

PROMETHEUS

Kalloccain—Karin Boye's dark dystopia

By Richard B. Vowles

(This essay originally appeared as the introduction to Karin Boye's novel, *Kalloccain*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1966. Nominated for the LFS Hall of Fame Award, *Kalloccain* is a Swedish dystopian novel about a totalitarian world state. Originally published in 1940, the book tells the story about a truth drug used to suppress any thoughts of rebellion.)

Karin Boye's literary successes lie at opposite ends of a spectrum reaching from the private to the public and, in another sense, from a mythical past to a hypothetical future. Hers is the victory of extremity. She will be remembered for two books, the collected poetry, numbering some three hundred pages, and *Kalloccain* (1940), which deserves to take a secure place in the literature of dystopia, among such novels as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. Her works reflect, on the one hand, a lyrical inwardness and, on the other, an oracular sense of public responsibility. It was Karin Boye's tragedy that the two fields lay hopelessly apart. There was, to return to the original image, no sure continuity of the spectrum.

Though rarely time-bound, Karin Boye belongs to the literary twenties and thirties. To American readers, she will seem most easily associated with Pär Lagerkvist, who made his debut in 1912, and Harry Martinson, who appeared on the scene in 1929. All three are melodic poets making sacrament of simple things, though Boye's yearning for the ideal sets her somewhat apart. All three, interestingly enough, ventured into the chill realms of dystopia. "The Children's Campaign," which Lagerkvist published in 1935, studies the grim mechanism and bloody combat of a totalitarian youth corps in a fashion that obviously had a partial influence on *Kalloccain*. Martinson ultimately came to create a significant merger of poetry and science fiction in *Aniara*, the symbolic story of a wayward space ship, now widely known as an opera by Carl-Birger Blomdahl. But both Lagerkvist and Martinson are more robust, more resilient. They were able to mend cleavages of the soul and lesions of the heart. They have survived, and they continue to write. Still, Karin Boye will live as a poignancy and an intensity of some moment in Swedish letters.

II

Karin Boye was born in 1900 in the shipping and industrial city of Göteborg [Sweden]. The daughter of a civil engineer of German descent, she grew up in a home environment that was both religious and intellectual. Her early ecstasies over now Christ now Nietzsche might not have been brought into dangerous conflict had she not been sent at the age of twenty to a seminary where she encountered a hardened, institutionalized Christianity that seemed to efface her life impulses, her real identity. The resultant emotional upheaval is documented in the series of Socratic dialogues published under the title of *Crisis* (*Kris*, 1934), a book in which the two sides of her personality are represented by Malin Forst I and Malin Forst II, and sometimes further abstracted into the chess pieces Black and White—standing for the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the instinct and the intellect.

When Karin Boye went to Uppsala University in 1922 to continue her studies, her first volume of poetry, *Clouds* (*Moln*), had just appeared. Her life continued to be a series of crises. She joined the international worker movement Clarté, which enjoyed a more sustained dedication in Sweden than in any other European country except France, the native country of its founder, Henri Barbusse. It would be difficult to locate Karin Boye's precise ideological position between social democracy and communism, but suffice it to say that she was

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The newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society

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Books and other stuff

I enjoyed Jasper Fforde's several Thursday Next novels, and recently picked up a non-Next book, *Shades of Grey* (no, not the numbered *Shades of Grey* book). Published in 2009, this is a book that should have merited Prometheus Award consideration. Though Fforde's novels exist somewhat beyond the traditional genre borders of science fiction, *Shades of Grey* fully embraces the "What If" nature that forms the core of SF writing. It also falls into the dystopian genre, albeit with some ambivalence.

I find that I'm often playing catch-up with books. Like *Shades of Grey*, I read some good books, check the publication date, and see they were published well outside the nomination deadline. Fforde's novel (and the one with the similar name), didn't leap into the public eye as much as the Hunger Games series. I've read the first one and about the other two, and they all seems to fit right into the reason our award for best novel exists: well-written and tackling issues of individual liberty.

As a reminder, any member of the LFS can nominate books for the Prometheus and Hall of Fame Awards—don't hesitate to mention good books to the respective chairs (see left side bar for email addresses). As for 2012 books, *Darkship Renegades*, the sequel to Sarah Hoyt's Prometheus Award winning *Darkship Thieves*, is a book that should be on everyone's radar. It's dangerous to speak of books based solely on cover-blurbs, but Brenda Cooper's *The Creative Fire* appears intriguing.

Not every book we read falls into the Prometheus Award category, though that doesn't make some of them less enjoyable. Ian McDonald's Everness series comprise excellent young adult SF, starting with *Planesrunner* and the sequel *Be My Enemy*; at least one more will follow in this series. These are books clearly connected and part of a longer series, which can be both frustrating and exciting. SF spawns trilogies and longer series like no other genre. In McDonald's two books I feel that I know the characters, care about some of them, and look ahead to the outcome.

I cannot say the same about every series. Investing time and money in multi-book series is like investing in the stock market I suppose. Sometimes even as the stock plummets you feel the need to see it through, hoping events will turn. I'm 5/6th through one such series at the moment, wondering whether to abandon ship or just finish that last book.

—Anders Monsen

Correction

In the Volume 30, Number 1 (Fall 2011) issue of *Prometheus*, the 2011 WorldCon report regrettably retained the title from the previous year's report. Instead of "Aussiecon4", the title should have been: "Renovation - Worldcon 2011 Convention Report"

Snuff

By Terry Pratchett

Tor, 2011

Reviewed by Chris Hibbert

I expected the usual fluffy, tongue-in-cheek material from Terry Pratchett's *Snuff*, but what I got instead was a serious story with profound insights about the nature of humanity, and the dangers of stereotyping. Of course, it has the usual fluff and tongue-in-cheek as well. *Snuff* is likely to be a finalist for the Prometheus award this year, because of its strong message of self-reliance and Sam Vimes' matter-of-fact acceptance of every person for their strengths regardless of others' prejudices. Vimes treats everyone as an individual and is incensed when he realizes that Goblins are being enslaved and that the laws don't protect them. (Maybe as a life-long cop he should have noticed earlier, but never mind that.)

The story follows Commander Sam Vimes, Police Chief of Ankh-Morpork, as he attempts to take a vacation with his wife at her ancestral country home. He enjoys himself immensely, but that's because he enjoys his work. His vacation, counter to his best intentions, turns into a working vacation when he comes across evidence that a young goblin girl has been murdered in an attempt to frame Vimes himself. When he detects indications that the locals are conspiring to hide something, he goes into full detective mode.

