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Co-Editor: Mark Leeper, mleeper@optonline.net
Co-Editor: Evelyn Leeper, eleeper@optonline.net
Sending Address: evelynchimeisleeper@gmail.com
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The Great Courses: "A Historian Goes to the Movies: Ancient Rome" (Part 4: The Revival) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

GLADIATOR (2000):

The nano-summary is that it was very popular, very profitable, and very inaccurate. The state of the Germanic wars at the beginning is wrong, the idea that Marcus Aurelius was promoting someone other than Commodus as his successor is wrong(*), the brevity of Commodus's reign is wrong, and the implication of the return of the Republic at the end is definitely wrong.

(*) Whatever Commodus's flaws were--and they were many--and whether Marcus Aurelius was aware of them, he really only had three choices: name his son Commodus as his successor, name someone else and pretty much guarantee a civil war after he died, or kill Commodus. Stoic he may have been, but not *that* Stoic.

On finer details, the film gets Marcus Aurelius's appearance with a beard correct, along with his philosophy, but not his age or health. Commodus's psychological state was correct, but his appearance all wrong.

While they did pretty well on the Colosseum, the training of gladiators, as well as their costumes, weapons, and fighting styles were wrong, as were the army's battle tactics, armor, and weapons.

In fact, the professor hired as a historical advisor for the film asked to have her name removed from the credits when she discovered that her function was to provide support for what the filmmakers wanted to do (e.g., have female gladiators who fought with razor blades on their nipples) rather than to help them get the film to be accurate.

In summary, GLADIATOR was more true to the stereotypes of ancient Rome than to actual history.

ROME (HBO) (2005):

Aldrete began by saying that the first few episodes of HBO's "Rome" are the best depiction of ancient Rome on screen. Yes, it takes liberties and has anachronisms, but it is still the best at depicting religion, slavery, politics, and all aspects of Roman life. Especially for the non-elite.

For example, "Rome" depicts Roman religion as a transactional relationship ("I'll give you a sacrifice; you give me what I am asking for"), not a request for altruism (as in Christianity). It's also a part of everyday life, with various gods for various purposes, and goes along with ancestral masks, divination, and curse tablets, all of which Aldrete says are accurately portrayed.

Slaves are not treated empathetically by masters as they often are in other films, but more as furniture. Yes, slaves could wield power, but they were also treated inhumanely. Also, the line between free and slave was permeable, as shown by the character of Posca.

Women are accurately portrayed as being used as tools in politics; other tools include rumor and slander (graffiti). (Although taking a hint from Livia in I, CLAUDIUS, the filmmakers have *two* scheming women.)

"Rome" also showed the collegia (which Aldrete described as a combination of trade organization and proto-mafia--sounds like some of the trade unions here, at least at one point), and the patron/client relationship,

Aldrete also thought that the characterizations of Antony and the teenaged Octavian were good, although with too much sex and violence. And there is no evidence that the Romans used opium or hemp as recreational drugs.

In short, "Rome" presents a grungy Rome that, as someone described to Aldrete, was "not accurate, but authentic."

CENTURION (2010):

Both this and THE EAGLE deal with the legend of the lost Ninth Legion in Britain. (There was a third, THE LAST LEGION (2007), but it was more of a fantasy film about Arthurian legend.)

In terms of the historical incident, all three films are more inspired by 1954 Rosemary Sutcliffe YA novel THE EAGLE OF THE NINTH than my historical records. Theodor Mommsen pretty much started the legend by combining the disappearance of the Ninth from historical records and a report of a large number of Romans having been killed by the Britons. But there seem to be records of the Ninth in the Netherlands after this slaying, so it is more likely that it became undermanned and was disbanded.

CENTURION has a fair number of inaccuracies: flaming arrows in a night attack (which would be counter-productive and how would they light them anyway?), and giant flaming balls that are shot through a forest, missing all the trees and hitting all the Romans.

