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An index with links to the issues of the MT VOID since 1986 is at http://leepers.us/mtvoid/back_issues.htm.

Mark Leeper Tribute Book:

A collection of the various tributes written about Mark Leeper has been posted to http://leepers.us/tribute_book.htm. [-ecl]

Mini Reviews, Part 13 (film reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Back a couple of decades ago, Mark was on several panels discussing "neglected films" or "forgotten gems" of the fantastic.

The full list with comments (created by assembling the various lists) can be found at . I have decided to try to watch my way through them, and make my own comments. (I have seen all of them already, but some not for a long time.) So here are the first two, and because both star German actors (though THE MAN WHO LAUGHS is not itself a German film), I have also included PARACELSUS, made in Germany under the Nazis in 1943. PARACELSUS was not on Mark's list; in fact, he never saw it.

FAUST (1926): This was F. W. Murnau's final German film, and made extensive use of special effects and Expressionist sets. The plot is familiar (though the ending of the film is a bit sugary for my tastes. And the version I saw had small white English subtitles that were often over large white German intertitles, so following the actual dialogue was often hopeless. But in any case it is for the visuals that one watches it.

Emil Jannings (who played Mephisto) went to Hollywood after this film and won the first Best Actor Oscar for his work there. But with talkies, his accent was a detriment, and he returned to Germany in 1929. He continue to work there, even after the Nazis came to power and controlled the film industry, with the result that after the war, he never worked as an actor again.

Scenes from this film inspired the "Night on Bald Mountain" scene in FANTASIA.

Released theatrically 06 December 1926.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0016847/reference>

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS (1928): "Comprachicos" is a term coined by Victor Hugo in the novel THE MAN WHO LAUGHS to describe people known in European folklore to steal and disfigure children for commercial gain, but their actual existence in Stuart England is questionable at best. (The setting is straight from Hugo's novel.) I'm not sure where in England one would have a blizzard like the one shown at the beginning.

The film is best known for Conrad Veidt's performance. Made in America five years before Veidt fled to Britain from Nazi Germany in 1933, it established him as an international star, and he had a very successful career in Britain, and later in the United States, where he is remembered primarily for his final role. Major Strasser in CASABLANCA. In THE MAN WHO LAUGHS, his mouth is fixed in a permanent grin, meaning he can act only with his eyes, which he does magnificently. So striking was his performance that it served as the inspiration for The Joker in BATMAN. And the love story seems to have inspired Charlie Chaplin's CITY LIGHTS. (This is just my opinion, though).

Oh, an the ending is not Hugo's ending.

(The version I saw had the sides cut off at some point, so when various pieces of correspondence were shown, they were often impossible to understand, sort of like this:

version I saw had the sid t some point, so when var s of correspondence were were often impossible to stand.

Released theatrically 04 November 1928.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0019130/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_man_whoLaughs_1928

PARACELSUS (1943): PARACELSUS was made for the 400th anniversary of Paracelsus's death, but didn't get a United States release until 1974.

Paracelsus (the person) is often held up as someone who tried to modernize medicine from its superstitious past. But many of his views on medicine seem just as primitive--for example, that diseases are caused by an imbalance among the four elements. As a biography, this film didn't do much for me, but as an example of visual style in the detail of its sets it is stunning (not surprising, since it was directed by G. W. Pabst), as is Fliegelbein's "Totendanz" ("Dance of Death") (choreographed and danced by Harald Kreutzberg as Fliegelbein). Kreutzberg, Germany's most famous male dancer of the 20th century, had managed to stay in the good graces of the Nazi regime in spite of being homosexual, and in spite of his work often crossing gender lines, with men using movements traditionally used by women, and vice versa.

Released theatrically 12 March 1943 (Germany), theatrically 27 October 1974 (United States).

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036249/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/paracelsus_1943

Summer Reading List--NOT!:

Regarding the summer reading list published in the Chicago Sun-Times, the first thing to know is that it is a fake, AI-generated, and contains a bunch of non-existent books by famous authors.

As far as the science fictional content, TIDEWATER DREAMS by Isabel Allende, THE LAST ALGORITHM by Andy Weir, and RAINMAKERS by Percival Everett are all figments of the AI's imagination.

The list is at <https://www.404media.co/chicago-sun-times-prints-ai-generated-summer-reading-list-with-books-that-dont-exist/>. NPR and other sources have further information and commentary.

<https://forward.com/culture/721669/isabel-allende-percival-everett-chicago-sun-times-fake-books-talmudic-commentary/> is particularly interesting ("An AI-generated list of summer book titles is the sort of thing Talmudic sages warned against"). [-ecl]

THE LONG WAY TO A SMALL, ANGRY PLANET and A CLOSED AND COMMON ORBIT by Becky Chambers (book reviews by Paul S. R. Chisholm):

These are the first two novels in the "Wayfarers" series, four related books by Becky Chambers. I bought them when they were on sale at the Kindle store.

THE LONG WAY TO A SMALL, ANGRY PLANET is a remarkably good book for a novel without a plot.

Ms. Chambers has built a deep, fascinating universe for the Wayfarers stories. Multiple alien species, each with its own variations. Humans as junior players in a galactic society, but still split into different factions. Each character is distinct, each with his / her / its / their own secret. (Beyond the secrets, the characters seem a bit thin.)