In this case, he gets involved in unravelling a case of willful blindness, and a gap in the law's coverage. Goblins, it turns out have never been respected by the law, so it's not a crime to mistreat them. But Vimes learns that they are thinking creatures with feelings, and their own culture. When he then learns that they are being killed, mistreated, and enslaved, he does something about it.

It turns into a rollicking adventure, with Vimes, his taciturn but well-armed manservant, and the various oddities that constitute Vimes' police department all playing parts. As Vimes has done in previous Discworld installments, he hires anyone who seems like they could be a competent cop, and turns them into a respectable member of the constabulary, regardless of their apparent handicaps—social, ethnic, or species. (He has hired vampires, gargoyles, golems, and zombies. All turned into fine police, with their racial predilections exhibited as strengths.)

There's a good sub-plot woven through, in which Vimes attempts to teach his son, Sam, Jr., some of the wisdom he considers essential. Young Sam is oblivious and hilarious, and learns whatever he wants to learn, while uncovering embarrassing nuggets for the local ne'er-do-wells. This book, like the other novels in Pratchett's Discworld that have been nominated for the Prometheus Award, hides a strong pro-freedom and pro-individualism message behind a light-hearted and fun surface story.

The Dark Knight Rises

Directed by Christopher Nolan

Starring: Christian Bale, Michael Caine, Gary Oldman, Anne Hathaway, Tom Hardy

Distributed by: Warner Brothers

Reviewed by William H. Stoddard

The final film of Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy has been attracting conservative and libertarian notice as a seeming political allegory—specifically, a negative portrayal of the Occupy movement. Nolan himself has protested that the script for the film was written before the Occupy movement emerged, and drew instead on older political imagery, particularly the French Revolution. The reading of a passage from *A Tale of Two Cities* at a key point in *The Dark Knight Rises* is consistent with this. Certainly parallels can be drawn between the film's scenes of mob violence in Gotham City and of a revolutionary "court" conducting show trials of the wealthy, and the Occupy movement's propaganda about "the 1%"—but that's a question, in Tolkien's terms, of applicability rather than allegory, of the freedom of the viewer and not the purported domination of the writer.

What's striking about *The Dark Knight Rises* is something more fundamental than any political message: Its stylistic return to the very roots of the superhero mythos. *Batman Begins* was a contemporary superhero film, with overtones of martial arts; *The Dark Knight* looked back to the pulp literature of the decades before the first superhero comics, with its scenes of criminal gangs and the heroism of James Gordon and Harvey Dent; but *The Dark Knight Rises* looks further back, to the romantic novels of the nineteenth century.

There has been a lot of critical discussion of where the figure of the superhero comes from; Zorro is often cited as a prototype, or the Scarlet Pimpernel, despite his lack of an actual costume—his dual identity, his secret mission, and his superlative abilities all set a pattern that later superheroes followed. But much of that same pattern can be seen in Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, whose hero in some ways is an even closer precursor of that pattern, with the first part of the novel being a model for the obligatory superheroic origin story. The Count's traumatic beginnings leave him set apart from human society, trained in an amazing range of skills, inconceivably wealthy, and driven to the secret pursuit of vengeance against his enemies. All he needs is a terrifying disguise as a creature of the night.

The Dark Knight Rises repeatedly evokes the tropes of nineteenth-century fiction, of which Dumas's novel is an example. As Nolan acknowledged and indeed made a point of, its scenes of a city in turmoil, though inspired by a supervillain's plot, evoke the French Revolution, whose conflicts were a recurrent theme of romantic novelists such as Dumas and Hugo. Some of its key scenes take place in an underground prison very much like the scene of Edmond Dantès's confinement. It has not only an attraction-of-opposites story about Bat-

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actively engaged in Clarté until a 1928 trip to Russia brought disillusionment. Then and in the early thirties she wrote extensively for the liberal journals and the little magazines, chiefly *Spektrum*, which did so much to acquaint Sweden with the surrealists and T. S. Eliot. She and the critic-librarian Erik Mesterton, then a fellow writer for *Spektrum*, made the very fine Swedish translation of *The Waste Land*.

An early, unsuccessful marriage to an Uppsala Clartéist was the first of several emotional defeats that finally led Karin Boye to seek psychoanalytic help in Berlin. She continually sought therapy there and in Sweden and, while the experience fructified her prose works and to some degree colored her poetry, it accomplished nothing for her permanent peace of mind. In 1941, in a land strangely sequestered from the hates of Europe, she walked out into the night and took her own life.

Two volumes of poetry, *Hidden Country* (*Gömda land*, 1924), and *Hearths* (*Härdarna*, 1927), followed *Clouds* and established Boye's reputation as a poet before the end of the twenties. But her full and exciting maturity came only with the volume *For Love of the Tree* (*För trädets skull*), which appeared in 1935. It is customary to see new promise in "The Seven Deadly Sins" ("De sju dödsynderna"), a fragment of a cantata, and other posthumously published poems; but it strikes me that resignation and defeat had begun to damp the vitality of her poetic impulse. Nevertheless, the poetry has the flexibility and assurance of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, from which it clearly derived a measure of inspiration.

In 1931, as if to meet the social demands of a new decade, Karin Boye made her debut in prose. To the surprise of the critics who had pigeon-holed her as a poet, she won a major Scandinavian book award with *Astarte*, a book impressive for its "living, natural, and infallibly sure prose,"¹ but somewhat removed from novelistic orthodoxy. It is, by virtue of an irony which Boye seems to have reserved for her prose, an expressionistic portrayal of city mores, presided over after a fashion by the goddess Astarte, who has been metamorphosed from her Asiatic splendor into a gilded, smirking window mannequin.

In *Merit Wakens* (*Merit vaknar*, 1933) Boye accomplishes a fractional distillation of love. A widow discovers that her husband was far from the man she thought him to be, that he had in fact embezzled and was being blackmailed at one time. The spectacle of a young couple whose relationship is about to collapse convinces the disillusioned widow that sacrifices have to be made for love and that she must cherish her husband's memory for what it was. Love has to be accepted conditionally, as it were. *Too Little* (*För lite*, 1936) is Karin Boye's version of the poet trapped in a prosaic marriage, unable to realize himself in poetry or in love. Undoubtedly these two realistic novels come close to the problems of Boye's own life.

