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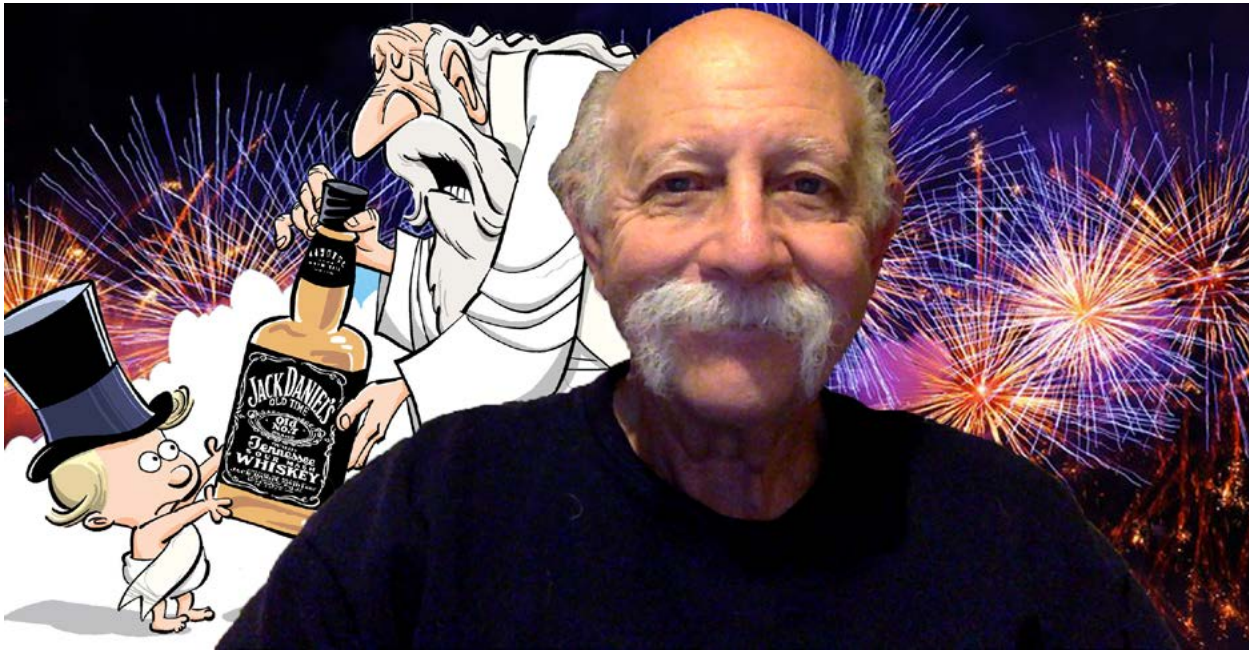
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***Greetings!
Happy Earth
New Year***

President's Column



My birthday is the last day of the year. For the early part of my life I had the sense that each year, as the new rolled around, I was being shoveled away with the old as the fresh "new" began to unfold. It was not a feeling that boded well for the forward progress of my psyche. Sometime in my twenties, the incandescent light bulb went off in my head. I turned my birth narrative. With newfound clarity, I realized I was not the detritus of time past but the harbinger of what was to come. I was a step or two in advance of that damned new year baby. I admit this is small comfort to most of you, but I hope you make the recreation that is your birthdate in your own image. For me it was revelation.

Strange, in light of my end of year illumination, I have never understood the glee spread about the prognosticating power of science fiction. Jules Verne forecasted the use of submarine. He had his bullet steampunk capsule to the moon blasted, like Quaker Oats from a gun, at the future NASA launch site at Cape Canaveral. Much like Jeanne Dixon and a host of the prediction prophets, every once in a while a seeming novel idea comes to fruition in the hazy future. Yes, I am talking about you, Mr. Nostradamus. Doesn't make any of them more farsighted than am I at my newly enlightened year's end. Besides, didn't Wells predict the time machine? Didn't Hugo Gernsback and DeBergerac and a pile of others posit the aether? Aren't we all waiting breathlessly for the singularity?

