

The Devniad

Book 85c

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Orbita Dicta

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When I go to a science fiction/fantasy/horror/TV/movies/anime/comics/costuming/gaming convention, see, I hear voices ...

[On check-in, the hotel employee at the front desk is blandly reassuring about my desperate desire for a quiet con life]

Oh, yes, seven is a nice quiet floor. We put everyone who asks for a quiet room on seven.

[But the smiling bastard's testimony is contradicted by APA:NESFA Czarina Sheila Perry, who comes up as I start to insert my key into the lock of Room 726]

What, you wanted a room on the party floor?
... I'm hosting the Noreascon Four party a few doors down in a few hours.

[Encumbered by luggage and bad feeling, I lumber down to the lobby once more, where, after a 45-minute wait in line while the clump of fans ahead engineers a complicated room-swap — I believe the transaction involved five people, two gamers, and a goat — Pat Vandenberg, the Arisia innkeeper, gives her fairy wand a short sharp snap]

Oh, no problem. We can fix that easily. *[And she does. Hello, eighth floor!]*

[While I'm waiting, NESFAn Suford Lewis watches as her famous husband Tony strolls around trailing almost visible clouds of glory]

He's Fan Guest of Honor here ... I'm just so pleased for him.

[In the dealer's room, bull bibliopole Larry Smith has finally seen LOTR:TFOTR (on DVD), but he's feeling testy as a cave troll]

Arwen Evenstar as a young babe? Try hundreds of years old ... Well, I suppose she *is* a full Age younger than Gildor.

[At the con registration desk, I hail SMOF friend Lisa Hertel, who reveals she's here alone while Mark stays home constraining the kids; I'm happy for her]
So this weekend, you're a party girl?

[But for NESFAns, the fannish ramble's rarely restful]
— Not exactly. Operations, security, all the gritty stuff — this weekend, I'm a division head.

[Swallowing a quick smoothie at Au Bon Pain, rising short form writer and once-and-future-Hugo-nominee Shane Tourtellotte touts three favorite cons]

I live in New Jersey, but usually try to come up here and hit the trifecta: Arisia, Boskone, and Readercon.

[Enter Walter Hunt clutching his brand-new sequel to The Dark Wing, a glossy volume named The Dark Path, with another terrific David Seeley cover]

I've got three copies ... The third book is still at Tor. Have they bought it? I don't know yet. It's only been 2 weeks.

[Analog reviewer Tom Easton concludes his introductions for the Book Reviewing panel with a nod to a tome he wrote himself, though]
... Publishers Weekly peed all over it.

[The next panelist shoots Easton a fraught glance, then gamely begins anyway]
— My name is Charlene Brusso — and I do reviews for Publishers Weekly.

[According to her, exegesis may save but the amounts sure don't mount up]
Thirteenth Moon paid me \$10 per review.

[For Easton, it's still like stealing]

These are books I would have been out there spending money on [anyway]. Getting them for free feels like a real deal.

[SFRevu stalwart Steve Sawicki recalls his formative critical experience]

I said, I can do that. I certainly read enough, and I certainly am opinionated enough.

[From the audience, is SFRevu editor Ernest Lilley wistful or just uxorious?]

Before I got married, I could read a book a night.

[Darklady (Theresa Reed), I feel your pain]

I'm the sexpert for Venus Book Club, so I get at least five questions a month from people asking how to put a spark in their relationships.

...If I have to tell a woman how to have an orgasm one more time, I'm going to scream.

[Easton somehow maintains his joie de livre]

Do I still read for pleasure? The stuff I get pleasure out of, gets great reviews.

[Brusso recalls a recent favorite]

Sean Stewart's *Mockingbird* is the last novel that absolutely blew me away, so I couldn't find a thing wrong.

[Darklady remembers the guilty pleasure of her put-down of an actress in a film review]

I essentially said that talking is not what this woman should be doing with her mouth.

[Of course, sometimes the public bites back, as Easton has found]

After I trashed a late van Vogt book, I got letters calling me a jealous son of a bitch.

[Darklady suggests a properly improper response

— Yeah, so, I'm a jealous son of a bitch with a column.

[I ask Sawicki what other reviewers he admires, but]

I'm nervous about reading other reviewers' work. So it won't color my own work.

[Astoundingly, Easton demolishes all my previous estimates of the speed of write]

I can finish a 3600 word column in, oh, 2 or 3 hours ... I also love art books, because they can be reviewed quickly. Flip, flip, flip ...

[New cover blurb, here Tor comes: Easton bestows what publishers might call the "money quote"]

Watch for Walter Hunt's *The Dark Path* ... He's got a quest here that could be the science fictional equivalent of *The Lord of the Rings*.

[Brusso names some recent outstanding selections of her own, by two of The Devniad's favorite writers]

Swanwick, *Bones of the Earth*. And Patrick O'Leary, *The Impossible Bird*.