Kallocain, which appeared in the fall of 1940, was immediately greeted as the finest of Karin Boye's novels. "Of international class," wrote Artur Lundkvist; and Karl Ragnar Gierow did not hesitate to call it "a significant and lasting work of art."²

This sinister vision of a world state might well be described as a montage of what Karin Boye had seen or surmised in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. In it she absolves herself of any lingering stigma of political naïveté.

It is possible to admire Karin Boye's prose for its color, texture, and precision, but by and large fiction was not her medium. The truth is that she did not know people well enough to have any real gift for characterization. The figures in her novels are either extensions of herself, fragments from a mirror that was never one whole, placid surface; or they are abstract poles sparking her troubled, tortured dialectic. She could not project her emotions so well into people as into things; and the investing of object and form with emotional content is much more the concern of poetry.

III

The lyricism of Karin Boye is so intensely personal that it seems neither very Swedish nor very modern. Except for the images of ice and cold, a fleeting preoccupation with the Uppsala plains, and the rare appearance of the mythical Æsir (gods) and the álfar (elves), Scandinavian scenes and personages are notably absent from her poetry. The world of Boye's poetry is the world of self; it subsists on its own almost confessional vibrancy. The lyric strain may be narrow, but it has depth and a kind of liquid purity. To read much modern poetry is to go by train, absorbing all the shocks, glimpsing the sordid and the lovely alike, the billboards, the festoons of laundry, the ideographs of smoke besmirching the sky, the sweet and desperate faces, the rich, colliding color. To read the poetry of Karin Boye is to force oneself Alastor-like up the river of the soul, where a torment of vegetation thrusts back a somber sky, where all nature is reflection of the poet's mind, a vista of the poet's anguish.

Or, the poetry of Karin Boye might be described as an ascent to symbolic fulfillment, through anguish and pain:

I am sick from poison. I am sick from a thirst
for which nature has provided no healing drink.
Rivulets and springs flow everywhere;
I kneel to take the sacrament of the earth's veins.

And holy rivers inundate the heavens. I lean back,
feel my lips wet with white ecstasies.
But nowhere, nowhere . . .

I am sick from poison. I am sick from a thirst
for which nature has provided no healing drink.

Karin Boye is something of the saint thirsting in the desert; she is, in fact, drabbad av renhed (beset by, scourged by purity), in the phrase from the poem "Cherubim" which Margit Aebenius chose as the trenchant title of her Karin Boye biography. In that poem, the image of "beast-angels . . . with lion feet and sun wings" is expressive of the struggle between body and soul that plagued her from early seminary days.

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Boye's rejection of reality is Platonic with mystical overtones. In the early poem "Idea" she sees herself as a "lying mirror image"; later her vision has a kind of Blakean ecstasy:

The world is dreamed by a sleeping god,
and the quivering dawn waters his soul.
Memories of things that happened yesterday,
before the world was;
ghosts, glimpses.

In the search for adequate defense against the world of actuality, Karin Boye musters images of cleansing, excision, hardness, and armored protection. Truth, for her, must be cold steel, the surgeon's knife. She would don a coat of mail, very like that of the Christian crusader. But finally her militancy dissolves into images of softness and sensitivity as more suitable to a philosophy of love. Hers is a pagan variant of Eliot's "Teach me to care and not to care, / Teach me to sit still."

The wonderfully expansive, luminous symbols of *For Love of the Tree* make it the pinnacle of Karin Boye's achievement. "The deep violoncello of night casts its dark rejoicing over the expanses," she sings, and of another hour, "Blond morning lay your lambent hair against my cheek." The poet is both mother and microcosm:

Ripe as a fruit the world lies in my bosom
it has ripened overnight
and the rind is the thin blue film
that tightens bubble-round
and the juice is the sweet and fragrant,
running, burning
flood of sunlight.

"Ripeness is all," the poet might say in the words of Shakespeare's Edgar.

Indeed a kind of vegetant harmony informs the best of Boye's poetry and the tree is her most expressive symbol. Growth is for her both cruel and wonderful. "Of course it hurts when buds are bursting," she confesses, but she will pray for a rooted existence, for hands that burst open like flowers. She would be Yeats's "great rooted blossomer," not "bruising body to pleasure soul." Karin Boye and Virginia Woolf have often been called kindred spirits, for scarcely more reason than that their deaths were similar immolations; but Boye is closer to Katherine Mansfield in pathos and symbolic statement. One thinks of the pear tree in "Bliss" and Mansfield's outburst in a letter of May 1919: "O this spring—it makes me long for happiness... Why are human beings the only ones who do not put forth fresh buds—exquisite flowers and leaves? I cannot bear to go among them."³

The tree comprehends all; Boye loves its organic assurance, its oneness—and its magic possibility as symbol:

A tree grows beneath the earth;
an hallucination haunts me,
a song of living glass, of burning silver.
Like darkness before light

all weight must melt
and only one drop of song fall from the leaves.

An anguish consumes me.
It seeps from the earth.
A tree writhes in the heavy layers of earth.
O wind! Sunlight!
Feel this agony:
the promise of a breath of paradise below.

Here and elsewhere the tree takes on mythic identity; it is Ygdrasil, the tree of life, as well as the tree of the poet's life. It is, however, no intellectual totem, consciously adopted because of its ubiquity as a cultural symbol. Rather, it seems to spring from the "collective unconscious"; it is the poet's bond with the fecund earth, with the racial past, present, and future.

It might even be said that Karin Boye's lyric development describes a vegetative cycle. Her early poetry is a sapling: lean, sinuous, and possessed of a hymnlike simplicity (one thinks of such lines as "Unlocked the copper portal of the world," "I know a path that takes me home," "Your every word is like a seed," "The onetime said is forever said," and "I am a priest of poverty"); then comes efflorescence and a rich harvest of symbols. Finally the tree has gained in strength and dignity but lost its former glow; the later poetry is firmly rooted, its limbs are raised in the posture of supplication so typical of Boye, but one senses inevitably the "drift toward death."