Even though science fiction has a sense of the things to come about it, prediction is a sorry concept to use as a basis for the genre. SF ideas can be profound and new. The strange is often the backdrop for an adventure of the mind as real as any turn from the 19th century trip to the North Pole. Or a future dreamt to swarm down a wormhole.

It is, this morning, as I sit in my basement office, cold enough to form a frost pattern on my empty, save the dregs of the grind, cup of coffee, the first day of a new year. I'll give it this, I did not, as is my usual habit pass from my old to the new year within the nod of a dream. I was thoroughly awake, if not entirely conscious, during the telecast of a ball climbing up a pole in downtown Pittsburgh, defying the gravity of the countdown, kissed my wife, dormant the TV screen on an orgy of The Thin Man, and read into the night. No resolutions on my lips, no prophecy present in my mind. Just another new day. Just another new year. Just another new future.

Arrivals



Departures

I will be presenting a class entitled "Departures and Arrivals - The Science Fiction Film from 1950 to the Present" for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Pittsburgh on Five Fridays in January/February 2018

- Joe



December 2017 Meeting Minutes

Before the meeting, one newcomer, an older gentleman, Michael Charles Emmert, with a rather storm-blown appearance but a warm presence, made sure to identify himself. He talked about working on a non-fiction book, working title "Project Zeus." For his part, President Joe chatted about the subjects of our last Sigma, namely "fringe" science fiction. Larry Ivkovich talked about the Bridgeville Public Library Mini-Con, which featured costuming and artwork. (That library has one happening Facebook page, check it out.) Mary Soon Lee published six poems, with appearances due next year in Asimov's and The Magazine of Fantasy and

Science Fiction. She read us "Exercise 2050," in which robot dogs walk owners, and "Secret Life of a Toaster." Next year will also see a January meeting dedicated to fantasy (Joe) and a February meeting dedicated to rock music (Larry).

Eric Davin talked at some length about how the history of American science fiction was peppered with left-of-center politics, noting such figures as Inez Haynes Gilman ("Angel Island," editor of The Masses Magazine), early editors Charles Hornig and David Lasser (Lasser of the Interplanetary Society, performing rocket experiments), literally Populist Ignatius Donnelly ("Caesar's Column"), and Edward Bellamy (nearly Mayor of New York City). Jack London prophesied Fascism in 1907's "The Iron Heel." Diane Turnshek noted how a tweet of hers concerning a chemical joke – someone asks a bartender for "H2O, too" – went viral.

Two books got raffled off, Scott McCloud's "Making Comics" and an anthology. Eric noted that the "Alfred Hitchcock Hour" episode "Memo From Purgatory" was written by Harlan Ellison, and featured James Caan and Walter Koenig. Mike Emmert and our own Francis Graham discussed thorium. Kyle Hill's "Because Science" videos got an honorable mention. Such were odds and ends of our last 2017 meeting.

Our headcount reached 19.

Secretary Bill Hall

2017 Christmas Party



It officially started at 5 PM, but the monthly meeting broke up fairly early, permitting Barton Levenson, Elizabeth Penrose, and myself to show up with more than a half hour to spare. It was, like last time, helpful to see a giant inflatable black dragon on the lawn with glowing red eyes and slowly flapping wings; it kind of tells you "This way to F&SF." It was interesting to be back in the old Ann Cecil place, and books continued to predominate. Walking in we saw many Star Trek starships hanging from the living room ceiling, along with some mossy mango open to interpretation. Jean Martin thought of an asteroid infested by baobabs, thereby invoking "The Little Prince" – which put her way ahead of me, as I thought of the troublesome asteroid Flora which appears at the beginning of the 1968 schlockfest The Green Slime.

I brought my usual lemon and Oreo creme pies, which went pretty fast. Likewise, Matt Urick brought meatballs I could not quite identify, but they were tasty, and they too went quickly. Some of us dared to cut a towering chocolate cake. Greg Armstrong did not do his usual stew, but made beef Stroganoff instead, which was very satisfying. Round about the time that fried chicken and a call to gaming arrived, my own allotted time expired.

