

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 6/19/85 -- Vol. 3, No. 49

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.
LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; HO meetings are in HO 2N-523.

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>
06/26	LZ: TACTICS OF MISTAKE by Gordon R. Dickson (War & the Military)
07/03	HO: THE INTEGRAL TREES by Larry Niven
07/17	LZ: THIS IMMORTAL by Roger Zelazny (Immortality)
07/24	HO: DAMIANO by R. A. MacAvoy
08/07	LZ: A CASE OF CONSCIENCE by James Blish (Religion)
08/14	HO: ? (11AM)
08/28	LZ: DINOSAUR BEACH by Keith Laumer (Time Travel)
09/04	HO: ? (11AM)
09/11	MT: Organizational Meeting (tentative)
09/18	LZ: THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES by Ray Bradbury (Near Future History)
10/09	LZ: THE SHEEP LOOK UP by John Brunner (Catastrophes)

HO Chair is Mark Leeper, HO 1E-412 (834-2657). LZ Chair is Rob Mitchell, LZ 1B-306 (576-6106). LZ Librarian is Lance Larsen, LZ 3C-219 (576-2668). HO Librarian is Tim Schroeder, HO 2G-427A (949-5866). Jill-of-all-trades is Evelyn Leeper, HO 1B-500A (834-4723).

1. From Rob Mitchell, chair-tyrant of the Lizzies:

On June 26th, the only important SF club in the area will meet in Lincroft to discuss Gordie Dickson's TACTICS OF MISTAKE, one of his Dorsai novels and an insightful commentary on the role of the military in society. "War and the military" will be the general discussion topic, although as usual the conversation will be far-ranging and unconstrained. Other recommended books on this subject are Heinlein's STARSHIP TROOPERS, Haldeman's THE FOREVER WAR, and Harrison's BILL THE GALACTIC HERO.

2. I see that Harlan Ellison just got a big out-of-court settlement for supposed similarities between his two Outer Limits episodes and the film THE TERMINATOR. Science fiction is a literature that prides itself on freedom of ideas. For a long time science fiction in the magazines was really a dialog of ideas. One author would disagree with another by writing a story along similar lines, but would vary the idea showing how he thought things would work out differently. Writers built on the ideas of previous authors. They came to assume, in fact, that the reader was familiar with earlier works on the same subject. Wells had to explain the concept of time travel in TIME MACHINE, Ellison didn't in Soldier From the

*****Presorted*****
* Leeper, Evelyn C. *
* 114A HO 1B-500A *

Future. Stories borrowed ideas from other stories all the time and nobody paid much attention because that is the way the science fiction game is played. And one reason it could be played that way is that large sums of money were not involved. Then TV and cinema got into the science fiction act and still there did not seem to be much of a problem since science fiction was still not a big moneymaker.

Then Ellison and Bova wrote a story called "Brillo" about how a human is better than a robot to act as a policeman. In some ways it reused ideas from Asimov and others, but nobody cared because it was a different approach to some of Asimov's ideas. A TV network considered adapting "Brillo" into a series or a TV movie or something but the project never got off the ground. That same network did do a series on the concept that a robot policeman would have to overcome initial prejudice, but would be a good thing. It is highly profitable to win a suit against a network and Ellison and Bova sued. They apparently demonstrated that "Brillo" inspired the concept of FUTURE COP and laid claim to ownership of the idea of a robot policeman. They must have had a darn good lawyer but they won that one. Science fiction fans everywhere applauded that a couple science fiction writers had won a suit against a big, bad corporation.

After Fox made ALIEN, Van Vogt threatened to sue over similarities to his "Discord in Scarlet." Apparently egg-laying aliens is another owned idea.

Now I admit when I saw TERMINATOR I did think of "Soldier from the Future." I thought a whole lot more about CYBORG 2087, a film in which a cyborg is sent back into our present to avert a totalitarian future. I can't tell you what concept Ellison must have claimed was stolen from him. "Soldier" was about a soldier, not a civilian or a robot. Is it the idea of time travelers coming from the future into the present to avert a bad future? Surely that is too broad for Ellison to claim all of it.