[Somewhere in here there was a birthday party for fan and friend Nomi Burstein; I recall a former student's abusing Nomi's husband Michael (who can blame her?), but we were all having too good a time to take notes]

[At the panel for *New Con Goers*, in the audience, Becky Feld believes neofans should be imprinted early and often]

I brought my son to his first con when he was 10 days old. It was a Worldcon.

[On the panel, Jerome Conner is a real sucker for fanishment]

I keep going because of the people I meet. I met my soon-to-be-ex-wife at a convention.

[Famous fan Wombat (Jan Howard Finder) counts out some well-known tips for con survival]

It started out as the Five and Two Rule. Five hours sleep, two meals a day. Then the gamers showed up, and it became the Five Two One Rule. Five hours sleep, two meals, and one shower.

[Feld has Arisia's number already]

They're estimating 2400 people here.

[Wombat advises us to beard dragons in their, er, weyrs]

The people you came to see, the authors or the artists — they're extremely approachable ...

Twenty-nine years ago, I walked up to a budding author, she only had three books out, and I said, "Ms. McCaffrey, I like your stuff. Can I buy you a drink?"

And we've been friends ever since.

[In the hall, lovely writer Paul Levinson keeps an oculus on the future]

What's coming up next? Well, I've got *The Pixel Eye* coming out July 6, so I'll have it at Readercon.

It's about squirrels and holograms ... Yes, the third Phil D'Amato novel.

"Phil D'Amato": love love, you know. Do people get that? Almost nobody; I think one person has ever come up to me with that.

[In the Art Show party, Steve Sawicki remembers an answer to a question he drew a blank on during the Book Review panel]

OK, you want a recent novel that really impressed me: *Solitaire*, by Kelley Eskridge. It's one of those bifurcated stories, where the main character is one thing during the first half and then goes off in a completely different direction in the second half.

Normally I hate that. But this was so good I had to ask myself, Maybe it has to be like that?

I'm still thinking about that book, long after I finished it. Which is a good sign.

[Fan Marlin May may be sorry he encountered me in the hall outside his room so early Saturday morn]

Do you mind if we stop talking? If I don't get some coffee *right now* my head will explode.

[My brother and faithful companion Michael can't make this con, so I'm forced to sit solo at the bar, forlornly inhaling balesfull of buffet until adjacent fan Anna Mancini takes pity and we start talking; her daughter has already ditched her for the day]

I try to interest Samantha in her Hispanic heritage, because I think that's important. Or her Italian heritage — I go to Italy whenever I can.

But she's a teenager now, and she got interested in anime. So the only place she wants to go is Japan.

[Halfway into the panel on If You Could Go Back in Time, grandmaster Hal Clement thinks about altering courses for the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria]

What if the American natives, before burning the three ships, had looked them over first and learned some useful technology?

[Fan Toni Lay, who's descended from both African and Native American lines, takes it personally]

My branch points? Part of my ancestry would have run faster, and another part of my ancestry would have burned the damned *boats*.

[We all nod as if Shane Tourtellotte's question has occurred to us already except we would have asked it in Latin probably if, you know, we'd taken Latin]

But what counts as the fall of Rome? The sack under Honorius or the murder of Romulus Augustulus?

[From the floor, I can't resist poisoning the air with politics]

How about a more recent branch point, where Gore didn't win the election?

[But Clement remains fair and balanced]

— Then we would be hearing exactly the same charges against the Democrats.

[Now that these columns are so infamous, people accost me in the halls, blurt out favorite quotes, I scribble, they go away, and later I realize I have no idea what they mean; fan Mark Mandel said this one involved a young lady, and I'd swear he winked]

Someone call housekeeping for more towels. Mine were on the side of the tub and I filled it without looking.

[It's hard to take notes during a panel you're sitting on, but when in the Movies: Year in Review panel I'm strangely silent on the first six obscure flicks he mentions, I well recall what my so-called friend and pro critic Dan Kimmel said in front of everybody]

So did you see any movies this year?

[Pro critic Rob Newton is equally unkind to director Wes Craven about a rather immodest title]

Wes Craven Presents: They. It should have been called *Wes Craven's Jaguar Payment*.

[I do remember standing up for Ice Age as an enjoyable flick with lotsa laughs, like this]

How about the attack of the Tae Kwan Dodos? How hapless they were? "Uh-oh, there goes our last female!"

[From the audience, fan and friend Charley Sumner quotes what Entertainment Weekly had to say about M. Night Shyamalan's flick Signs]

"The message of the film is that nothing is a coincidence. Of course nothing is a coincidence, it's a movie!" Not sure I agree with that, but it's a nice quote.

[Newton dives deep for an interesting-sounding sleeper]

Below. It's a movie about a haunted submarine, by the director of *Pitch Black*. Sank without a trace, but it's on my list of 10 best movies of the year.

