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Mini Reviews, Part 9 (film reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper):

In honor of Passover:

BETWEEN THE TEMPLES (2024): How could we resist a Jewish-themed comedy? Ben is a forty-year-old cantor who can't sing, and who lives with his mothers, who are are trying to fix him up with a woman--not a specific woman, just a woman. Then one night he runs into his music teacher from elementary school in a bar, and she decides she wants bat mitzvah lessons from Ben. BETWEEN THE TEMPLES got a lot of positive reviews, but for me it was just another forgettable romantic comedy with a different "meet-cute" gimmick. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 23 August 2024.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27722375/reference>

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

WHEN DO WE EAT? (2005): WHEN DO WE EAT? is a film directed and co-written by Salvador Litvak, who also made SAVING LINCOLN (2013) (reviewed in the 06/23/23 issue of the MT VOID. As with SAVING LINCOLN, WHEN DO WE EAT? has several sequences with striking visual styles. (His wife, Nina Davidovich, was the co-writer for both films. Note: While SAVING LINCOLN is family-friendly, WHEN DO WE EAT? is definitely R-rated.)

WHEN DO WE EAT? centers around a dysfunctional family's Seder. The mother wants a truly authentic Seder, so she is having a tent built in the backyard by a one-eyed Israeli. (Huh? The first seder was in Egypt. Okay, so all the early Seders were in tents wandering in the desert.) The father's occupation is manufacturing Christmas ornaments. One son has become Chasidic, another is autistic, and the third is a drug dealer. One daughter is a sex therapist, her half-sister is a lesbian in an interracial relationship, and their cousin has her own issues. It's a Passover movie, but not of the sort one would find on the Hallmark Channel. (Does the Hallmark Channel even do Passover movies?) In atmosphere, at times it seems to be a bit like a Coen brothers movie, but it also has its own vibe as well. [-ecl]

Released theatrically 07 April 2006.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0392908/reference>

What others are saying: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/10006270>

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (1956): I mention THE TEN COMMANDMENTS because it is, I believe, the first film I saw in a theater. I don't remember it. Well, I remember it from all the subsequent viewings, but all I remember of that first one is actually going to the movie theater (probably the Bijou Theatre) in Bangor, Maine.

These days the music is what strikes me, because it has been traditional for years now that I play the soundtrack while I have been making the charoses for the Seder. I don't know how this tradition got started, but there it is. I didn't make charoses this year (I was invited to a some friends' house for Seder), so I played it while I made the cranberry relish instead. [-ecl]

(And I'm pretty sure my second film was THE MIRACLE WORKER, which turns out to have had some scenes filmed just down the road in Middletown (NJ).)

Released theatrically 05 October 1956.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049833/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1021015-ten_commandments

STARS IN MY POCKET, LIKE GRAINS OF SAND (letters of comment by Daniel M. Kimmel and Fred Lerner):

In response to [Joe Karpierz's comments on STARS IN MY POCKET, LIKE GRAINS OF SAND](#) in the 04/11/25 issue of the MT VOID, Daniel M. Kimmel writes:

This was my take of "STARS IN MY POCKET, LIKE GRAINS OF SAND" when I read it:

Hailed as a "masterpiece," I dove in not knowing what to expect. What I found was a book with enough inventiveness for dozens of novels and lacking sufficient plot for even one. I don't require the proverbial "page turner," but if whole sections could be removed without making a difference then this isn't a work of fiction, it's a literary exercise. It is highly regarded by many, but it was a long hard slog for me, and I won't be returning to his work any time soon, if ever. [-dmk]

And Fred Lerner writes:

Is Joe Karpierz (whose writing in MT VOID I always enjoy) aware that Delany had planned a sequel to STARS IN MY POCKET LIKE GRAINS OF SAND, which was to be called THE SPLENDOR AND MISERY OF F BODIES, OF CITIES? [-fl]

THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WENT UP A HILL BUT CAME DOWN A MOUNTAIN (letters of comment by Gary McGath, Scott Dorsey, Peter Trei, John Kerr-Mudd, and an anonymous poster):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WENT UP A HILL BUT CAME DOWN A MOUNTAIN](#) in the 04/04/25 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

Evelyn wrote, "THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WENT UP A HILL BUT CAME DOWN A MOUNTAIN may not be the longest movie title in English, but if one rules out titles clearly designed as a gimmick, and titles of the form "(words), or (more words)" (e.g., DR. STRANGELOVE, OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB), it is certainly in the running." [-ecl]

Don't forget THE INCREDIBLY STRANGE CREATURES WHO STOPPED LIVING AND BECAME MIXED-UP ZOMBIES. [-gmg]

An anonymous poster asks:

Is this a title "clearly designed as a gimmick":

THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF JEAN-PAUL MARAT AS PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE ASYLUM OF CHARENTON UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE (usually shortened to MARAT/SADE)? [-anon]

Evelyn answers:

Yes.

