



December 2009 Newsletter

Uplifting Redux

That's Science Fiction

Tuesday, December 1, 2009 – 7p

Hillsdale Public Library

Prancer (1989) – Chris is at it again.

Drawing A Crowd

Wednesday December 9, 2009

New Moon Comics - www.newmooncomics.com

Join moderator Tim Cook as we discuss our year in comics.

Face the Fiction/Holiday Dinner – 6:30p

Saturday December 12, 2009

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer

Ramsey, NJ 07446

Sights & Sound of SF Panel: Join us for a very special night of food, fun and an exciting panel of guest!

Larry M. Weiner (creative director and head writer for the Radio Repertory Company of America) and audio partner and Angelo Panetta, Tony Tellado, host of SciFiTalk radio show (www.scifitalk.com). Mike Schneider, Dorian Bachman, and JM DeSantis (www.jmdesantis.com).

Suspense Central

Monday December 14, 2009 – 8p

Panera Bread Restaurant - www.paneranj.com

165 Route 4 West

Paramus, NJ

201.368.0752

Nightlife by Rob Thurman

Films to Come: 4-Star Movie Discussion

Wednesday December 16, 2009 – 7p

Suffern Free Library

If it deals with entertainment, our Master of Entertainment Moderator will cover it.

*Dining follows this event.

Modern Masters

Friday December 18, 2009 – 8p

Mahwah Bar & Grill

2 Island Road

Mahwah, NJ 07430

201.529.8056

www.MAHWAHBARANDGRILL.com

Join us for a unique ***Dinner & a Book*** night of fun as we discuss ***Moonlight*** by Rob Thurman over dinner!

Fantasy Gamers Group

Saturday December 19, 2009 - 2:30 p - 7:30 p

Directions available upon request/contact **Todd**

Join us for terror, monsters, madness and more as we explore the city of Arkham MA with our monthly Call of Cthulu (Chaosium 6th edition) game. Books are available for order at New Moon Comics.

Themes of the Fantastic

Tuesday December 22, 2009 – 8p

Wayne Public Library – www.waynepubliclibrary.org

A year in themes.

Infinite Chaos: A Temnia Campaign

Saturday December 26, 2009 – 2p – 10p

Directions available upon request/contact **Todd**

Welcome to the Western Nations of Temnia, a brutal and vicious tyranny ruled by the Immortal Emperor, the illustrious Naram'tzin, your boss. This game explores life in the far West, where powerful Samurai serve demon-worshipping madmen, and expediency and survival are balanced by honor and horror. A new day in the Yenxhai Dominions is dawning, and the peaceful nations of the East should beware!

please visit www.sfsnnj.com for full details

SFSNNJ Face the Fiction presents:

Sights & Sound of SF Panel

Saturday, December 12, 2009

Lutheran Church of the Redeemer

55 Wyckoff Avenue

Ramsey, NJ 07446

201.327.0148

Guests begin arriving at 6:30p

Dinner will be served at 7p

Panel presentation begins at 8:00p

Dessert/coffee will follow the presentation

Join us for this very special presentation of the Sights & Sound of SF at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. We are proud to present to you an outstanding panel.

Representing the Sound of SF - Guest Larry M. Weiner is the creative director and head writer for the Radio Repertory Company of America (www.rcca.com), a NJ based producer of original audio drama. Larry will discuss the ins and outs of the Radio Repertory and sprinkle in some sound bytes of award winning science fiction audio. Audio partner, Angelo Panetta, will join Larry. Also joining the panel is Tony Tellado, host of SciFiTalk radio show (www.scifitalk.com).

Representing the Sights of SF – We welcome back Mike Schneider (Night of the Living Dead – Reanimated curator) and welcome Dorian Bachman: sculptor/ fine artist turned comic illustrator/ animator. Mike & Dorian are currently collaborating on the first few stories of a steam punk series and Dorian's one of the lead artists on a drama for the 'Unseen Horror' series. Also joining our panel to represent Sight is J.M. DeSantis (www.jmdesantis.com). JM is a repeat contributor to Planet Lovecraft magazine, and has also been featured in Heavy Metal Magazine, Iconic and a number of other Sci-Fi/ Fantasy anthologies and magazines. JM has written for illustrators and illustrated for writers, having experience with both translation/ illustration process.

Please join us for this special event and enjoy the food, panel guests, conversation and friends for the holidays!



November Meeting Recaps

Suspense Central – Monday – 11/9/09

On Monday, Aurelia brought us all together to discuss Laurel K. Hamilton's *Guilty Pleasures* -- the first of her *Anita Blake Vampire Hunter* series at Panera in Paramus.

