

Holmdel Science Fiction Discussion Group
Club Notice - 11/14/79

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

(All meetings are in room 3H-506 on Wednesdays at noon.)

DATE -----	TOPIC -----
11/21/79	THE STARS MY DESTINATION by Alfred Bester and election of officers, rm 3H-506
12/12/79	GATEWAY by Fredrick Pohl, rm 3H-506
1/9/80	BLIND VOICES by Tom Reamy, rm 3H-506
1/30/80	BERSERKER by Fred Saberhagen, rm 3H-506

Our library is in HO 2D-634A. Rich Ditch (x3432) is librarian.
Evelyn Leeper (HO 4E-507B x6334) is Club book-buyer.

1. This next meeting we will be having election of officers as is required by the rules of the Bell Labs Club. As yet we really have only one nomination for each elected office.

Chairperson	Mark Leeper
Vice-chairperson/librarian	Rich Ditch
Secretary-treasurer	Evelyn Leeper

We will accept further nominations right up until election time, but it appears unlikely that we can find any other ~~suckers~~ candidates. Anyone interested in holding office in the club, please let me know before or at the next meeting.

2. The discussion on November 21 will be of THE STARS MY DESTINATION by Alfred Bester. This is a novel that seems to turn up with some regularity on people's lists of the five best science fiction novels. It is sort of a fast-paced adventure set in a future in which corporations run the world.

3. Please note that my room number has changed. In fact, particularly for people working on ACS, a lot of people have been moved around of late. We should probably bring our mailing labels and the club records up to date on what members' office numbers are. Please check the mailing label on this notice and if it is incorrect use the notification form on the last page of this notice to let me know what your current address is.

Mark Leeper
HO 2B-502A x7093

THE DEAD ZONE, by Stephen King. Viking Press, New York, 1979, 426p, Cloth, Novel, \$11.95. ISBN 0-670-26077-0.

When Johnny Smith is six years old, he falls and suffers a minor concussion. This appears to have only temporary effects and is soon forgotten. Twenty years later, John Smith is in a car accident which puts him in a coma for four and a half years. When he awakens, he discovers that he has developed psychic abilities, apparently due to the combination of the two accidents. (Smith tells his girlfriend a story the night of the accident that is obviously a parallel to what will happen to him.)

It is important to realize at the outset that in spite of the realistic settings and many references to actual occurrences, King is not trying to write a "true-to-life" novel. His characters are often larger than life -- as in THE STAND, some characters are totally evil, others are totally good. There are, of course, many characters whose personalities show aspects of both types, but King is writing the modern equivalent of a medieval miracle play, Good vs. Evil.

When Smith wakes up, he discovers that by touching a person (or an object touched by that person) he can see into that person's past, present, and future. (Later, King dispenses with the need for physical contact between Smith and the person.) The results are predictable -- Smith becomes a "nine-day-wonder" in the press, people send him objects and questions ("Here is my son's last letter. He was declared MIA in Vietnam. What happened to him?"), he is asked by a sheriff to help track down a killer, and so forth. Gradually, Smith comes to loathe his talent, as more and more people become afraid of him -- afraid to touch him because of what he might learn from the contact. He attempts to hide by moving to another town, but he cannot escape himself. He gets a perverse enjoyment out of meeting the various political candidates (he lives in Maine, right over the New Hampshire border) and discovering what the future has in store for them. It is in this section that King seems to be striving for realism, but his method is a trifle heavy-handed. It is very easy to throw in references to Muskie's crying, Carter's win, etc., in an attempt to seem accurate, but since the novel does not strive to be realistic in its characterization, topical references such as these serve only to jar the reader. Finally, Smith meets Greg Stillson, an ex-Bible salesman with a violent temper which he can barely control. When Stillson shakes Smith's hand, Smith realizes that Stillson, whose campaign seems to combine the more obnoxious features of Billy Carter, Lester Maddox (of the ax handles), and "Lonesome" Rhodes in A FACE IN THE CROWD, will eventually become President and start a nuclear war. (Somehow, in a way never made clear, Stillson realizes that Smith knows something about him that could hurt him.) At this point, Smith is faced with the dilemma: Knowing that Stillson will destroy a large percentage (if not all) of the human race, what should he do?

The last part of the book deals with this problem. Again,

King seems to lay it on a bit thick -- Smith asks an extraordinary number and assortment of people whether, if they had a time machine and could do it, they would go back to 1932 and kill Hitler. Somehow, none of the people he asks feels this is an unusual question, in spite of the fact it is totally unrelated to anything else in the conversation. But King also deals with some important issues here. Stillson, regarded at the start of his campaign for the House of Representatives as the village clown, has become somewhat of a folk hero. The press has played up his good points, and skipped over the bad (when a little girl was injured after being pushed off a stage by Stillson's bodyguards, a group of ex-motorcycle toughs, this gets only a one-line filler in the newspapers). The one person who was investigating Stillson's background of blackmail and strong-arm tactics is mysteriously killed when his car blows up. The few people who are still bothered by Stillson's extremism are drowned out by the many who love his showmanship and promises. The parallel with Hitler's rise is, in fact, a fairly accurate and frightening one.

I suspect that when King wrote the ending, he felt it to be clear and straightforward. However, the current political situation, vis-a-vis a certain Presidential hopeful and his past, have rendered it quite ambiguous and more than slightly troubling. This book will leave a lot of people asking themselves, "When does a political figure cross the line between that which is acceptable and that which is not?" A better question might be, "How can the voter tell what is behind the mask?" Very highly recommended.