My impression is that Ellison is just a parasite who claims to be disgusted at how the film industry does not meet his high science fiction standards, yet when they try to play by the same rules that we expect from science fiction writers, he is right in there with his lawyer trying to make a fast buck.

Mark Leeper
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H. G. Wells and Frank McConnell's The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells
Oxford University Press, 1981, \$4.95.

A book review by Mark R. Leeper

One of my earliest memories was going to see the film War of the Worlds. I was not yet three years old and my parents, who usually hate science fiction, for some reason went to see it. I hated it. And we sat through it twice. By the time I was six, I would have sold both my parents into slavery to see the film again. I was bitten by science fiction early and hard. And the paragon of science fiction writers had to be H. G. Wells, I thought.

Finding in the library the Dover book Seven Science Fiction Novels by H. G. Wells was a high point of my youth. I remember how I originally acquired each of the fives "Classics Illustrated" comic books based on his science fiction books. When I was growing up, Wells was "Mr. Science Fiction" for me.

Of course, now I am somewhat more widely read and can put Wells into a perspective. In perspective, Wells is merely the best and most creative science fiction writer who ever lived. There are very few current types of science fiction story that Wells did not write and the majority of those he invented. Time travel, alien invasion, post-holocaust, space travel--they all descended from stories and novels by Wells. His shorter stories include the invention of the modern tank and the "atomic bomb" (Wells coined the phrase "atomic bomb" in 1914 and gave a surprisingly accurate appraisal of its use in war, particularly considering that he was writing about it thirty years before its development). Another early story describes a London described by terrorists with biological warfare. Most SF authors predicting the future only extrapolate the present without breakthroughs. Some actually put in breakthroughs but are way off base about what the breakthroughs will be. Wells predicted a surprising number of the real breakthroughs.

That brings me to The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells by Frank McConnell. McConnell is an Associate Professor of English at Northwestern, and he approaches Wells as an Associate Professor of English rather than as a science fiction fan. None of the pleasure of reading Wells comes across. He does mention, dryly and in passing, that certain novels were written during the period when Wells was "a great storyteller," and McConnell speculates that after that period Wells decided that he no longer wanted to be a great storyteller, but he never talks about what made a Wells story great. Instead of that, he gives us dry-as-dust speculations of how Wells may have been influenced by Darwin's theories and goes into long digressions about the history of Social Darwinism.

In fact, much of the matter of McConnell's book reminds me of my own writing when I was in high school and wanted to make a small idea fill an assigned number of pages.

He says things like Invisible Man presaged politics of the 20th Century in that Griffin is a terrorist who is damaged by his own tactics. Even assuming the point is true about terrorism, which it probably isn't, it is not an idea that is particularly worth considering. Wells knew nothing about 20th Century terrorists when he wrote the book, and McConnell's whole point is contrived.

Also, McConnell talks about the way the giants' nursery in Food of the Gods had brightly colored tiles the children could re-arrange. "The child psychology of Jean Piaget and the inspired practice of the Montessori schools... have both borne out the wisdom of Wells's ideas about the early training of children in creative play." Time and again, McConnell seems to be missing the essential points of the Wells story, but he will waste a half-page on what a good way these giant children were raised.

Earlier in his biographical chapter, he digresses to explain the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and Godel's Proof. He botches both but goes on for pages on their implications. (Actually, he is not alone in this. It is amazing how many people can correctly state neither the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle nor the meaning of Godel's proof, but can wax eloquent on their philosophical implications--implications that are not borne out by Heisenberg or Godel at all.) McConnell says that Godel was saying "mathematics had the structure not of a 'real' world but of an elegant fiction." To me that shows a complete misunderstanding of the implications of Godel's proof, yet he fills pages explaining it to his reader.

