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1. In all probability this will be the last notice I will be sending you this year. Hence please note the

01/08 LZ: PHOENIX WITHOUT ASHES by Edward Bryant (Generation Ships)  
01/15 HO: "Hitchhiker's" Trilogy by Douglas Adams

on the previous page. Or here. Or don't note it at all, I don't care.

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Mercury Capsules - December 18, 1985

"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 palpsc from the AT&T-IS ENS systems in Lincroft, {pegasus,mtgzz,ihnp4}!lznv!psc from everywhere else. If that's impossible, I'm at 113A LZ 1D-212, 576-2374.

⊗ Black Water: anthology edited by Alberto Manguel, 1983. This is an excellent anthology of "fantastic" stories from all over the world. Unlike most anthologies published in this country, it is not slanted toward American or British authors, but has a wide assortment of Latin American, European, and Asian authors. These aren't science fiction stories. Most aren't horror stories in the usually accepted sense, though some are horrific in nature. The closest common appellation would be fantasy, though if you're expecting unicorns and elves, look elsewhere. Run, do not walk, to your nearest bookstore to get this one!  
Evelyn C Leeper

⊗ God's Grace novel by Bernard Malamud, 1982. This novel provides an interesting counter-point to David Brin's "uplift" stories. Described as "the only survivors of the nuclear holocaust are a Jew and his chimp," this novel examines Sam's attempts to "raise" the chimpanzee (and others who appear) to the level of human beings. The results are, shall we say, less encouraging than Brin would want us to believe. Scientific accuracy isn't Malamud's strong point, but this is religious fantasy, not science fiction. Most people would find this too depressing, but post-holocaust completists may want to read it anyway.  
Evelyn C Leeper

⊗ The Forty-Minute War novel by Janet and Chris Morris, 1985. Like so many Baen Books these days, this is basically not a science-fiction story. The "40-Minute War" of the title provides the rationale for some very straightforward CIA/spy-type stuff, and the ending indicates that the authors didn't really have an ending. Talk about deus ex machina!  
Evelyn C Leeper

• The Long Forgetting novel by Edward A. Byers, 1985. Once more, Baen Books takes an interesting premise (a "fugue" in space that causes the loss of all memory and higher brain functions) and throws it away. Instead of spending time showing how mankind regained his former glory, surely the most interesting story, Byers tells us of the discovery of some religious documents that, if revealed, will completely change the way people look at their beliefs. Irving Wallace did the same thing with The Word and he didn't need science fiction to do it.

Evelyn C Leeper

• Sherlock Holmes: My Life and Crimes novel by Michael Hardwick, 1984. Hardwick (writing in the first person as Holmes) describes what really happened before during and after Reichenbach Falls. As with all of Hardwick Holmesian writings, this is recommended to fans of the Great Detective.

Evelyn C Leeper

• Murder Most Irregular novel by H. Paul Jeffers, 1983. The Baker Street Irregulars (a real-life Holmesian "fan club") are being killed off by a mysterious assassin in the style of various villains from the Holmes stories (didn't I see something like this in Theatre of Blood??). It might have been passable if 1) the characters weren't so closely identified with real people--the Isaac Asimov character in particular, and 2) the murderer wasn't so obvious from practically the beginning. For completists only.

Evelyn C Leeper



THE JEWEL OF THE NILE  
A film review by Mark R. Leeper

Capsule review: Romancing the Stone was the jewel. The Jewel of the Nile lays there like a stone. The characters are less interesting, the story is more mechanical, the humor is bland. This are still some of the humor and zip of the first film, but not enough.

These days it is a pretty safe bet that any film that shows a good profit will have some sort of a sequel to trade off its popularity. The acknowledged masters of the art of finding a way to make a sequel have been Twentieth Century Fox. They earned the champion's crown when they blew up the world in Beneath the Planet of the Apes and still found a way to make three more sequels. This same film company had a big hit in their delightful Romancing the Stone. The production of another Joan Wilder/Jack Colton story was pretty much a foregone conclusion, even without the same creative team.