These affairs often feel packed, but this one felt rather spacious. Usually, it's the living room that fills up, but that stayed navigable, people preferring to gather around the dining room table. I browsed books, getting ideas for authors to be given honorary mentions in a calendar project of mine. I recall no traditional business getting done. Was there any semblance of an election? As of this writing, I assume that in Parsec as often in Washington, the Incumbency Party won, so officers should stay the same, except perhaps for the Commentator. I didn't bother to renew membership or ask for a new card, either. Maybe I'm getting complacent.

Secretary Bill Hall

There's A Brand-New Doctor In Town

Larry Ivkovich

For the first time in its long broadcast history, the newly regenerated Dr. Who is a woman. No spoilers here since this was common knowledge before the 2017 *Doctor Who* Christmas special aired on BBC America December 25, but it's still a pretty cool and interesting development.



The new Doctor is portrayed by Jodie Whittaker of *Broadchurch* fame. She makes her brief appearance (as all newly-regenerated doctors do) in the last few minutes of the special, titled "Twice Upon a Time," and immediately gets into trouble. And it looks like really, really big trouble, before the end credits roll. Her only line is, "Brilliant," upon seeing her reflection. There is a precedence in *Doctor Who* for this gender-switching. The final regeneration of the Doctor's evil nemesis, the Master, was a woman. The Mistress, or Missy, was portrayed by Michelle Gomez (*Green Wing*) and kind of "took her own life" (pun intended) in Part 2 of the 10th series finale, "The Doctor Falls." So, you could say, it was only a matter of "time" before the Doctor followed suit. The regeneration, I mean. Not the life-taking.

In "The Doctor Falls," the Doctor does, in fact, die. After saving everyone, of course, with help from his companion Bill Potts, who's been turned into a Cyberman. Bill is returned to her human self (sort of) by intergalactic girlfriend, Heather. The two of them take the Doctor's body back to the TARDIS before they leave to explore the universe together.

The Doctor awakens (again, of course), only to resist the regeneration process. He wants to remain as his current self and doesn't want to be someone else. The episode ends with him in the South Pole in then futuristic-time 1986 with the very first Doctor ("The original, you might say."), who has a similar problematic attitude toward regenerating.

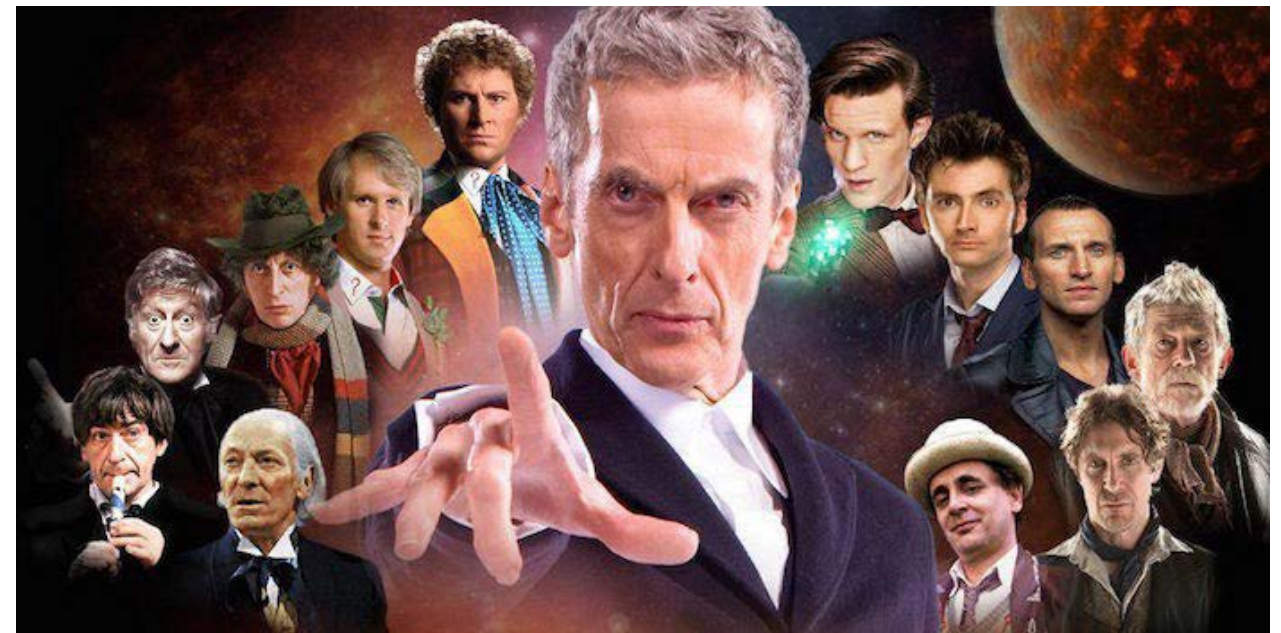
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he Christmas special is really good, really thoughtful, and emotional, with some homages to the original series and past companions. Peter Capaldi is terrific in his final appearance as the Doctor, William Hartnell lookalike, David Bradley, who played the first Doctor in the 2013 50th anniversary special, is great, as is Pearl Mackie as companion Bill Potts. The shots of the first TARDIS' interior are fun and nostalgic. Some original footage of Hartwell's final 1966 Dr. Who appearance is also used.