Guilty Pleasures, introduces Anita and her world. Anita is blackmailed by Nikolaos, the vampire Master of the City, into investigating a series of vampire murders. During the course of this investigation, we learn that Jean-Claude, another master vampire, is interested in Anita and gives her two of the four marks necessary to make her Jean-Claude's "human servant." We also learn that while Anita can usually guess the age of vampires, she cannot get a read on Jean-Claude's age. Anita identifies the murderer, but by that point has sufficiently antagonized Nikolaos and her underlings that she expects to be killed. With help from Edward, a human associate who specializes in assassinating supernatural targets, and Rafael the Rat King, Anita kills Nikolaos and many of her followers. To her surprise, Jean-Claude becomes the new Master of the City.

Kathleen had read the entire series and filled us in on how Anita Blake has changed...Barry tried to pinpoint which book had the most sexual content so he could avoid that one, but joked that Anita should have been on Demon Island. I think we decided there should be an Anita Blake DOES Demon Island book because she would DEFINITELY survive it.

Barry brought with him the version of the book he had read...the comic book version, which as it turns out omitted a lot of the content of the novel, and wouldn't really inspire someone to read the books. Chris had a synopsis (a pass around) with him that was probably more detailed than the comic book! The comic apparently only covers about half of *Guilty Pleasures* too, so it was a big disappointment!

We tossed around who might make a good Anita Blake in the movie version (if there ever is one). I suggested Jessica Alba. I think Barry mention Anna Paquin, but I said we wouldn't want her to get typecast..." we wouldn't?" Aurelia pointed out the description of Anita Blake sounds very much like Laurel K. Hamilton herself, then turned over the book to show us the author's picture...she has a real case there!

As with all vampire hunters, we compared the Anita Blake in *Guilty Pleasures* to Buffy. The movie Buffy was a little too much fluff (as we all know but who cares? I loved it!) and the TV Buffy is decidedly grittier and tougher, but Anita was probably one of the big inspirations for Buffy.

We should actually be VERY proud of ourselves for staying on topic until about 9:45! When we turned our attention to next month's title *Nightlife* by Rob Thurman. This is going to be a Modern Masters tie-in with Rob Thurman's *Moonshine*. Don't miss either one! (Jo)

Drawing A Crowd – Wednesday – 11/11/09

Last night Steve Rubin & I joined the usual regulars at Drawing a Crowd at New Moon Comics, with the topic being *Guilty Pleasures*. Moderator Tim admitted that he wasn't particularly prepared to lead the discussion, and then Barry suggested that we go around the room to get examples from each participant a la Themes of the Fantastic. I then started by saying that the R.Crumb Underground Comix (Mr. Natural, etc) were guilty pleasures of my brother Jim & his friend Joe Del Guidice, then specifically cited a "Fabulous Furry Freak Bros." storyline with a scurrilous reference to Abortions. I also mentioned R. Crumb's latest offering *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*. Other examples mentioned include Devil and Angel Chocolates (Steve R.), Aliens Vs. Predator (Internet Comics-Todd), Battlestar Galactic (original & new-Craig), Superman's love of hamburgers (Barry), The Incredible Hulk's love of smashing things (which was interpreted as Hulk liking ass), The Joker liking baby dolls (from the Dark Knight series-AM), Capt. Prothero's Porcelain Doll collection (from V for Vendetta-Craig) Baby Huey's love of lollipops (Barry & Todd), Popeye's love of spinach & Spiderman's problem with Casual Relationships (Tim). Along the way we hints of films to come (Indiana Jones 5, a redo of King Solomon's Mines, Sam Raimi taking over the Shadow, The new Green Hornet)

sprinkled in the mix. At one point Tim tried to take control of the proceedings by suggesting that superheroes didn't have guilty pleasures, which led to mentions of Tony Stark's rock star-like lifestyle (Iron Man) Spike TV, the show Man Tracker, & World's Dumbest Criminals. Tim got on a riff about Doomsday's murder of Superman being his favorite guilty pleasure (and also how much he hated Green Arrow) before we were disrupted by a car alarm going off in the parking lot!!! After it was finally shut off, the discussion resumed, but Steve R. & I had to leave, so I don't know where it went from there!!! (Steve Spinosa)

Addendum:

DAC was much fun last night. Us table full of heathens did a good job discussing guilty pleasures. We not only discussed 'guilty pleasures' from the standpoint of our 'guilty pleasures' - such as Archie comics, Tim truly enjoying Superman's demise, etc. but from the standpoint of the character's 'guilty pleasures' - be it dolls, lollipops, or taking a risk on a relationship (just go for it already Spiderman - maybe Black Cat is patiently biding her time - duh!).
*An aside for those who may think comic books are trite: **Spider-Man/Black Cat: The Evil That Men Do** is a six-issue comic book limited series published by Marvel Comics starring the superhero Spiderman and his ally, the cat burglar known as the Black Cat. The title of the book is an allusion to William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In the play, Mark Antony says, with regards to Caesar, "The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones."*

