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Page 1 of 7

Mini Reviews, Part 09 (film reviews by Evelyn C. Leeper):

This time, three films about music:

A COMPLETE UNKNOWN (2024): If the purpose of *A COMPLETE UNKNOWN* is to make clear that Bob Dylan is a complete asshole, it certainly succeeds. (Joan Baez even says to Dylan, "You're kind of an asshole, Bob.") It's obvious why Timothee Chalamet won the Academy Award, but I can't say I enjoyed, or even appreciated it. I was never a big Bob Dylan fan (or even a small Bob Dylan fan; I suppose I'm like the people at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival that want him to sing just "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'". and maybe a couple of his other "classics".

Actually, my problem is not that he was singing in a different style at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival--it's that I am so musically inept that I couldn't tell that he was. Or at least inept in folk versus popular or whatever; I can listen to a lot of soundtrack music and tell you who composed it, because (for example) Miklos Rozsa's style is very different from Bernard Herrmann's. But how "Maggie's Farm" so different from "It's Ain't Me, Babe" that the audience loves one and hates the other is beyond me.

His "problem" was basically type-casting (though he eventually broke out of it, so I suppose in some sense he made the right choices. Actors find this all the time; some break out (e.g., Sean Connery) and some don't (e.g., Boris Karloff). Authors have it a bit easier, because they can always take a pseudonym. But some authors get stuck permanently labeled with their big success (e.g. "Robert-Bloch-the-author-of-PSYCHO").

The commentary is more interesting, in fact, than the actual film.

Released theatricall 25 December 2024.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11563598/reference>

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

WALK THE LINE (2005): *WALK THE LINE* (about Johnny Cash) was a film that James Margold made twenty years before he made *A COMPLETE UNKNOWN*. I will start by saying that I think *WALK THE LINE* is a much better film. (Its IMDb rating is also slightly higher.) Margold's fascination with Bob Dylan shows up in *WALK THE LINE*. One character talks about how the music world is changing by saying, "Dylan's gone electric." At another point, we hear "Highway '61 Revisited" in the background. And the duet Bob Dylan and Joan Baez of "It's Not Me, Babe" in *A COMPLETE UNKNOWN* is shot the same way and from the same angle as the same duet in *WALK THE LINE* between Johnny Cash and June Carter.

Released theatricall 18 November 2005.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0358273/reference>

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

MOULIN ROUGE (1952): The 1952 version of *MOULIN ROUGE* is quite different from the 2001 version by Baz Luhrmann. The 1952 version centers around the real Toulouse-Lautrec rather than the fictional dancer and poet in the 2001 version. While the 1952 version is not terrifically accurate (what biopics in the 1950s were?) it does try to be reasonably accurate to the spirit of the artist.

This is an early (and usually ignored) Peter Cushing-Christopher Lee film, probably because they have no scenes together.

Released theatricall 23 December 1952.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044926/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1014294-moulin_rouge

[-ecl]

Ray Harryhausen Films, Part 05 (film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

THE VALLEY OF GWANGI (1969): THE VALLEY OF GWANGI was made after a five-year gap with Charles Scheer, during which time Harryhausen did ONE MILLION YEARS B.C. with Michael Carreras at Hammer Studios.

The opening credits for THE VALLEY OF GWANGI are illustrated by charcoal drawings, rather than crayon. And the story takes place in the early 20th century at the latest, so I suppose it was the whole moon thing that spooked Schneer about setting films in the past.

Harryhausen re-used his experience animating an elephant (from 20 MILLION MILES TO EARTH) in this film. Of course, one reason is probably that you need a large animal to fight a Tyrannosaurus rex; somehow a battle even with a lion would be very one-sided. I'm not sure why all the reptiles are purple.

Released theatrically 11 June 1969.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065163/reference>

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

THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD (1974): The temples in this are not Arabian (in spite of what DuckDuckGo's "SearchAssist" claims), but a mix of Indian (Kali), Cambodian (four-facing spires), Tibetan (grinning demon masks), and Buddhist (statues of Buddha).