There's a poignant moment near the end when the Doctor interacts with a recovered memory of Clara, his previous companion. Jenna Coleman reprised the role and tells Capaldi's Doctor not to "forget her again."

For, in fact, a theme running through the episode is Memory, wanting to remember those you loved, or forget the fact they're not around anymore, and that you've outlived them all. And, most harshly, that you may have been responsible for some of their deaths. Not to mention, possibly facing death for the first time ever and never remembering again.

A different take on a classic Who villain is revealed, and a powerful, mysterious organization called the Testimony, is featured. A fantastic, historical scene, set in World War I, with a great twist regarding a Doctor Who character, is well done and unexpected. From what I've read, it looks like the new Doctor will have an entirely new team with her for the new season, which won't run until next year. I'm looking forward to it. Let's see what the new Doctor Who has in store for us.



Brief Bios

Eric Leif Davin

Seven years ago Eric Leif Davin began publishing his brief bios of Early Women Science Fiction Writers, 1926-1960 in Sigma. In the December issue of Sigma Eric completed his list. We are happy that Eric has given us permission to repeat the cycle and proud to present the beginning in this issue

-Eds

Karen Anderson (June Millichamp Kruse), (1932-)



Anderson was born in Erlanger, Kentucky, in 1953. She married Poul Anderson (1926-2001) and is the co-author with him of the "King of Ys" novels, including Roma Mater (1986), Gallicenae (1987), Dahut (1988), and The Dog and the Wolf (1988). In 1958 she edited an appreciation of Henry Kuttner, in which well-known authors remembered him, with an extensive bibliography. An avid mystery reader, while living in Washington, D.C., she founded the Red Circle, the local branch of the Baker Street Irregulars, the Sherlock Holmes fan club. For more than 20 years (May, 1956-February, 1978) she was also a member of the legendary science fiction fan group, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (FAPA).

Charlotte Armstrong (Lewi) (1905-1969)



Born and raised in the gritty Upper Peninsula mining town of Vulcan, Michigan, Armstrong attended the University of Wisconsin and graduated from Barnard College, Columbia University, in 1925. She then began working as a fashion writer while writing poetry for magazines such as The New Yorker, as well as plays. Two of her plays, The Happiest Days (1939) and The Ring Around Elizabeth (1941), had short Broadway runs. She then became a prolific mystery novelist, with her first such novel, Lay On, MacDuff (1942), centering on a murder in a theatrical setting.

The Case of the Weird Sisters (1943) soon followed this.