I think anything that familiarizes readers with the literary classics ain't so shabby. After you and Steve left we continued the somewhat organized mayhem tossing out guilty pleasures of our own and comic book characters. One concept we discussed was; is the relationship that a superhero has with his nemesis a guilty pleasure? For example, Batman & Joker. Neither will kill the other - each needs the other - is this a guilty pleasure? **(AM)**

Face the Fiction – Saturday – 11/14/09

Last night the SFSNNJ introduced three authors representing BookView Cafe at our monthly Face The Fiction series: Laura Anne Gilman ("Staying Dead", "Blood from Stone", "Flesh and Fire"), Susan Wright ("A Pound of Flesh") & Sue Lange ("Uncategorized -The ABD and Other Tales").

After my introduction of the trio, Sue started the discussion by admitting that she had forgotten to bring her books with her, but made up for it by bringing various handouts that listed the authors in the collective. Among them notable and famed Star Trek authors Vonda N. McIntyre & Christie Golden. Also in the collective, legendary fantasy author Ursula K. LeGuin. Sue advertised their newest short story anthologies "Rocket Boy and the Geek Girls" (which features the work of Steven Piziks - the first male in what had been an almost exclusively female collective) & "The Shadow Conspiracy: Tales of the Steam Age" (which Laura had edited and was their first foray into steampunk stories) along with her own anthology (mentioned in the paragraph above).

Sue then stated that one of the goals was to provide a forum for authors to present their work in the new electronic formats that are out there now and make them accessible to the public at low prices. It's also a way of bringing back older works from authors that have fallen out of print. Laura Anne added that it wasn't necessarily true in her case (knock on wood) but Susan Wright said that in her case the first volume of her trilogy HAD fallen out of print even though it sold well (mainly because the imprint under which the first volume was published had gone out of business- this had intrigued Master "Topher"). They all agreed that the intent of BookViewCafe was not to put traditional publishing out of business, but to supplement it.

After a few more questions and answers each of the authors read a sample from their works. Laura Anne read from "Flesh and Fire" a horror story. Susan W. read from her soon-to-be-released novel "Confessions of a Demon" an urban fantasy about a vampiress who feeds on her victims' emotions. Both Susan W. & Laura Anne said that in urban fantasies you could use real locations (as long as the businesses don't actually exist there). Sue Lange closed out the meeting by reading her science-fiction satire "The Club". They graciously signed some of their books while the rest of us began clean up. Laura Anne Gilman joined most of us at the diner to hear Master Bill's movie anecdotes (except for poor Josephine, who was roped into helping out trainees at the Borders in Ramsey, even though it was her night off!!!) [leaving poor AM stuck because Jo was her ride home!!!]

All in all a good meeting. Bookview Cafe is definitely worth checking out. Join us next month for our annual Holiday Party with our special Sights & Sounds of SF panel. See y'all then!!!

That's Science Fiction! – Monday, 11/16/09 (postponed from original date)

Our That's Science Fiction! Guilty Pleasure was exactly that - a truly guilty pleasure. We viewed the film *There's Nothing Out There* and were fortunate enough to have live commentary from Barry who worked on the film in several capacities.

It was interesting to hear 'behind the scene' details from Barry ranging from actor issues to stunts to the way the movie was filmed out of sequence and why. The commentary added much and helped clear some things up. It was funny to hear, "those are my sneakers but not my feet." We should have known from that early remark, but did we stop? No, we kept watching any way.

The movie was *Scream* before there was *Scream*. This quirky movie throws a bunch of teenagers into a house in the woods with a killer alien on the loose. One of the gang, Mike, is a horror movie buff and the running gag is he knows

things are not good and no one listens to him. The actor delivers his lines with a deadpan dread. One example is when the teens are driving to their destination they see an accident on the side of the road. They overhear the EMT workers saying the driver is missing. Mike immediately tells them this is horror movie 101 - let's go back...to no avail. The rest of the gang roll their eyes and mock him.

Things go down hill from there. It's one silly, random event after another. The movie is silly and meant to be so. Of course, there are the gratuitous nudie scenes, but even they manage to be somewhat comical. The 'monster' is silly looking and shoots silly green rays from its eyes. As silly and low-budget as the movie is, it does a good job of entertaining. It's the perfect guilty pleasure.

Films to Come –Wednesday – 11/18/09

Once again moderator, Barry, dipped into the brave pool and let us talk about the movies we wanted to discuss. OK, he did so after covering everything he wanted to cover, but still...