The gist of the book: The starship Wayfarer picks up a new crew member. The ship then travels to different places. At each place, and in between, a few things happen to various crew members. The shop arrives at the titular small angry planet. A few things happen. Then a very big, bad thing happens. The crew works to recover from that big, bad thing, with mixed results. The end.

The novel has no overarching elements: no plot arcs, no through-lines, no central character anchoring the story. Each character develops over the course of the book. Many characters enter loving physical relationships with others, often of a different species. (Thankfully, Ms. Chambers doesn't go into details of the mechanics.)

And yet, and yet: The society, the species, the universe are all fascinating. It's a mix of a travel log and a novel, the former predominating. It works out as a good read.

A CLOSED AND COMMON ORBIT covers events set after the first book. Only one character continues on (sort of) from it. We then see two chronicles laid out in parallel: one just after the first book, one decades earlier. Each explores what might happen when a human and an AI develop a long relationship. Eventually the two chronologies meet, and a plot develops. The story comes to a satisfying ending. Again, a good read.

Both books, especially the second, trigger a pet peeve of mine. They rely on the idea that information can be moved. But it can't! Information can be copied, and one copy destroyed; but that's not the same thing. (See also debates about how Star Trek transporters, and teleportation in general, work.) Maybe it's just me.

I mildly recommend both books. I have no interest in reading the rest in the series. [-psrc]

Passover (and Hanukkah) Movies (letter of comment by Paul S. R. Chisholm):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on Passover movies](#) in the 04/18/25 issue of the MT VOID, Paul S. R. Chisholm writes:

In your 04/18/25 (Vol. 43, No. 42, Whole Number 2376) issue, you asked, "Does the Hallmark Channel even do Passover movies?" I couldn't find any, only some videos on their website about how to prepare Seder dinners. (Satire sites such as McSweeney's suggest otherwise.)

Hallmark concentrates more on December holidays than spring ones. They have more than three hundred Christmas films, but only two Easter movies, EASTER UNDER WRAPS and AN EASTER BLOOM.

But they've done a few Hanukkah films:

- LOVE, LIGHTS, HANUKKAH, 2020 (IMDb plot summary: "As Christina prepares her restaurant for its busiest time of year, she gets her DNA test revealing that she's Jewish. The discovery leads her to a new family and an unlikely romance over eight nights.")
- EIGHT GIFTS OF HANUKKAH, 2021 ("An anonymous suitor sends optometrist Sarah a gift for each night of Hanukkah. As she tries to find her secret admirer, she learns that her one true love might be someone she never expected.")
- HANUKKAH ON RYE, 2022 ("Can a Hanukkah miracle keep fresh couple Molly and Jacob together after they realize that they are actually competing delicatessen owners?")
- HANUKKAH ON THE ROCKS, 2024 ("A recently unemployed lawyer Tory embarks on a journey to find Hanukkah candles, leading her to a Chicago bar where she transforms the holiday spirit, and finds the courage to pursue a new path in life.")

I've seen the last one. (Sherry watches Hallmark, mostly for the mysteries. I don't always run out of the room.)

See also: <https://www.kveller.com/a-ranking-of-hallmarks-jewish-romcoms/>

Hope this helps. [-psrc]

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

AURORA by Kim Stanley Robinson (Orbit, ISBN 978-0-316-52699-9) has generated a lot of discussion, so I decided to re-read it in the context of that discussion.

The main criticism of the book is that Robinson stacks the deck against space travel, in specific generation ships. And it's true that he has a lot of things go wrong. However, having a generation ship which travels to another star and nothing goes wrong would make for a rather dull book. Also, I don't recall these people complaining about all the stories of the Golden Age where somehow we have colonized the entire galaxy, live on hundreds or thousands of planets without any ill effects, and usually manage to do it at faster-than-light speed.

The complaint about AURORA seems to be at root a complaint that by presenting all the (possible) negatives of generation ships and ill-researched terraforming, a case is made for not exploring space. Certainly there is an argument for not sending out generation ships without first doing some less ambitious exploration. (I suppose the argument in the book might have been that disaster was imminent on Earth.)

The least convincing argument Robinson has for his characters make is that all planets are either lifeless, requiring thousands of years of terraforming, or have life, which Robinson postulates would inevitably be deadly to humans. How he reconciles this with his "Mars" series is not clear.

I feel obliged to compare AURORA to THE MARTIAN by Andy Weir. On Mars, Mark Watney goes through a series of "setbacks" (disasters), all of which he manages to overcome, either through his own ingenuity, or just plain luck. This is considered a very positive portrayal of space exploration--basically, "humans are smart enough to fix anything." No one writes a review saying that Watney would indeed have died on Sol 6, and hence it's a bad book.

But just as pointing out the mistakes (or loaded dice) in THE MARTIAN doesn't make the book a bad book, pointing out where Robinson loads the dice doesn't make AURORA a bad book. In fact, pointing out the problems the ship has in AURORA is a good way to help people in real life avoid these problems, or at least acknowledge their existence.

Sp while criticizing AURORA's specifics is fine--many have pointed out specific problems in THE MARTIAN--complaining that they make the book a bad book seems a bit extreme. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

Eat a live toad the first thing in the morning and
nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day.
--Anonymous

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