



Table of Contents

- REVOLUTIONS: THE MARTIAN REVOLUTION (podcast review by Evelyn C. Leeper)
SPACE ODDITY by Catherynne M. Valente (book review by Joe Karpierz)
A Television Tuned to an Unused Channel (letter of comment by Fred Lerner)
Tajikistan/Tadzhikistan (letter of comment by Arthur Kaletsky)
Inter-Library Loan (letter of comment by an anonymous poster)
Merritt Parkway (letters of comment by Hal Heydt and Peter Trei)
This Week's Reading (THE JEFFERSON BIBLE) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
Quote of the Week

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REVOLUTIONS: THE MARTIAN REVOLUTION (podcast review by Evelyn C. Leeper):

In 2007, Mike Duncan began a podcast called "The History of Rome".

It took five years and almost two hundred episodes to complete, and even then it went up only through the fall of the Western empire. (Robin Pearson picked up with thread with "The History of Byzantium", and it is still running, having over three hundred episodes and gotten up to the early 1300s.)

After Duncan finished "The History of Rome", he began "Revolutions" in 2013, which covered ten revolutions (from the English Civil War to the Russian Revolution) and ended in 2022.

Or so we thought.

A couple of weeks ago, there dropped into the "Revolutions" feed the announcement and first episode of a new "Revolutions" season: "The Martian Revolution".

Yes, Duncan has branched out into science fiction. Done in same style as the others--that is, told from the point of view well in the future of the Martian Revolution of 2247. Duncan has taken all the recurring elements of the revolutions of the past, and built a Martian revolution from them. The good news is that he has entirely plotted it out, so it is unlikely to run away from him the way the historical revolutions did, specifically the French and the Russian Revolutions. (Duncan had expected each revolution to be about a dozen episodes. The French Revolution ran 54 episodes, the Russian, 105.) He has said how many episodes he expects, but I can't recall exactly.

At any rate, part of the fun is identifying the elements Duncan recycled. (I had thought the long-lived Vernon Bird (Byrd?) was patterned after Augustus from "The History of Rome", but Duncan said elsewhere he was inspired by Porfirio Diaz.) This means that people who have listened to all the previous "Revolutions" podcasts may get more of the "homages", but I think it would be enjoyable for science fiction fans in general. Was this inspired by THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS? Who knows?

"Revolutions: The Martian Revolution" can be found wherever you find podcasts. [-ecl]

SPACE ODDITY by Catherynne M. Valente (copyright 2024, Saga Press, \$28.99, Hardcover, 378pp, ISBN 978-1-5344-5452-1) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

A funny thing happened on the way to writing this review of SPACE ODDITY, the follow-up to Catherynne M. Valente's Hugo-nominated novel, 2018's SPACE OPERA. Before I go any further, I need to say that it's fitting that a funny thing happened on the way to this review, given the subject material at hand. But I digress. Actually, depending on how you look at it, two or three funny things happened on the way to the review. Look, I can't even count, because I've just realized that it's probably only two. One them is that I ended up spending way more time than I wanted to looking at the list of books I've reviewed since February 17th, 1999. That's as far back as I go on my current laptop. Not that I've had this laptop for more than twenty-five years, it's that I've managed to keep them around from computer to computer just in case I needed to refer to one of them one day. Which is what I was actually trying to do when I was preparing for this review. You see, somewhere in one of my reviews in the deep dark past, I wrote one that contained a statement something along the lines of "I'm not sure whether this book is a masterpiece, one of the worst books I've ever read, or something in between". I never did find that review--I have been writing these things going back to at least the mid-1990s (and to be honest, much further back than that, since I was writing for "The Log of the SS Voyager" back in the late 1970s/early 1980s, but stopped for several years after that)--but I think that if I saw the book on my shelf (which I can't because it's buried behind a bunch of books laying on their sides because I haven't read them yet) I'd recognize it immediately. Anyway, I wanted to pull that quote directly and use it here because, well, I think it's relevant.

Right about now, gentle reader, you're probably yelling at me in your head, "WILL YOU GET ON WITH IT ALREADY?!"

