

## C is for Clear

By Michael Stone

A thick silence descended over the small tableau. Charity said to Andy, "Just run that one by me again, will you?" Tom the fat tomcat sidled out of the kitchen into the lounge. Andy wilted. "This bloke down the pub said they were all the rage across the Atlantic. That is, until somebody sued the manufacturers and put them out of business.

He's got a contact who sends 'em over by the lorry load. On the black market, like. That's why there are no instructions with it, or packaging. Not that you need any, it looks pretty much self-explanatory to me."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"Well, this bloke, he said that they were a great tonic for anybody dazed, or weary. Or if they was just plain jaded. He reckons it works like an emotional back-scrubber. Perks you up, like. You put this plug attachment in your ear," – Andy demonstrated it – "enter a number on the keypad, presumably you put in a higher number the more depressed you are, and press the green button here. Only the battery needs recharging first."

"This green button? The one with a phone symbol on it?"

"Yes, that's the one. A phone? I thought that was a C for . . . I dunno. Cheer up? Carefree?" Andy's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "It does look like phone though, doesn't it?"

Charity nodded.

"D'you think I've been conned?"

Charity widened her eyes and raised an eyebrow.

There was a long pause. Andy said, "Sorry, love." Charity just huffed.

But Andy was nothing if not persistent. "How the bloke was saying, you could wake up all groggy and fed up, and just refresh your brain. He said that's why it's called a DazeAway. And I thought to meself, 'That'd be grand! I'm always a bit dazed and confused first thing'."

Charity snorted, opened her mouth to say something and then decided against it.

"And I thought about you and little Robbie and the . . ." They never mentioned Charity's postnatal depression by name.

"Oh, Andy, that's what the tablets are for. The doctor said it was going to be a long haul. There are no shortcuts. Even if this stupid thingy worked." She picked up the DazeAway. "It's not as if we haven't already got a mobile phone. I bet this one was nicked. What did you pay for it?"

Andy looked even more wretched.

Charity sighed. "Go on."

"I told him I hadn't got the cash, but he said it was okay, he took all major credit cards."

“And?”

“We-ell, he did. I gave him my card and he took it. Just got up and walked out, like.”

“You pillock! Didn't you try and stop him?”

“I couldn't believe it at first. I kept thinking he must've gone to get a pen or summat. Then when he'd been gone a couple of minutes I got suspicious.”

“You don't say? Good God! What am I to do with you? You and little Robbie, it's like having twins! Look, get on the phone and give the credit card company our details. Tell them your card has been stolen.”

“Isn't it a bit late at night for that?”

“They'll have a 24hr automated service. Just do as you're told.” Charity wiped a hand across her eyes. It was late and no doubt Robbie would be awake in a couple of hours. She loved the little blighter but God he was demanding. A bit like her husband really. She smiled. That's it Charity, she thought, keep smiling, and it just might see you through.

“I'm sorry Charity, love. I didn't think.”

“No, you never—” She bit back the angry retort; she was too tired. “Tomorrow you go down the police station and tell them what's happened. If some thug is going around selling what are probably stolen mobile phones, he needs locking up. Would you recognise him if you saw him again?”

“Too true I would! I've a good memory for faces if nowt else.”

“Okay.” She patted his cheek. “But for now, just phone the credit card company. I'm going to bed.”

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Andy stood in the draughty hallway, frustrated. A pleasant woman's voice, after welcoming him to the Credit Card Customer Careline, told him to test to see if his phone was a touch-tone model. “Please press the star button, now,” the voice advised.

Andy frowned and fumbled with the dial. “What's a bloody star button when it's at home?” He snatched up Charity's mobile off the side of the phone table and saw a button with a \* symbol at the bottom right corner. The dial phone had no such provision. “Oh, great!”

What to do? It'd be too expensive making the call on Charity's mobile. He could wait till morning when customer services would be manned by real live people, but by then the bugger with his credit card would probably have spent a fortune on it. Andy switched on Charity's mobile and began to punch in the number for the careline. The keypad was locked. “For God's sake!” He shook it ineffectually and considered waking Charity for advice, but his sense of self-preservation quickly derailed that train of thought.

Andy trudged back into the kitchen and idly picked up the new phone. Why not? he thought. After a little jiggery-pokery he managed to use Charity's charger to plug it into the mains. A smug smirk plastered itself across his face as a green display lit up. “I ain't so dumb.”

He screwed the earpiece into his ear tightly, balanced the phone book on the kitchen table, traced the careline number with his left index finger, and thumbed in the number.

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Charity's slippers feet slapped the rods as she carried little Robbie down the stairs. She had spent twenty minutes trying to coax him back to sleep. He was neither too cold nor too warm, he wasn't hungry or thirsty, and his nappy was clean and dry. "So go to sleep you little toad!" Robbie, ignoring his mum's sound advice, continued to grizzle. "Let's get you a drink of milk, eh?"