Films to Come covered October, November and December. Barry told us the movies he'd seen and provided his take. Attendees discussed films they had seen and what films they are looking forward to. Chris seemed leery about Avatar, not liking what he's been seeing in the trailers and commercials (much to Barry's chagrin). Jo backed Chris - she thinks the characters like Jar-Jar Binks (not a good thing in her book). All I have to say on that one is, "Piranha II: The Spawning, Barry, Piranha II).

Another film sparking some debate and doubt is Sherlock Holmes. Action Sherlock?! Most of us aren't buying it...I guess we'll have to wait and see.

In addition to discussing recently viewed, current releases and anticipated releases, Barry brought several books to the table. The Best Horror of the Year, Vol. 1, 101 Sci-Fi Movies, History Is Dead: A Zombie Anthology by Kim Paffenroth (a recent guest speaker at our Face the Fiction event), a Pixar book, and the current issue of Rue Morgue. We talked about the books one-at-a-time but weren't well behaved enough to warrant Barry reading form the Pixar book to us.

Chris had an issue of Entertainment Weekly with Oscar contenders and requested going through the list. He read off who had made the list and we chimed in with whether or not we agreed or disagreed. In addition, we discussed some notable absences from the list.

Informative and good meeting.

Modern Masters – Friday – 11/20/09 (moved up to accommodate book store)

Modern Masters met to discuss *Mean Streets*. *Mean Streets* is a collection of four novellas: *The Warrior* by Jim Butcher, *The Difference a Day Makes* by Simon Green, *The Third Death of the Little Clay Dog* by Kat Richardson and rounding out the collection *Noah's Orphans* Thomas E. Sniegowski.

In Jim Butcher's *The Warrior* we find Chicago's only professional wizard Harry Dresden trying to figure out who is threatening his good friend and Knight of the Cross Michael Carpenter. As Chris stated, this was a fun mystery with many twists and turns.

The second story, *The Difference a Day Makes* by Simon Green has PI John Taylor and his sidekick Dead Boy helping a woman find not only her missing husband but her memory as well. The trio takes a trip to the Nightside for a journey filled with danger and challenges. What happened that was so bad this woman lost her memory?

The third story by Kat Richardson, *The Death of the Little Clay Dog* has Harper Blaine still talking to dead people – this time in Mexico on the Day of the Dead! To say that this story had ghosts is an understatement. This was a fun story that was also a good mystery. Will Harper be able to complete the mission she's been asked to do? Will she find the grave she needs to find or will the dead try to stop her?

The fourth and final story *Noah's Orphans* by Thomas E. Sniegowski has main character Remy Chandler (aka the angel Remiel in human form) investigating Noah's death. Yes, that Noah but without the ark. Was Noah hiding a secret that got him killed?

Attendees who read the book enjoyed it. It was pointed out that the stories, while listed in alphabetical order by author, also wound up being in order of preference. We all enjoyed the Jim Butcher story the most and *Noah's Orphan's* the least. All four stories were well written and good reads. We felt at a loss with the last story not having any prior familiarity with the author or his characters. In all, a good collection and a recommended read.



Themes of the Fantastic – 11/24/09

Last night Guilty Pleasures was the topic at our Themes group as we played Steve Rubin's game "SF Scrabble (or Genre Scrabble, if you prefer). Chuck, "Topher" and I did a couple of warm-up rounds while waiting for the ladies to arrive with the game pieces. Chuck cited *Godzilla '98*, *Children of The Corn*, Topher cited *Godzilla 2000* & *Crusader Rabbit*, and I cited *Airport* & *The Funky Phantom* (an early 70's cartoon). Finally Barry and the ladies showed up and we began in Ernest (NO NOT HIM!)

A brief explanation of the rules: Each player picks three pieces from the game bag (WITHOUT LOOKING!!!). The pieces are either letters or categories (such as Bad SF, Worst Adaptation, etc) each player cites an example for each letter or category they have. The rounds continue until everyone has used up their pieces. No trading or altering of letters is allowed! Naturally some people broke these rules right off the bat while others tried to play fair. Your humble moderator just wrote down the answers.

The first round: Chuck opened with *The Shadow of The Cat* for S, Barry chose to pass on F, Topher chose Ernest Thiger, a lesser-known actor for T, I chose the Monkees film *HEAD* for H, Josephine chose our in-house picture *There's Nothing Out There* for Bad SF, and Ann-Marie chose *Braindead* (a. k.a. *Dead Alive*) for B. Chuck cited *Amazon Women of the Avocado Jungle* for A, Barry went with all Comic books for C, Topher chose Fritz Lang's "*M*" for M, I chose the film *Never So Few* for N (a war movie with horrific moments), Jo chose *Re-animator* for R and AM chose all Anime for A. Chuck then went with *The New Avengers* for N, Barry chose Peter Jackson's version of *Lord of The Rings* for Worst Adaptation, Topher cited *Shadow of the Vampire* for S, I chose *The Phantom Planet* for Worst Ever (noting the meteors that were actually popcorn balls), Jo chose *Omen* sequels & remakes, and AM went with *Lost Boys* for L.