Kali is yet another example of the multi-armed creatures Harryhausen has done several times before: the snake-woman in THE 7TH VOYAGE OF SINBAD, the hydra and the multiple skeletons in JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS, and so on. But the one-eyed centaur creature is a step down (although there was a hint of the decline in THE VALLEY OF GWANGI). Harryhausen does metallic and rock creatures well, and also reptilian creatures (such as dinosaurs and lizards), and the motions of the eohippus and the centaur are fine, but the exteriors are, well, awful. The eohippus head looked too smooth, like a sculpture only partially formed, and the centaur's head looks like something just stuck together. And the fur on both looks quite artificial. (And again, the bare skin area on the centaur is purple--what's with that?) The griffin looks slightly more realistic.

Released theatrically 05 April 1974.

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071569/reference>

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

[-ecl]

Lost Georges Melies Film Found (comments by David Langford, Gary McGath, and Scott Dorsey):

As reported in ANSIBLE 264 by David Langford:

George Melies's long-lost sf film "Gugusse et l'Automate" (1897) has come to light in the USA: a 45-second slapstick melodrama. Melies himself winds up a Pierrot automaton which promptly starts thumping him; retaliation with a comically huge sledgehammer follows. It's arguably the first ever robot film.... (Library of Congress blog, 26 February) [AJW] [-dl]

And Gary McGath add:

Here's a link for the film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8jGTcmFY8A>

[-gmg]

Scott Dorsey points out:

Note that this film has the same plot as WESTWORLD although it is not developed as well. [-sd]

Saving Things Unnecessarily (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

As proof that we (well, I) save things unnecessarily, I present Exhibit A: a Social Security booklet "What You Need to Know When You Get Retirement or Survivors Benefits". This is dated 2020, so I assume I kept it since then. And sure enough, last year I needed to request survivor benefits. Did I immediately say, "Oh, I have a booklet on this"? No, of course not. I just Googled, or possibly just called the Social Security Administration to handle that along with other Social Security stuff. And is the book even accurate five years later?

So when I ran across it today ... I threw it out. [-ecf]

SLOW GODS by Claire North (copyright 2025, Orbit, 12 hours and 11 minutes, narrated by Peter Kenny, ASIN: B0DTRX894S) (an audio book review by Joe Karpierz):

Like many people I know, I have a large to-be-read pile. (Some might use the word stack rather than pile, but a stack implies an orderly arrangement of things, possibly a last-in-first-out arrangement of things piled high. My to-be-read stack would be so tall that it would probably fall over into a pile anyway, so I might as well call it what it is.) I'm always adding new books by authors I know and like, or, as in the case of the upcoming Hugo reading season--the 2026 nominating period is open now--new books by authors who have been nominated for the award and have become favorites. And thus the pile grows exponentially.

The other thing I try to do is get ahead of the Hugo reading game. I hear about books that are supposed to be good, so I read those in an effort to lessen my reading responsibility during the voting period. The last time I did this with any success at all was with *SOME DESPERATE GLORY*, by Emily Tesh. By the time I finished that book I was just ready to give the best novel Hugo to that book right then and there (and for those new to the game, *SOME DESPERATE GLORY* did in fact win the Hugo the year it was up for the award). Recently, I'd been hearing a lot of good things about *SLOW GODS* by Claire North, who also writes under her real name of Catherine Webb as well as another pseudonym, Kate Griffin. And hey, it's a space opera, so why wouldn't I jump right in? What I learned as I read it is that it is so much more than a space opera.

We need to talk about the setting first. *SLOW GODS* takes place in the far future, in a place where faster than light travel is made possible by jumping into and out of something called arcspace. Arcspace is a dangerous place. Not everyone who goes in comes out. Or if they do, they come out changed. Those who can pilot through arcspace are prized and in-demand individuals. But their lifespan as a pilot is short, sometimes lasting as few as one or two trips, after which they are retired--or maybe worse. And there is something living in arcspace, some kind of sentience that lurks in the dark corners of that strange place, one that plays a small but important part of the story. The on-the-surface plot driver is that there is a double star that is about to go super nova and take out everything within an eighty-light-year radius (although, really, the distance is kind of irrelevant to the story, other than that it seems that North has worked out the physics of the event such that we know how long it will take for the radiation front to reach the star systems in its path).