Scott Dorsey also responds to the original post:

Also IT'S A MAD MAD MAD MAD WORLD should get some mention and it is hard to beat THE SAGA OF THE VIKING WOMEN AND THEIR VOYAGE TO THE WATERS OF THE GREAT SEA SERPENT. Of course, theatre marquees were much larger back then than they are today.

Vilmos Zsigimond and Laszlo Kovacs used to love talking about TISCWSLABMUZ which I gather was a lot of fun for them to shoot as young kids in a new country. [-sd]

Regarding the possibility of the events in the film, Peter Trei writes:

Evelyn writes, "Of course, the solution in the movie wouldn't work. Soil has a 20-degree angle of repose, hence a 20-foot mound would have a radius of about 55 feet, so a volume of about 63,000 cubic feet. At 75 pounds per cubic foot (the average for soil), that's 2400 *tons*. There were not enough people to move that much soil in the time given." [-ecl]

It's easy to say that, but I wonder....

From Wikipedia:

"The film is based on a story heard by Christopher Monger from his grandfather about the real village of Taff's Well, in the old county of Glamorgan, and its neighbouring Garth Hill. Due to 20th century urbanisation of the area, it was filmed in the more rural Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant and Llansilin in Powys."

So, I looked up Garth Hill on Google Earth. It's at 51 deg 32'35.72" N 3 deg 17'39.26" W.

Here's the thing. There's a mound on top of the hill, about 120 feet in diameter. It's apparently called 'The Garth'.

The surrounding land on this gentle hill is around 990 feet high. However, 'the Garth' tops out at 999 feet.

I can't find anything about this mound specifically. Theoretically, it could be a geologic feature, or built by aspirational peasants for a map.

Silbury Hill has an angle of about 25 degrees, and has stood for over 4000 years, but its more engineered than a mere heap of dirt. Its volume approaches 9 million cubic feet. 'The Garth' would be a mere 37,000 cf.

However, the Wikipedia article for Garth Hill notes the presence of a number of Bronze Age round barrows on the top of the hill. It seems very likely that 'The Garth' is one of these, and the top being nearly exactly 1000 feet a coincidence that engendered a nice local legend. [-pt]

John Kerr-Mudd responds:

I blame erosion. Or the Englishman who came down a Hill after going up a Mountain.

"However, the Wikipedia article for Garth Hill notes the presence of a number of Bronze Age round barrows on the top of the hill. It seems very likely that 'The Garth' is one of these, and the top being nearly exactly 1000 feet a coincidence that engendered a nice local legend." [-pt]

More likely. And the locals of the time would have had a longer time to do it.

P.S. Taff's Wells was (not now, alas) more recently not quite famous for having a general hardware store that had a tinbath outside; inspiring Ronnie Barker to create "Open All Hours". [-jkm]

Tim Merrigan adds:

I watched that film, and seem to recall an epilogue that said that while the villagers had achieved their goal of increasing the height of the hill to (barely) qualify as a mountain, in the intervening years till the making of the film, the mound had settled to below the requisite height. [-tm]

Color-Blind Casting (letters of comment by Gary McGath, Jay Morris, Keith F. Lynch, and Peter Trei):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on color-blind casting](#) in the 04/11/25 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

It's a weird thing. Racial miscasting is regarded as something terrible, yet it's done all the time without getting complaints.

When there are complaints, they often get it wrong. People complain when Othello is played by a white of European extraction, but a black actor of sub-Saharan ancestry would be equally inaccurate. People from that area were rare in Shakespeare's England. A "Moor," which is what Othello is called, would have been North African or Middle Eastern.

Historically, well-qualified actors matching a part's ethnicity were often passed up in favor of white actors in movies. A big reason for this was the Hays Code, which banned interracial romance or kissing. Once a white was chosen for a role, any part romantically involved with it also had to be white. [-gmg]

Jay Morris writes:

I would have hoped that it would be at least as historically accurate as Hamilton. [-jm]

Keith F. Lynch responds to Evelyn:

I agree. I wonder how many viewers of BRIDGERTON have been left with the mistaken impression that George III's wife Charlotte was black.

It would hardly be any more inaccurate to cast a black actor as George Washington and white actors as his slaves. [-kfl]

Peter responds:

Back in the early 80s, I saw a production of Ted Tally's play "Terra Nova", about the Scott Antarctic expedition. The lead (Scott) was played by an African-American actor. This was a little jarring at first, but rapidly became irrelevant.