In the late 1940s she and her family moved to Southern California, where she remained the rest of her life. While there, she became a scriptwriter for the TV series, Alfred Hitchcock Presents. Trouble in Thor (1953) takes place in a hardscrabble Michigan mining town similar to her hometown of Vulcan. Her 1956 novel, A Dram of Poison, won the Edgar Allen Poe Award for best novel of the year from

the Mystery Writers of America. This "Edgar" Award is the mystery equivalent of science fiction's Hugo Award. Her short fiction was twice nominated for Edgars and "The Enemy" won an Ellery Queen award for best story in that magazine. Martin H. Greenberg, Joseph Olander, and Charles Waugh reprinted "Three Day Magic," her story from The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, in their 1979 anthology, Mysterious Visions. In introducing it they said Armstrong, "may have been America's best mystery authoress.... most famous for suspense and style. But 'Three Day Magic,' a powerful and almost forgotten novella, indicates that had she chosen, she could have become equally famous for humor and style." Armstrong died at age 64 in Glendale, CA, and her final novel, The Protégé, was published posthumously in 1970.

Since we became editors, few discoveries have surprised and pleased us as much as this short novel by Charlotte Armstrong (an abbreviated version of which appeared a few years ago in a popular women's magazine). We have long known and intensely admired Miss Armstrong's work. We were among the first enthusiasts of her straight detective stories, starring that unusually human and likable operative MacDougal Duff. We followed with lively interest her shift to the suspense novel and her Hollywood success with THE UNSUSPECTED. We rejoiced when her fine short story The Enemy won EQMM's first prize in 1951, and we consider her MISCHIEF a serious candidate for the title of Best Psychological Thriller ever written. But none of this had prepared us for the Other Armstrong whom you'll find here — a writer who understands the true nature of logical fantasy like few authors since E. Nesbit and F. Anstey, who can take all the formula ingredients of magic-stories and twist them back to glittering newness, who can manage to be warm and imaginative and tender and extremely funny all at once. We envy you your first reading of this classic of modern fantasy.

Three Day Magic

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

from F&SF September 1952 vol 3, no 5 - page 56



Parsec Meeting Schedule Saturday, January 13, 2018

East Asian Archaeoastronomy
Presented by Wendelin Gray
The History Of Science And Some Mythology Of The Region.



A look at measurements of time, organization of the heavens, and the meanings derived from all of that. The presentation will include comparisons with ancient Western conceptions and star charts. Of course, with the concepts of science back then there will be a heavy dose of astrology involved.

Squirrel Hill Branch of the Carnegie Library
Room B - Next to the Rear Entrance
1:30 - 4:30 PM
Come in and introduce yourself
The room is open at noon.



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<http://parsec-sff.org/membership-form-2/>

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Bonnie Funk (Vice President)
William Hall (Secretary)
Greg Armstrong (Treasurer)
Michelle Gonzalez (Commentator)
Joe Coluccio & Larry Ivkovich (SIGMA Editors)

Fantastic Artist of the Month

Bob Eggleton



Multiple award-winning artist Bob Eggleton is well-known for his dragons and monster illustrations and paintings, Godzilla and Lovecraftian creatures being particular favorites of his.

He's also illustrated book covers, comic books, magazines, and *Magic: the Gathering* collectible cards. He's worked on films as a concept artist, and has a Pittsburgh connection – he illustrated the cover of Wen Spencer's fantasy novel *Tinker*.

Eggleton has won the Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist 8 times and won the Chesley Award for Artistic Achievement in 1999. He also has an asteroid named in his honor- "Bobeggleton."

Here's the link to his website: <http://www.bobeggleton.com/>



The Many “Faces” Of Dirk Gently

Larry Ivkovich



The current BBC production of “Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency,” based on Douglas Adams’ novels and characters (*Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* and *The Long Dark Tea Time of the Soul*), is now in its second season. The series follows the adventures of Holistic Detective Dirk Gently (Samuel Barnett, *Penny Dreadful*) and his partner/sidekick Todd Brotzman (played by Elijah Wood of Frodo Baggins fame in the *Lord of the Rings* movies, and named Richard MacDuff in the novel). Dirk promotes himself as a “holistic detective”, investigating cases based on the inter-connectivity of all things. (As an aside, this brings to mind the 2004 movie *I Heart Huckabees*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin, about a husband-wife detective team who solve “existential cases” for their clients.) Since the creators of the show consider Adams’ source material somewhat, if completely, unfilmable, liberties have been taken with the storylines, which always happens in any case with a book-to-film adaptation. The basic premise and characters are here, but that’s basically where the similarities end. It was said the novels had too many ideas and too much happening in them in order for an adaption to do the works justice.