And so life ends in a quasi-mystic resignation. Karin Boye might recognize the possibility of two gods, "the god we create, and the god who creates us—the one within us and in the world's will"; but she would have only the latter god, a god who was "a dark, shaping power, behind and beyond the visible, always in flux and animation . . . a just, inspiriting star glance," as Margit Abenius has put it.⁴ It was a god who brought Boye's poetry to the kind of symbolic fruition I have attempted to describe, but gave spiritual solace in no sufficient measure. Karin Boye's final vision is concentrated in the brief, but lovely, "Dark Angels," one of her last poems:

The dark angels with blue flames
like flowers of fire in their black hair
know the answers to strange, blasphemous questions—
and perhaps they know where the bridge is
from the depths of night to the light of day—
and perhaps they know the guise of all unity—
and there may be in our final home
a bright dwelling that bears their name.⁵

IV

Kallocain was written during the summer of 1940, less than a year before Karin Boye's suicide. The task was pure torture partly because she had never attempted to hold together so large a book "without an ounce of autobiography" and partly because the very subject filled her with increasing terror. When she submitted the finished manuscript to her publisher on 21 August, she wrote: "I know well enough that the novel has its failings, but at least it is exciting, and, if it's any consolation, I

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—*Kalloccain*, continued from page 5

promise that I shall never write anything so macabre again.” And she added: “In any case, it was something I had to do.” Though she readily admitted the influence of her recent reading in Kafka, she seemed, perhaps in whimsy, to imply some outside instrumentality. To the compliments of her mother, she replied: “Do you really think it was I who did it?”⁶

Kalloccain is the first-person account of Leo Kall, a scientist in the totalitarian Worldstate, who has discovered a truth serum of disarmingly pale green color, which, when injected into the bloodstream, reduces the inhibition threshold and compels the patient to blurt out the whole truth. His drug is of inestimable value to the police state because it eliminates the last vestige of privacy. It fulfills the prognostication of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, the patron saint of all dystopias:

And they will have no secrets from us. We shall allow or forbid them to live with their wives or mistresses, to have or not to have children—according to whether they have been obedient or disobedient—and they will submit to us gladly and cheerfully. The most painful secrets of their conscience, all, all they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all. And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves.⁷

In the world of 1984, “nothing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull,” but that too must become a property of the Worldstate. Karin Boye probably knew very little about pentothal and sodium amytal, though she might have heard of them through her friend, Ebbe Linde, the chemist turned poet and critic. Rumors of truth drugs and various forms of chemical persuasion were already current in the 1940’s.

Kalloccain, named after the drug, is the confession of a dedicated party member turned deviationist. “Confession” is perhaps too strong a word, because the narrative is notably matter-of-fact and emotionless (*kall* means both “cold” and “profession” in Swedish). The style reflects the imprint of a society reduced to austerity and routine. But when Kall experiences conversion, the style gains resonance as the lost values reassert themselves.

Dr. Kall’s chief wish, so he believes, is to be a “good fellow-soldier, a happy, healthy cell in the state organism.” “From individualism to collectivism,” he says, “from aloneness to communion, such had been the course of this giant, holy organism in which the individual was only a cell... *Kalloccain* was a necessary stage in this whole development, since it widened the communion to encompass the inner self, which had been kept private before.” Kall moves up the power ladder by testing the drug on many human guinea pigs and then persuading the police that *Kalloccain* might be of use to them.

Kall is, however, troubled by memories of another communion than that of the State. He remarks, “One might speak of ‘love’ as an obsolete, romantic concept, but I am afraid it exists anyway, and from its very inception it contains an indescribably painful element.” He has these vestigial feelings for his wife Linda—beautiful, strong, uncommunicative—and desperately unhappy. To him she has become a frightening

and almost hateful enigma.

But even more disturbing to Leo Kall’s peace of mind is his immediate superior in the laboratory, Edo Rissen. It is not simply that Leo Kall, a petty Othello of the test-tube kind, suspects his wife of previous infidelities with Rissen. It is that they have something in common that he has not, something that perhaps he once had. Rissen is too casual, too lax, too permissive—in short, too humane. He has an inner core of security that protects him from the multiple terrors in the power struggle of the State. He is, in other words, suspect as a fellow-soldier and a throw-back to the “Civilian Era.” In the thought-controlled society of the Worldstate, Rissen observes sagely but without a trace of smug phrase-making: “No fellow-soldier over forty can have a clear conscience.”

This is, of course, why citizens over the age of ten had to be deported from Plato’s *Republic* and the past had to be systematically eradicated in the society of 1984. History is heresy.

Leo Kall, approaching forty, caught up in the State’s network of mutual suspicion, and running short on tranquilizers, strikes out at his imagined adversaries. He performs a kind of mental rape on Linda, with some *Kalloccain* smuggled out of the laboratory. Disappointed in the results, he brings about the arrest and subsequent trial of Rissen.

As for Linda, after the shock of the *Kalloccain* injection, she decides she has a choice, either to kill Leo or to make a gift of her complete confidence, to open her heart and mind to him altogether. She chooses the latter course, and he is transfigured by the discovery that there is a higher communion and a stronger attachment possible than that of individual and State. Liberated from fear, he tries to save Rissen, recognizing that his strong feeling toward that strange man is closer to love than to hate.

But there is no turning back. Others were bound to inform on a man like Rissen, and they have. Indeed, Leo sees neither wife nor rival again. Nor his three children, who in any case belonged more to the state than to him. Kall’s role in the Worldstate ends abruptly when he is captured by a raiding party from the enemy Universal State. It is only after twenty years of captivity (a life not very different, as he remarks, from his erstwhile “freedom”) that he undertakes to write down his “memories of a certain eventful time” in his life.

The usual dystopian conditions prevail in the Worldstate. The state is everything, the individual is nothing, regulation prevails, and that which cannot be regulated is outlawed or extirpated. The focal character occupies a position of ambiguity and indecision between the old and new. He is sufficiently sensitive to observe and report change, but he is numb and impotent. Ultimately he is assimilated or destroyed by the new order of society. On the other hand, this is not to say that *Kalloccain* is like all other dystopian fiction.

In *Brave New World*, written some nine years before, the race of man has been conditioned by prenatal treatment and postnatal suggestion into a vacuous euphoria which is maintained by booster doses of soma. Huxley’s novel, with its Social Predestination Room, its feelies, its songs (“Orgy-

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—*Kallocain*, continued from previous page

porgy, Ford and fun”), and characters like Helmholtz Watson, Bernard Marx, and Mustapha Mond, displays all the comic inventiveness of the musical revue. If Huxley chose to laugh a technological world out of countenance, Karin Boye found the strangulation of all individuality too devastating to laugh at. *Kallocain* is not satire, although the flat understatement of Leo Kall’s chronicle may constitute a minor irony of method. The names sound like the coinages of science fiction. While some are identifiably Greek (Kalipso Lavris), Japanese (Kakumita), and Hamitic (Tuareg), most of them are vaguely Baltic in sound. At any rate, they are not chosen for their comic possibility.