Now go back and read that first paragraph. Rambling, sprawling, seeming silliness. Looking like it's going nowhere. That's SPACE ODDITY. Now look at it another way (which, by the way, you really shouldn't do because I'm going to compare that to what Valente has done in SPACE ODDITY and that comparison is downright criminal and ridiculous), in which that paragraphs contains some of the most wonderfully written comedic prose in the history of science fiction (see, like I said, mine is not that--I told you so). That is also SPACE ODDITY.

Let's summarize for the class. In SPACE OPERA, humanity's first contact with aliens involved taking part in a contest called The Metagalactic Grand Prix, an event styled after Eurovision (yes, THAT Eurovision) which pits alien races against each other in a contest meant to take the place of the nasty wars that previously threatened to ravage the galaxy. Our planet's heroic representatives, Decibel Jones and the Absolute Zeros, participate in the 100th iteration of the MGP. If they had finished dead last, all humanity on Earth would have been obliterated, the planet cleansed, and the next inhabitants of Earth would be allowed to evolve and participate again at a later date, if they were found worthy.

I know. "WILL YOU GET ON WITH IT ALREADY?!"

In SPACE OPERA, someone had to shepherd Decibel Jones and the Absolute Zeros through the process of getting ready for and actually participating in the MGP. In SPACE ODDITY, Decibel (Dess) and crew are making a galactic victory tour when they discover a species in a hostile (to life) planetary system that heretofore was unknown to the rest of the galaxy. According to the rules, they must shepherd the new aliens through that same process. The issue is that the MGP has literally just been held, and there were no plans to hold the 101st so soon. But through the various machinations of the aliens ostensibly in charge, a new version of the MGP must be held, even though the new species has no desire to participate.

Hilarity ensues. I think.

So, for a large portion of the at least the first half of the book, nothing happens. Valente spends most of that time writing what is mostly, but not always, hilarious prose in an attempt to be funny. And some of it is very very funny, and some of it falls flat. She sprinkles in all sorts of pop culture references, from Monty Python to Pink Floyd to Douglas Adams (there's actually a badger named Douglas in the book, and the book itself has forty-one chapters, because as Valente herself says in the Liner Notes, "Because you simply can never equal the greatest, you can only hope to come close. Occasionally.", to, well, whatever reference fit at the time. Or, it may not have fit, but it was funny, so it's there, and after all, isn't that the point (I wish I'd made notes of all the pop culture references so I could share them here, but I'd be here forever, and this review is 6 weeks late anyway) of the whole thing? But we don't actually meet the new aliens until halfway through the book, long after I yelled "WILL YOU GET ON WITH IT ALREADY?!"

But oh my goodness, does the last part of the book make up for all the rest of the meandering, sometimes funny, sometimes not, prose. The strength of the ending is that the language and storytelling (maybe what came before wasn't meant to be storytelling, which is why it fell flat for me) became much more linear and straightforward. Maybe Valente was trying too hard to be funny, and when she stopped trying so hard it got better. And the ending did stick the landing.

I wanted very much to like, even love this book, and at times I did. Laughing out loud at the gym on the elliptica machine caused many heads to turn my way, but after a while those occurrences were few and far between. I don't know. Maybe this is one of these books that I'm just not meant to understand. But I did *like* it. And that's what counts, right? [-jak]

A Television Tuned to an Unused Channel (letter of comment by Fred Lerner):

In response to Evelyn's comments on outdated expressions (e.g., a television tuned to an unused channel) in the 11/08/24 issue of the MT VOID, Fred Lerner writes:

At the Winnipeg WorldCon a few decades ago there was a hoax bid for a future convention in Antarctica. At a party sponsored by the hoaxers several television sets had been tuned to an unused channel, with the explanation that it was a live transmission from the proposed convention site. [-fl]

Tajikistan/Tadzhikistan (letter of comment by Arthur Kaletsky):

In response to Evelyn's comments on the spelling of "Tajikistan/Tadzhikistan" in the 11/08/24 issue of the MT VOID, Arthur Kaletsky writes:

[Evelyn wrote that what Stephenson transliterated as "Tadzhikistan" is now "Tajikistan".]