[Back in the hall, NESFAn Chip Hitchcock comes up with a truly epic quote]

I was in a panel today where somebody brought up Aristotle's definition of the worst kind of plot: the episodic, where there is a series of incidents with no story — and someone in the audience said, "You mean like *The Odyssey*?"

[In Mechanics of Magic, I'll bet if writer Clayton Emery polled the majority of people in the room —]

In the majority of the world, about 90 percent of the population still believes in magic. In China and India and Africa and in much of Hispanic culture, and so on.

[Fan and radio newbie Michael McAfee points out we like our objects bright and shiny]

When a thing is new, it's wondrous. Like the computer, which started out with stories where the computer is what moves the plot. How long has it been since you've read a story like that? Now it's just part of cubicle culture.

[David Sklar may be setting himself up for a wizardly whuppin']

Too much contemporary fantasy makes magic too powerful ... but if you go back, what really are Gandalf's powers? He talks to birds, and makes fireworks.

[Writer Delia Sherman starts out kinda Readerconly, but by the end she's all Arisia]

I'm really more of a magic is metaphor person. Because I'm more interested in metaphor than the mechanics of magic ... When you look at the actual spells that folk magicians do, some of it is clearly sympathetic magic, and some of it is because "this is a really weird-shit thing to do." And who knows, it might work.

[Has Emery forgotten Stop and Shop Superstores?]

In comics, anyway, there are only three places you can get superpowers. There's pseudoscientific, where you get bitten by a radioactive spider. There's magical. And there's — like Captain Marvel — the divine, where God gives you your power.

[Wonder if this highway writer Debra Doyle mentions is known as Route 666]

In Iceland, they had to reroute a road because it would go too near a hill inhabited by elves.

[In the dealer's room (again), old (young) friend Marsy Sumner has just got to get this cool paperback set of all Diana Wynne Jones's Chrestomanci novels]

The first one in this series was the first fantasy book I ever read.

[Shamelessly overheard in the hall between panels, this young woman finally answers for me Freud's big question, What do women want?; as we suspected, guys, it's hopeless]

I just want somebody who will cuddle me, very tenderly, for a long time. Not necessarily in a sexual way.

[The panel on Rereading Tolkien begins with newish fantasy novelist Susan Hanniford Crowley's recalling an old fond memory]

I first found Tolkien in an old bookstore. In the occult section.

[Workshop wizard Jeanne Cavelos plays the Minor Arcana card]

I've read *Lord of the Rings* only 4 or 5 times, but I've read *Smith of Wootton Major* and *Farmer Giles of Ham* 30 or 40 times. I think they're fantastic books that everybody should read.

[Wombat advises perseverance if you find LOTR's opening a tad leisurely]

Get to where you meet Strider. After that, it's no problem.

[By contrast, NESFAn Lis Carey takes a grown-up attitude]

The first time through, it was an adventure. Now, it's all about moral choices.

... I gave my theology professor *Lord of the Rings*, and she gave me C. S. Lewis. So we had a lot to talk about.

[At the slide show where Artist Guests of Honor Victoria (Poyser) Lisi and Julius Lisi show off their bright, clean, silky-smooth stuff, Victoria does most of the talking; as here, about one trouble with using your kids as models for your paintings]

This is *Rapunzel*. My daughter posed for it, and it looks a lot like her.

Well, it *did* look like her, she had really long blonde hair ... But she just dyed it all red.

[Basking in their series of big, bright, beautiful paintings of cats lying on geometrically decorated quilts, I ask about influences; Victoria is thoughtful]

Five years ago, if you'd asked about influences, I'd have a long list for you. But now, we're trying to just be our own people.

With these cat pictures, we're trying to be influenced only by the cats ... Cats are Zen masters. They can really teach you something.

[In the panel on How to Change the Past, Writer Guest of Honor Harry Turtledove gets technical]

The only problem I have with Kim Stanley Robinson's *Years of Rice and Salt* is that I don't see how you can have a scientific civilization without first having the scientific revolution.

[Turtledove seems to admire Pavane, by the late Keith Roberts, but does the category fit?]

Pavane's not quite an alternate history, *Pavane's* a recursive history. People went into it with a knowledge of what went on in the last cycle.

[Not that long ago a professional historian, Turtledove's good at making disturbing connections]

The Vikings didn't settle North America, but they got close. They could see it, they could smell it, but they couldn't find a way to make enough of an immediate profit out of it ...

This is what worries me about our space program these days.

[Editor/writer Ian Randal Strock is always marketing his Artemis Project]

We're selling advertising everywhere. That's the trouble with NASA these days. The rockets are white, they're pristine. They should look like NASCAR!

[There may only be three people on the panel and four in the audience for the discussion about Anthologies, but we're good people; like writer Keith R. A. DeCandido, who sure knows how to get his name into a fanzine]

Hey, Bob. I had to make up the name of a planet in the last panel, and on the spur of the moment I chose Devniad!