George Orwell’s *1984*, which appeared eight years after *Kallocain*, is at the same time both more sophisticated and less sophisticated than Karin Boye’s dystopia. It documents the philosophy of the world state in far more detail, but it keeps physical torture as an instrumentality of the state, when subtler methods of persuasion are available. So *1984* is both novel-of-idea and melodrama, and it may be argued whether the two are entirely compatible. Karin Boye, on the other hand, is concerned with one man’s mind, a scientific mind, and perhaps therefore a politically naïve mind, as it documents its past life in the hallucinatory horror of the Worldstate. Ideology and police violence, while they exist, fall outside the perimeter of her fiction.

The closest relative and very likely the progenitor of *Kallocain* was yet another and earlier fantasy, *We* (1920), by Eugene Zamiatin, the self-styled “devil of Soviet literature.”⁸ In this case the hero-narrator D-503 is a mathematician who designed the Integral, a space ship which, “like a flaming Tamerlane of happiness,” will visit other planets and bring all beings into the fold of the United State. It will unbend the last wild curve, “integrate the colossal universal equation.”

Like Leo Kall, D-503 is caught between two worlds. Although a zealot of the new life of reason, he conducts an old-style clandestine love affair, no easy feat in his glass city, and as a result he is caught up in a revolutionary movement. Finally he submits to official lobotomy and, already depersonalized, he now joins the happy deactivated masses of the state. Always there is some inner cancer to be excised. In *We* it is fancy, or imagination; in *1984*, it is memory; in *Kallocain* it is the élan vital, the hidden well-spring of love.⁹ For love is the stubborn center of man and the most difficult to remove.

The symbolic use of green is important to both novels. Defying the United State means penetrating the Green Wall that surrounds it. Moving to a secret rendezvous, D-503 writes:

From beyond the Wall, from the infinite ocean of green, there arose toward me an immense wave of roots, branches, flowers, leaves. It rose higher and higher and higher; it seemed as though it would splash over me and that from a man, from the finest and most precise mechanism which I am, I would be transposed into . . .¹⁰

D-503 does not dare finish the sentence; but Edo Rissen, under the influence of the truth serum, expresses his faith in somewhat similar terms of color:

I wanted so to believe there was a green depth in the human being, a sea of undefiled growth-power that melted

all dead remnants in its crucible and healed and created in eternity . . .

Typically Karin Boye, in moments of intensity, resorts to the symbols of her poetry. Beneath the concrete expanses of the Worldstate lies the source spring of her lyricism. “The objective world-image, the logical-scientific, is a gridwork we stretch over our personal experiences,” she wrote in the essay “Language Beyond Logic.”¹¹ If Karin Boye subjugates or sublimates the poet in herself in *Kallocain*, it is to demonstrate that much more dramatically how the gridwork of reason can become a world prison and how it can bring about the death of the self.

December, 1965

Notes

[1] Sten Selander, quoted in the introduction to *Astarte* (Bonnier, 1949), p. 42.

[2] Quoted in the introduction to *Kallocain* (Bonnier, 1949), pp. xiv-xv.

[3] *Letters*, ed. J. M. Murry (Albatross, 1938), p. 164.

[4] *Introduction to Dikter* (Bonnier, 1942), p. 8.

[5] Translated by Alan Blair, *Life and Letters*, 63 (October 1949), 21. All other translations are my own.

[6] Quoted in *Margit Abenius*, Karin Boye (Aldus, 1965), pp. 296-97.

[7] *The Brothers Karamazov* (Everyman, 1950), p. 265. See D. Richards, “Four Utopias,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 40 (1961), 220.

[8] Peter Rudy, “Introduction,” *We* (Dutton paperback, 1952), p. vi.

[9] Cf. D. Richards, p. 226.

[10] *We*, p. 88.

[11] “Språket bortom logiken,” *Spektrum* (1932), reprinted in *Tendens och verkan* (Bonnier, 1949), p. 42.

<http://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/0557.htm>

Boye, Karin. *Kallocain* © 1966 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System. Reprinted by permission of the University of Wisconsin Press.

Karin Boye (1900–1941) was a Swedish poet and novelist whose suicide in 1941 amid the shambles of a war-racked Europe reflects the fate of a whole generation of writers. Her first novel, *Astarte*, appeared in 1931.

Daemon & Freedom

By Daniel Suarez

Signet, 2009 & 2011

Reviewed by Chris Hibbert

Daniel Suarez's *Daemon* and *Freedom* tell a single story about an artificial intelligence (the "Daemon" of the title) created by a game designer, that becomes extremely powerful in the real economy through violence and by hacking software systems throughout the world. In the end its creator offers to relinquish that power, but by then agents of various governments have shown how ruthless they can be in trying to defeat it, and a representative of the people being protected says it should continue running things. The story is occasionally violent, and includes several explicit misogynistic and sadistic scenes that I had trouble reading. The rest of the story is interesting enough on a couple of levels that I kept going.

It's a fast-paced story involving MMORPGs, augmented reality systems, and an AI created by a wealthy software gaming entrepreneur. The story (and its characters) presumes that the world's economy is controlled by a few powerful, wealthy, and unscrupulous tycoons who pull the strings of the big governments and are getting out of control. The AI makes a preemptive attack and attempts to take over in order to prevent an eventuality which is never really made clear. Instead, we see the US and other governments' secret agencies and militaries attempt to strike back at a system they don't understand, and which is decentralized and has infiltrated most of the world's computer systems. This allows it to watch its opponents and strike back in completely unexpected ways. It also invests heavily in a fleet of autonomous weaponized vehicles that it deploys very effectively.

The depiction of disaffected people from many backgrounds being recruited into a hidden network that deploys them on unexplained tasks that they willingly take on is disquieting. It's clear that many people who join have made thinly justified assumptions that the network's objectives are consistent with their values, but others do it because they're desperate for a job or a sense of belonging, and are willing to ignore their moral qualms about what they're doing—building, testing, delivering obviously dangerous weapons, or worse. It's plausible that many people would go along with an AI that could get this far, and the thing that keeps this from being possible now is that neither AI nor conventional intelligence augmented with modern tools gives anyone enough power to pull it off. Who knows how soon that will change, though.