Re SNOW CRASH: Now and then? If âœœœœœœœœœœ is before 1990, âœœœœœœœœœœ is correct, the official CIA-approved transliteration of the Russian [non-ASCII here]. [-ak]

Evelyn responds:

SNOW CRASH was published in 1992, so Stephenson was probably correct when he wrote it, and no one ever caught the "official" change. [-ecl]

Inter-Library Loan (letter of comment by an anonymous poster):

In response to Evelyn's comments on inter-library loan in the 11/08/24 issue of the MT VOID, an anonymous poster writes:

This is a reminder to tell you one potential downside of ILL.

Because of the government invasions of privacy, many library systems erase all information of what books you took out as soon as they're returned. (The government can demand all it wants, but the information no longer exists.) ILL holds onto that information forever (or at least decades), claiming they have to for some kind of copyright compliance. [-anon]

Merritt Parkway (letters of comment by Hal Heydt and Peter Trei):

In response to Evelyn's comments on the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut in the 11/08/24 issue of the MT VOID, Hal Heydt writes:

My father used to reminisce about driving on the Merritt Parkway after the bridges had been put in, but before the rest had actually been paved.

For myself, I'll say that I don't know of a prettier road anywhere I've ever been. [-hh]

Peter Trei adds:

The Merritt is indeed a pretty road, though often overcrowded. I use it to get to NYC from central MA.

Every bridge is different, though designed by one architect. Most are Art Deco in design, and build by the WPA. [-pt]

Evelyn responds:

Well, the drive from Flagstaff to Sedona on AZ 89-A through Oak Creek Canyon is certainly more impressive, but I'm not sure if one could apply the adjective "pretty", because "pretty" just isn't enough. Indeed, most of the roads I would name as competitors would be classified as impressive, dramatic, or in the case of Utah Scenic Byway 12, downright scary. (See for a photo of the Hog's Back Ridge part of the highway.) [-ecl]

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

THE JEFFERSON BIBLE by Peter Manseau (Smithsonian, ISBN 978-0-691-20968-5) explains that while THE LIFE AND MORALS OF JESUS OF NAZARETH, usually referred to as "The Jefferson Bible" is usually described as Thomas Jefferson's editing of the Gospels to eliminate all the miracles and present a "rational" biography of Jesus, it is actually many different books.

The original was a literal "cut-and-paste" work by Jefferson. He bought two copies each of the Bible in Greek, Latin, English, and French, and proceeded to cut out the verses from the Gospels that contain the moral teachings of Jesus and paste them into four parallel columns.

Jefferson never published it. The original floated around until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was finally printed in a small edition. After that, it kept turning up, but changed: other verses were added, introductions tried to put different spins on it, the non-English columns were eliminated, and so on. What I found the most interesting was the edition edited by Dr. Henry Jackson which was specifically aimed at "social engineering". An example of Jackson's introduction:

[Let] us suppose that the minister in beginning his sermon should say, "I want to consider with you some ideas of Jesus as they are recorded in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence," would you be shocked? You might be shocked to hear it from a pulpit, but would you be shocked at the statement itself? Almost all the other worshippers would. Would you? Would it not at present be generally regarded as sacrilegious to suggest that Jesus and Jefferson had worked at the same task?

And yet what is the simple fact, obvious to anyone from whom it has not been hidden by a smoke screen? Look at the preamble of the Declaration. The three basic rights which it treats -- "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" -- are not these subjects exactly paralleled in the teaching and thought of Jesus? First -- "life"; said Jesus, "I have come that they may have life and may have it in abundance." Second -- "liberty"; said Jesus, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." Third -- "the pursuit of happiness"; said Jesus, "I have spoken to you that my joy might remain in you and that your joy might be full."

And later Jackson said in a statement to the Committee of Finance of the United States Senate in 1935:

"Strangely enough the pursuit of work was not among the basic natural rights listed by Thomas Jefferson in the great declaration which gave birth to the Nation; only the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But the right to the pursuit of happiness is merely theoretical and meaningless unless one has the right to the things which produce happiness; the right to liberty is theoretical and meaningless unless one is in a position to exercise it; the right even to life itself is theoretical and meaningless unless one has a right to secure the means necessary to support it. The right to work, to earn a living, to earn enough to support a family in decency, is a prior antecedent right, without which no other rights have value."

One wonders what HUAC would have made of this interpretation of the Bible. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Future: that period of time in which our affairs prosper,
our friends are true, and our happiness is assured.
--Ambrose Bierce

Go to our home page