Which isn’t a bad thing. For instance – In this series, Dirk was once part of “Project Blackwing,” a secret CIA project studying people with extraordinary powers. Agents of Blackwing are after Dirk to recapture him, but, if that isn’t enough, a “holistic assassin” is also on his trail. Shades of Stephen King and Dean Koontz (think *Firestarter* and *Watchers*, among others). I have to admit I’m a sucker for that kind of black ops, genetic mutation, conspiracy theory stuff. In fiction, not real life. Seriously.

There were, however, earlier adaptations of Adams’ work in other media. A radio serial was produced and broadcast in the early 2000s. The series adapted and broadcast versions of both *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency* and *The Long Dark Tea Time of the Soul*.

A stage play was done in 2007, starring comedian Dick Enfield as Dirk, in what

appears to be the only characterization which resembled the “short, balding, overweight” Dirk of the novels. On stage special effects were created by computer animation. In a review, *SFX magazine* said «As fine a piece of science fiction theatre as you are likely to find anywhere.» Adams attended the final performance and was said to be pleased with the production.

There was also an earlier television production of Adams’ novels in 2012. Simply titled “Dirk Gently,” four episodes were produced with Stephen Mangan (*Green Wing*) as a mop-topped Dirk and Darren Boyd (*Green Wing*, *Watching Ellie*) as his assistant Richard MacDuff, Lisa Jackson (*Mr. Selfridge*) as Dirk’s receptionist, Janice, and Helen Baxendale (*Miss Marple*, *Poirot*) as Richard’s girlfriend, Susan.

As in the new series, Dirk operates his Holistic Detective Agency based on the “fundamental interconnectedness of all things.” He also uses “random chance” methods and the principles of quantum mechanics in his investigations. At least that’s what he tells his clients, many of whom suspect they’re being conned and don’t pay him his fees. Until, of course, he solves the case.

Or does he?

As part of the fun in this first series, girlfriend Susan is skeptical of Dirk’s abilities and secretary Janice hasn’t been paid by Dirk in years. She, therefore, shows up for work but does nothing while there.

For whatever reason, the show was cancelled after the fourth episode, much to the chagrin of the cast and fans of the show. Stephen Mangan, in particular because he had been a fan of Adams’ work, was very disappointed in the decision. It’s interesting to compare the two shows, never mind the similarities or differences from the novels. The concepts in both shows are based on Adams’ ideas, etc. but, especially in the new series, diverge wildly. The first show was more an odd detective story, including such elements as time travel, artificial intelligence, and, of course, humor.

The second show, as reviewed in a 2016 *Wired* post by award winning SF author Charlie Jane Anders, is “crammed with weird ideas, gore, crazy set pieces and a few charming moments. But you probably won’t be able to enjoy it unless you stop thinking of it as a Douglas Adams adaptation.”

<https://www.wired.com/2016/10/dirk-gently-bbc-america/>

Having watched 3 episodes of the first production and a handful of the second, I have to say both are very enjoyable in their own ways.

Interestingly, Adams pulled ideas for Dirk Gently from his 1977 script for the unfinished *Doctor Who* episode “Shada.” Now there’s some interconnected randomness!

Or is it?