In another place McConnell does a metric analysis of the sentences in a paragraph of Invisible Man. I could go on and on with a list of how what he says may vaguely concern Wells, but how he totally misses essential points. McConnell's only really interesting sections about Wells are facts he gleaned from a biography of the author. To all appearances, that is the book I should have read.

EMERGENCE by David Palmer
Bantam, 1984, \$2.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

This book suffers from the "levitation method" of writing--whatever corner you write your character into, he or she will turn out to have just the right abilities to get out of it. (If the situation is bad enough, the character will turn out to be able to levitate over the obstacle.) Well, Palmer does make some attempt to rationalize his main character's set of abilities. He fails. While I kept reading and was indeed interested in finding out what was going to happen next, the moment I began to think, even a little, about the situations that Palmer was setting up and Candy's ability to get out of them, I realized what a patently absurd book it is.

Candy is a superman (superwoman?)--really. The product of some sort of genetic mutation caused by the 1918 influenza epidemic, she can do everything, even at the tender age of eleven. She is an expert at karate, can perform basic surgery, can learn to fly an airplane by herself, etc., etc. R-i-g-h-t! The rest of the characters are not much better (in some cases, they're worse).

Portions of the novel were previously published as short stories. It shows--the second section repeats a lot of information already given in the first, as if Palmer couldn't be bothered to do any re-writing on the parts that had already been published. And on top of everything, the book doesn't end neatly, but leaves some loose ends just perfect for--you guessed it--a sequel! I can't recommend this book. While it was passable enough while I was reading it, it left me ultimately unsatisfied. If this is all it takes to be a Hugo nominee, it must have been a very weak year last year.

COUNTDOWN TO MIDNIGHT edited by H. Bruce Franklin
DAW, 1985, \$2.95.

A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

You can tell this is edited by an academic--many of the stories are interesting from an academic viewpoint, but boring to the average reader. How can stories about nuclear warfare be boring? Well, here's how...

"To Still the Drums" by Chandler Davis is acceptable, but the war he talks about could be any war; it doesn't have to be atomic. "Thunder and Roses" by Theodore Sturgeon is probably the best of the bunch (well, after all, it is Sturgeon). "Lot" by Ward Moore is of interest only as the basis of Panic in the Year Zero; the ideas in it have become trite from overuse since its writing. It may very well have been then--how many times have you read the "survivalist" story in which there is one character (always female) who is busy packing her make-up and nylons in her survival kit? "That Only a Mother" by Judith Merrill has nothing to do with nuclear war (though one supposedly forms the background of the story). "I Kill Myself" by Julian Kawalec is "literate" but not very engrossing. "The Neutrino Bomb" by Ralph S. Cooper is cute, but trivial. "Akua Nuten (The South Wind)" by Yves Theriault is told from an interesting perspective, but too shallow. "I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" by Harlan Ellison didn't appeal to me when I read it fourteen years ago, and I didn't bother to re-read it here. "Countdown" by Kate Wilhelm attempts to touch an emotional chord, but doesn't quite succeed. "The Big Flash" by Norman Spinrad is too punkish for my tastes. "Everything But Love" by Mikhail Yemstev and Eremai Parnov was unreadable; I tried, but couldn't force my way through it. "To Howard Hughes: A Modest Proposal" by Joe Haldeman showed the most imagination, but was ultimately unconvincing.

Perhaps the problem is that the scope of nuclear war does not lend itself to being reduced to a short story. Certainly many of these stories, written before nuclear winter was discovered, no longer ring true as depictions of a nuclear war. They are interesting from an historical perspective, perhaps, but do not expect engrossing, convincing portrayals of a modern nuclear war.

