is it SFnal? Well, it does present a kind of Alternate Canada that exists only in our empty minds.

To Tony Lewis

Fine full report on Worldcon. Much enjoyed our breakfast together at the very plain (this is an Amish compliment) Dutch Eating Place, although I don't like scrapple as much as when I left Pennsylvania at age 8.

Envy your dinner with singer/songwriter and, it turns out, genuinely well-read SF fan Janis Ian. Have you seen her own lengthy, modest, and enthusiastic report on finally finding fandom at MilPhil? See www.janisian.com/news-oct2001wc.html.

Don't think I've yet put in writing my concern about Suford's cardiac troubles. If I don't see you at this Other Meeting, Suford, let me just say: We know it's not easy being married to Tony, but try to bear up ...

To Joe Ross

Somehow I don't feel ready to write about what Patrick Nielsen Hayden calls The Current Situation yet. But I like what you say about flying the flag without jingoism. Expanding suggestions I've seen on the net, perhaps flag-waving should be restricted to firefighters, policemen, veterans of military service or organizations like the Peace Corps, registered voters, and those who can define the Bill of Rights. And let's deem it bad taste to yell "Nuke Afghanistan!" unless you can first locate said country on a map ...

To Brad Ackerman

Good luck on the job hunt, guy. Afraid it's getting even tougher out there now. Unless you're tempted by a career in the military?

You've got a good line going in a real fanzine specialty: disparate pieces on slightly exotic subjects. Especially your stuff

on Japanese anime and other culture, where I'm always flattered by your style of assuming I'll get more of your references than is actually the case. So Tokyo's famous Akibahara electronics shopping district has great stuff but high prices: interesting, I'd visualized it more like some of those low-price, great-selection camera stores in Manhattan.

To Lisa Hertel

Your pieces are oft on the short side, but always deceptively full of info and insight.

Glad you made it clear that you and I only *talked* about having Palm sex together, but of course couldn't actually do it, since I don't have one. A Palm, I mean.

About your being radioactive due to medical treatment (trust that's going well). Hope Mark is taking the chance to try out new compliments, such as, "My, you look radiant tonight."

To Paul Giguere

Your favorable review of new crime thriller *Hardcase*, by the usually reliable Dan Simmons — I'll wait for the paperback, but definitely get it then — reminds me that recently I've seen several recommendations for F. Paul Wilson's Repairman Jack novels. Being a completist, naturally I refuse to start with the series entry he published this year, and have been looking for the launch book, apparently a 1984 novel called *The Tomb*. Anyone out there read it or others in the series and have comments?

Once again, Paul, thanks for the upcoming-book highlights. Of course I echo your yay for November's *Collected Stories of Vernor Vinge*. Plus *Dark Light* by Ken MacLeod in January. Already have Alistair Reynold's *Chasm City* in the British edition, but it may take me at least until the American edition next April to get to it ...

To Mark Olson

I like the way your precis of the early Olson fannish career modestly trails off with the words "and within a few years ... was doing regionals and Worldcons." Including the Worldcon you *chaired*, of course?

Agree with you that Bujold's new *The Curse of Chalion* is a very good book; a fabulous fantasy. Think you should have included one of those second-to-last paragraph caveats where the reviewer, in the midst of a rave, admits there were one or two bobbles. In this case, I can't believe that someone with your intolerance for coincidence could blink the little item of just who happened to have been chained next to Cazaril during his galley-slave days ...

For Chris Logan Edwards

Congratulations on one new job and the prospect of perhaps another. Although the post office might not just be the most popular choice of new careers this month.

Will be curious about your reaction to the flick *From Hell*, Chris. (See review in this ish.) Know you're a great admirer of Alan Moore's graphic novels. Have you read this one? Got a feeling you'll think the book a cut above.

I also was devastated that Michael Dirda of the *Washington Post* skipped our critics panel at MilPhil. Not saying he would have intimidated me or anything, though. After all, I'm a four-time Hugo loser and what's he got for street cred? Not counting the Pulitzer.