Charity frowned at seeing the kitchen light on and the lounge in darkness. She had expected to find her husband watching some late night TV or sulking over a beer. And she was ready to give him some grief over it, too. Why did she have to get up to the baby when her dozy hubby was already awake! "Hush, Robbie." She set the baby down on a mat where he immediately found something crunchy to pop in his mouth. Charity moaned. Finding something small, inedible and potentially lethal seemed a knack Robbie possessed. She bent down to take it from him when she saw the DazeAway smashed apart on the tiled kitchen floor. Poor Andy, she thought. He must have taken it harder than she realized. She prised a shard of black plastic out of Robbie's mouth and gathered together several larger pieces from under the table. She examined them closely. One was the battery compartment lid. On the inside was embossed a logo. A white sticker read: Memoraze and DaysAway are trademarks of

Charity frowned and examined another fragment. Caution! Always consult the manual before using your DaysAway.

"The manufacturer accepts no responsibility for misuse of portable Memoraze equipment." Charity said the words to herself, softly, letting them tumble off her lips like poisoned cherries. So Andy had got it wrong about the DaysAway, but so had she.

"Come here Robbie!" she gathered the youngster up in her arms and trod slowly to the lounge. "Andy? Andy, are you there? Andy, love?" She flicked the lounge light on. And there, occupying a small space between the settee and the wall and curled up in a ball, was Andy.

"Andy? Are you—Are you all right?"

He removed a thumb from his mouth. "You aren't my mummy!"

Tom the fat tomcat, sensing he wasn't going to get any peace tonight, got up and sidled out of the cat flap.

Charity thought it again: You and little Robbie, it's like having twins. She tried to cover her ears as Andy began to wail. "I want my mummy, I want my mummy, I want my mummy . . ." End

Top

From The Daze After Tomorrow to Painting With Glass

By William Rupp

I'm afraid it is increasingly clear that science fiction, at least in the popular mind, means movies these days rather than novels or short stories. Furthermore, science fiction is taking an increasingly distant second place to fantasy. The Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings series are leading cases in point.

However, science fiction films do continue to appear. And when I say “science fiction films,” I refer to movies that knowledgeable fans would consider worthy of that title. I believe that, for those of us who care about SF, the quality of science fiction films is important. Good SF films should (though not necessarily will) increase interest in the field.

One relatively recent science fiction film worthy of consideration is “The Day After Tomorrow.” Please note that I said worthy of consideration, not necessarily worthy of praise. In fact, on a scale of one to four, I could not give the film more than a two. For a big budget movie featuring outstanding visual effects and a solid acting team, that is not a very high rating. Note also that this rating is as a movie, not in terms of its effect, if any, on the public perception of science fiction.

I made a point of seeing the movie in a theater, since I wanted to experience the flooding of New York on the big screen. Fortunately, I was able to see it at a second run theater for about \$3.50. I enjoyed the flood and other natural disasters, as well as the acting. Unfortunately, the whole thing is based on so ridiculous a premise that it cannot be taken seriously. Based on what I heard and read last year, no expert in the field of climatology took the idea seriously, either. And that includes radical environmentalists.

In case this whole controversy passed you by, the idea to which I allude is the concept of so radical a climate change as to cause massive tidal waves and a new ice age....all in a couple of weeks! Okay, such a concept is a joke. But somebody with a lot of money thought it was plausible enough to give the go-ahead to film the darned thing.

What effect does such a well mounted but logically brain-dead movie have on the science fiction genre? One hopes not much, since the only effect it could possibly have is a negative one. It’s not that this is the only SF film based on a shaky premise. It’s just that this one is so obviously stupid that even scientifically challenged viewers can figure out that they are watching high class garbage. Furthermore, this movie suffers from a fairly obvious political motivation (who knew that Dick Cheney was moonlighting as a movie actor?)

One might say that any film using faster-than-light-speed travel also is nonsense. That would cover a lot of ground, in printed fiction as well as on the screen. Personally, I hold out hope that someday we will discover some loophole in Einstein’s theory. But in any case such stories are so speculative that, if they are well done, willing suspension of disbelief can take place. But “The Day After Tomorrow” is so obviously contrary to what we know that is just can’t be taken seriously. Let’s hope that not too many folks take it for a good example of science fiction.

Recent SF films that are much worthier examples of the genre include “Minority Report,” “I, Robot,” and “Signs.” I liked “Minority Report” fairly well. Its premise is somewhat shaky, too, but not downright ridiculous. The production values and visual effects were quite good, and the acting was more than adequate. One might say that “Minority Report” was a mystery/suspense story in science fictional clothing. That is clearly true, but not a negative criticism of the work. Science fiction can deal with any theme; love, revenge, retribution, etc., etc. The question is always, “Was it done well?” “Minority Report” was indeed done well. It’s also nice to see the work of one of the field’s all-time greats, in this case Phil Dick, given a solid screen treatment.