[Now Paul Levinson, does absolutely everything have to be about sex? Well, OK then]

I would never use a pseudonym. I want the girl who sat next to me in seventh grade to know that I turned out famous.

What was her name? Deborah Goldberg.
[DeCandido's perfect for this panel, because]

I have an anthology coming up this year: *Imaginations: An Anthology of Long Short Fiction*. With nobodies like Harry Turtledove and others in it. All novelettes.

[Which takes SF poet Scott E. Green aback]

— I'm astonished to meet an anthology editor who's *not* Martin Greenberg. What's he done, 500 of them?

[DeCandido reckons rapidly]

— Yes, just last week ... I think what Marty has done is create a huge market for anthologies and *glut* that market at the same time.

[Why anthologize at all, Professor Levinson?]

When a short story is published in a magazine, from the author's point of view, you get a guaranteed readership from the subscribers and people who read that magazine. But when the month is over, it goes away ...

An anthology gets your words out there for a longer length of time ... Some of the most important things in my career have been because of stories that appeared in anthologies.

[Told you DeCandido was good with figures]

The paperwork on an anthology is a nightmare ... One reason there are 10 stories in *Imaginations* is that it's very easy to divide by 10.

[Levinson gets more specific]

The standard is the editor gets 50 percent, and then the rest is divided among the authors ... Usually 5 to 10 cents a word; but it varies widely.

It's incredibly generous of Keith to not make any money off it.

[Cards, letter bombs, and maple-syrup-filled balloons re the following quote should go not to The Devniad but to Paul Levinson, that's L-E-V- ...]

One genre of anthology that I *don't* like is an anthology where the requirement to appear is some demographic quality of the author ... Like *Northern Stars*, you have to be a Canadian writer?

Wandering Stars, I think that was different, because the subject matter, not the author requirement, was Jewish ... Did any non-Jewish writer appear in that? I'll have to check my copy when I get home.

I first got irritated with those women's anthologies ... and I got a lot of letters of course denouncing me as a male chauvinist pig ...

Dark Matter? Those were mostly very fine stories, but I'm uneasy.

[I was wondering what Green was doing here]

I'm president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association ... The deal we have with the Nebula anthologies is that the editor for each year has the choice whether to put in some poetry.

[For a visual aid, DeCandido just happens to have the text for Imaginations he can hold up]

It is my fond hope this will sweep for novelette in the Nebulas and Hugos next year.

[At dinner with SFRevu editor Ernest Lilley, writer Steve Sawicki, and actually-reads-the-stuff SF fan Joe Petronio, we discuss books 'n' flix; whether we had to wait 40 minutes with a reservation because I'm a non-tipping wuss or because Maggiano's screwed up; the coming invasion; and how some wives (not ours, of course, honey) mess up the bathroom vanity with stuff; also, how has marriage changed you, Ernest?]

Women are *not* a spectator sport.

[Sunday morning, burdened with bags and intending to check out before breakfast, I wait 10 minutes for the down elevator on the 8th floor; finally, a guy on an up elevator say to me, very seriously]

If I were you, I'd take *this* elevator.

[A woman's voice from the front of the crowded car tells us all what the matter is]

More than 2,000 people are checking out this morning. An elevator is broken. The fire department is here, trying to fix it ... Two others are on the same circuit, so they're shut down too! We've been waiting 20 minutes —

[An approving voice issues from some other slice of pressed meat in our people sandwich]

— Now it's a *con!*

[But few worries are felt by my friend Marlin May, hanging happily over the rail of the lobby restaurant]

I had an *excellent* time at this convention ... I was dancing until 5:30 this morning.

[On the omelet line at breakfast, a pretty young woman named Raven Harlock chats me up; wonder if she knows Marlin?]

I was dancing until 5:00 this morning. I love it at Arisia! ... I met my husband here last year.

[I ask if they had an anniversary party; apparently yes]

— Why do you think I was dancing till 5:00?

[Next to me at the breakfast bar, the young man in the long olive duster and long black hair turns out to be Adrian Perez, an anime enthusiast who offers informed advice once I tell him writer/director Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Away was my favorite movie of any kind last year]

Oh, get his *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* also if you can possibly find it. A lot of people think it's his best, or among them. It's set in a future post-Apocalyptic setting ... And like all his movies, there's a subtle ecological, anti-technology theme.

[Writing Against the Grain in Fantasy starts out with new writer Wen Spencer's starting out]

I started out writing fantasy, but it didn't sell. So I fell into being a science fiction writer, and sold some of those: *Alien Taste*, and *Tainted Trail*, and my new one *Bitter Waters* ... But now I'm back and have a fantasy novel called *Tinker* coming out this year. It's *Borderlands* turned on its head and sidewise.

