

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 01/04/84 -- Vol. 2, No. 27

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all Lincroft meetings are on Wednesdays
in LZ 3A-206 (HO meetings in HO 3N-418) at noon.

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
01/25	COURTSHIP RITE by Donald Kingsbury
02/15	Audio/visual meeting
03/07	NOR CRYSTAL TEARS by Alan Dean Foster
03/28	Audio/visual meeting
04/18	DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS by John Wyndham

LZ's library and librarian Lance Larsen (576-2668) are in LZ 3C-219.
Mark Leeper (576-2571) is chairperson. HO's library and librarian
Mike Lukacs (949-4043) are in HO 4B-510. John Jetzt (834-3332) is
HO-chairperson.

1. Again, not much for me to say, this week. There is just the
usual accumulation of reviews to send out.

2. FYI: "W. J. Stuart," who wrote the novelization of FORBIDDEN
PLANET, is actually Philip MacDonald. (This information from
XIGNALS, the Waldenbooks fanzine, via Evelyn Leeper.)

Mark Leeper
LZ 3E-215 x2571
hocse!lznv!mrl
houxa!mhtsa!lznv!mrl
hogpd!lznv!mrl

*****Presorted*****
* Leeper, Evelyn C. *
* LZ 1D-216 *

Mercury Capsules - January 4, 1984

"Mercury Capsules": SF review column, edited by Paul S R Chisholm. Appears in the "Lincroft-Holmdel SF Club Notice".

A medium for quick reviews of anything of interest in the world of science fiction. I'll pass along anything (not slanderous or scatological) without nasty comments. I prefer to get reviews by electronic mail: send to mhntsa!lznv!psc, houxà!mhntsa!lznv!psc, or hocse!lznv!psc from the Holmdel Computer Center, or nv!psc from the Lincroft Computer Center. If that's impossible, I'm at LZ 1D-212, 576-2374.

+ Sundiver: novel, David Brin.

This is Brin's first novel. (A full review of its sequel, Startide Rising, appears elsewhere in this notice.) Brin has improved since then.

The story takes place on a future Earth, where people are screened for violent tendencies (a minor issue, not continued in Startide Rising), where dolphins and chimpanzees have been altered for greater intelligence, and where aliens are building a library of their knowledge, to help us catch up with them (or not!) The aliens were all raised to intelligent creatures by some older race, who were raised by someone else, and so on, back to a mythical race of originals. On the other hand, we seem to have evolved all by ourselves; it's only because we're raising two of our fellow species that we're treated as intelligent.

That's the background; the story deals with the exploration of the outer layer of our sun . . . and the pitfalls there and on the way. The explorers bring quite a bit of their own danger, to make things more interesting.

Praising with small damns department: first of all, the pacing is weird. There are way too many characters introduced in the middle of story, and too many plot twists appearing out of nowhere near the end. The story either rushes by too fast, or stops dead for characterization. I never got over the feeling that the characters served the plot, instead of being its basis. The plot itself is a complicated mystery, a "whodunit" where the "it" that's been done isn't clear till the end. That's supposed to be a feature, but I wasn't always clear what was up. Maybe on a second reading?

It's a good book, as good as most of last year's Hugo nominees. If you want to read Startide Rising, which is terrific, I suggest you go through Sundiver first.

Paul S R Chisholm

Critical Vocabulary:
"simple", "complicated", and "complex"

a review by Paul S R Chisholm of
David Brin's
Startide Rising

If criticism is the art of saying, "I liked it", or "I didn't like it", and explaining why, then we need to agree on our vocabulary. There are three words I've often used to describe stories, and reading Startide Rising made me realize the words are usually mutually exclusive. Brin's novel is an exception that proves the rule.

A "simple" story's strength is unity. There's not a lot going on, but what is (if the story works) is fascinating. There's a single plot line, a single theme, not a lot of settings, and a limited cast of characters. The characters are often a bit thin; there no room, no time to flesh them out. However, they must fit into the story; there's no room for shoehorns, no time to stop and "explain" why this unlikely character really belongs. Similarly, a good simple story must be fresh; if it's based on a cliché, then there's no room for anything but a cliché. There are few mediocre simple stories; they work (albeit not necessarily with great impact), or they flop. Most short fiction is simple, by necessity. Star Wars is the best example of a story that succeeded beyond all possible expectations by being simple.

