

CyberCozen

Science-Fiction Newsletter

Vol. XII, No. 8; August, 2000


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01.01.01
The end is near!



Commentary: Israel is not a country for science fiction films

By Aharon Sheer

In straw poll conducted among the early registrants of the World Science Fiction Convention, Chicago 2000, the following films were chosen as the

10 best science fiction films of the Twentieth Century:

The Top 10 List in Order of Votes

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Blade Runner (1982)

Forbidden Planet (1956)

Aliens (1986)

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)

The War of the Worlds (1953)

Dark City (1998)

Gattaca (1997)

The Thing (1951)

Now what is infuriating about this list is that the two most recent films on this list, *Dark City* and *Gattaca*, were *never shown in movie theaters in Israel*. All of the others made since 1968 were shown, and I know because I saw them there. Worse yet, the Israeli Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy, which has a film and media-oriented convention every year at the Cinemateque in Tel Aviv, didn't bother to show either of these two **Best of the Century** movies! (In case anyone wants to see any of these movies, I have all of them on video except *Gattaca*.)

Now here's another list of films. These are the **Hugo Nominations** for

Best Dramatic Presentation for 1999

Being John Malkovich

Galaxy Quest

The Iron Giant

The Matrix

The Sixth Sense

Of these five films, four were shown in movie theaters in Israel; but *Galaxy Quest* was not (I have it on video). I hope the Israel Society will show these **great unshown films** at its 2000 convention.



ביקורת ספרותית: **מרשעת** - חייה ומוחה של המכשפה הרעה של המערב

מאת גרגורי מגווייר (1995) עמ' 388 - מבקר: גל חיימוביץ'

Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West by Gregory Maguire

Wicked מגווייר מביא לנו את הצד של אלפבה, הלא היא המכשפה הרעה מהמערב. הספר מתאר את חייה של אלפבה החל מיום היולדה לכומר ואישתו הנואפת ועד ליום מותה בידי דורות.

ארץ עוץ המתוארת ע"י מגווייר אינה אותה עוץ שאנו מכירים מסיפוריו של באום. זוהי ארץ שקרועה לגזרים בגלל אמונות טפלות, דתות שונות, עוני ופוליטיקה. הקוסם הוא עריץ שהדיח את שושלת אוזמה ומנסה לאחד את כל עוץ תחת שלטונו. הקוסם

באחד מסרטי "משפחת אדמס", מורטישיה עובדת בתור גנת והיא מספרת לילדים את הסיפור על הנזל וגרטל. כשהיא מגיעה לקטע בו הילדים זורקים את המכשפה לתנור היא שואלת את הילדים "ואיך אתם חושבים שהמכשפה המסכנה הרגישה?". וזה נכון, בהרבה סיפורים אנחנו לא שומעים את הצד של הרעים בסיפור.

כשדורותי הביסה את המכשפה הרעה מהמערב בספר **הקוסם מארץ עוץ** של פרנק באום שמענו רק את הצד של דורותי. בספר **מרשעת**

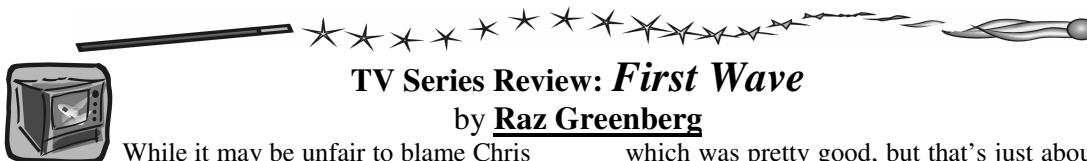
טבעם של בני האדם על אמת ושקר ובעיקר הוא מנסה לענות כאן על אחת השאלות החשובות ביותר - מהו טיבו של הרוע. "איש אינו יודע איך המכשפה נעשית רעה, או אם הייתה זו בחירה טובה מבחינתה - האם יכולה להיות בחירה טובה? האם השטן נאבק כדי להיעשות טוב שוב, ואם כן, האם אינו שטן?" (עמ' 228). מגווייר בעצם מציג בספר שאין רוע מוחלט כמו שאין טוב מוחלט - אלפבה מנסה לעזור לאנשים ובעלי חיים אך דברים משתבשים וקל לאנשים לחשוב אישה שנראית כמוה, שעפה על מטאטא ויש לה חברים כמו נחיל דבורים, כמכשפה בעוד שגלינדה בעלת השמלות היפות והכסף הרב נראית בדיוק ההפך ממנה. אני חושב שמגווייר עשה כאן עבודה טובה למדי בהצגת הסיפור המוכר והתמים בצורה ריאליסטית, מעוררת מחשבה ומשעשעת. מומלץ.

English summary: A successful Marxist-feminist retelling of the classic *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* from the point of view of the Wicked Witch of the West.