The second round: Chuck started with *Frogs* for F, then Master Barry (or Lord Aragorn as he now prefers to be called) chose *Fantasy Island* for his missing F from the first round, then tried to pass of *Lord of the Rings* again for L but was rebuffed by the group (he claimed that he was "just testing") but finally went with *Legend*. Topher chose *Peeping Tom* for P; I interpreted my H to be an I and chose *Invasion*, the one-season Shaun Cassidy-produced series. Jo went with *Videodrome* for V, and AM did *Sasquatch Mountain* (from Sci-Fi Saturday). Chuck cited *Return of Dracula* for R, Aragorn chose *The Empire Strikes Back* for E (going on a riff about the discrepancies creeping into the original trilogy at that point), Topher chose *Time after Time* (based on an H.G. Wells story), I picked *The Next Step Beyond* for N (a color sequel to the original TV series), Jo chose *Flash Gordon* for Worst Casting Ever, and AM did *Hysterical* (a Hudson Bros. movie) for H. Chuck did *Night Monster* for N (also mentioning *Night of the Lepus*, a killer rabbits [or is that wabbits] story. ...lol...Aragorn chose *Halloween 3* for his free letter, Topher went with Abba for A, I picked the Bugs Bunny cartoon Easter Yeggs for E, Jo did *Enemy Mine* and *Evil Dead* for E, and AM rounded it off with *Alien Loves Predator* (internet comic-must have been channeling Todd...lol) and *Anaconda* for A.

The Third and Final round commenced with Chuck choosing *Q-The Winged Serpent*, Aragorn passed (to everyone's relief), Topher went with *Son of Godzilla* for Bad Fantasy, I picked *Thunderbirds 2004* for T, Jo chose Archie meets The Punisher for Bad Comic ('nuff said)& AM did *Beowulf2008* for B. Chuck chose *Attack of the Crab Monster* for A, Aragorn picked the TV series *Angel* for A (specifically citing the finale), Topher chose *Gorgo* for G, I went with the Elvis film *Clambake* for C, Jo picked *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* for T (she loves all versions) and AM did *Return of the Living Dead* for R. Chuck went with *The Vulture* for Bad Horror, Aragorn passed again, Topher chose Val Luton for L, I almost passed but chose Green Lantern for G, Jo picked the films of Ray Harryhausen for H, and AM finished with *Ice Twister* for I, punctuating her choice with the words "So There!" Just before 10:00 p.m. Aragorn picked *Return of the King* for R and was nearly torn apart...(well not really)...We cleaned up the bloody mess and called it a night...lol. . Have a happy Thanksgiving and we'll see y'all next month!!!

Peter J. Gutierrez

"The Audience in the Wilderness: Where The Wild Things Are and the Problem of the Kids' Movie" Of Audiences and Expectations

The epic difficulties that Spike Jonze's *Where the Wild Things Are* faced during its long, long journey into theaters achieved such notoriety it's fair to say that most moviegoers' expectations were modulated precipitously downwards. After all, what would result from all the compromises that were reached between the unconventional auteur and his studio bosses? These were compromises, one would surmise from the abundant Web speculation, that concerned "light" and "dark" approaches to children's fare, style vs. "substance," allegory vs. narrative, and even (gulp) the demands of product marketing vs. those of art.

Of course all the advance press about its troubled history probably worked to the film's benefit when it was revealed to be a cohesive, thoughtful adaptation, both respectful of the source material and filled with startling passages of sheer filmcraft. Moreover, many who saw *Where the Wild Things Are* seemed pleasantly surprised for reasons that had more to do with the politics of movie culture than anything actually up on the screen: a big budget adaptation of a beloved classic *not* geared toward the lowest common denominator and merchandising tie-ins? That alone seemed like cause for rejoicing.

Still, that's not to say that everyone has been wowed. Many critics have cited the meandering aspects of the plot, which certainly could be said to have an "arc," albeit one drawn with a crayon by a sleepy or distracted hand. Others have noted the tonal clash between, on the one hand, the newly inserted scenes of violence and the pervasive mood of menace, and, on the other hand... well, what exactly? The reasonable expectations one has when bringing a child to see a work advertised as a kid's movie?

Or, just possibly, the very concept of a "kid's movie" itself?

Childhood and its Boundaries

Behind these questions one senses certain audience segments dealing with a deeper disconnect—the one between the warm and fuzzy innocence of Maurice Sendak's 1963 book and the film's contemporary feel, complete with neurotic creatures who come across as adults grappling with "issues" rather than the playful peers of our young protagonist. (I say "peers" in that their impulses largely match his, notwithstanding their gigantic size and rush to embrace him as their monarch.)