Evelyn C. Leeper

THE BOOK OF THE DUN COW, by Walter Wangerin, Jr.. Pocket Books, New York, 1979, 255p, Paper, Novel, \$2.50. ISBN 0-671-83217-4.

It appears that this book was written as a cross between WATERSHIP DOWN, CHARLOTTE'S WEB, and THE LORD OF THE RINGS. The blurb on the back certainly reinforces this notion, saying that it belongs on the shelf with all the above and ANIMAL FARM. (Never mind that the only thing all those books have in common are the talking animals -- hardly enough to base a category of literature on.) Unfortunately, Wangerin has missed his target on all counts.

First, his animals are not true to their characteristics. Adams's rabbits in WATERSHIP DOWN (and dogs, and cats, and even bears) act like rabbits (and dogs, and cats, and bears). There is some anthropomorphism, but not enough to make the characters unrecognizable as what they are. The animals in CHARLOTTE'S WEB, also, are definitely what they claim to be. Even Charlotte manages to be convincing as a spider, which is not as easy as one might think. The characters in THE LORD OF THE RINGS are not animals in our world, but rather quasi-humans (hobbits, elves, etc.). Still, they manage to come alive in a realistic manner. ANIMAL FARM is a completely different type of book -- yet even here, the animals retain some of their characteristics. The pigs are the cleverest (which is true in actual fact), and the sheep are among the dimmest (also true in fact). But Wangerin has come up with animals that are either unbelievable as what he claims them to be, or totally uninteresting. The dog, for example, does not act in the least like a dog, but spends his time wishing he were a rooster. Anyone who has ever observed dogs would realize that this is totally ridiculous. (And the idea of naming the dog Mundo Cani is just too cutesy for words!) John Wesley Weasel (I really hate these names!) also seems most unlike any sort of animal, particularly when "sparking the Wee Widow Mouse" (I give up -- no more of these names!).

The novel, however, is mostly about chickens. Yes, chickens -- Wangerin postulates a world in which chickens are the rulers (more specifically, roosters), and chickens are all that stand between all the good animals and the evil Wyrms who live under the earth. It is true that the chickens are probably the most realistic of Wangerin's animals. Unfortunately, that is because (let us face it) chickens are stupid. And Wangerin has indeed made his chickens stupid. The only problem with this is that the reader finds himself rooting for the villain of the novel, Wyrms (now there's a decent name!), and his minister, Cockatrice. They're the only characters with, well, character. But a novel in which the reader has more sympathy and interest in the villain than in the hero is not a very well-written novel. (By the way, the title character seems to be a bovine imitation of Aslan from the Narnia books of C.S. Lewis. Never let it be said that Wangerin doesn't copy from the best.)

There are a few good passages: the spawning of the basilisks, the description of the sunless winter, Wyrms' rise from the

earth. But again, the most interesting parts are those based on the villain of the work. Had Wangerin been able to make his readers care about the chickens, it would have been quite a feat; after all, humans tend to be "mammalists" (which is why E.B. White's success with Charlotte is all the more remarkable). But he didn't, and the result is an idea that falls flat on its beak (sorry, face). Not recommended.

Evelyn C. Leeper

SIGNET BOOK OF MOVIE LISTS, by Jeff Rovin. Signet, New York, 1979, 167p, Paper, Non-fiction, \$1.75. ISBN 0-451-08929-4.

Jeff Rovin has become known among science fiction film buffs as the author of various over-priced "studies" of the field. Among these are THE FABULOUS FANTASY FILMS (full of inaccuracies and priced at \$19.95), FROM THE LAND BEYOND BEYOND (a study of Ray Harryhausen's films), A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION FILMS (which Rovin lists in the book being reviewed as one of the worst books about film ever published; even he admits to "witless and puerile text"), and FROM JULES VERNE TO STAR TREK (a quickie book with very little real information in it), as well as three quizbooks on genre films. Unfortunately, THE SIGNET BOOK OF MOVIE LISTS suffers from all the same faults as Rovin's other works. Some of the lists are interesting (the names of the spaceships in various films), some are superfluous (a list of Hitchcock's films -- this can be found in almost any reference work on film), and some are just dull (do you really care what Claudette Colbert's favorite films are?). There is no order to the lists, nor is there an index or a table of contents, so using this as a reference is going to be difficult. In addition, the inaccuracies make it untrustworthy; two examples: in his list of "survivors" (actors who have been acting for a long time) he omits Laurence Olivier while listing actors who got started long after Olivier, and he doesn't list HERE COMES MR. JORDAN as a "boxing film", though he does list its remake, HEAVEN CAN WAIT, as a "football film". These two are typical of the many mistakes Rovin makes. In addition, many of the lists of subjective, and while Rick Baker's opinion on the best and worst "ape makeup jobs" may have some validity (Baker is considered by many one of the leading makeup artists in Hollywood), Rovin's list of "Hollywood's best makeup jobs" does not appear to be based on any expertise (THE INCREDIBLE MELTING MAN? now really!). His lists of stars who have walked off the set due to disagreements with co-stars (as well as his list of directors who were fired part-way through a picture) would be better placed in a Rona Barrett column.

The timing of the publication of this book would lead one to believe that Signet hopes to sell it as a gift item for Christmas. For completists only; give your film buff friend the latest edition of Leslie Halliwell's FILMGOER'S COMPANION instead.

Evelyn C. Leeper

! Return to Mark Leeper, HO 2B 502A !

Please change my mailing address for the Science Fiction Discussion Group. My name and current room number is:

name

location & room #

P.S. Incidentally, Mark, I know you are too modest to actually expect praise, but I just wanted you to know I think you are doing just a TERRIFIC job as chairperson of the discussion group.

[No changes can be accepted without the postscript intact.]