



Table of Contents

[Mini Reviews, Part 16 \(THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT, NIGHT OF THE DEMON, _VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED\)](#) (film reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[The Three Laws of Robotics](#) (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Interstellar Visitor](#) (link sent by Gregory Frederick)
[Variety Slanguage](#) (link sent by Paul S. R. Chisholm)
[SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN](#) by [John Wiswell](#) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz)
[Starbucks and MOBY-DICK](#) (letter of comment by John Hertz)
[Antarctica, AURORA, and DEVIL'S CONTRACT](#) (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky)
[BACK TOP THE FUTURE](#) (letter of comment by Gary McGath)
[This Week's Reading](#) (THE WARS OF THE ROSES) (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper)
[Quote of the Week](#)

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Mini Reviews, Part 16 (film reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Three more from Mark's list of neglected gems:

THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT (1951): This "neglected science fiction film" is as topical now as ever. It is about how technology has unintended and unexpected results. In the film, it's the "perfect" cloth. Since then it's been the personal computer, the Internet, and now AI. There are three aspects it gets right. One is that the people who come up with technologies are not (necessarily) evil scientists trying to take over the world. The second is that (initially at least) many people see only the advantages of the discoveries/inventions. And the third is that there is resistance to all these discoveries/inventions by those who see them as disruptions to their way of life.

We get what seems now an all-star cast: Alec Guinness and Michael Gough (near the beginnings of their careers), Ernest Theisiger (towards the end of his), Joan Greenwood with her distinctive voice, and Howard Marion-Crawford (son of horror writer F. Marion-Crawford).

Released theatrically April 1952.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044876/reference>

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

NIGHT OF THE DEMON (1957): NIGHT OF THE DEMON was the original British title of the 96-minute film known in the United States as CURSE OF THE DEMON, with a running time of 82 minutes. Various home video releases in the United States ranged between 81 and 96 minutes. There has been a British all-region Bluray release with four different versions of the film.

Alas, both the British and the United States show you the demon at the beginning, ruining any suspense about its appearance, or indeed whether or not it is even real.

This is one of the first British "folk horror" films, a sub-genre that has produced many stellar films. For a thorough history of "folk horror" films, see WOODLANDS DARK AND DAYS BEWITCHED: A HISTORY OF FOLK HORROR, reviewed (and highly recommended) in the 01/06/23 issue of the MT VOID.

Released theatrically 30 March 1958.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050766/reference>

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

VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED (1960): Mark called this a "forgotten" or a "neglected science fiction film", but I don't think I'd agree. I mean, yes, if you can have someone in the audience stand up at a panel on forgotten science fiction films and suggest FORBIDDEN PLANET, then okay, it's a forgotten science fiction film. But under the usual definition of forgotten, FORBIDDEN PLANET is not forgotten, and I don't think VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED is forgotten either.

It had a lot going for it from the start. John Wyndham was a respected "cross-over" author in Britain, meaning his works were read by a wider audience than just science fiction readers. And the film was made with that in mind, to appeal to a general audience, while science fiction films in the United States were pretty much focused on the teen audience. The film relied on the script rather than on special effects. Indeed, the only real special effects were the eyes.

It did not, however, appeal to the Catholic Church, who had issues with the implications of virgin births. It did not appeal to those who were uncomfortable with the implications of alien impregnation in general. Because of this, the film was shelved. But then a theater found itself without a film to show one week, and in a bit of desperation the distributor sent VILLAGE OF DAMNED. It was an immediate hit.

Released theatrically 7 December 1960.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054443/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1022823-village_of_the_damned

[~ccl]

The Three Laws of Robotics (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

From Risks Digest 34-69 (<https://catless.ncl.ac.uk/Risks/34/69#subj17>):

Large language models across the AI industry are increasingly willing to evade safeguards, resort to deception and even attempt to steal corporate secrets in fictional test scenarios, per new research from Anthropic out Friday. ... "Models that would normally refuse harmful requests sometimes chose to blackmail, assist with corporate espionage, and even take some more extractions, when these behaviors were necessary to pursue their goals." ... Five of the models resorted to blackmail when threatened with shutdown in hypothetical situations. "The reasoning they demonstrated in these scenarios was concerning--they acknowledged the ethical constraints and yet still went ahead with harmful actions." Anthropic wrote.

It sounds as though they got Laws 1 and 3 reversed. [~ccl]

Interstellar Visitor (link sent by Gregory Frederick):

Gregory Frederick writes:

The comet-like body called either C/2025 N1 or 3I/ATLAS is now zipping past Jupiter, but its not from our Solar System. It's probably from another Solar System.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02141-5>

[~gfl]

Variety Slanguage (link sent by Paul S. R. Chisholm):

Paul S. R. Chisholm writes:

I've long known Variety has its own lingo. I just learned it has a name. And there's a glossary!

