My Favorite World #21



Some of My Most Favorite Things are the moving picture shows. This week, I got to watch *North by Northwest* again for the eleventieth time.

The movie is terrific in every way, really one of Hitchcock's best. The story framework – a case of mistaken identity that draws the Cary Grant character, Roger Thornhill, into a spy vs. spy intrigue – is a classic 'wrong man' plot. It's a common plot device<fn>Hellloooo Lebowski</fn>, and one that is at the core of so many of his great movies.

The dialogue has the kind of snap and charm that makes me want to listen to Cole Porter and drink a dry martini. Or a Gibson.<fn>Grant's cocktail of choice in the film, basically a martini with a cocktail onion instead of the olive.</fn> Eva Marie Saint, playing Eve Kendall, is a classic Hollywood dame, a model of pluck and barely suppressed sexuality, a character that served as a template for dozens of femme fatales from the classic Bond girls (think Pussy Galore and Tiffany Case) to *Romancing the Stone*'s Joan Wilder.<fn>Who actually combines the *dame* persona with the hapless mistaken identity victim in one character.</fn> She is not quite as overt as some of the pre-Code dames, but in some ways that may actually turn up the heat. Film nerd fact: During filming, Eve tells Roger that, "I never make love on an empty stomach." The censors flipped and made them overdub a change: "I never *discuss* love on an empty stomach." The change makes Grant's double-take response a little less effective.



Roger hearing something the rest of us did not.

Many of the movie's structural elements – like the preposterous chase in a ridiculous setting (e.g., scampering across the face of Mt. Rushmore or the crop duster chasing Grant across the corn field) have left their stamp on a flood of later productions like the Bond movies, the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* franchises, *Bullitt*, *French Connection*, even in a Dr Who episode.<fn>Somebody could write a cool film studies dissertation on this.</fn>



The fourth Doctor waiting for a plane

But forget all that. The thing that rang my bells with this viewing was the design sense of the movie. I grew up in the 70s and 80s, and there really has been no more dismal fashion era than that. Sure, we get a little campy buzz off of polyester bell bottoms in eye-popping colors, but nobody wants to dress like that.<fn>The less said about the teased-hair, shoulder-padded 80s the better.</fn> But that suit that Grant wears pretty much the entire movie? Good god, people…that is a piece of clothing!



I want that suit. Hell, I want that dress, too.

In this scene, Thornhill believes Eve to be one of the bad guys.<fn>Which she both is and isn’t.</fn> He’s in gray, she’s in red: colors in opposition.

Here, we find Roger and Eve in cahoots. Same suit for Roger, but now Eve is dressed in a dress from the same color family: colors in concert.<fn>All credit to Tom and Lorenzo for getting me to think like this in the first place. My default mode had been “Hey, cool suit!”, if I even noticed it at all.</fn>



I still want that suit.

But the visual element that really tickles My Favorite World spot, even more than the fashion, are the sets. Much of the movie was filmed on location, as with this early scene in NY’s Plaza Hotel.



Just like a Holiday Inn Express

Now that, people, is what a hotel lobby should look like.

And this scene, in one of my favorite places.



Glory days of Grand Central. A recent restoration has pretty much brought it back to full gorgeousity.

Also, too…Hitchcock knew how to paint a picture. Check out this overhead shot of Grant fleeing the UN Building.



I can tell ya, the UN Building can’t look that good these days. It was already falling apart when I was a kid.

But the killer is the Vandamm House, a complete fabrication designed to look like a Frank Lloyd Wright-ish construction at the top of Mt. Rushmore.<fn>In fact, the area at the top of Rushmore is extremely restricted. Almost nobody gets to go up there, and there are definitely no cantilevered houses dangling over GW’s ear.</fn>



Nice digs.

The exterior shots are matte paintings, and the interiors are all built on a soundstage.



I would so live in this house.



I mean, come on. A McMansion or this? Even with the gun entering frame left, I'd still live there.

Another cool film nerd tidbit…look again at this still from the cafeteria.



I still want that suit.