There are many accuracies (or perhaps "authenticities" is better), many drawn from the actual Battle of Teutoberg Forest over a hundred years earlier. Many of the names are homages to real Romans. There is no CGI, so everything looks real. It may be inaccurate in parts, but Aldrete says it is a solid adventure/war movie. The director says one inspiration was Walter Hill's THE WARRIORS, which in turn was a modern retelling of Xenophon.

THE EAGLE (2011):

THE EAGLE is more closely based on the Sutcliffe novel. It has accuracies in the use of the testudo and Roman short swords, and is perhaps unique in portraying the worship of Mithras, an Eastern God popular among soldiers. (Mithraism also shows up in the alternate history novel A DRAGON WAITING by John M. Ford, about an England where Byzantium never fell.)

[-ecl]

Hammer Versus Universal DVD Releases (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

When Universal packaged their classic monster series, they first issued each series as a single boxed set (with some adjustments for cross-over films). Then they did a Blu-ray set of all the initial films, plus BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN (and PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, otherwise very hard to find at the time).

Hammer, however, had no real plan. Take the "Frankenstein" films; here's how we have them:

- CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN: issued as a double feature with TASTE THE BLOOD OF DRACULA
- THE REVENGE OF FRANKENSTEIN: issued as a stand-alone
- EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN: issued in the set "Hammer Horror Series"
- FRANKENSTEIN CREATED WOMAN: issued as a double feature with LEGEND OF THE 7 GOLDEN VAMPIRES and in the "Hammer Feature Film Set"
- FRANKENSTEIN MUST BE DESTROYED: issued as a stand-alone
- FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MONSTER FROM HELL: issued as a stand-alone

And that isn't even addressing the irregular use of "The" in the titles. [-ecl]

ALIEN CLAY by Adrian Tchaikovsky (copyright 2024, Orbit, \$19.99, trade paperback, 388pp, ISBN 978-0-316-57897-4) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

While I've only started reading Adrian Tchaikovsky within the last couple of years, I discovered by looking in various bibliographies that he is prolific. And then I noticed that every time I looked up, he was publishing another novel or novella. His works have been nominated for the Hugo award, and he seems to be getting a lot of attention these days. I did enjoy his series entitled "The Final Architecture", which was up for the Best Series Hugo this year, so when I got the chance to get a copy of his latest novel ALIEN CLAY I jumped on it.

The setting is some unspecified time in Earth's future, although it is far enough out that humanity has developed space travel. Earth is something of an authoritarian planet, under the rule that is known simply as The Mandate. We don't learn much about the Mandate, who came up with it, or who enforces it. What we do know is that the Mandate dictates how life and the universe exists, and anyone who rebels against the Mandate is sent off world to one of the few planets that is known to be able to support macrocellular life, known as Kiln. Those who enforce the Mandate do not care about interplanetary colonization. Rather, it would like to use knowledge gained on Kiln to support its view of how the world and the universe work. And if what is discovered on Kiln does not support the Mandate, the discovery is hidden from the masses back on Earth, or at the very least twisted so that it does support the dogma of the Mandate.

As you might guess, the Mandate is really just the mechanism to set up the story on Kiln. The protagonist is Arton Daghdev, an ecologist who dared to contradict the mandate and led a small revolution to boot. Arton and a bunch of other dissidents--they aren't the first, and they won't be the last--are sent to work in Kiln's labor camp to find the answers that will support the Mandate's definition of the universe and thus that whatever civilization was on Kiln is not a threat to humanity.

Of course, what Arton and his workmates find does not fit into the Mandate's definition. The creatures that are found on Kiln are nothing like human beings. They are amalgamations of creatures. They are not hive minds, but rather a combination of various animals that work together for the greater good of the whole. A creature that was broken open by a weapon would reveal other creatures inside, and there might be other creatures inside of those. It's hard for the Commandant of the camp to accept what he learns about life on the planet. There are structures scattered across the planet that the Commandant--the Mandate's representative on the planet--believes are indicative of a prior civilization. The structures have writing on them, which seems to support the belief that there was indeed intelligent life on Kiln, and of course the Commandant wants to know everything about those structures that he possibly can.