Mawukana na-Vdnaze is a member of the Shine, one of the many civilizations that North has created and described in *SLOW GODS*. The Shine is capitalism at its worst. People are born into debt, and never really get out of it (sound familiar?). The Shine aren't worried at all about the upcoming disaster--they do their best to save their bureaucrats and corporate executives, but don't care about the rest of the population. Maw, as he is known, dies a horrible death in arcspace. For some reason, that something living in arcspace brings him back to life, a changed individual. Maw is now essentially immortal. He can die, but will always come back. One of his scarier traits is that if he gets angry--very angry--he goes on a killing spree. The result is that he is known as a monster. Maw becomes a very in-demand pilot, as one of the side effects of his transformation after his death in arcspace is that whoever he pilots through arcspace always comes through unscathed.

The real talking point of the novel is the world-building. North creates a myriad of civilizations, but just doesn't give them names and a planet, but goes into (sometimes too much) detail about their languages, culture, lifestyle, and gender. I consumed *SLOW GODS* as an audio book, and while I mostly don't comment on the narration these days, I will have to say that I was completely lost when it came to associating which genders were associated with which cultures based solely on the pronunciations of the pronouns--and there were a lot of different pronouns. (As a side note, I read a post from a reader/reviewer a week or two ago who was trying to make the point that in many cases the audio book does not allow the listener to experience where the punctuation, parenthetical statements, and even footnotes--if there are any--go. Upon giving this a bit of thought, I suspect that the assertion can especially be made for *SLOW GODS* and pronouns.) It's not out of the realm of possibility to say that the wealth and beauty of all the civilizations that North created for the novel overshadow and diminish the plot--if there is one.

And I'm not sure there is. I will say that even though it sounds like I may not have liked *SLOW GODS*, I don't think that's true. I think there's enough here that if I had enough time, I'd like to go back and re-read it to try to get everything North was trying to say. I may never get around to doing that--refer back to the to-be-read pile I described earlier. Will *SLOW GODS* be this year's equivalent to *SOME DESPERATE GLORY*? I don't know. I don't feel as strongly about it as I did the Tesh novel. But it is a good novel, and one that has a shot at ending up on the final Hugo ballot for Best Novel. From there, who can say? [-jak]

Evelyn adds:

And I was the reviewer who made the comment about audiobooks. Joe's reviews are published elsewhere as well as here, so he ekpt the reference generic. [-ecl]

FIRST MEN IN THE MOON and Gravity (letters of comment by Paul Dormer and Keith F. Lynch): In response to Evelyn's comments on *FIRST MEN IN THE MOON* in the 03/06/26 issue of the MT VOID, Paul Dormer writes:

The BBC did a version of this back in 2010 and they actually had a dedication to Lionel Jeffries, who had recently died. The writer was Mark Gatiss, who played Cavor. However, their physics was off. At one point, Cavor points out that they are heavier than on the surface, so they must be deep underground. But anyone with a knowledge of simple physics knows that the deeper you go, the lighter you are. (At the centre of a planet, you would be weightless.) [-pd]

Keith F. Lynch replies:

That depends on how the density varies with depth. Here on Earth, for instance, it's believed that gravity remains roughly constant until you're halfway to the core, and then drops.

If the density is uniform, then gravity decreases linearly in proportion to your depth. At the other extreme, if all the mass is concentrated in the center the inverse square law continues all the way to the center, gravity becoming infinite at the singularity in the middle. [-kfl]

Paul explains:

That can't be right. A planet can be considered as a nested group of hollow spheres. The gravity inside a hollow sphere is zero. Therefore gravity decreases as you go deeper. [-pd]

Keith replies:

Gravity will always be zero at the center. (It may also be infinite at the center if there's a singularity there.) The density profile is likely to vary with depth. Only if it's constant will gravity drop linearly with depth.

See <https://profoundphysics.com/gravity-underground/> [-kfl]

Paul returns:

Never said it was. But still, the deeper you go, the less the gravitational attraction. [-pd]

Keith persists:

Again, <https://profoundphysics.com/gravity-underground/> disagrees with you. It says gravity is at a maximum, 10.7 m/s/s (as contrasted with 9.8 at the surface), at the outer edge of the core. That's about halfway to the center.