ATLAS SHRUGGED by Ayn Rand
Signet, 1957, \$1.75.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

In spite of its over a thousand pages, I can't find much to say about this book. The premise is that the technical and managerial geniuses, who have been all that has stood between the masses and ruin, have decided (with the encouragement of one John Galt) no longer to let their talents and abilities be commandeered by those less able than themselves, but instead to drop out of society and form their own society based on their desires. (I bet you hadn't realized that Ayn Rand invented the hippie!) Of course, things quickly go to hell in a handbasket because of this, starting with the collapse of the railroads, which Rand sees as the foundation of American society, trade, and culture. The result is predictable to any one who has read any Rand before (though I refuse to believe that even as their are food and fuel shortages because of collapsing (in some cases literally) railroads, a post card can get from Colorado to New York in four days. It can't do that now!

Rand's obvious happiness in killing off all the "worthless" characters in this book (which includes over 90% of the general public) makes it somewhat difficult for most people to buy into the good points that she is making. While her methods of making her points are not the most subtle in the world, Rand's questions of ability and the responsibility of an individual to "donate" his or her ability to the general good because others have decided so is well worth considering. Unfortunately, eleven hundred pages is more considering that you may want to do. The best way to read this book is to skip all the long speeches (particularly in the second half) and read it as a science fiction "end of the world" story. Then do your philosophizing on your own.

DEATH OF A SCAVENGER by Keith Spore
Belmont, 1980, \$2.25.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

Dr. Hugo Enclave is a modern detective who pretends that he is Sherlock Holmes. He affects a deerstalker cap and magnifying glass, and follows the methods of Holmes (as he interprets them). In spite of this, Holmes fans will probably not find this book of interest. Enclave and the narrator (a police officer on leave of absence) attempt to solve some murders which seem to be connected to the "Aquadoor" break-in at the Democratic National Headquarters. (Yes, I know--at times this book suffers from terminal cuteness, in spite of not being a comedy.) I was usually twenty pages or so ahead of the narrator and this did not make for an interesting book. In fact, it was boring. Skip it.

TRISTAN AND ISOLDE (a.k.a. LOVESPELL)
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

For those unfamiliar with the tale, the love story of Tristan and Isolde goes back to the Sixth Century (it is thought) and has been re-told many times in many different forms. It is probably best known either for having been included in Malory's Morte d'Arthur or for having been the subject of a Wagnerian opera. Malory sort of cheated to include the story since until that time the story had never been associated with Arthurian legend, but Malory liked the story so gave Tristan a knighthood and a place at the Round Table.

A film of the story (entitled Tristan and Isolde) was made in the mid-Seventies in Britain, but when it was released in 1979, it was under the title Lovespell (as near as I can piece together the details). As the story goes, the Irish Isolde had an uncle nobody cared much for. The uncle is killed by Tristan, the dashing nephew of Mark, the King of Cornwall. Mark comes to Ireland to make claims against Isolde's family and forms a fast friendship with Isolde. After Mark returns to Cornwall, he decides to marry Isolde and sends his nephew Tristan with the proposal. Big mistake. By the time Tristan gets Isolde to Cornwall, it isn't Mark she loves. She faithfully marries Mark, but eventually runs off with Tristan. That is just the beginning of the story, of course. The story is sort of Britain's own version of Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare only re-told that story, incidentally).

The idea of re-telling the story was perhaps a little uninspired, of course. But this re-telling will probably be the version I'll remember. The photography is atmospheric and the story moves along. The production is almost lavish, considering that the most spectacular sights of the time were castles that are still standing. The musical score is well-constructed enough, though a piece borrowed from the Russian film Alexander Nevsky seems out-of-place. The cast is quite good, with Richard Burton top-lined as Mark, King of Cornwall. (I like that name--Mark. Good name for a king.) Nicholas Clay (Evil Under the Sun) seems a little wimpy to be the great lover of legend. For those who enjoyed the mythic feel of Ladyhawke, this is a good film to watch for. Rate it +2 on the -4 to +4 scale.