The problem is that if you take a bunch of dissidents from one location and transport them to another location in order to get them to work toward a stated goal, they are still dissidents, and will behave as such. So those same people plotted a breakout. It failed of course, because there is always that one person who squeals, not unlike people back on Earth who ratted out those who worked against the Mandate. This episode underscored that people don't necessarily change, and they will work together for the common goal.

This concept of working together for a common goal comes to the forefront when Arton's work team is stranded out in the forest because their transport is destroyed. That team cooperates with each other, and a growing sense of something else going on brings them closer with each other and with the planet.

ALIEN CLAY is a cautionary tale of what can happen when an authoritarian regime controls the thoughts of an entire planet. But it's also a story of how cooperation and collaboration, not just within a species but across species, can lead to better things. It seems as if ALIEN CLAY is talking about us here on Earth right now, and the dangers of things like the Mandate can send humanity down a dark path, and that the only way out is to band together for the common good, even with people we know absolutely nothing about. ALIEN CLAY also shows Tchaikovsky's outstanding range. I've read multiple works by him now, and they are all different in tone, theme, and subject matter. It's my opinion that Tchaikovsky is one of the great writers of our day, and I look forward to reading more of his work. [-jak]

AGE OF REVOLUTIONS (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Gregory Frederick's review of AGE OF REVOLUTIONS](#) in the 10/11/24 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

[Gregory Frederick writes.] "Zakaria's central message is that successful revolutions occur gradually, rooted in societal engagement rather than imposed top-down. His recommendations for strengthening democracy include fostering family and community bonds through policies like paid parental leave and national service, as well as maintaining a balance between freedom and order." [-gf]

Where the "balance" consists of forcing people to serve the government by a top-down requirement. [-gmg]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

CHINA DREAMS: GROWING UP JEWISH IN TIENTSIN by Isabelle Maynard (University of Iowa Press, ISBN 0-87745-571-6) is Maynard's anecdotal recounting of her growing up the daughter of Russian Jews fleeing the revolution in China and later in San Francisco. I had hoped for an interesting meeting of cultures, but the truth turned out to be that, as with most other non-Chinese, the Maynards lived in an isolated compound where their only contact was with often nameless Chinese servants. (Maynard knew her personal "maid" only as "amah".) Her circle of acquaintances included non-Jews, but no Chinese. She learned to speak English and French in addition to Russian, but not Chinese. As a result, the cultures that met were all European, and while this was of some interest, this is not very different from the stories of other Jewish refugees in the United States, or England, or Australia. Somehow, I was hoping for more.

(This is not to blame Maynard for anything. It was her parents' decision, and she could do no more than give a true accounting.)

The "Historia Augusta" (Harvard University/Loeb Classical Library, three volumes, ISBNs 978-0-674-99744-8, 978-0-674-99745-5, 978-0-674-99746-2; also available on-line, though not in Project Gutenberg) is a history of the Roman emperors from Hadrian through Numerian (the predecessor of Diocletian). There are supposedly six authors of the various parts, but in fact, it is an elaborate hoax by a single author, consisting of some truths and a lot of false information, made-up anecdotes, and many non-existent characters (including at least one emperor). Think of it as an alternate history rather than an accurate retelling.

A.D.69: EMPERORS, ARMIES & ANARCHY by Nic Fields (Pen and Sword Military, ISBN 978-1-399-02340-5) is yet another book about the Year of the Four Emperors. Fields writes with a modern sensibility, or rather a tendency to tie the events of 69 to those of today. This is unusual, at least in the books I have read. The only exception might be THE STORM BEFORE THE STORM by Mike Duncan, Most authors stick to a more "academic" approach.

However, the proofreading left something to be desired. One example: "allusions" instead of "illusions". [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
mleeper@optonline.net

Quote of the Week:

Too often we ... enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

--John F. Kennedy

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