Just to the right of Eve, there is a child extra who has his fingers in his ears. From rehearsals, he knew that 1) there was a gunshot coming and 2) that it was loud. So he pre-emptively plugged his ears before the gunshot. Nobody noticed at the time, but apparently Hitchcock was pretty miffed about it when they noticed it later on.

More substantively, Favorite World-wise: this is the first film appearance by Martin Landau. He played Leonard, Vandamm's (the awesome James Mason) assistant thug.



A couple of real creeps

Hitchcock had asked Landau to play Leonard as “gay” to help explain his animosity and mistrust for Eve. I have to admit that I did not pick up on this the first few times I watched, probably because Landau was so understated.<fn>And partly because I am a little oblivious.</fn> This was considered pretty controversial at the time, and many of Landau’s friends urged him to refuse.

The great thing about the portrayal is how he avoided cliche. The menace of Leonard is front and center; hints to his sexuality are almost entirely background, although at one point he ad-libbed the line, “Call it my woman’s intuition, if you will.” Anyway, Landau went on to an impressive career, frequently working alongside his wife, Barbara Bain. His turn as Andro in *The Outer Limits – The Man Who Was Never Born* is one of my all-time favorite episodes on the electric picture radio box.



There is nothing wrong with your electric picture radio machine.

So let’s review:

- Gripping plot
- Great dialog
- Eye popping fashion
- Gorgeous sets and scenery
- Film nerdery goldmine
- Amazing cast
- Hitchcock!
- Cary Fucking Grant!

Admit it. Cary Grant is the coolest guy ever. As he once remarked: “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant—even I want to be Cary Grant.” Well, I can’t be Cary Grant<fn>I’m barely even Archie Leach on my best day. Probably more like Archie Rice.</fn>, but I can pretend.

My Favorite World.

My Favorite World #20



When I was a wee sprite of 5, my parents took me to the 1964 World’s Fair. I honestly do not remember much of that day, but a couple of episodes stand out.

Leastly…

We rode the train from my grandparents’ house in Hartford into the city, with many transfers and such. <fn>In retrospect, I imagine this must have been a stressful day for my Southern born and bred parentals, having to negotiate for the first time the wilds of New York City and its bizarre underground choo-choo trains, with an easily distracted little boy in tow.</fn> On the train back from the big day in the Big City, I needed a bathroom so I was delivered to the on-train loo. When I flushed, the toilet opened and delivered my production directly onto the tracks. I was mesmerized, and flushed that damn toilet about twenty times to confirm my discovery. Satisfied, I emerged, and yelled the length of the traincar to my parents:

> *You can see the tracks!!!!!*

They cringed, everyone else laughed, and I was confused by it all.



For good damned reason.

Luckily, we were travelling at full clip, allowing my effluvia to distribute across a greater distance. An early, formative event in My Favorite (albeit somewhat nasty) World.

But more epically…

Aside from the giant globe that still stands in Queens (see it up top), the only thing that remains in memory is the Sinclair Dinoland.



What miracles await?

Way before you young whippersnappers had your hippity hoppity Jurassic Park rigmarole, we had life size dinosaur exhibits of our own. Sure, they didn't move much, and they didn't really make any sound. But we liked it that way!

The big feature of the exhibition was Sinclair's mascot dinosaur, the brontosaurus. Oh, it was big, but it was gentle

<fn>Eating only plants, not humans or Baby Jesuses or some such.</fn>, a friendly beast. Best of all, from a corporate imagistic / synergistic <fn>Anachronistic in this context, yes, but still reflective of intent.</fn> angle, the brontosaurus reminded us every step of the way of the benevolent goodness of our corporate betters who paid good money to advance *science* with no concern for their own advantage save to keep their corporate logo in our sights for an entire afternoon.

Why, I even went home with a plastic model of Bronto, molded in a machine before my very eyes!<fn>The irony of creating, and then owning, a replica of a dinosaur made out of actual dinosaur stuff went unremarked at the time.</fn>



My petro-based dinosaur friend.