Of course the concept of "audience," and the practice of targeting one in both the production and promotion of a film, is central to media literacy education. Nor is the question of audience-alignment unknown to everyday public discourse about film, particularly when it comes to so-called family movies. How often have you heard said of a particular film that "adults will love it" but that "kids will be bored by it"—or vice versa? It's part of our analytical filter: we taxonomize content with pre- and post-adolescent labels and then observe how any given film satisfies the audience members of either camp or, if we're lucky, both.

What's interesting about *Where the Wild Things Are*—which I'd argue is both the purest kid's movie ever *and* the starkest big-screen betrayal of children's literature we're likely to see for quite some time—is the way that it questions, whether consciously or not, our presuppositions about these categories themselves. That's not to say that we don't typically applaud cross-over films that aim for that sweet spot of mutual overlap and thus earn the clichéd characterization of being suitable for "children of all ages." Indeed, one might claim that all effective children's movies are intended, to some degree, to appeal to the "child within the adult" and the "adult within the child"; the latter is true insofar as they are a form of enculturation, modeling various grownup-generated values and providing socially acceptable pathways for childhood fantasies and desires.

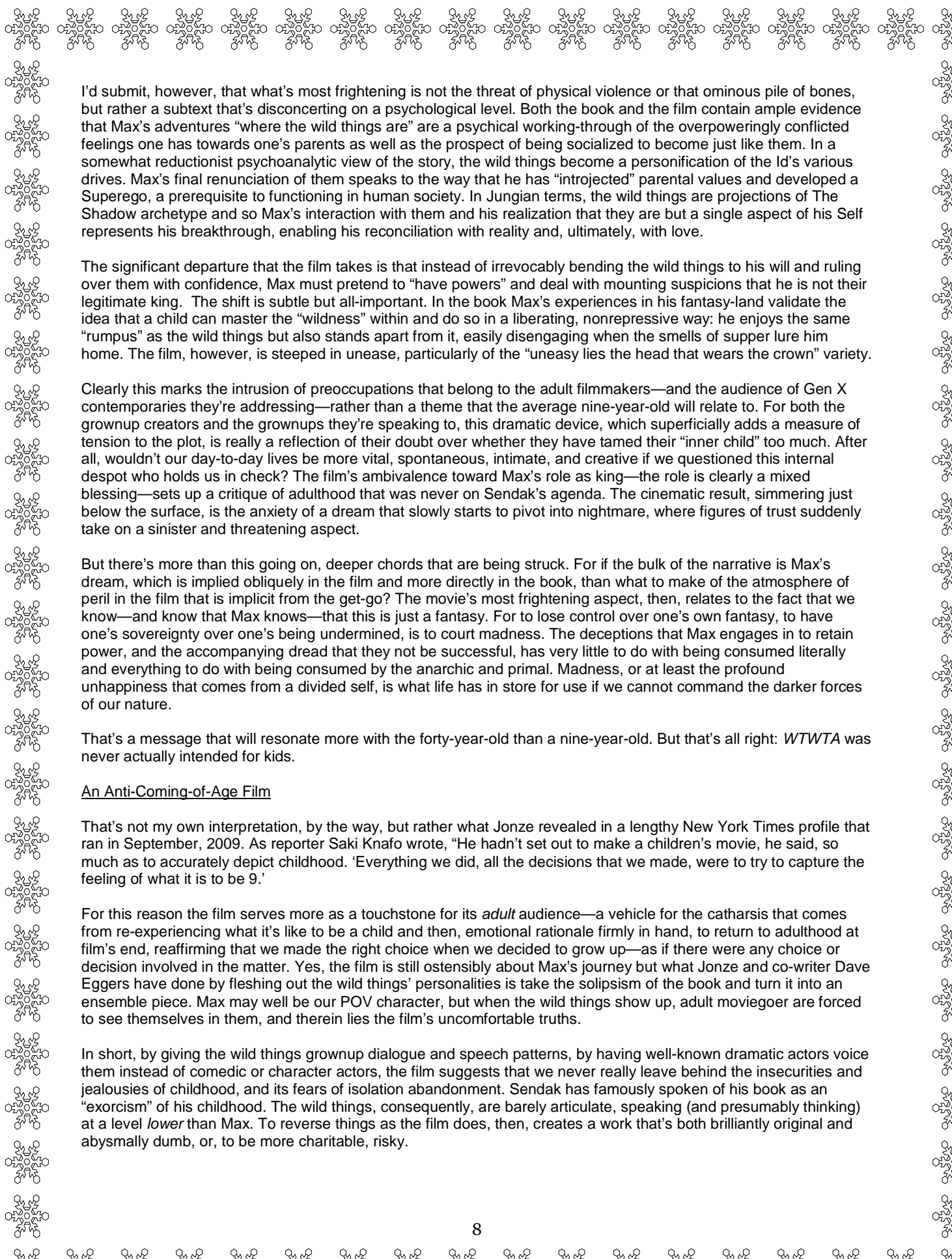
However, as consumers of entertainment, we don't want a film that calls too much attention to this apparatus. And moviegoers looking for clever and uplifting escapist material along the lines of *Shrek* certainly don't want a film to critique *them*. Or their cherished beliefs about what constitutes the hallmarks of childhood (lack of responsibility, a facility with fantasy) or adulthood (independence, emotional self-control).