From Figures to Shape: Why 2017 May Be My 1939 in Film

The conventional wisdom says that 1939 was our greatest year in movies. Why? All right, it saw *The Wizard of Oz*; I give it that. The rest, I'm not so sure of. *Gone With the Wind*? The joke I always tell is that he says "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" and I want to reply "Clark, I felt that way a whole hour ago." Mr. Smith Goes to Washington? Please! Some seem to think it somehow means or cynical or corrupting to ascribe politics to *Oz*, but it is frankly a better political movie than *Smith*. You go to the grand capital expecting answers to all your problems and learn that the great wizard is simply some well-meaning blowhard from your home district. The wizard is still good for something, providing documentation (such as diplomas and testimonials) of great personal achievement, and he can even launch an expedition to the planet E Pluribus Unum. No, beyond *Oz*, for 1939 I have to look to *Stagecoach*, not even out of any particular love of Westerns, but because I respect the movie tradition it started.

For me, 2017 was both a horrible and wonderful year, horrible for its politics, wonderful for its spirit. Rarely was I as proud of Pittsburgh as I was during the March For Science in April, where we became a throng of thousands, many of us Parseckians. The world of movies was also coming through. *Get Out* was harrowing wicked fun, a skeptical angle on modern race relations as viewed through a horror movie lens. Much later, Pixar treated us to *Coco*, which (despite getting accidentally weighed down with a 22-minute *Frozen* spinoff preceding it) plunged us into Mexican culture and made it all feel happily familiar.

2017 was to have been packed with F&SF blockbusters. We were to have gotten our *Blade Runner* groove back on, met Spider-Man once more, enjoyed *Beauty and the Beast* as live action, revisited the *Alien* cosmos, approached the *Dark Tower*, rediscovered Kong on Skull Island, and joined *Valerian* and *Laureline* in that *City of a Thousand Planets*. Oh yeah, and there was that whole "last Jedi" riddle. Ehh ... not so much. I gloss over a great deal here – Logan, *It*, a grittier *Planet of the Apes* series, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* returning – and that is admittedly unfair of me, yet I must be harsh, because there is a stark difference between simply rolling along with a movie in its moment and a movie resonating with you long after.

Long before the March For Science, 2017 showed an immediate spark of life with *Hidden Figures*. *Figures* can be taken as a commentary on the history of race and gender relations in America, and it succeeds as that, but for me, even more than recalling the heady thrill of *Project Mercury*, it was quite simply a celebration of "nerd" culture. Has any other film ever celebrated the mathematics of Leonhard Euler? (2016's *The Accountant* did cite great mathematicians of old but as a bit of a cheat.) For that matter, when did any other movie ever sing the praises of Fortran? *Figures* has a lean skeletal look as if everyone was amazed that it got any budget at all, but it got me hooked, and I kept coming back to it.

If 2017 began with an appeal to my mind, then it closed nicely with an appeal to my nostalgia. The first image that ever hooked me on science fiction was that of

the Creature From the Black Lagoon. President Joe is right, those movies are sad, but the Creature himself is immortal.

Thankfully, Guillermo Del Toro never forgot about him. There's been a little concern over Del Toro lately, what with *Pacific Rim* and *Crimson Peak*, but with *The Shape of Water*, his master touch is back. In the midst of the Cold War, a Gill Man referred to as "the Asset" gets hauled up from South America to a drab facility in Baltimore, where cleaning woman Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) becomes free to pursue a secret curiosity in him. (It only now hits me: with a Cadillac dealership making a big deal of 1962 models, *Shape* may very well be set in 1961, the very same year as *Figures* – and, just like in *Figures*, we get another great Octavia Spencer role.) I rarely get a big laugh out of a movie, but the very idea that a miraculously cooperative hodgepodge of likable misfits, conspiring to liberate the Asset from certain death, could be mistaken for a "crack team" of KGB "special ops" experts made me grin.

If any movie truly deserves to be called *Revenge of the Creature*, this is it. Granted, Del Toro tips the scale by giving the Asset certain magical powers. (Confusion over the Asset's exact nature is reflected in the line "Is he a god? He ate a cat. I don't know.") As a kind of distant ancestor of Abe Sapien from Del Toro's *Hellboy* movies, this guy has much more going for him than mere lust and fearsomeness. I am in fact a little disappointed that we don't learn anything more specific about what he likes – I mean, even the robot Wall-E gets to be a Hello Dolly fan – and I must also wonder just how perfectly suited Elisa is to her fate. No matter. The movie is an excuse for Elisa to give an eloquently heartbreaking explanation of love – in sign language, yet – and the reason is enough to smooth over the movie's harsher choices.