יוצא בקמפיין נגד בעלי החיים - חיות בעלות תודעה, כושר דיבור וחשיבה.

חייה של אלפבה לא היו קלים בתור ילדה - קשה להיות מקובלת כשאת ירוקה. מה עוד שהיה עליה לטפל באחותה הקטנה נסרוז חסרת הזרועות ולעזור לאביה כאשר ניסה להמיר את דתם של כפריים. כשהתבגרה, הגיעה אלפבה לאוניברסיטת שייץ שם פגשה את חברתה גלינדה - נערה מפונקת מבית עשיר. באוניברסיטה, אלפבה נתקלה בראשונה ביחס העויין נגד בעלי החיים והיא הקדישה את המשך חייה כטרוריסטית למען זכויות בעלי החיים. לאט לאט מתרחקת אלפבה מחבריה ומשפחתה כשכל רצונה הוא רק לעזור אך בשל הופעתה, חכמתה וכמה אפקטים נלווים היא נהפכת יותר ויותר מוכרת כמכשפה הרעה מהמערב, בעוד שאחותה הדתית, שולטת בארץ המונצ'קינים ונקראת המכשפה הרעה של המזרח.

דורותי מוצגת כילדה כפרית עם כלב מעצבן שלא ממש יודעת מה רוצים ממנה והכל היה בעצם טעות אחת גדולה והיא רק רוצה הביתה.... אבל אין לקחת את הספר הזה רק כסיפור. מגווייר מתאר כאן את ארץ עוץ בצורה ריאליסטית, את



TV Series Review: *First Wave*

by Raz Greenberg

While it may be unfair to blame Chris Carter and *The X-Files* for everything that's wrong with science fiction TV shows today, it is the sad truth that some of the worst installments in the area were the result of people trying to imitate Carter's brainchild without really understanding what made it so successful in the first place. *First Wave* (Saturdays, 20:00, *Star World*) marks the next step in this scary evolution: it doesn't try to imitate *The X-Files*. It tries to imitate all the other shows that tried to imitate *The X-Files*. Watching it feels like watching an episode marathon of *The Visitor*, *The Pretender* and *Prey* put together. Scary huh? You ain't seen nothing yet.

Sebastian Spence plays Cade Foster, a former master-burglar who now tries to live an honest life working for a security company. Unfortunately for him, he's also one of the 117 humans chosen by an alien race as test subjects to determine the success of their upcoming invasion. He's the only subject who manages to pass their tests, and as a reward, the aliens kill his girlfriend and frame him for the murder. Now he's on the run. But Foster has a secret weapon: he found out that the upcoming invasion has been - get this - foretold in the book of Nostradamus.

Sounds stupid? It is. This is largely due to writer Chris Brancato, who is the man behind the show. The promos credited him as "Creator of *The X-Files*" but this is, at best, inaccurate history. Brancato wrote one episode of *The X-Files* during its first season ("Eve")

which was pretty good, but that's just about how far his involvement with *The X-Files* went. On the other hand, he also wrote the script for a certain movie called *Species II*. And in case you wondered which one of Brancato's works has more echoes in *First Wave*, you got your answer in one of the pilot episode's most disgusting and distasteful scenes, in which an alien who impersonates Foster's girlfriend tries to strangle him to death while they're having sex. Add terrible dialogue, plot twists that range from bizarre to plain silly, and absolutely no sense of character individuality, and you'll soon realize that this is indeed *Species II*, without the only thing it had going for it (Natasha Henstridge).

Directing, on the other hand, is another clear case of trying to imitate *The X-Files* without understanding what made it tick. The elements are all here: quick editing, use of one-color lighting (here it's gray) and lots of faceless expressions (I'll give them credit and assume it was a conscious decision and not an evidence of the actors' talent or lack thereof). Does it come up to anything? Not really. The show has a flat, lifeless feeling to it: it's as if someone has deliberately drained out the energy of everything.

On the bright side, this is the first show on *Star World*, which originally ran on the **Sci-Fi channel**. This means that some other SFC shows (like their documentaries and the excellent *Farscape*) may also be on the way. But in the meantime, *First Wave* remains the science fiction TV show you shouldn't see.



Book Review: *Two Books by Iain M. Banks*

by Aharon Sheer

There are too many Ian/Iain-s writing sf. Banks, Watson, McDonald, Lee, MacLeod. Who can remember them all? This Iain was born in Scotland in 1954 and lives there still. What that says about his writing I don't know.

Excession by Iain M. Banks (1996), 499 pages. (Recommended by Oleg Sverdlov).