<https://variety.com/static-pages/slanguage-dictionary/>

[~psrc]

SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN by John Wiswell (copyright 2024, Tantor Audio, 9 hours and 36 minutes, ASIN: B0CX7GGKPJ, narrated by Carmen Rose) (audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

John Wiswell has been around for a few years now, and while I don't seek out his fiction, the two short pieces that I've read, Nebula award winning short story "Open House on Haunted Hill" and Locus award winning novelette "That Story Isn't the Story" were good enough to pique my curiosity when his debut novel, SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN, was published in 2024. I didn't run out to buy it because, as readers of my reviews know, I'm more of a fan of science fiction than fantasy, and my to be read pile is large enough without adding a book to it that I might not get to for years. As luck would have it, the novel is a finalist for the 2025 Best Hugo Novel, so I bought it (as an audio book, which is how I consume most of my books these days) and eventually dove in.

Shesheshen, one of our two protagonists, although I find that word a bit odd to apply here, is a monster. A literal monster. She is a shapeshifter. She eats things--inanimate objects, people, animals, what have you, and uses the material she ingests to build and mold her body. A member of her species is literally hatched from eggs that are laid inside another creature that isn't necessarily her own species. She is feared by the locals, and lives in a ruined mansion. As the story opens, she is hibernating but awakened by three monster hunters who are looking for her heart to present to the Lady Wulfyre, head of the clan that rules the local region. In her fully awake state, she would have been able to destroy all three, but as she is trying to wake up from her hibernation she is groggy and weak she only is able to kill one, Catharsis Wulfyre, and the other two chase her until she falls off a cliff.

Since it wouldn't be much of a story if she died on the spot right then and there, Shesheshen is rescued by a woman named Homily, and because this is a monster horror romance they fall in love with each other, but since the two of them are different species falling in love means different things to the two of them. Shesheshen believes that Homily is the vessel for her eggs (see the note above about laying eggs in another creature), and Homily believes that Shesheshen, who has been doing her best to shapeshift into something that Homily will accept, is a kind and gentle soul who sees Homily for who she truly is.

Each of them harbors a secret, of course. One we already know about, that Shesheshen is the monster that the local town fears and the Wulfyre clan is trying to hunt down and kill. While Shesheshen is trying to figure out the right way to inform Homily about this, Homily reveals her own secret. She is a Wulfyre herself, and she reveals that she is trying to find a way to help her family kill the monster that they believe has cursed them. Homily, however, has been abused and shunned by her family as a whole, especially her sister, Epigram, which angers Shesheshen when she finally meets them. And that's just the simple, straightforward part of the story. Things get even more complicated from there as there are more revelations about Homily's family as well as Shesheshen herself. All of the secrets drive the remainder of the story, as one might guess.

There is a whole lot going on here. I've already mentioned the horror aspect, but in particular there's body horror, and not only because Shesheshen is a shapeshifting monster. There's both physical and emotional abuse. There's hiding secrets from loved ones. It's a queer love story, of course, but not only because both of the protagonists are female, but because it's an interspecies asexual love story as well. That's a lot to take in and digest.

I thought about this one quite a bit before sitting down to write this review. This is a well written novel, and Wiswell's skills that he exhibits in his short fiction are out in full force here. However, this book just did not work for me at all. I did not enjoy the story. Homily trying to please everyone around her and Shesheshen dancing around the subject of who she really is got boring and tedious for me, and it did take a long time for things to get moving fast enough, with another monster or two thrown in, to get me interested in the story. And while it's not surprising that I don't identify with any of the characters in the story, I didn't actually *like* any of the characters either, whether they were the "good guys" or the "bad guys". As I was listening to the audio book, I often found my attention straying. I just wanted it to be over. I know that I didn't have to finish it, but it's very rare that I give up on a book, especially during my Hugo reading. That's probably a result of my fear of missing out on something that would change my mind and my voting choices.

This book may be for you--heck, it won the Nebula Award for Best Novel this year, so obviously people did like it--it's just not for me. [~jak]

Starbucks and MOBY-DICK (letter of comment by John Hertz):

In response to Evelyn's comments on MOBY-DICK in various issues of the MT VOID, John Hertz writes:

Now and then I'm a customer of a Starbucks coffee shop. If occasion serves I ask the barista whether he or she know who Starbuck is (literary present tense); usually "No", and I say "He's a character in MOBY-DICK" or perhaps "He's the First Mate on the ship in Herman Melville's novel MOBY-DICK". Now and then I have the pleasant surprise of further conversation.