Unless the race of the character is part of the story, I don't see that it matters. Oddly, in BRIDGERTON (I only watched the first season), race is mentioned at least once. [-pt]

Gary McGath responds:

Soprano Kathleen Battle has been noteworthy as Pamina in THE MAGIC FLUTE. Because of a racial subplot, Pamina is supposed to be white, but no one really cares. In opera, physical suitability for the role doesn't matter. I've seen a singer who was well over 6 feet tall play a half-dwarf in Wagner. Heavily built women singing the leading part in LA TRAVIATA, a woman who's dying of tuberculosis, have become a standing joke. I recently heard of a production of FIDELIO where Leonore, who is a woman disguised as a man until the final scene, was played by a woman who was eight months pregnant. [-gmg]

Tim Merrigan adds:

Famously the admonition "it ain't over till the fat lady sings" references Brunhilde's final song in the "Ring" Saga. In "reality" Brunhilde, a Valkyrie and warrior maiden, would not have been fat, her combined jobs having kept her in shape. [-tm]

Evelyn adds:

Back in the 1980s, we went to a high school production of something which had twin sisters in the story. Okay, you know what's coming--one was played by a black student and one by a white student. It was a bit jarring--after all, forty years ago, color-blind casting was not a thing (except for the awful instances of blackface, yellowface, etc.). [-ecl]

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

Okay, it's been another hectic week, and while I did read MAROONED by Martin Caidin for our discussion group, I haven't had a chance to write anything up, so you get another chapter's-worth of commentary on MOBY-DICK.

CHAPTER 3: The Spouter-Inn

THE COMPACT EDITION OF THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY thinks "squitchy" means "squishy"--having to do with water. However, "to squitch" means "to jerk or twitch", and the only use of the word "squitchy" is in MOBY-DICK, so I think Melville coined a portmanteau word, incorporating both the watery element of the subject of the painting and the reaction it generates in the viewer of it.

"It's a Hyperborean winter scene." Boreas was the North Wind, who supposed lived in Borea, which was later called Thrace and is north of Greece. Hyperborea was the land "above/beyond Boreas", which at the time of Homer would have been around what is now Bulgaria, Macedonia, and possibly Serbia. Borea was known as a place where the sun shone twenty-four hours a day (or whatever the ancient Greek units were) and so the fact that it has come to mean extreme northern lands, in the Arctic, is only fitting. ("Aurora Borealis" means "Northern Dawn".)

(Thrace is best known these days as the home of Spartacus, although this is not absolutely certain. When Spartacus was described as "a Thracian gladiator" it is not clear if they were speaking of his origins or his style of fighting.)

Did Nathan Swain really kill fifteen whales in a single day with a single harpoon? I cannot find any reference other than Melville.

Where is the Cape of Blanco? Who knows? There is a Cape Blanco in Oregon, but no Cape of Blanco.

"Abominable are the tumblers into which he pours his poison. Though true cylinders without--within, the villainous green goggles glasses deceitfully tapered downwards to a cheating bottom. Parallel meridians rudely pecked into the glass, surround these footpads' goblets. Fill to *this* mark, and your charge is but a penny; to this a penny more; and so on to the full glass--the Cape Horn measure, which you may gulp down for a shilling." I love the description of deceptive marketing, and proof that it is nothing new. But why a "shilling"? Well, it was not until 1857 that United States coins became the sole legal tender in this country, and in the first half of the 19th century United States coins were not very popular. Add to this that New Bedford was a port full of sailors from all over the world and it is not surprisingly that the price might be in a more universal currency, much as prices in cruise stops now are often in dollars, or Euros, or yen. So the penny is probably a British penny, or one-twelfth of a shilling. Assuming the traditional "one-pound-equals-five-dollars" rule held back then, for a British penny would be about two American cents, and a full glass would cost 25 American cents.

"Skrimshander" is an alternative spelling for "scrimshander", which is someone who practices scrimshaw, the art of carving on ivory, bone, or shells. In a whaling village, it would probably be almost exclusively on ivory.

"I told him that I never liked to sleep two in a bed; that if I should ever do so, it would depend upon who the harpooneer might be, and that if he (the landlord) really had no other place for me, and the harpooneer was not decidedly objectionable, why rather than wander further about a strange town on so bitter a night, I would put up with the half of any decent man's blanket." More of Melville's humor.

A monkey jacket is a waist-length jacket tapering to a point in the back and traditionally worn by sailors. A box coat is one that hangs loosely from the shoulders.

When Peter Coffin starts dropped hints about Ishmael's bedmate, Ishmael thinks, "I could not help it, but I began to feel suspicious of this 'dark complexioned' harpooneer. At any rate, I made up my mind that if it so turned out that we should sleep together, he must undress and get into bed before I did." There are undoubtedly some who use the second sentence to re-enforce the idea that there is a homosexual relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, but it is clear in context that Ishmael here is more concerned that his bedmate have no concealed weapons.