The "Culture" is an interstellar democratically run non-empire based on decency and morality. Sounds unlikely? In this far future man and other races have banded together loosely to make sure that no nasty aliens within our galaxy go around imposing themselves on other races. Plentifully supplied with power and technology, they will willingly give away their secrets to newly encountered beings if that will help to keep them from trying to take over others. This sometimes leads them into long and nasty wars, since some of these newly found races are innately aggressive and actually enjoy bossing people around. Take that opportunity away from them, and they will be unhappy. In this book the latest unpleasant aliens are called the "Affront", and the Affront are just the kind of adventurously nasty guys the Culture is trying to keep from running wild, without actually wiping them out.

The Culture is aided by Artificial Intelligences that we are told are vastly more intelligent than biological beings can ever be. We are given the chance to enjoy snippets of these AIs' conversations, which show them to be so human and like-us that we can hardly believe them to be much more intelligent than the more positive neighbors in our apartment building (the less-pleasant aliens reminding us of some of our more negative neighbors). The AIs' wry conversation is amusing but not more.

Among the Culture's worries, and the background of this particular book in the Culture series, is the "Outside Context Problem". Here is how Banks describes it (p. 78-79):

"An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilizations encountered just once, and which they tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop. The usual example given to illustrate an Outside Context Problem was imagining you were a tribe on a largish, fertile island; you'd tamed the land, invented the wheel or writing or whatever, the neighbors were cooperative or enslaved but at any rate peaceful and you were busy raising temples to

yourself with all the excess productive capacity you had, you were in a position of near-absolute power and control which your hallowed ancestors could hardly have dreamed of and the whole situation was just running along nicely like a canoe on wet grass. . . when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears sailless and trailing steam in the bay and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you've just been discovered, you're all subjects of the Emperor now, he's keen on presents called *tax* and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests.

"That was an Outside Context Problem; so was the suitably upteched version that happened when somebody like the Affront chanced upon them first, rather than say, the Culture."

The Culture had itself encountered various Outside Context Problems in the past, but had succeeded in handling them properly. There were those in the Culture that enjoyed thinking that some day an OCP would appear – say from the Andromeda Galaxy -- which was so powerful that the Culture could not defend itself. So when the "Excession" appears, many are interested and attracted. Is this an OCP?

Iain M. Banks, who writes his more mainstream novels under the name Iain Banks – without the "M" -- is a good stylist and pleasant to read; but while I enjoyed the book, I have only the slightest desire to read any others of his sf novels, and even less to read any of his mainstream novels. I reviewed another book of Iain M. Banks, *Use of Weapons*, in the June 1994 issue of *CyberCozen*. It was not a Culture book, and I enjoyed it even less. Banks is a young Scottish writer, born in 1954, whose first book was published in 1984. John Clute says in the *Grolier SF Encyclopedia*, "For many readers and critics, Iain (M.) Banks was the major new UK sf writer of recent decades." You'll have to decide for yourselves.

Consider Phlebas by Iain M. Banks (1987), 497 pages. (Recommended *many* years ago by Ilana Gomel, but I only found a copy recently).

This is really the first of the "Culture" books, so perhaps I should have read it first. It's much better than *Excession*. This is a pretty fast-moving (except for a few slow sections) adventure novel, excitingly written, and keeps up the reader's interest throughout most of it. One of the book's clever features is the artificial intelligences, the smartest of which are pictured as rather inane second-rate humans. They do have enormous databases, however, and are very proud of their vast knowledge. The lesser of these intelligences, called "drones", who do the dirty work required by people are obedient loud-mouths. Here is a conversation with one of them. If you like this you are likely to like one of the important features of this book, and all other "Culture" series books:

"How dare you speak to me like that!" the drone bellowed. "I'll have you know I am an Accredited Free Construct, certified sentient under the Free Will Acts by the Greater Vavatch United Moral Standards Administration and with full citizenship...."

"Will you shut your goddamn . . . speaker and listen?" Horza shouted, breaking into the machine's breathless monologue. "We're not on Vavatch, and I don't care how goddamn smart you are, or how many qualifications you've got. You're on this ship and you do as I say. You want to get off? Get off now and float back to whatever's left of your

fucking Orbital. Stay and you obey orders. Or get junked."

"Those are my choices?"

"Yes. Use some of your accredited free will and decide right now."

"I . . ." the drone rose from the table, then sank again. "Hmm," it said. "Very well. I shall stay."

"And obey all orders."

"And obey all orders . . ."

Good, at—

". . . within reason."

"Machine," Horza said, reaching for the plasma pistol.

"Oh, good grief, man!" the drone exclaimed. "What do you want? A robot?" (p. 283)

There's one interesting technological idea. They have anti-gravity (AG), but it only works against gravity that is produced by a mass of matter. That is, if a large rotating body produces your "gravitational" pull, so that the downward pressure is produced by centrifugal force, the AG device won't work. One poor guy doesn't get the reminder about that from the group's leader, and can't understand why the group is walking all the way down this long staircase. He decides to use his AG and jumps, crashing to his death. Says one of his fellows, shakily, "Guess kids these days just can't tell their gravity from their rotating frame of reference." I have the vague impression that Einstein said that no one can tell the difference between gravity and a rotating frame of

reference. Am I wrong?