It was warm to the touch for a long time after I received it, and I think I probably undermined its scientific accuracy a bit with my active little hands. My bronto pal always had a slightly crooked neck. Alas.

Oh, and how they loved them their brontosaurus. From the narration at the exhibit:

> *Sinclair uses the brontosaurus as a symbol to dramatize the age and quality of the crude oils from which Sinclair petroleum products were made, crudes which were mellowing in the earth millions of years ago when brontosaurus and other*

dinosaurs lived.

They make it sound like a fine whiskey.

http://www.immunetoboredom.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/09-Brontosaurus.mp3

Coincidentally, my maternal grandfather spent long years as a field agent (salesman) for Sinclair, driving the backroads of the South endlessly to spread the good word about Sinclair's mellow crude. The Sinclair sign was a beacon for us, a family connection even when we were far from home.



A friendly beast who did not eat children.

We would get angry at the parents if they stopped at other stations, especially those animalistic demons from Esso.



A child-eating demon.

We were less opposed to Texaco for some odd reason.



Cross-dressing petrochemical shill.

Alas, the brontosaurus was eventually decreed *not a real dinosaur* by actual scientists who get to decide these things. <fn>Just like those wankers who cut Pluto out of the planet club.</fn> And an entire generation of people like me were left bereft and crestfallen, our trust crushed and our dreams but a mere wisp.

“And so,” say the two or three readers<fn>I’m an optimist.</fn> who hung around this far to find out how in Hade’s Handbag this could exemplify My Favorite World, “how in Hade’s Handbag &c.?”

Well here’s how.

Science, and the stuck up sticky beaks who get to decide what we all are supposed to know, has changed its mind. At long last, the brontosaurus resumes its rightful place in the hall of reptilian behemoths! Excelsior!

And so today, the Unisphere is all that’s left of the World’s Fair, and Shea Stadium (you can see it in the background up top there) is gone.

But the brontosaurus is back, bitches. You can’t keep a good

beast down.

My Favorite World.<fn>Not to mention, it should give Pluto hope for redemption.</fn>

My Favorite World #18



When I was a lad, I decided I should go ahead and plan on accomplishing three simple tasks:

1. Read every great book ever written.
2. Listen to every great piece of music ever written.
3. See every great movie ever made.

I'm almost finished.<fn>/rimshot</fn>

Reading is a huge piece of My Favorite World. Much of my recent reading has been non-fiction. It's been pretty heavy slogging.<fn>Including yet another run-in with Daniel Dennett that ended the way the first two did: I'm doing pretty well until, inevitably, somewhere c. page 120-150, I begin to feel I am the stupidest person in the world.</fn> I liked *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* quite a lot, but covering billions of years can sort of feel like it. It was time for some fiction.

Now, because I like to believe I am an enlightened and fair-minded fellow, I stacked up three books written by actual women(!).<fn>To burnish my bona fides as a Friend of

Women; my membership renewal is up for review.</fn> Briefly, then, a few notes on these.



I've seen her movies and read her short stories, and I've even spent some time with Miranda July's web-based work. I really like her; she feels gentle and optimistic, but not a Pollyanna. Still, first novels can be problematic, so I wondered if she could pull it off.