Yet this is precisely what *WTWTA* does, making it a cinematic experience that's both wonderfully refreshing and undeniably problematic... which helps account for the polarized responses to it, often from the same viewer.

"Too Weird and Too Scary"

That's how some Warner Brothers executives reportedly described an early cut of the film, and even in the released version we can see echoes of what they must have been responding to.

"Weird and scary," of course, have a welcome place in children's films, starting with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and extending through other acknowledged classics such as *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory* (1971). It's the qualifier "too" that gives pause. What makes something too extreme in its weirdness? One example might be found in Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), which, in a misguided attempt at narrative fidelity, lensed essentially unfilmable scenes from Roald Dahl's novel, rendering them bizarre and self-indulgent rather than merely offbeat and whimsical as they come across in prose. In *WTWTA* there is without question much that is weird, from the set designs to the new characters of Bob and Terry, and yet often it's these elements that are the most humorous and engaging. The scary content is fairly obvious, stemming mostly from a pretender-to-the throne thrilleresque plot strand that is entirely (and significantly) absent from Sendak's book.



I'd submit, however, that what's most frightening is not the threat of physical violence or that ominous pile of bones, but rather a subtext that's disconcerting on a psychological level. Both the book and the film contain ample evidence that Max's adventures "where the wild things are" are a psychical working-through of the overpoweringly conflicted feelings one has towards one's parents as well as the prospect of being socialized to become just like them. In a somewhat reductionist psychoanalytic view of the story, the wild things become a personification of the Id's various drives. Max's final renunciation of them speaks to the way that he has "introjected" parental values and developed a Superego, a prerequisite to functioning in human society. In Jungian terms, the wild things are projections of The Shadow archetype and so Max's interaction with them and his realization that they are but a single aspect of his Self represents his breakthrough, enabling his reconciliation with reality and, ultimately, with love.

The significant departure that the film takes is that instead of irrevocably bending the wild things to his will and ruling over them with confidence, Max must pretend to "have powers" and deal with mounting suspicions that he is not their legitimate king. The shift is subtle but all-important. In the book Max's experiences in his fantasy-land validate the idea that a child can master the "wildness" within and do so in a liberating, nonrepressive way: he enjoys the same "rumpus" as the wild things but also stands apart from it, easily disengaging when the smells of supper lure him home. The film, however, is steeped in unease, particularly of the "uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" variety.

Clearly this marks the intrusion of preoccupations that belong to the adult filmmakers—and the audience of Gen X contemporaries they're addressing—rather than a theme that the average nine-year-old will relate to. For both the grownup creators and the grownups they're speaking to, this dramatic device, which superficially adds a measure of tension to the plot, is really a reflection of their doubt over whether they have tamed their "inner child" too much. After all, wouldn't our day-to-day lives be more vital, spontaneous, intimate, and creative if we questioned this internal despot who holds us in check? The film's ambivalence toward Max's role as king—the role is clearly a mixed blessing—sets up a critique of adulthood that was never on Sendak's agenda. The cinematic result, simmering just below the surface, is the anxiety of a dream that slowly starts to pivot into nightmare, where figures of trust suddenly take on a sinister and threatening aspect.

But there's more than this going on, deeper chords that are being struck. For if the bulk of the narrative is Max's dream, which is implied obliquely in the film and more directly in the book, then what to make of the atmosphere of peril in the film that is implicit from the get-go? The movie's most frightening aspect, then, relates to the fact that we know—and know that Max knows—that this is just a fantasy. For to lose control over one's own fantasy, to have one's sovereignty over one's being undermined, is to court madness. The deceptions that Max engages in to retain power, and the accompanying dread that they not be successful, has very little to do with being consumed literally and everything to do with being consumed by the anarchic and primal. Madness, or at least the profound unhappiness that comes from a divided self, is what life has in store for use if we cannot command the darker forces of our nature.

That's a message that will resonate more with the forty-year-old than a nine-year-old. But that's all right: *WTWTA* was never actually intended for kids.