Book Review: *Two excellent books by Maria Doria Russell*

The Sparrow by Maria Doria Russell (1996), 405 pages.

The British sf/fantasy bookstore, **Andromeda**, says of this book:

"Winner of the James Tiptree Award, British SF Award, Arthur C. Clarke Award and the John W. Campbell Jr. Award for Best new writer! Our choice for **Book of the Decade**. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED."

Reviewers have compared the author to Arthur C. Clarke, H. G. Wells, and Ursula K. LeGuin. With hype like that, I was rather scared to start reading this book. In fact, the story is scary. The tale is one of first contact with an alien civilization. Radio broadcasts of alien music have been received from Alpha Centauri. It appears that only recently one of the planets of that triple star has developed the ability to broadcast radio. But why only music? The Jesuits, following a long tradition of exploratory missions to visit newly discovered peoples, decide to send out a contact crew, and so several of the people on the mission are Jesuit priests, while others are experts in fields

such as language-learning and medicine. Thus religious belief and feelings are an important part of the narrative. The tale is frightening because it is only near the end of the expedition that the contact people realize what a horrible misunderstanding they have made, and at that point disaster has already struck. Only one crewmember survives to return to earth. The story is gripping, well written, interesting both for the science and the human tale. The characters are extremely well described, and they are people that you feel you would enjoy knowing. Yet the story is also a full-fledged science fiction tale. The author is an anthropologist, and the societies

she has created are based on knowledge of how societies work. Not pleasant, but **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED**. *The Sparrow* was reviewed

and recommended in the January 1999 *CyberCozen* by Mordechai Housman.

Children of God by Maria Doria Russell (1998), 436 pages.

This is the sequel to *The Sparrow*. It's very good. Still, it's hard for me to review. It's not as cruel and as painful as *The Sparrow*, and yet the overall book is one of great tragedy – when you stop and think about it. We have the main character of the first novel, Emilio Sandoz, as the central character of this novel. The same Father Superior continues as the tough, unrelenting, guiding hand. We meet Supaari again, one of the aliens, and find out why he did the terrible things he did. I would love to discuss the central thesis of this book, but in doing so I might spoil things for those who haven't read the first book yet. Let's just say that the happiness of the many are gained at the awful pain of the few. And as happy as the ending of this book is,

we can guess that there will be a sequel to this book too: The planet Rakhat will have to deal with some difficult problems, and earth's representatives are now intimately involved. As in the first novel, religious discussions are an important part. Is God good? If so, why does he do such horrible things? If the first novel left us with the feeling that God didn't give a damn, the second novel argues that maybe there was a positive purpose overall. The author tells us in a Conversation at the end of the book that 80% of the readers say they preferred this book to the first. I can understand why, but I still think the first was better. Definitely worth reading, and arguing with.



Science Fiction and Fantasy
News and Rumors

Collected and brought to you by **Guy Eldar**

On my quest for this month's news and rumors, I found some old news that was new to me and new news that I'll share with you as well.

First, have you heard about the making of a live action fantasy based on the classic role-playing game - *Dungeons & Dragons*? It is a fantasy quest starring *Jeremy Irons* and *Thora Birch* (among others) filled with CGI backgrounds and effects. The film is set to open in October and previews have been shown at conventions around the US. Judging by the late arrival of *The X-Men* to Israel (mid October, now playing in the US and around the world) I'd expect this film to reach us for Passover vacation at the earliest.

Speaking of *The X-Men*, less than three months in the theaters and rumors are spreading about the making of a sequel. Recently actress *Halle Berry* (*Storm*) said she'd definitely take

part in the making of the sequel. It is not a formal announcement, but it does show a certain trend.

Finally, a bit more on the SF side. Director *Tim Burton*, the creator of such films as *Beetle Juice*, *Disney's The Nightmare before Christmas* and recently *Sleepy Hollow*, is working on a new movie for *Fox*.

The movie is called *The Visitor*, and it's inspired by 1968's *Planet of the Apes*. The human visitor is played by former porn star *Mark Wahlberg* and *Helena Bonham Carter* plays his Ape princess counter part. The juicy rumor on the web nowadays is that of a love scene between *Wahlberg's* human and *Carter's* Ape.

Although in stages of development, the production has a release date set for April 4th 2001. I doubt it if they can make that schedule but one can hope.

Comments, News and Rumors' facts and sites would be appreciated. Write to: eldarguy@netvision.net.il
Please subject messages as "News and Rumors".

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