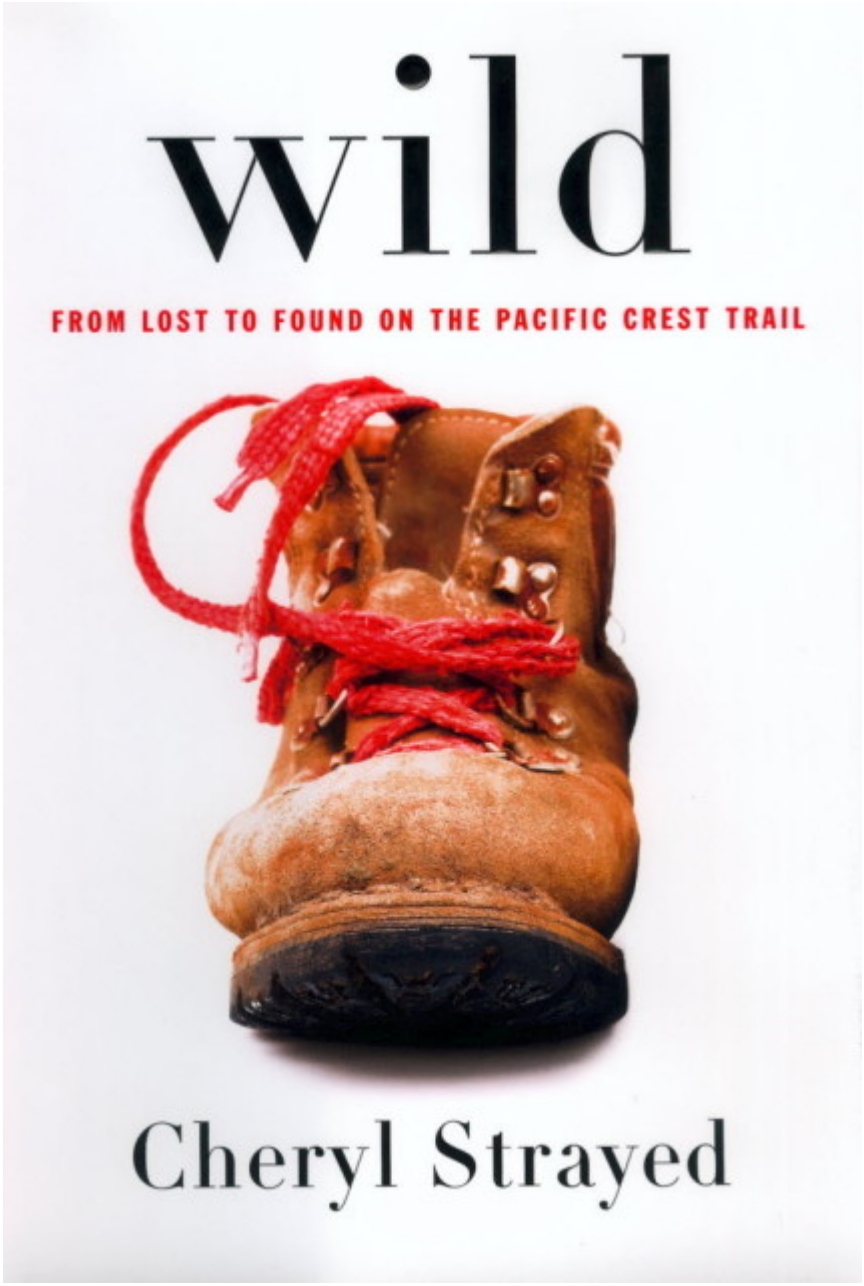
Wonder no more. This strange tale spent the first third making me annoyed-unto-angry with the characters; the second third creeped me right the fk out; and the ending wrapped up this unlikely story with a sweetness and hopefulness that was not forced or cloying, but somehow managed to give some credence to the idea of *First Bad Man* being some kind of feel-good novel.

July's writing is sometimes spare, sometimes florid, but always direct and compelling. Even during the sections that angered me or creeped me, I never considered putting it down. She takes an unfiltered view, but never comes off as cynical or above-it-all ironic.

(Also, too: her book of short stories, *No One Belongs Here*

More Than You, is pretty terrific.)