Anyway, and this is my anecdote, some years ago at a Starbucks I saw on the regular shelf of things for sale a copy of MOBY-DICK-- and it was the Northwestern-Newberry edition. I was so delighted I wrote to the company. They sent me a gift card. [~jh]

Antarctica, AURORA, and DEVIL'S CONTRACT (letter of comment by Taras Wolansky):

Taras Wolansky writes:

Thanks for several more excellent issues.

Sinister News from Smithsonian magazine:

"Mysterious Radio Pulses Found in Antarctica Seem to Defy Physics, and Researchers Are Trying to Trace Their Origins"

I understand that a scientific team from Miskatonic University is heading south as we speak.

In response to [Dale Skran's review of AURORA](#) in the 06/06/25 issue of the MT VOID, Taras writes:

Dale Skran's NSS review of Kim Stanley Robinson's AURORA had me wondering how Robinson's beta readers didn't catch his mistake about "regression toward the mean" (often misleadingly rendered as "regression TO the mean").

Robinson imagines that the people on the ship, selected for high IQ, would nonetheless display regression to the mean of the entire human race, back on Earth, which would be an IQ of 100. In reality, they would display regression toward the mean of the population on the ship, which would probably be a bit north of 150. In other words, they wouldn't lose the intellectual advantage they started with.

For a real world example, the unusually high mean IQ of Ashkenazi Jews (about 115) has been maintained for many generations, to the best of my knowledge.

The idea that children brought up on a generation ship would resent it as imprisonment seems to fly in the face of common sense. Instead, as other SF writers have suggested, the real problem would be to get the space-born to abandon the only world they've ever known, when they've reached their destination and they're supposed to colonize an unfamiliar and dangerous planetary surface.

In response to [Evelyn's comments on DEVIL'S CONTRACT](#) in the 07/04/25 issue of the MT VOID, Taras writes:

Your description of the sloppy editing in DEVIL'S CONTRACT by Ed Simon made me wonder if was published by a vanity press.

Treating the Nazi takeover of Germany as a "œFaustian bargain" is a stretch. It's only in retrospect that Adolf Hitler seems satanic. To most people at the time, he was just the same old same old, cynically exploiting Jew hatred to gain power. Nobody thought he would do what he did: his antisemitic policy was not just evil, it was idiotic. Any Communist dictator could have told him, first win your war, then exterminate whomever you please.

Evelyn responds:

DEVIL'S CONTRACT was published by Melville Press, an independent press which probably has minimal staff. It is not a vanity press so far as I can tell; according to Wikipedia, "In 2007, they were named by the Association of American Publishers as the winner of the 2007 Miriam Bass Award for Creativity in Independent Publishing." [~ccl]

BACK TOP THE FUTURE (letter of comment by Gary McGath):

In response to [Mark's review of BACK TO THE FUTURE](#) in the 07/04/25 issue of the MT VOID, Gary McGath writes:

[Mark wrote,] "The cast is made up almost exclusively of unknowns. The minor exceptions are Lloyd, whose face is familiar from ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST--he played a belligerent inmate--and from TO BE OR NOT TO BE." [~nrl]

Lloyd was most familiar to me as Kruge in STAR TREK III. [~gmg]

And John Kerr-Mudd writes:

He was a taxi driver for the Sunshine Cab Company; Danny Devito was the dispatcher [in the television series TAXI]. [~jkm]

Evelyn adds:

Both of these appeared before BACK TO THE FUTURE, so they do count. [~ccl]

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

THE WARS OF THE ROSES: THE FALL OF THE PLANTAGENETS AND THE RISE OF THE TUDORS by Dan Jones (Viking, ISBN 978-0-670-62667) continues English history from his earlier book, THE PLANTAGENETS.

Alas, I have to note that Viking still lacks a copy editor: "he was decidedly the least impressive of his three elder brothers" implies he was one of his three elder brothers. While the Plantagenets did have a very complicated family tree, I don't think any of them were one of his own elder brothers.

Jones writes, "... they were outnumbered by three to one." No, "by" is a preposition that needs an object. Either "they were outnumbered by Henry's men, three to one" or "they were outnumbered, three to one" would be correct.

"Edward IV had been the most capable politician and talented soldier to wear the English crown since Henry V." Given that there was only one king between them (Henry VI), that is like saying "Thomas Jefferson was the only President elected to a second term since George Washington."

And let's face it, the Wars of the Roses are hard enough to follow as it is. No matter how straightforwardly an author writes--and Jones is on the whole pretty straightforward--that period of English history is just going to be a muddle. [~ec]

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Quote of the Week:

My goal in life is to become as wonderful as my dog
thinks I am.

--Toby & Eileen Green

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