[Another new novelist has a book for which I'm already hearing quite a bit of buzz]

I'm Holly Black, and my new book is *Tithe*. It's a young adult fantasy trailerpark novel, so that's somewhat against the grain. And it has cursing in it, which is somewhat unusual for a fantasy novel.

[From the audience, a Farscape fan reacts]

— What the *frell!*

[Writer Mary Catelli believes in piling on the pagefuls to get up to speed]

Ray Bradbury observed once that you have a million bad words in your head. And you have good ones, too, but they're buried underneath. And the only way to get the bad words out is to *write* them.

[Writer Sherry Briggs reports the less-than-attractive truth]

In so many of these stories, the bad guys are ugly. Tolkien is totemic in this sense, with the orcs and so on ... Even in science fiction, so many of the characters have scales or something ...

[A guy in the audience thinks of some pretty villains in]

Terry Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies*. Where elves are what cats would be if mice thought they were cool.

[Although a woman in the audience echoes my own (vast) experience]

Where the villain is a woman, if she's hot and willing, she's invariably evil.

[Writer Will McDermott on a handsome evil bastard he created in one story (or game?)]

He was a lot of fun to write. And a lot of fun to kill.

[Briggs takes a classic tack]

A lot of this about the hidden prince goes back to Herodotus. He has the story about when Cyrus the Great was a boy, hidden among the shepherds. And they played kingdom. And Cyrus was king and ordered people about, and beat a boy who didn't follow his orders ...

Herodotus believed that these kingly virtues were inherent.

[McDermott repeats other words of wisdom]

My editor once told me, you have to have both comfort and surprise. They won't read this book unless there are some comfortable tropes they're familiar with.

But without the surprise, they ain't coming back for the second book.

[Starting the panel on *Modernism and Magic*, Arisia's run Ian Randal Strock a little ragged]

Roger MacBride Allen told me to get my face out there. So I always tell cons I'll go onto an unlimited number of panels.

This is the first convention to take me at my word ... This is my *eighth* panel.

[Though fatigue hasn't dulled his keen perceptions]

Since there are significantly more people in the audience for this panel than for the one on starting your own magazine, I can only assume that there are many more people interested in a world with fantasy than in a world with lots of hard work and no pay.

[Did this con hand out copies of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in a goody bag or something? NESFAn Suford Lewis continues the Arisia/Aristotle connection]

I am reminded of the Aristotle quote, that there will be slaves forever until the looms weave themselves and the mines dig themselves.

[Again, a guy in the audience (must be Anonymous' brother) has an insight: a slightly less well-known corollary to Clarke's Third Law]

Any significantly advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology.

[Michael McAfee is a firm TANSTAAFList]

The best magic systems have a price attached to them.

[From the front row, instant agreement by me]

— I'd like to propose a Law of the Conservation of Misery!

[Lewis is more of an eldritch entropist]

We're in a mana universe here, just like John Brunner's *Traveler in Black*. And they may not grow back the trees that went into the paper that made [points to Strock's *Artemis* magazine]. And the mana may be lost forever.

[Would this woman from the audience be a demonical democrat?]

But magic wants to be free! Just because it's dangerous doesn't mean the common people shouldn't have it!

[McAfee groans]

— Oh god, it's the Magic Freedom Foundation!

[But he can be serious too]

In the works of Charles de Lint and Neil Gaiman, the cost of the magic is always loss of self ... You become the animal you turned yourself into, or you forget your true love.

[Think McAfee was also the one who brought up this extreme case of faith-versus-works]

A lot of horror movies are written toward the Manichean heresy. The demon is not exorcised because the priest was not virtuous enough.

Although in the Catholic Church, again, that's a heresy. In the Church, as long as you have your place in the hierarchy — you're a priest, when you

were *ordained* you got the power you need to exorcise.

[Strock knows how to close his case (and sale)]

As Harry Turtledove taught me yesterday, the final word should always be: Buy my stuff!

[In my last trip to the dealer's room, Su Braviak of Science Fiction Continuum sells me Ghost in the Shell and Metropolis DVDs to continue my early education in classical anime, and confirms she'll be back for Boskone]

We usually go to an anime con that weekend, but there are 50 anime dealers there, all selling the same thing. So last year we said, hey, let's try Boskone. And it worked. I think we were the only people selling a lot of anime ...

So take a look at these, and see you in a month so you can tell us how you liked them!

[On the stairs heading out, fan Priscilla Ballou quotes something said by a Eucharistic minister in a panel earlier this morning, possibly the one on Can You Be a Religious Fan?]

They trust us not to sell Jesus on E-Bay.

And so, laden with books, anime DVDs, and the usual fractally fractured memories, we bid a fond farewell to the fabled Floating World of Fandom — until Boskone next month! See all you SF/F/H/A fans there ...