In contrast, a "complicated" story has lots and lots going on. This is the form of most long novels: lots of characters, lots of plot, many story lines going on at once. The story's world is usually quite involved, but only seen through flashes from the different viewpoints. This can be a good basis for a science fiction novel, if the reader can keep track of everything, and has become increasingly more popular over the past decade. Oddly enough, the characters are again somewhat thin: there are so many of them, even major players, that there's no time to flesh them out. Oath of Fealty, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, is my favorite complicated SF novel of recent years. Donald Kingsbury's Courtship Rites was good, though a little confusing. The Snow Queen, by Joan Vinge, drowned in its complications; there was nothing else there.

Combining the strengths of both leaves a kind of story that is neither simple nor complicated. A "complex" story has a few story lines, a single background that is described in depth, and (typically) a small cast of major characters, who interact with many bit players. Complex stories tend to be even longer and more involved than complicated ones, but not as difficult to follow. There is a feeling of "richness", a great deal of verisimilitude (evidence that helps the reader "believe" the story). The major characters are more lifelike, not because we're told more about them, but because we spend more time with them, we see them as part of their world, and part of the group of people they live with. I won't go as far as to say that a complex story is a complicated story that works, but there's no doubt as to which I enjoy. The two best examples of complex stories I can think of are

The Lord of the Rings by J R R Tolkien, and Frank Herbert's Dune.

There's also no doubt that Startide Rising, David Brin's second novel, is complex. It's a story of a Terran starship, but the crew consists of one hundred and twenty dolphins (including the captain, the first officer, and the pilot), seven humans, and a chimpanzee. Their enemies are several fleets of the worst paranoids and fanatics in five galaxies, and their slaves. The setting is a world mostly covered by metal-rich oceans, and the planet's easily overlooked inhabitants. The conflicts concern "the Library", a collection of knowledge collected throughout the five galaxies over millions of years, and some extremely specific questions of "Why are we here?" To give you some idea of this book's scope, all that's covered in the first ten pages; then the story begins.

But the plot of Startide Rising is based on some simple, classic patterns. Discovery, of secrets old and new. Love. Pride. Racism. War. And shipwreck in an alien, primitive place, and escape. There's nothing cliched about any of this; Brin works hard to keep everything fresh, and it pays off.

There are elements of complicatedness, too, but they work. There are more than a few subplots going on, and an overly large cast of characters, but they're needed to cover all the ground Brin has built. At one point in the story, a character tells how he's impressed of all the things going on at once. Looking back, it does strike me as a bit of a coincidence, but I believed it when I was reading the story, because the story made me believe it.

I don't know if I've convinced you that there are these three kinds of stories, or that they're usually mutually exclusive, or that Startide Rising has the best of all three. If I haven't convinced you that it's terrific, I'm sorry. It's the best new book I've read in years, better than any of last year's Hugo nominees for Best Novel, and an outstanding candidate for the award this year.

THE PSYCHOTRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM by Michael Weldon
Ballantine Books, 1983, \$17.95.

Book review by Mark R. Leeper

The cover looks anything but promising. It is crudely composed of pictures from films and day-glow colors. It looks like a 42nd Street film ad. Amid promises of rock and roll, mad scientists, cave women, etc., the back cover has a warning that the movies discussed endanger the reader's sanity. There are a lot of very poor books written about science fiction/horror/fantasy films, full of inaccuracies. Most look better at the outset than The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film.

Wrongo! Get past the inauspicious cover and you will find the best book on fantasy film written in over a decade. The over 800 pages list over 3000 films, alphabetically with some credits and a paragraph on each, telling plot and some critical comment. Critical comment is a touchy thing. Te gustibus non disputatum. But in my opinion Weldon's taste is very good. Nowhere does he praise a film that isn't quite good, nor pan a film undeservedly. It may be that his taste in films is just very close to my own, but I really cannot fault his critical acumen.

Weldon has an incredible fund of knowledge about the people involved with fantasy films. The book is liberally spiced with facts like the director of Creeping Terror went on to edit The Greatest Story Ever Told. The introduction seems to indicate that Weldon is mainly covering just exploitation films and some related fields. In fact, I had a difficult time finding science fiction, horror, or fantasy films that he has not covered. He has a lot of films that do not seem to fit in, like Easy Rider, but as long as he covers fantasy films so well, who cares if he covers other films as well?