THE MAFU CAGE
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

A short simple story with overtones of horror is The Mafu Cage, a film based on a French play. Lee Grant and Carol Kane play the daughters of a deceased naturalist, who raised them in the jungle with pygmies. Grant turned out relatively normal and works as a solar astronomer. Kane seems to demonstrate that you can take the girl out of the jungle, but you can't take the jungle out of the girl. She has recreated a jungle atmosphere in the sisters' house and lives much like a wild animal. She is seriously mentally disturbed. She spends her days by the Mafu cage. "Mafu" is any ape she can get her hands on from a local supplier (Will Geer). She chains Mafu in a cage and sketches him. When she tires of that she beats Mafu to death and buries him in the garden, only to have Mafu reborn when she is next supplied with another ape.

This idyllic(?) lifestyle is threatened when sister Grant seems to be amorously interested in a co-worker (James Olsen). Kane feels her safe, familiar world threatened and decides to defend it. The Mafu Cage has more a mythic feel than one of unpredictability. There never is much doubt as to what is going to happen next. The Mafu Cage is competently acted and engrossing, but lacks any real depth. Rate it 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

FLETCH
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Every year the Mystery Writers of America choose what they consider to be the best mystery novel of the year and give it their "Edgar" award. One of the past winners of the award was Fletch by Gregory McDonald. The story (told entirely in dialog, if I remember from leafing through the book) was about a wise-cracking investigative reported hired by a wealthy businessman who wants to be murdered. The story was apparently complex and suspenseful enough to win an Edgar.

It is hard to believe that the filmmakers did not tone down the plot complexity and turn up the comedy when they cast Chevy Chase as Fletch. Still, there is enough of a mystery left in Fletch to keep the audience guessing just what is going on until all is revealed in the final reel. Chase is admittedly quite funny in the role at times.

Occasionally, he tries to push the humor a little far as he pipe-dreams himself to be a white professional basketball player in a silly-looking Afro. The real problem with Fletch is not the comedy which gets out of hand nor insufficient storyline, though Fletch is no Prizzi's Honor.

The problem with Fletch is that a mystery needs some credibility, and that is almost totally lacking. All Chase seems to have to do is put on the right weird disguise and pretend to be someone else and the world just seems to open up to him. If he wants to find where someone has been flying a private plane, he dresses as an engine mechanic and, in spite of the fact that he clearly knows nothing about his assumed field of expertise, people just open up to him with all kinds of nifty clues. And each just happens to be the right clue for the next step. Fletch just collects the clues and at the end announces the results.

As a comedy Fletch is entertaining, albeit unmemorable. As a mystery it is less than convincing. As a puzzle it is almost good, though the solution is not all that impressive. This is not the stuff of which series should be made, but if it hits at the boxoffice, you can bet that Chase will be back. Give it +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. If you want to unravel a puzzle, go see Prizzi's Honor instead.

SIXTEEN CANDLES
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

We've had a number of teenage love comedies over the last few years. Most are not very good. One of the better ones is on cable this month. Sixteen Candles is an odd hodge-podge of comedy styles. When it is good it is pretty darn good and when it is bad it is mercifully forgettable. When Director John Hughes has the confidence to do human comedy with his characters, his film rivals Bill Forsyth's Gregory's Girl and Local Hero. The American family he shows us is funny and likable without being cloying or cute. High school life, and particularly scenes on the school bus, are funny without seeming contrived or unrealistic.

But in the second half of the film something goes very wrong with the film. Suddenly, Hughes starts reaching for easy laughs with slapstick comedy. We get car accidents and wild party scenes that have come to be real yawners through overuse. There are still a few honest laughs in the second half, but the first half is really worth seeing. Rate this one +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

PRIZZI'S HONOR
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

One of the classic names of American cinema is John Huston. He has worked in the cinema since he worked on the screenplay of the 1932 Murders in the Rue Morgue. Besides being a familiar face in the films like Chinatown, he has directed such classics as Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Key Largo, The African Queen, and The Man Who Would Be King. He is still out there making films of some seriousness for the viewer over 30. In the middle of the summer's fluff films, he has released Prizzi's Honor, a comedy that turns out to be more than a comedy.