Instead of the late Diane Thomas to write the script, they used the team of Mark Rosenthal and Lawrence Komner, who had worked together previously on the script of Real Genius. Instead of Robert Zemeckis as director, they had Lewis Teague. Unfortunately, the combination of Thomas and Zemeckis is sorely missed.

In The Jewel of the Nile, Wilder and Colton are enjoying their ill-gotten gains of the first film, starting to get on each other's nerves, and are on the point of breaking up when a rising Middle Eastern leader--with Fascist tendencies--coerces Joan to come to his palace and write his biography. Instead, she gets embroiled in an adventure (big surprise!) involving a struggle for power between the fascist Omar (Omar Sharif look-alike Spiros Focas) and a comical Arab holy man (Avner Eisenberg, fresh from his one man Broadway show "Avner the Eccentric"). The holy man's disciples are five juggling Arabs played by the comic juggling and acrobatic team "The Flying Karamazov Brothers."

The real problem with the new script is that it fails to involve the audience. When Joan Wilder and Jack Colton were strangers in danger, the first film had the feel of a South American It Happened One Night. As rich, bickering lovers, the couple loses much of their appeal. And caring as little as we do for the petty lovers, the action is just action without excitement. The wise man, who should be charismatic, is almost cute but is mostly bland. He and his followers--played by American comedians--have no credibility as Arabs. They are at best stereotypes and are rarely that good.

The film does have some humor, though not as much as its predecessor. Much of the comedy is provided by Neptune-born, Asbury Park-raised Danny DeVito, who seems to be in this film only to add comic relief and continuity with Romancing the Stone. But even the comedy is scaled down from the previous film. On the -4 to +4 scale, Romancing the Stone got a +2 and The Jewel of the Nile gets a 0.

THINNER by Stephen King  
Signet, 1985, \$3.95.  
A book review by Mark R. Leeper

Stephen King is undoubtedly the best-selling horror author in the world, yet most of his novels do not have very much horror in them. Thinner is not so much a horror novel as an adventure with a supernatural premise. His The Shining and 'Salem's Lot were true horror novels in which a genuine feeling of growing menace suffused the novels. That is not the case with Thinner or with recent King novels like Pet Semetary. Still, take the horror out of Thinner and you still have an interesting story. If you take out of Pet Semetary everything that borrowed from W. W. Jacobs's story "The Monkey's Paw," there is not much left worth reading. At least King's Thinner would have some interest even without the horror elements.

Billy Halleck is a heavyweight lawyer. He weighs in at just about an eighth of a ton. Then he has an auto accident in which he kills an old gypsy woman. Another gypsy from her group taps Billy on the cheek and whispers "Thinner." After that the chapters are "245," "227," "221," etc. What would seem at first to be a blessing soon becomes obviously a gypsy curse. Once Billy establishes that he has been cursed, he must find the gypsies to convince them to remove the curse. Neither half of this task is easy. The gypsies move around, well, like gypsies. Then once the gypsies have been found, there is the thorny problem of convincing the gypsies to remove the curse. As good a lawyer as Halleck is, convincing a lot of gypsies to forgive his killing one of their number is beyond his powers.

One definite problem with Thinner is its conflicting goals. On one hand King is trying to show the plight of gypsies, even in the United States. On the other hand, this is a horror novel and he needs the gypsies to provide the horror. He is at once trying to make them more human and also to make them monstrous. It doesn't really work. In the end King has totally justified--at least in part with fact rather than fantasy--the intolerance shown toward gypsies. Even without references to gypsy magic, these gypsies do not seem like people anyone would want coming into their town.

Thinner is one of five novels originally published under King's penname, Richard Bachman. The first four of these novels were published under the Bachman name early in King's career. This one has more of the feel of a later King novel. I have heard rationalizations for why King published it under the Bachman name. My personal (cynical) belief is that it was planned to be released under the Bachman name and then have the rumor openly spread that this was "the Stephen King novel nobody knows is a Stephen King novel." This was done with the full intention of later publishing it under King's real name. That way instead of being just another Stephen King horror novel, it is a novel of sure notoriety.

In any case, it is an above-average novel for King. Give it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.