I thought the violence was over the top, and not really necessary to the story. I disagree with the world view that predominates here and says that malevolent actors control significant aspects of our economy and will go to extreme lengths to maintain their influence. I found the depictions of technology (other than the killing machines) reasonably plausible, and won't be surprised to see augmented reality, consensual shared overlays, and large-scale real-time cooperation. I expect the cooperation to be much less centrally controlled, and much more spontaneous, or polycentric. And my strong expectations about AI are that it will arise gradually and in

many places. It is very unlikely that one person (much less likely even than one independent group) will make a breakthrough that will enable them to take over. This particular question has been much debated, and there isn't clear agreement on how it will play out, but I firmly agree with Robin Hanson's position that a "hard takeoff" under the control of a single entity isn't a likely scenario. That one person could pull it off with help from at most two colleagues (as in the story) is completely unbelievable.

Migration

By James P. Hogan

BAEN, 2011

Reviewed by Chris Hibbert

James P. Hogan's *Migration* is a funny mix of high-tech space traveling futurism and down-home country folks. The bulk of the story takes place on Aurora, an interstellar ship on the first part of its journey, but it starts out on a mostly back-country world. We get to see some local politics and Korshak, a quick-thinking sleight-of-hand magician, who takes advantage of the local ruler's gullibility as far as he can. Korshak has a fan and friend who is on the recruiting team for Aurora, so he manages to escape his pursuers and jump into a world unlike everything he's used to. But he's an adaptable guy, so he learns to be useful in the new environment.

Korshak has to use his wits to rescue Aurora from sabotage by a subversive faction that has recruited Kek, a robot, to help them. We get the standard tour around the society as Korshak chases Kek from place to place. Some of the sub-societies are interesting, including one group trying to live at a subsistence level on this generation star ship. But Hogan makes it completely plausible.

Early on, the recruiters are interviewing a ne'er-do-well the local authorities would like to get rid of. He responds

If it's military, or some kind of troublemaking to provide an excuse for protective intervention somewhere, the answer's no, but you don't look like a military recruiter. [That] doesn't solve anything. Just causes a lot of hate and reasons for revenge, and makes problems worse. The wrong people get rich.

Who do you think should get rich?

Well, the way I see it is, nobody's born with anything. So whatever they get on top of what they produce themselves must come from other people. And the only way other people are going to give it to them is if they get something worthwhile back in return. So the ones who should end up with a lot to show are the ones who can do things better when it comes to providing what other people need.

But Hogan isn't consistently pro-commerce. The bad guys who have brainwashed Kek call themselves Dollarians and their high officials have titles like Banker. It's a fun story, but though it was nominated for the Prometheus last year, it wasn't selected as a finalist. The side trip into Kek's attempt to be more human, (which ends up with him getting involved with a cult) is worth the trip.

2012 Prometheus Award finalists

The Libertarian Futurist Society has announced finalists for this year's Prometheus Awards, which will be presented during the 70th World Science Fiction Convention over Labor Day weekend in Chicago.

The Prometheus finalists for Best Novel recognize pro-freedom novels published last year:

» *The Children of the Sky* (TOR Books) — A sequel to Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* and in the same universe as Prometheus-winning *A Deepness in the Sky*, this novel focuses on advanced humans, stranded and struggling to survive on a low-tech planet populated by Tines, dog-like creatures who are only intelligent when organized in packs. The most libertarian of the three human factions and their local allies must cope with the world's authoritarian factions to advance peaceful trade over war and coercion.

» *The Freedom Maze* (Small Beer Press) - Delia Sherman's young-adult fantasy novel focuses on an adolescent girl of 1960 who is magically sent back in time to 1860 when her family owned slaves on a Louisiana plantation. With her summer tan, she's mistaken for a slave herself, and she learns the hard way what life was like. In the process, she comes to appreciate the values of honor, respect, courage, and personal responsibility.

» *In the Shadow of Ares* (Amazon Kindle edition) — This young-adult first novel by Thomas L. James and Carl C. Carlsson focuses on a Mars-born female teenager in a near-future, small civilization on Mars, where hardworking citizens are constantly and unjustly constrained by a growing, centralized authority whose excessive power has led to corruption and conflict.

» *Ready Player One* (Random House) — Ernest Cline's genre-busting blend of science fiction, romance, suspense, and adventure describes a virtual world that has managed to evolve an order without a state and where entrepreneurial gamers must solve virtual puzzles and battle real-life enemies to save their virtual world from domination and corruption. The novel also stresses the importance of allowing open access to the Internet for everyone.

» *The Restoration Game* (Pyr Books) — Set in a world whose true nature is a deeper mystery, this philosophical and political thriller by Ken MacLeod (winner of Prometheus awards for *Learning the World*, *The Star Fraction*, and *The Stone Canal*) explores the dark legacy of communism and the primacy of information in shaping what is "reality" amid Eastern European intrigue, online gaming, romance and mystery.

» *Snuff* (Harper Collins) — A Discworld novel by Terry Pratchett (winner of a Prometheus Award for *Night Watch*, also set in Discworld), *Snuff* blends comedy, drama, satire, suspense and mystery as a police chief investigates the murder of a goblin and finds himself battling discrimination. The mystery broadens into a powerful drama to extend the world's recognition of rights to include these long-oppressed and disdained

people with a sophisticated culture of their own.

Thirteen novels were nominated this past year and read and voted on by 10 judges, selected from LFS members. The other nominees: *Cowboy Angels*, by Paul McAuley (Pyr Books); *The Hot Gate: Troy Rising III*, by John Ringo (Baen Books); *REAMDE*, by Neal Stephenson (William Morrow); *Revolution World*, by Katy Stauber (Night Shade Books); *Sweeter Than Wine*, by L. Neil Smith (Arc Manor/Phoenix Pick); *Temporary Duty*, by Ric Locke (Amazon; Kindle edition, Ric's Rulez blog); and *The Unincorporated Woman*, by Dani and Eytan Kollin (TOR Books).

For more than three decades, the Prometheus Awards have recognized outstanding works of science fiction and fantasy that stress the importance of liberty as the foundation for civilization, peace, prosperity, progress and justice.

**

The 2012 Prometheus finalists for Best Classic Fiction (Hall of Fame) were announced earlier. This category honors novels, novellas, stories, graphic novels, anthologies, films, TV shows/series, plays, poems, music recordings and other works of fiction first published or broadcast more than five years ago:

» *Falling Free*, a novel by Lois McMaster Bujold (1988);

» "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman," a story by Harlan Ellison (1965)

» "The Machine Stops," a story by E. M. Forster (1909)

» "As Easy as A.B.C.," a story by Rudyard Kipling (1912)

For more information, contact LFS Publicity Chair Chris Hibbert (hibbert@mydruthers.com).