A coffer-dam is a temporary watertight enclosure that can be pumped dry to allow the construction of piers, locks, etc. It can also be a watertight compartment on the side of a ship that can be pumped out to allow repairs below the water-line without entering dry dock.

Mt. Hecla (now spelled Hekla) is a volcano in Iceland. During the Middle Ages, it was called "the Gateway to Hell". (The entrance in the Spouter Inn seems reminiscent of the entrance to Dante's Hell.)

Curios are "rare, unusual, or intriguing objects"; Melville is credited by THE COMPACT EDITION OF THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY with coining this word.

Coffin tells Ishmael, "I'll give you a glim in a jiffy." A glim is a candle, but I was surprised at the use of "in a jiffy"--somehow that sounds anachronistic. "I vum it's Sunday," must mean something like, "I think/suppose it's Sunday."

"Had not the stranger stood between me and the door, I would have bolted out of it quicker than ever I bolted a dinner," is (I believe) an example of Zeugma.

"Ignorance is the parent of fear ..." At first, one is tempted to say, a parent, perhaps, but the whalers fear the whales, no matter how knowledgeable they are about them. Or are they knowledgeable? In spite of all their familiarity with them, maybe the whole point is that there remains a permanent mystery about the nature of the whale.

"Going to his heavy gredo, or wrappal, or dreadnaught, ..." A grego is "a short coat made of a coarse, tick fabric with a hood attached." A dreadnaught is "a garment made of very thick cloth, which can defend against storm and cold." I could not find a definition for wrappal, but I assume it is similar. The only differences seem to be whether or not the garment has a hood.

Ishmael refers to Queequeg's idol as a "Congo idol", but this is because he has previously said it was "exactly the color of a three days' old Congo baby." He knows that Queequeg comes from the South Seas.

Ishmael describes Queequeg's sacrifice to his idol: "... then blowing off the heat and ashes a little, he made a polite offer of it to the little negro [idol]. But the little devil did not seem to fancy such dry sort of fare at all; he never moved his lips." There's an echo of the story from the Apocrypha of Bel and the idol, in which Daniel proves to Cyrus that the grain supposedly consumed by the idol was really eaten by the priests. (He does this by scattering ashes around the idol--in the morning the footprints of the priests and their families were revealed.) And who else remembers leaving cookies and milk out for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve and on Christmas morning finding they had been consumed?

After offering a sacrifice to it, and praying to it, Queequeg "took the idol up very unceremoniously, and bagged it again in his grego pocket as carelessly as if he were a sportsman bagging a dead woodcock." Melville gives us a real contrast in Queequeg's religion and in Western religions, and an ironic one. Most (all?) Western religions, which claim to eschew idolatry, have some sacred objects, be they transubstantiated wafers, holy books, or relics of some sort or other. Even statues of saints would not be treated so "unceremoniously." Yet Queequeg, who Ishmael probably assumes worships this actual idol, treats it more as a symbol. During the actual worship, it is endowed with sacred characteristics, but when the worship is over, it reverts to be a lump of wood. By this account, Queequeg is less an idolater than most Christians.

(The review in London's "John Bull" on October 25, 1851, says, "... it is all the greater pity, that he should have defaced his pages by occasionally thrusts against revealed religion which add nothing to the interest of his story, and cannot but shock readers accustomed to a reverent treatment of whatever is associated with sacred subjects." Well, that's the point!)

And Ishmael regrets his hasty judgment of Queequeg based on religion: "'You gettee in,' he added, motioning to me with the whole of his tomahawk, and throwing the clothes to one side. He really did this in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way. I stood looking at him a moment. For all his tattooings he was on the whole a clean, comely looking fellow. What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself--the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian."

This brings up another topic: the representation of pidgin in MOBY-DICK (and in literature in general). Pidgin is often represented by to suffix '-ee' attached to just about everything: nouns, verbs, adjectives, ... (The famous "No tickee, no washee" hits the nouns, but in "You gettee in" it is the verbs, and words like "biggee" abound for the adjectives.) But is this an accurate representation? Daniel Defoe used it (in ROBINSON CRUSOE and other works), and Benjamin Franklin referenced it. Yet it is not clear that this suffix is at least typical of pidgins. Nevertheless, by Melville's time it had become standard in literature. (Similarly, dialect is often represented by strict phonetic spelling, even when that phonetic spelling represented the standard accepted pronunciation.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

You have to believe in free will. You have no choice.
--Isaac Bashevis Singer

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