An Anti-Coming-of-Age Film

That's not my own interpretation, by the way, but rather what Jonze revealed in a lengthy New York Times profile that ran in September, 2009. As reporter Saki Knafo wrote, "He hadn't set out to make a children's movie, he said, so much as to accurately depict childhood. 'Everything we did, all the decisions that we made, were to try to capture the feeling of what it is to be 9.'

For this reason the film serves more as a touchstone for its *adult* audience—a vehicle for the catharsis that comes from re-experiencing what it's like to be a child and then, emotional rationale firmly in hand, to return to adulthood at film's end, reaffirming that we made the right choice when we decided to grow up—as if there were any choice or decision involved in the matter. Yes, the film is still ostensibly about Max's journey but what Jonze and co-writer Dave Eggers have done by fleshing out the wild things' personalities is take the solipsism of the book and turn it into an ensemble piece. Max may well be our POV character, but when the wild things show up, adult moviegoer are forced to see themselves in them, and therein lies the film's uncomfortable truths.

In short, by giving the wild things grownup dialogue and speech patterns, by having well-known dramatic actors voice them instead of comedic or character actors, the film suggests that we never really leave behind the insecurities and jealousies of childhood, and its fears of isolation abandonment. Sendak has famously spoken of his book as an "exorcism" of his childhood. The wild things, consequently, are barely articulate, speaking (and presumably thinking) at a level *lower* than Max. To reverse things as the film does, then, creates a work that's both brilliantly original and abysmally dumb, or, to be more charitable, risky.

Brilliant because it convincingly makes the case for there being no sharp category breaks between “adult” and “child.” Instead, there’s simply a continuum. The child practices adult behaviors and psychic mechanisms when he or she renounces the ways of the Id; the wild things, now stand-ins for adults as well as the subconscious, revel in their childishness like slackers at a never-ending binge...

Dumb because movie audiences don’t like psychological allegory served up so starkly and with such a non-feel-good message. When this happens, narrative film ceases to be a shaped and mediated dream and instead aspires to approximate dream itself.

The Case of the Missing Parent

Hence *WTWTA*’s purity as well as its betrayal—of both the work of art it adapts and the young audiences that have flocked to see it. And, again, this contention has nothing to do with the film’s “dark” content. Or rather it does, but indirectly. What the movie lacks is the trusted guide, the presence of a protective spirit that assures us that we won’t be eaten up when we venture into the wilderness that is ourselves.

Does Sendak’s book contain this element? It most certainly does. As with all picture books for young children, it’s written to be read aloud by a parent or a caregiver, often as a bedtime story. The parent is therefore literally right there with us as well as being embedded in the voice and cadence of the text itself.

What the film version of *WTWTA* lacks is precisely this narrative voice that renders the book warm and fuzzy despite its shadowy intimations. One would hope that screenwriters and movie producers understood the importance of this thinly veiled parental surrogate, but here they apparently didn’t, perhaps thinking that the difference between a picture book and a chapter book lies in the respective word counts or the number of images in each. It’s much more basic than that. As in other areas in life, children need the comforting presence of a loving caregiver in order that they may explore that which is challenging, daunting, or just plain scary.

Ironically, in Sendak’s book the mother is famously absent. The only evidence we have of her existence is in the result of her actions, as if she were a magical elf or else the Divine. The film version, by contrast, asserts her central importance every moment she’s on screen but seems to confuse this with the adult presence that the story demands psychologically. In essence, it gets things backwards. Max’s parent(s) *can* be absent, but not so the reliable, quick-to-soothe authorial whisper that tells us, the audience, that things will be fine no matter how dark they get.

To be sure, I’m not suggesting that what’s required is some heavy-handed voice-over, be it paternal or, as in Sigourney Weaver’s work in 2008’s *The Tale of Despereaux*, maternal. Rather, it’s the director who needs to be hovering just out of sight, like a watchful adult at a playground ready to intervene when things get too dangerous or intense. *That* kind of presence is there in countless classics whether made by Frank Capra, Walt Disney, or Nick Park. Spike Jonze, by contrast, is cowering there in the dark with the rest of us kids. He may have the key to lead us out to safety in his pocket, but he’s clearly in no hurry to do so—better instead to spend as much time engaged in psychodrama as possible.

In the end, this unique, fend-for-yourself attitude toward its audience is what makes *WTWTA* a complex and important film, maybe even a landmark one. But is it a success? Well, that probably depends on whether you believe that one can ever consider childhood itself a “success.”

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SFSNNJ Member Movie Reviews

Michael Jackson’s This Is It – Chris Hasselkus

I just went to see Michael Jackson’s film. There’s a kind of melancholy to it, for obvious reasons. It doesn’t look like he’s going all-out, but after all it’s only rehearsals. The love and respect the performers showed Michael was real, however. The tour would have been a massive undertaking with all of the things they had planned. Grade: A.

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