Web Site of the Month

Found on Eliot Gelwan's smart and provocative weblog *Follow Me Here*, one of the daily minimum mental health requirements I consume most lunchtimes instead of working on this fanzine. It's at <http://gelwan.com/followme.html>

In December, Gelwan led me straight to www.notwithoutmyhandbag.com/babynames/index.html

This site is billed as *Baby's Named a Bad, Bad Thing: A Primer on Parent Cruelty*. It's apparently compiled by a San Francisco accessories designer (you can buy her hip stuff via included links) named Diana Goodman. She has the unforgivably hilarious idea of mining a collection of "naming questions and

suggestions posted on two different baby naming bulletin boards going back as far as early 2001." Each selection from the board is followed by a less-than-kind comment (in italics below) from Goodman.

Three samples may suffice to send your heartless fingers scampering for that link:

Anyone ever thought about Sierra Joy? I love the name, but husband is less than thrilled with it.

But he'll love the pine-fresh scent!

Hey guys i am Miranda, i have 4 month old twin girls there names are Kiarne Rhukaya & Paris jewel.

Miranda, sweetie, don't keep any weapons in the house. Twins can be all telekinetic and spooky, and those two are going to wreak some revenge on your ass.

My last name is Tinkletop. For some reason my wife objects to naming our son Timothy, Timmy for short. I think it's a good, memorable name.

You're right.

Quote of the Month

This really should have been for November. It's from Molly Ivins in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, probably Nov. 3, 2002. [Might still be up at: www.dfw.com/mld/startelegram/news/columnists/molly_ivins/4434744.htm]

"What stuns me most about contemporary politics is not even that the system has been so badly corrupted by money. It is that so few people get the connection between their lives and what the bozos do in Washington and our state capitols ...

"Is the person who prescribes your eyeglasses qualified to do so? How deep will you be buried when you die? What textbooks are your children learning from at school? What will happen if you become seriously ill? Is the meat you're eating tainted? Will you be able to afford to go to college or to send your kids? Would you like a vacation? Expect to retire before you die? Can you find a job? Drive a car? Afford insurance? Is your credit card company or your banker or your broker ripping you off?

"It's all politics, Bubba. You don't get to opt out for lack of interest."

FlimFan

VERY GOOD:

Adaptation — Even the best artists can have a hard time fascinating us with their own belly-button lint. That was the trouble with Andrew Niccol's *S1mONE* earlier this year, and to a lesser degree it's the problem with *Adaptation*, made by director Spike Jonze and writer Charlie Kaufman. They're the team that brought us 1999's best movie, *Being John Malkovich*. This year's entry won't quite make my list, though. *Adaptation* is the story of a screenwriter named, let's be creative, Charlie Kaufman, and the neurotic agonies he suffers carrying two monkeys on his back. Monkey One is his much dumber and happier twin brother Donald, who decides to be a screenwriter too and is much less conflicted about it than Charlie. Monkey Two is Charlie's latest assignment, adapting for the screen a recent (real) intellectual nonfiction bestseller, Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* ... The acting in this vehicle is delightful. Nicolas Cage plays the obsessed one and the oblivious one as totally different characters without ever getting caught being obvious about it. Meryl Streep is wonderful as Orlean (who had another pretty good movie adapted from one of her books this year: *Blue Crush*, based on her article "Surf Girls of Maui"). There's a moment where she seems to be making a momentous decision, and we get the full Streep hesitation, liquid eyes, and sensitive trembling lip treatment — then her choice isn't so sensitive after all. The invaluable Chris Cooper (Mel Gibson's boss in *The Patriot*? The angry father in *American Beauty*? Trust me, he's great) also has a ball as the thief. And Tilda Swinton plays a perfectly embarrassing foil to Cage as the coolly bewildered studio exec ... There are some changes at the end that you may have to think about twice. Ask yourself, just who *wrote* the last part of the movie? ... Yet *Adaptation* finally comes across as an assemblage of smoothly made bits, sharply observed moments, and good acting turns. Go see it, sure, you'll have a great time. It's way better than most movies made this year. But you won't ever quite take Charlie Kaufman's (or Donald's) hand and step over the threshold of the mirror into Wonderland.

GOOD:

About Schmidt — Like its protagonist, an Omaha insurance executive (Jack Nicholson) who retires in the first scene, this movie is often ponderously slow as it takes us through several months of Warren Schmidt's largely clueless life, culminating in a comic road trip and his daughter's wedding in Denver. On the other hand, I like a movie that makes me laugh, then think. A chief ponder point here: Is Warren Schmidt a good man or not? Is he Lester Burnham or George Babbitt? Like *American Beauty* (which remains a better movie), *About Schmidt* is an unexpectedly arty, few-holds-barred satire that may surprise many in the great American multiplex. For instance, Nicholson is now officially old and fat. (But then, who isn't? Certainly not anyone in *this* car.) As his Schmidt stares out at us, eyes heavy-lidded in a face like a sexagenarian turtle's, we look for some sign of the Jackster's nimble slyness. It's not there, though: this guy's not-too-brightness remains a big part of the joke. (The best bits may be his letters to a distant foster child, and his voiceover narration in general. As when Schmidt meets a Native American on the road: "He really opened my eyes. Those people got a *raw deal!*") Kathy Bates appears quite late here, and gets comparatively little screen time. But her domineering hippy, the hottubbing mother of the groom, remains the flick's most vivid portrayal after Nicholson's. And *WKRP* fans will be in a fever to see Howard Hesseman's deft little turn as her ex-husband. Hope Davis, so luminous in *Mumford* and so heartless in *Hearts in Atlantis*, does what she can with Schmidt's long-ignored daughter, who's going down in class and seems not to care with her marriage to Dermot Mulroney's hilarious mattress salesman. Befitting a satire as opposed to a mere comedy, there are moments of real pain throughout. And at movie's end, do its creators (screenwriters Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, with direction by Payne) let Schmidt off the moral hook, or is his moment of redemption as suspect as the rest of his life? Likely the novel by Louis Begley would provide more definite clues. On the evidence here, we're probably safe believing the worst.

DECENT:

Solaris — In the small group that saw the movie with me, one woman announced beforehand she was in attendance solely “to see George Clooney’s butt.” I believe we can discount her subsequent judgment that it was “weird.” (The movie, I think.) Not that I would have objected to seeing Natascha McElhone’s butt, but this was not to be ... Written and directed by fine talent Steven Soderbergh (*Sex, Lies, and Videotape; Out of Sight; Traffic; Ocean’s Eleven*), this flick does develop a hypnotic rhythm. The filmmakers must have hoped that our experience of seeing the film would pass through subtlety and understatement into a sort of mesmerized transcendence. Yet the end result is worthy, but dull. You may know the story (if not, SPOILER WARNING), from the Stanislaw Lem novel or the 1972 Tarkovsky movie: Kris Kelvin (an oh-so-60s name, no?) investigates an space station in orbit around a mysterious planet. Turns out people on the station are inexplicably “visited” by perfect simulacra of dead loved ones brought back to life. The ultimate idea has a psychological rightness that resonates with much of the reason we like science fiction itself: We don’t really want to see other beings, other worlds; we want a mirror ... The book and original movie had more rumination, less romance. Despite earnest performances by Clooney and McElhone, plus more lively turns by Viola Davis and especially by Jeremy Davies as a twitchy crewman, this version is beautifully made, but slight. It’s a minor SF romance given a full hothouse treatment. The final flower kinda fails.

Far from Heaven — If you can have movies that are *hommages* to the 40s *noir*, don’t know why you can’t have *hommages* to 50s melodrama. Except that they’re not nearly as much fun. Julianne Moore (who from the ads seems to play quite a similar role simultaneously in *The Hours*) is a perfect 50s housewife, with two perfect kids (who call their parents “Mother” and “Father” in direct address), married to a perfect 50s man — Dennis Quaid as an advertising manager for a big Connecticut electronics company. They even model together in his ads, as Mr. and Mrs. Magnetech. But you soon realize that Mr. Perfect is distant and worried about something, while Mrs. Perfect finds the only one she can really talk to is her tall, handsome Negro (gasp) (Dennis Haysbert) gardening contractor. Ensure revelations and eventualities, which Julianne’s character tries to handle with perfectly made-up niceness and the best of intentions. The filmmakers here don’t use flat modern lighting, which would

signal we’re looking back satirically from our modern viewpoint. They use the same slightly muddy, grainy light you’d see in a 50s movie or advertising illustration, addressing us as a 50s audience ourselves. And the two social problems the film turns its lurid gaze upon, race and sexual preference, while treated with more unquestioning prejudice by this 50s community, aren’t problems we’d exactly cleared up by 2002 either. But the end result: hey, are we *satirizing* 50s melodrama or just *watching* one?

Ego Scanners (Shall Not) Live in Vain

[For fan and friend Charles Sumner, there are bargains everywhere]

Just a quick overheard from Arisia...

In my role as Fashion Reporter, I noticed that this season’s must-have accessory, spotted on quite a number of fans, was a silver necklace with a gold ring hanging from it. Why anyone would want to be a ringbearer is beyond me but, there you go. The defining moment for this was when I overheard a con-goer, shopping in Dealer’s Row, ask “How much for The One Ring?” (Apparently, this finely crafted item, once the bane of all Middle-Earth, now goes for \$20.)

Also, since I took a note of this at your 2002 movies in review panel, make sure to check out: <http://www.lordofthepeeps.com/>

[Charley, I’ve seen the One Ring elsewhere on the Web for \$295. At \$20, it’s a steal. Quick, in the darkness bind it!]

**Backchat
on APA: NESFA #390,
November 2002**

To Tom Endrey

The song about 9/11 that I remember putting you onto was a folk number by Tom Paxton, not a country song by Alan Jackson — don’t think I’ve heard that one. About 10 years ago my sister-in-law Karen thought Jackson was the world’s dreamiest entertainer: you?