Finally, of course, between the extreme bookends of *Figures* and *Shape*, my Summer of '17 was defined by *Wonder Woman*. (Side note: till now, "erotica" has impressed me as "porn except a bit snobbish and even duller." There is a distinct erotic charge, not only to *The Shape of Water* but *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, which can be misleading as a biopic but satisfying as a kind of erotic reverie.) I confess at my peril that I wound up seeing *WW* thirty times. Mind you, I saw problems with it the first time, and by the thirtieth time, I saw a whole lot more problems with it. Those didn't matter so much. Inside of three months, I was sitting down to a movie with the same happy familiarity of a movie from three decades ago.

For me, this was a year of alchemy. I might tend to use that term negatively, but not here. This was a year of pleasant surprises, of realizing the allegedly impossible. The power of nerds launched us into orbit, the Creature got vindicated (sort of), and the god of war got zapped. It was a year touched by genuine inspiration. As I peer into a future clogged with franchises, not even the prospect of a *Wonder Woman* sequel gives me much hope. If 2017 was my 1939, will I ever see its like again? I gravely doubt it. That is my worry. Yet it will also be my treasure.

Bill Hall

This month's Parsec meeting presentation will be by Wendelin Gray. She is an author, linguist and dancer. We look forward to welcoming her to Parsec on Saturday, January 13, 2018. Please join us. - eds.

Meditations on Foreign Language Fluency

by Wendelin Gray



"What languages do you speak?"

If you've ever studied a foreign language, chances are you've heard this question and know how hard it is to answer. It illustrates some common misconceptions about language learning, and the biggest of these misconceptions is the fuzzy definition of the word "fluency." Typical assumptions about fluency are that you can speak a given language flawlessly on any subject after just a few classes. In reality, using any language requires the use more or less of four skills: writing, speaking, reading and listening. Some of these skills are active, while some are passive. This is how most second language classes approach their lessons. The language industry shifts the boundaries a bit, splitting language into two business categories, translation and interpreting. Translation encompasses the skills of reading and writing a second language, and interpreting focuses on listening and speaking. While there are some language professionals who do both translating and interpreting, most only do one or the other. The industry also recognizes there are gaps naturally in linguistic knowledge, which is why they encourage specialization, and they prefer linguists work in no more than two languages formally because it's hard to reach the same depth with 16 languages that you can if you only focus on two or three. A linguist may be a specialist in two or three languages on chemical engineering but may have trouble understanding

botany in those languages. Fluency across subjects is often uneven. This shows why the question, "What languages do you speak" is inaccurate. A better question would be, "What language do you know?"

But what does it mean to know a language anyway? Many factors affect the answer to this question. Fluency often depends on the level of difficulty of the language in question and the time put into study and maintenance. Foreign languages are typically split into four or five categories, reflecting the amount of grammatical and orthographic distance between the person's native and target languages, which also figures in how many study hours are required to learn the language. If English is the person's native language, a language with similar features like Spanish or other Romance languages would be considered category 1 with a fairly small number of study hours. A category 4 or 5 language like Arabic that has dramatically different features from English will require exponentially more study hours than a category 1 language. Most formal coursework for any foreign language in the US falls well below the number of study hours needed to achieve high level fluency.

Once the basics of a language are mastered, the student must regularly make time for study to maintain or increase fluency. It is a lifetime process for modern languages because vocabulary is always changing or being added to the lexicon as new science, technology or fashion dictates. In contrast, dead languages have fixed lexicons and limited textual usage, so it's possible to thoroughly master them, though some revivals of dead languages like Latin, Irish Gaelic and Hebrew prove that they can become living and vibrant again.

So next time you are at a party and you hear someone ask, "What languages do you speak?" you will be better prepared with your answer, or if you are inclined to ask people that question, you can be more precise and get them to talk in more depth about what they know about their second or third language.

Klaatu Barada Nikto
Ansible
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