To submit 2012 novels for consideration and possible nomination by LFS members, contact Michael Grossberg, Best Novel finalist judging committee chair (mikegrossb@aol.com or 614-236-5040).

To propose works published more than five years ago for the Hall of Fame, contact William H. Stoddard, Hall of Fame finalist judging committee chair (whswhs@mindspring.com).

More information is available at <http://www.lfs.org>.

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Under the mishaps of Mars—from ERB to silver screen

By David Wayland

Movies featuring “Mars” in their title appear to suffer much the same fate as NASA’s many unsuccessful missions to Mars. From *Mission to Mars* (2000) to *Mars Needs Moms* (2011) and in between, cinematic tales of the Red Planet fail time and time again to recoup costs and to capture the imagination. Either under “the Red Planet” or “Mars” it’s almost as if evil telepathic thoughts stream from the Martians themselves to the movie-going public. When Disney budgeted a quarter of a billion dollars for Andrew Stanton’s adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs novel, *A Princess of Mars*, no doubt two thoughts went through the marketing department heads’ minds as they sought the male movie-going demographic: ix-nay on the “Princess,” and don’t mention “Mars.”

Perhaps shying away from naming that planet in the title is apocryphal, a convenient story to fit a funny pattern of failed movies. So, when the movie adaptation, *John Carter of Mars*, (the focus from princess to a male character made to target a more fannish demographic, perhaps?) lost the “of Mars” portion of its title, maybe Disney thought they had a fighting chance. And yet, in 2012, *John Carter* turned into one of the biggest box office flops in recent years, at least in the US.

Why did it fail? After all, those early planetary novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs form the source material of so many movies in the past 50 years, from *Star Wars* to *Avatar*, and those science fiction epics raked in billions of dollars, despite borrowing liberally and lacking in original content. Is science fiction no longer box office gold? Did the movie fail because it didn’t adhere closely enough to the book, or because it followed the book too closely, or some other factor entirely?

Reading some of the history of the making of *John Carter* serves to generate both relief and ripples of fear. Apparently, the first steps toward the movie took place in 2004, with director Robert Rodriguez part of the project. Though the script is not detailed in the Wikipedia entry, it states that when Jon Favreau later replaced Rodriguez, he argued for taller Tharks and retaining Carter’s links to the Confederacy. Implied in this is that earlier scripts would have featured a modern Carter and human-sized Tharks, a scary prospect, although mucking around with source material is normal procedure in Hollywood. Adapting ERB’s first novel—any novel—requires some changes; no book transfers directly to the screen; the purists would have to deal with a clothed Dejah Thoris.

The end product merged parts of all three John Carter of Mars novels, and added a few twists of its own. Yet it still appeared when all came down to development to be in good hands. After all, director Andrew Stanton directed two very successful movies (Pixar’s *WALL-E* and *Finding Nemo*), and reams of money guaranteed quality special effects. However, Stanton’s experience came from animation, not live action movies, which possibly played a role in actor selection and direction. Yet with the failure at the box office, despite the movie’s open-ended conclusion, fans of ERB face slim prospects of any sequel, while Hollywood green-lights scores of lesser ideas.

Fans of ERB who would finally see “their” movie realized after nearly 100 years since the first book appearance either never showed up, or that segment of fans existed only as a small group, while the general public just didn’t get the message. My inclination leans toward the latter theory, for several fans wrote glowingly about the experience, and despite a few minor issues, I for one thoroughly enjoyed watching *John Carter* on the big screen. Typical for current science fiction movies, *John Carter* relied on special effects possible only today; twenty or thirty years ago those effects would have grounded such a visionary tale. Effects aside, the movie foundered mostly on the shoulders of the actors, who seemed un-Burroughs-like in appearance and manners.

The source material, a planetary romance tale from the pre-pulp era, bears the marks of its serialized appearance. Non-stop action, cliff-hangers, improbable actions and escapes all set a hectic pace. Though pre-scientific in the sense that ERB graces Mars with inhabitants whose history goes back centuries, and Carter magically teleports to the red planet from a mysterious Apache cave, the novel inspired countless readers to write similar stories or take up the space exploration that later would show no life existed on Mars, now or earlier.

There are three main John Carter novels, out of a collection of 11 books set on Barsoom, Burroughs’ name for the planet. (Incidentally, an anecdote in E. Hoffman Price’s *Book of the Dead* gives as inspiration for the name of Mars an Armenian dealer in carpets, Barsoom Badigan, who ERB met and asked if he could use the name in one of his tales.) The first book, and Burroughs’ first novel, long before Tarzan transformed him into an icon of 20th century popular culture, *A Princess of Mars*, appeared in 1917. The movie *John Carter* derives 80-90% from this book. However, the journey down the River Iss taken by Carter and company in the movie never happens in the book, and the scene at the source of the River Iss appears only in the sequel, *The Gods of Mars*.

One of the major sets of characters in the movie, the evil Therns, also derives from *The Gods of Mars*. Given Hollywood’s penchant for evil antagonists against whom each hero must battle, turning the Therns into a race of aliens sucking dry the life on Mars and in process of the same actions on Earth, seems driven by a meeting between the suits and writers. One can image the weekly development meetings, where one of the studio suits says, “We need this evil race of beings working behind the scenes. Great conspiracy stuff. They have this *Star Trek* technology, brings the whole thing up to date.” While Matai Shang appears briefly in *The Gods of Mars*, he assumes his terrible and adversarial role only in the third novel, *The Warlord of Mars*. In the movie his bad-guy persona oozes far darker than any actions in the third book. The only advantage of making the Therns such technologically advanced beings is how Carter teleports from Earth to Mars. I never quite got

—Continued next page

—*Under the mishaps of Mars*, continued from previous page

past the “reaching to the sky” method from the second book, or the accidental teleportation in the first.

A Princess of Mars opens with Confederate veteran John Carter prospecting for gold with a companion from the Civil War in the Apache territory in Arizona. The brutal Apache capture Carter’s associate. Carter rescues him, but they are pursued and take cover in a cave. His friend dying, Carter feels overcome with a strange sleep. When he awakes he finds himself in a strange land. After dealing with the strange effects of gravity, he is captured by tall, green, four-limbed creatures. These are the Tharks, a nomadic, warrior-based race, who wear their metal to indicate their warrior status. That metal is decoration that they win through battles, and Carter quickly proves his mettle as a warrior. The Tharks capture a native Martian, or Barsoomian, one Dejah Thoris, the princess of the book’s title. Carter decides to help return her to her people, despite her being pledged in marriage to the leader of a rival city. Many battles later, Carter and Thoris wed, and live in bliss for nine years, until the planet’s air supply is threatened and Carter sacrifices himself, waking up back on Earth in the original cave where he hid from the Apaches.