That bookstore appearance by Graham Hancock sounded interesting. You're lucky it was a whole prepared hour-long lecture with slides, instead of sign sign bye bye. However: I thought we were all supposed to stay open-minded, and not call attendees at a presentation on previously unsuspected prelapsarian maritime civilizations, well, "crackpots." Thomas, I'm surprised at you!

To Mark Olson

I read a reticuleful of Georgette Heyer romances growing up (thanks to my sister Liz, the real reader in the Devney family), and she's definitely a quality entertainer. Not an original literary artist, as Austen was, but a worthy craftsman who follows with respect in Miss Jane's footsteps. Unlike lots of later luvmongers. If you're looking for a follow-up to *Arabella*, I recall *The Nonesuch* as particularly fine.

Leapin lingos, Markman! You've gone through more linguistics books in the past months than in my college course on the subject. And even your sidenotes have demolished much of what I learned there: What, no more Whorf?

Quick note: the presenter of the History Channel's "History of Britain" is Simon Schama, not Sharma. In case anybody cares to look up his fine books on French or Dutch history, Rembrandt, landscape, so on. There's a book he wrote that accompanies the TV series, too.

To Elisabeth Carey

Thanks for all the work you're doing on Judith Merrill's fiction; really looking forward to reading it. I remember her, with great affection, as an editor — in fact, the first editor I encountered (in her introductions to the *Year's Best SF* anthologies) with a print personality that struck me as really Sixties. She knew what was happening, baby, and made you think just reading this stuff touched you with the hip stick too.

Thanks also for the ranting on Nicholson Baker's "years-long anti-library ranting." I don't have the background to choose sides confidently; you certainly make him sound the meddling amateur. However, your last sentence says "I'm sure there is some field in which Nicholson Baker knows what he's talking about." There I can help. As mentioned here before, Baker's novels — slim, fun marvels that observe the trivia of contemporary life with risibly close scrutiny — are *sui generis*, and well worth reading. I've been a fan since his first, 1988's *The Mezzanine*.

To Tony Lewis

So I blurted out femtometers (linear measurement) when I should have said barns (area measure)? Small matter.

Bet Washington hasn't seen anyone like your Alice since the days of Alice Longworth Roosevelt. Though our almost equally amazing niece Erin Easterbrooks is currently in her second year at George Washington University not far from Dupont Circle. Note that "second." When at her aunt's Christmas party this week I asked Erin how she found Washington, she gave me a scathing look and replied with full college-student hauteur, "What can I say? It is my city."

To Pam Fremon

A personal guided tour by an on-duty scientist of the Swedish Space Corporation's home base and launch site! You must have mentioned you were an ambassador from NESFA's Moon.

You know, the word "rocket" has a fairly Swedish sound now that I think about it. Tack så mycket, rocket flicka.

To Joe Ross

Beautiful bouquet of quotes as usual. On your Strom Thurmond mention, I also like something a kid says in *The Boondocks* comic strip this week: "Five bucks says ain't nobody showin' up for Strom's birthday party next year."

Both your Robert Benchley (took him years to discover he had no talent, but by then too famous) and Conan O'Brien (remembered exact moment he realized could make people laugh: in third season of his show) are really neat examples of false self-deprecation, aren't they? Like George Bernard Shaw when the premiere of *Arms and the Man* roused a storm of cheers, plus one hiss. Shaw bowed to his solitary heckler and proclaimed: "I quite agree with you, sir, but what can two do against so many?"

To Ray Bowie

Sorry to hear about your kidney stone recurrence, guy. Of course, in my battered bleeding heart can't help wondering if it's cosmic payback for your crowing in previous para about electing Replutocratublican (that's RE-plew-toh-cruh-TUB-lick-in) Romney as Mass gov. But ... will ... struggle ... mightily ... against mentioning it. No use! You know how weak we liberals have become these days.

Ray, hope you enjoy your sister's new baby plus *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Say, wouldn't it be cool if the baby were born non-

Muggle? You'd be a lot better influence than Uncle Vernon.

To Sheila Perry

Sorry to hear that parthenogenesis seems your only immediate hope of pregnancy. Think it was Poul Anderson who postulated that sex with Greek gods was inevitably babymaking. Anybody know a nice Olympian for Sheila?

Agree with most of your comments on the *Harry Potter 2* flick. You mentioned liking the "Easter egg at the end of the copious credits." Know what you mean, and those of us who always stay through the credits deserve a sweet reward once in a while in the form of an extra scene or outtake. But I think "Easter egg" is more reserved for hidden features or sites within computer programs; term we want here is "credit cookie."

To Sarah Prince

So your shrink has "heard about your Worldcon trip." Not trying to impinge on therapeutic confidentiality, but does he think of con attendance as an ameliorative ... or a symptom?