MFW



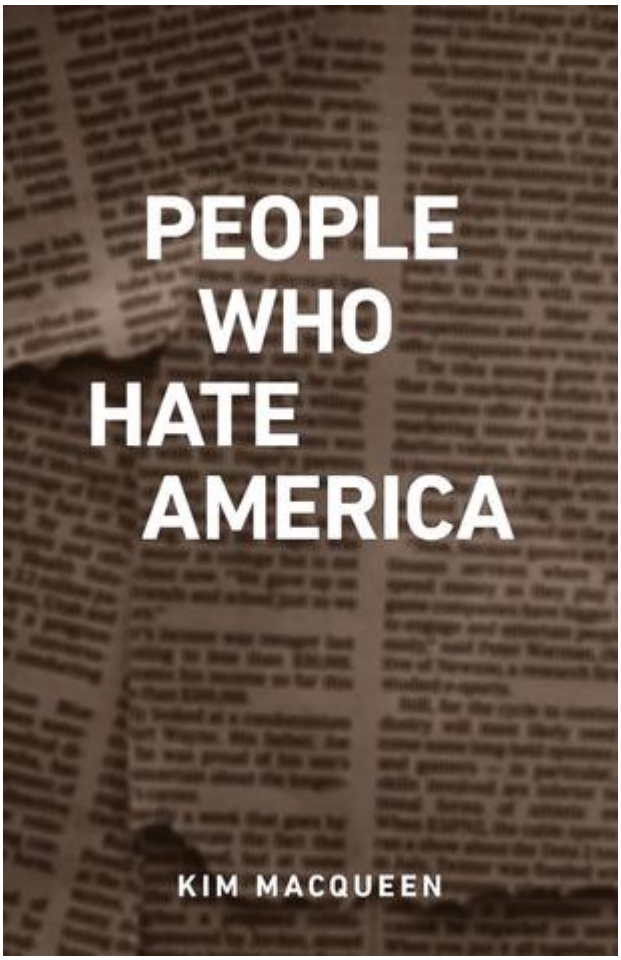
Yeah, it's an Oprah pick, but I ain't ashamed. I'm only about half-done with this book, but it is really pretty great. Strayed is a fantastic writer; the night I started, it kept me up way past pumpkin hour.

I had avoided this one for awhile, despite or because of the hoopla. Add the fact that I kind of hate the *memoir* genre<fn>With some exceptions like Jeanette Walls and Frank McCourt.</fn>, and I let this one slide. I get the sense that

Strayed is giving us a pretty straight story<fn>Keeping in mind this blog's fealty to the Unreliable Narrator theory that posits that all writers lie.</fn>, heartbreaking and terrifying and tragic.

I've been known to hurl *memoirs* wallward in disgust<fn>Augusten Burroughs, I'm calling you out!</fn>, and it could still happen with *Wild*, but I think I'm down for the whole hike.

(I also find Reese Witherspoon pretty adorable and I'm curious to see how she manages this on screen.)



This is the first of the three that I read, and it kicked this whole batch of reading off in high gear.<fn>Full disclosure: Kim and her family are good pals. This blog takes its conflict of interest standards seriously!</fn> The writing is spare, with an incessant rhythm that keeps the pages turning. The central – and several of the secondary – characters are fully

realized in a crisp and economical manner. The book is funny, and sad, and tragic in places.

The story is a fictionalized account of the Mayor of Newark leading up to the 1967 riots. It's familiar in a strange way for any of us who watched *The Sopranos.* We recognize some of the wise guys from our tv screen, and some of the grifts ring bells, too. But it never feels derivative; perhaps that is because the actual Mayor was a relative of the author, but I think it has more to do with the distinctive styling MacQueen brings to the page.

Sure, she's a pal, and I'm giving her an enthusiastic plug. Take it with a grain. But I'm telling you: this is a really terrific book. And watching a friend develop her talent into something that rings like *People Who Hate America*: that is My Favorite World in spades.

My Favorite World #16



See that way cool cat up there? That's composer/pianist/bandleader Horace Silver. He recorded a bunch of very deep swinging albums for Blue Note in the 60s. <fn>Turns out he died while I was in hospital last summer, passing without me noticing. Mea culpa.</fn> He's not one of the *Major* figures in jazz, but he is significant. And

swinging. Been listening to him a fair bit the past few days, thanks to the serendipity of Ipodius Randomonious.

Along the way, it occurred to me that Steely Dan might have copped the intro to *Rikki Don't Lost That Number* from *Song for my Father* by Horace Silver.

Whaddya think?

Other than that, this week, I got nuthin. You might use it til you feel better.

Still my favorite world.