The ads for Prizzi's Honor indicate that it is a light comedy about two people who fall in love without realizing that each is a hired killer. That seems like an odd premise for a comedy, though the comedies Pain in the A. and its American remake Buddy, Buddy have also attempted to be light comedies involving hired killers as main characters. Well, don't believe the ads. The first hour of Prizzi's Honor certainly has a fair amount of comedy, but by the second half the fun is abandoned and we are left with a serious story of crime family politics and back-stabbing like out of some sort of co-operation between Lillian Hellman and Mario Puzo.

The lovers are played by Kathleen Turner and Jack Nicholson, and an odder couple it is difficult to imagine. It is never really clear what the appealing Miss Turner sees in the fat, balding, New-York-accented Nicholson. The Nicholson character is so unappealing that the viewer tends to assume that Turner is pulling some sort of a scam. There is absolutely no chemistry between the characters on the screen. In fact, the most engaging character on the screen is William Hickey as the Patrone of the crime family. It isn't easy taking Hickey seriously in the role, as he usually plays a young man with a funny voice. Still, as the wizened head of a crime family, he is the most charismatic character in the film. The character's failing exterior causes the viewer to vastly underrate the keen mind of the character, who deftly pulls the strings for the entire family. Huston's daughter, Anjelica Huston, plays Nicholson's former girlfriend, who after a disagreement with her gangster father is trying to work her way back into the good graces of the crime family.

In reality, Prizzi's Honor will disappoint some with its uneven tone. Those who expect to rest their minds with a farce will find themselves lured by the second half into a complex film of some intrigue and a fair dose of violence. Even fans of the "Godfather" films may find themselves taxed to keep track of who is doing what to whom, or even just who is who. On the -4 to +4 scale, Prizzi's Honor is a high +1.

DAM BUSTERS by Paul Brickhill
and
DAM BUSTERS (1954)
A book/film review by Mark R. Leeper

I remember seeing this film as a teenager and being very impressed by it. There were quite a few British (and American) war films made in the 1940's and 50's. Most were about the glory of being a soldier or a pilot or a bulldozer operator in the face of the enemy's attacks. Some can be quite good, but they tend to run together. Dam Busters was a different sort of film. The hero gets nowhere near battle. He's not a soldier; he's an engineer. His virtue is not heroism (at least not predominantly); it is intellect and persistence.

The hero of this true story is Barnes Wallis, an aircraft engineer who manages to realize at the beginning of the war just what kind of attack would hurt the Germans the most: the destruction of the three dams of the Ruhr Valley. The problem is that it is totally impossible to destroy the dams in an air-raid with the sorts of planes and bombs available at the beginning of the war. The book treats the whole plan as the giant engineering problem that it really is. It is a sort of Soul of a New Machine at War. The bombing in questions, it turns out, requires a whole new concept of bombing. The bomb has to be dropped at precise altitudes, precise speeds, and precise distances from the targets, and each is handled as an engineering problem with an "Aha!" sort of solution that would please even a Martin Gardner. At every step along the way, Wallis finds ways to fight the bureaucracy of the War Department that are as creative as his solutions to the physics problems posed by the raid.

This is truly a war story for engineers and mathematicians. Toward the end of the book, the concentration is more on the airmen who must pull off the raid, a much more familiar sort of war story, but even then the thrill is more to see all the mechanisms developed earlier actually working than it is to see the heroism of the men.

WOR-TV recently showed a much abbreviated version of the film, and unfortunately what they cut was mostly the engineering part of the problem, and fighting the bureaucracy. The filmmaker had already cut out a fair amount of this part of the story, and the local station nearly finished the job. (I am partially remembering the quality of the film from very old memories.) I would say the book is very much more recommended than the uncut film; the uncut film is much better than WOR's version. Even that I give at least a qualified recommendation.