In the sequel, the *Gods of Mars*, Carter finally succeeds after years of effort in teleporting himself back to the red planet. He ends up immediately in danger, attacked by plant people and great white apes. By now, readers on Burroughs’s work are familiar with his style—relentless action, dialog centered around action honor, and vivid imagery in depicting alien life and scenery.

It is also in *Gods of Mars* that we encounter the Therns. While they are evil in this book just as in the movie, they are Barsoomians through and through, though ancient and manipulative in their priest-like existence upon the superstitions of other Barsoomians. Key to this novel is the idea of the pilgrimage to the source of the River Iss, where Barsoomians believe they travel to die. Here is where John Carter finds himself, and where his true love Dejah Thoris ventured to search for him, as did Tars Tarkas. And here John Carter battles the Therns, who live a life of luxury by enslaving the pilgrims who travelled down the River Iss.

Yet the Therns are not evil enough for Burroughs, who introduces a group of pirates from the moons of Mars, who prey on the Therns and steal their slaves. John Carter must battle both Therns and pirates to find Dejah Thoris, only to face another cliff-hanger at the end of *The Gods of Mars*, as she

is trapped inside a prison that will not unlock for a Martian year, and the reader likewise in suspense must wait until the sequel, *Warlord of Mars*, to learn her fate. In *Warlord of Mars*, John Carter must travel the length of Barsoom to save Dejah Thoris, and we encounter other, equally strange denizens of the red planet.

Possible sequels to the movie might have tapped into these two novels, but the alteration of the nature of the Therns likely would require altering the source material even more to fit the direction of any movie sequel. Having failed at the box-office, it is unlikely there ever will be any sequel, however, and fans are left with only the one movie to see the scope of the books realized on the big screen.

The host of changes included Carter’s prospecting associate. In the movie he’s a soldier trying to recruit Carter in the war against Indians. The Apache lose some of their bloodthirstiness. Carter teleports to Mars via a Thern device. The conflict on Barsoom between Helium and Zodanga gets more attention. A ninth ray is introduced. The list grows.

Why then did the movie fail? Reviews by fans generally were favorable, and many critics also liked the movie. Did the “curse of ‘Mars’”—even after being excised from the final title—fulfill its own prophecy? Perhaps the press playing up this angle started a small trickle that played a larger effect in the minds of movie-goers. Popular culture lives a strange life of its own, and some movies fail undeservedly. Others reap far more than they deserve, such as *Avatar* and the *Twilight* series; originality doesn’t always translate into success, and if *John Carter* is one of those works that seems unoriginal, it is only because many SF movies robbed unashamedly from the book. Thus, the movie appears to maybe take from other movies, but merely looks back at its own source material.

John Carter is one of those movies that deserved better. Although the acting at times seems tired, this might have been the result of recasting Carter as a war-weary veteran who lost his family in the war, and now cares only about his gold. Although best appreciated in the vastness of the big screen, enjoy it now on the small screen. Mars may well remain a desolate wasteland in reality, but the various races imagined by ERB lives on in our imagination. Consider the original work, perhaps more than any other novel has stirred up passions for space travel and adventure in the hearts of many readers. Barsoom forever!

Endnotes

1. “John Carter’ and the Curse of Mars”, AMC Blog, March 7, 2012, <http://blogs.amctv.com/movie-blog/2012/03/john-carter-and.php>

2. Though not all missions to Mars were failures, several failed spectacularly: “Mars: NASA Explores the Red Planet,” http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/mars/missions/index-past.html

3. “John Carter: don’t mention Mars,” The Guardian, March 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/mar/12/john-carter-dont-mention-mars>

4. John Carter Wikipedia entry, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Carter_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Carter_(film))

Classifieds

The (Libertarian) Connection, open-forum since 1968. Subscribers may insert four pages/issue free, unedited. **Factsheet Five** said, “Lively interchange of point, counterpoint and comments”. Eight/year, \$10. Strauss, 10 Hill #22-LP, Newark NJ 07102.

—*Dark Knight Rises review, continued from page 3*

man/Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle, but a rivalry between Selina and the more conventional Miranda Tate, modeled on the choice between Dea and Josiana in Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*, or Rowena and Rebecca in Scott's *Ivanhoe*. And beyond these tropes, it shows a delight in surprises and unexpected revelations, of the kind that inspired Ayn Rand's remark that the three most important features of a good novel are "plot, plot, and plot."

The Dark Knight Rises fits another part of Rand's conception of romantic fiction as well. The characterization is somewhat abstract, and focused on moral choice—which is a feature of the superhero genre at its best: well conceived superheroes are embodiments of moral themes. (For example, Batman is an embodiment of vengeance.) The conflicts between them are moral conflicts. This is often summarized as "good versus evil," but there's more to it than that; in fact, Batman's central conflict in this film involves rethinking his fundamental moral goal, and in doing so, finding the ability to recreate himself. And this rethinking is encouraged by his relationships with other characters, especially the newly introduced Selina Kyle and John Blake, each of whom is also shown in an abstract, stylized way. Established characters such as James Gordon and Alfred Pennyworth also have their own questions of principle to confront.

And in the end, this focus on abstract principle is what *makes* this film "applicable" to today's political conflicts—even, perhaps, despite or against the intent of its creators. Abstract themes bring out the common elements in an unlimited range of concrete situations. An abstract portrayal of what is involved in an attack on civilization, and what it takes to defend it, can apply to many concrete political conflicts, and can bring them a clarity they often lack in news stories. Nolan has made brilliant use of the ability of film to give abstract themes a visual and narrative form.

And at the film's conclusion, he has managed to achieve the actuality of the often mocked concept of "poetic justice": He has confronted each of his characters with the realized meaning of their own actions. The viewer—at least this viewer—goes away feeling that all of their fates were fitting, in a way that was not the case at the end of *The Dark Knight*. Not that that's a fault of *The Dark Knight*: It was intended as the middle film of a trilogy, and as such could not be complete, but had to demand a further completion, which *The Dark Knight Rises* has now provided.



The Newsletter of the Libertarian Futurist Society
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