As far as I know, that's conjectural, based on the best guess as to how Earth's internal density varies with depth.

The obvious approach would be to simply dig very deep holes and directly measure the gravity at the bottom of them. Unfortunately, that's not practical except for very shallow depths.

[But in a follow-up, Keith corrects himself, noting, "We know how the internal density varies with depth, as it can be deduced from the shape of the geoid, i.e. of mean sea level."]

One approach would be to use Earth as a gravitational lens. Find a constant uniform distant point source of gravitational waves, and observe how it varies downstream of Earth. From that, the exact density profile can be deduced. Similarly with other planets, and with the sun.

Correction: We know how the internal density varies with depth, as it can be deduced from the shape of the geoid, i.e. of mean sea level.

ObFandom: To his dying day Hal Clement was apologizing for getting the shape of Mesklin wrong [in MISSION OF GRAVITY]. But I'm not sure that he was wrong, or whether he was just implicitly using an unlikely model for its internal structure. (Mesklin was a rapidly rotating planet, one which humans could visit near the equator where the apparent gravity was moderate, but not near the poles where it was high.) [-kfl]

Paul adds:

I remember hearing him at a convention saying that people with more computing power than he had with a slide rule worked out that the equator would be more of a ridge. [-pd]

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

MAILMAN: MY WILD RIDE DELIVERING THE MAIL IN APPALACHIA AND FINALLY FINDING HOME by Stephen Starring Grant (Simon and Schuster, ISBN 978-1-6682-1804-0) brought back memories of the two summers I worked for the Post Office (1970 and 1971). I never drove a rural route, certainly not like the ones Grant drove. All my routes were "city routes", which basically meant drive to point A, park the truck, grab all the mail for that loop and walk down the street delivering it, then get back in the truck, drive to point B, and (as they say) rinse and repeat, until you were done.

But a lot of what he talked about in the preparation was very familiar. It's more automated now, of course, but "putting up the mail" in route order (I seem to remember we called it "throwing up a case") hasn't changed much. A "case" is something that looks like a bunch of pigeonholes, but on steroids, because each house or apartment gets its own, and the sizes of the pigeonholes vary: those for a business that gets a lot of mail will be larger, while those getting a lot of oversize mail like 9x12 manila envelopes may be wider to let you put them in flat. Since they're in the order of the route, not street number order, you have to get used to it: 20 Main street may not even be on the same route as 21 main Street.

Grant went through all the problems of learning a route. He seems to have mostly worked the same few routes, which helped. (The first year I got lucky and had the same half-route every day. The second year I got moved around a bit more.)

For me, the worst route was the low-income housing. Not for any of the reasons you are thinking, but because there were so many pieces of mail for people who had moved--it was not a place where people stayed for years. So even if I caught most of the forwarding notes in the case, there were always new ones to be discovered.

Grant, on the other hand, had to contend with driving on "roads" that were nothing but two tire tracks through a forest or on bridges that seemed unlikely to support the truck's weight.

The increase in parcel traffic (Grant drove during COVID) meant he had to carry heavy parcels long distances; he had to take them to the house, not just to the rural mailbox. (My heavy loads were the day someone in City Hall got about a half dozen law books that I had to carry up the front steps, or the day of either the Readers Digest Condensed Books or the Book of the Month Club--I forget which, but in one neighborhood I delivered once a week, it seemed like half the houses subscribed.)

Grant had his run-ins with dogs, with people seeing him walking up with a package and greeting him on their porch with a shotgun, with un-heated trucks in the winter, and un-air-conditioned trucks in the summer, and with trying to drive from the passenger seat in a lefthand drive vehicle to be able to deliver to roadside boxes without stopping, getting out, and getting back in.

He also waxes philosophical about the USPS and how it holds the country together, provides (unofficial) checks on people living alone (in his case, often miles back in the woods as well), and helps support voting. At times, it sounds like he's read David Brin's THE POSTMAN (or seen the movie) one too many times, but he's entitled to his opinions.

I really enjoyed this book (which I read all in one sitting), but I may be biased. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

He mocks the people who proposes that the government
shall protect the rich and that they in turn will care
for the laboring poor.

--Chester Arthur

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