A word about the author: Michael Weldon seems to be a New York City resident who published a short-lived, photocopied guide to horror on TV and in the theaters called Psychotronic. It seems to have been along the lines of the better-known (at least by me) Sleazoid Express and Gore Gazette. With Psychotronic dead, he turned his hand to writing The Encyclopedia instead. If he revives Psychotronic, he will probably have more than enough subscribers to keep it alive after they see this sample of his work.

BOOK REVIEWS by Nigel

My holiday was chaotic and thus I have not read an enormous number of books since the last time I reviewed anything. I am continuing to reread my way through my shelf of Andre Nortons; it is past time it was reorganised anyway. I also seem to have reached saturation with respect to the offerings of my bookstores. A year ago, I could wander into a bookstore and spend \$20 or \$30 on books that I knew that I wanted to have and to read. Now I go in, and more often than not, come out empty-handed. Even when I do buy something, I am rarely impressed by it.

For example, before Christmas, I bought a copy of Frank Herbert's The White Plague. I got perhaps three-quarters of the way through it before I lost interest in the story and the characters and every other aspect of the book. I'll review it properly if I ever get around to finishing it but in the meantime I do not recommend it.

My question to you all is: is this purely my problem because I have and have read too many books or is it a general problem that affects everyone who has even a marginal interest in SF?

HAMMER'S SLAMMERS by David Drake

Ignore the blurbs; I usually do anyway. This is a collection of short stories about some members of an armoured regiment. The continuity is that some few characters occur in more than one of the stories. In the first story the regiment, which has just won the war for which it was formed, turns mercenary. In the last story, it turns itself into the ruling organisation of the world that formed it before it turned mercenary. In the middle we hear of minor incidents.

The stories are mostly well written with a light, readable style. There are a few interesting ideas thrown in here and there that make the book worth reading.

Despite the blurbs, this is not a book in praise of the military and except for one story it is not anti-military. If you want to read of military power and prowess, find Jerry Pournelle's books about John Falkenberg's 42nd.

THE BLUE SWORD by Robin McKinley

This is an unashamed fantasy. Most fantasy novels try to form some link to the land and times that we live in. Most of the rest are immediately and blatantly different. This is one of the rare books that let you get into the story before pointing out that you are not where you thought you were.

The story has a flavour of Kipling about it which could make it less palatable to the average reader. Apart from the fact that the story is basically girls makes good in a man's world, it is not overly feminist (please note that this is a statement, not a criticism for or against). The story also contains scenes that match what are presumed to be every teenage girl's romantic fantasy.

I found it to be sufficiently interesting to keep me awake until I got to the last page. Not a classic but an enjoyable read.

SARGASSO OF SPACE
PLAGUE SHIP
VOODOO PLANET
POSTMARKED THE STARS
STAR HUNTER
OPERATION TIME SERACH
by Andre Norton

The first four titles are the 'Solar Queen' series of stories. They are the adventure of Dane Thorson, apprentice cargo master, of the Free Trader Solar Queen. They are probably the simplest of the stories set in a future where humanity has become one the more active races in a well-populated galaxy where many other races have come to power, formed widespread empires and either decayed or been destroyed. Most of Andre Norton's stories can be fitted into this background but the question is, is it the same future history for all of the stories? Star Hunter is also set in such a future but is not related to the 'Solar Queen' stories.

Star Hunter and Voodoo Planet are a single book because both are comparatively short stories.

Operation Time Search is very different. In this book the hero accidentally gets in the way of a prototype time/reality displacement device and ends up in the time and reality of Mu and Atlantis. The device was intended to switch to alternate realities in order that the resources or parallel worlds could be plundered. Alternate parallel realities are a device that Norton makes frequent use of and in this case it allows her to write about an interesting hypothetical event without having to try to explain the absence of physical evidence in the real world. This is also one of her rare stories that have an element of romantic interest.

One of the features of all of her books is that they have heroes who win out in the end. The heroes are also clay-footed and have to work at what they are doing but they do survive to a happy ending and usually without some disconcerting supernatural step in the last three pages. The rider is that even in a series, no two books have the same hero regardless of who is telling the story.