"I, Robot" seems to me to be one of the best science fiction movies to come out in some time. Maybe one of the better SF films ever. This one really holds one's interest throughout. For one thing, I am a big fan of Will Smith (I still want to see a sequel to "The Wild, Wild West" despite what some people think of that one!). The production values were first-rate, and the characters, especially the robot Sonny, were especially sympathetic. I should add that when I say sympathetic I mean believable and expertly drawn, not necessarily "nice." Sonny was both sympathetic and nice. Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics were carefully woven into the plot, which holds up throughout.

I browsed through the review of the film on the Internet Movie Data Base and found that the general reaction by reviewers there was quite favorable. One otherwise favorable review contained the following summary: "A clichéd cop thriller crossed with sci-fi but it is noisy, enjoyable fun - all a summer action film should be." That's superficially true, but unfair to the film as a whole. Any SF film that combines an intriguing moral question with intelligent scientific speculation is doing just what that type of film should do.

The last film I will mention is "Signs," which is the oldest of the several discussed here. I did not see this one when it appeared two or three years ago, but recently obtained a VHS copy. "Signs" is clearly science fiction. Any time you have a story about an alien invasion of Earth, it is by definition science fiction. But "Signs" is more a morality play than science fiction. No, that's not fair, either. As I said above, science fiction can be about any theme, idea, or emotion. The focus here is on the character of Graham Hess, a farmer who has lost his faith following the tragic death of his wife. The narrative question here is, Will the humans survive the invasion? But the more interesting question is, Will Graham regain his faith?

As science fiction, "Signs" is not exceptional. There are a few weak spots, such as how could creatures not terribly unlike humans in form be allergic to water? Also, the whole idea of aliens trying to conquer Earth is pretty clichéd by now.

Two things stand out in this movie. One is the suspense, which is very effective. The isolation of the farmhouse and the fact that we don't see much of the aliens for most of the movie contribute to a really scary atmosphere. I confess it scared me. In this regard, I am reminded of the horror movies ("The Cat People," "Leopard Man," etc.) produced by Val Lewton in the 1940s for RKO Radio Pictures.

The second point, and I suspect the more important one both for the film's creator, M. Night Shyamalan, and the lead actor, Mel Gibson, is the moral question represented by the character of Graham Hess. Hess is terribly shaken by the death of his wife, so much so that he has given up the ministry. His grief colors everything in his life. Where before he looked to God for guidance, he now believes "we are on our own." The balance of the story revolves, on one level, around the attack by aliens on the Hess farmhouse, and on a deeper level, around Hess' rediscovery of his belief in God.

I am convinced, based on his performance in this film, that Mel Gibson is a really good actor. While he didn't create the film, I am certain that he was attracted to the project largely because of the story's theme of lost and regained faith.

Is "Signs" good science fiction? Well, it may not be exceptional, but it's not bad. Is it good horror/suspense? You bet it is!! And how about good drama in terms of character portrayal? On this score it is perhaps at its strongest.

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Today's paper brings an item about a possible method of detecting incoming cruise missiles launched by terrorist against U.S. soil from boats off shore. David Ignatius, of the Washington Post, reports that Lockheed Martin VP David Kier is worried that not enough money is being spent to develop methods to detect low-flying missiles carrying WMD warheads. Kier's suggested technology is intriguing.

He proposes development of a "passive coherent locator." The trick is to amplify FM radio waves, then wait for the detection of a disturbance in the FM energy field caused by a cruise missile. There is no mention in the article of the how the technology would actually work. I wonder whether the nature of the FM signal is a factor. I mean, would it work just as well to broadcast The Rolling Stones as it would to play something by Miles Davis?

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My wife and I subscribe to Science News, which every week carries interesting science items. A recent issue had an intriguing article, complete with color cover, outlining a new discovery in the field of art.

It seems art critics and historians have long marveled at the luminescent quality of paintings created by Venetian Renaissance artist. In her article "Venetian Grinds" (who says science writers have no sense of humor?), Alexandra Goho says that for many years researchers and art experts have had the following question: "How did Venetian Renaissance painter create the strong, clear, and bright colors that make objects and figures in their paintings appear to glow?"

It appears that the answer has been discovered. Louisa Matthews, an art historian at Union College, has discovered a revealing list on a piece of paper dated 1534. The paper was among the state archives in Venice. It is a list written by a Venetian pigment seller. In addition to the expected items, azurite, vermilion, and the like, raw material used in the making of glass were listed. It seems that the Venetians were master glass makers. One of their achievements was a high-quality colorless glass called *cristallo*.

Venetian artists, like all artists in those days, mixed their own paints from raw materials. The theory is that they must have included tiny bits of this special glass in their paints. Goho mentions the painter Lorenzo Lotto in her article. Lotto left a notebook which lists various items related to his work. Among them was *sal ammoniac*, a clear colorless crystalline salt. The glass particles had the effect of making paint somewhat transparent. A microscopic examination of a portion of one of Lotto's paintings in fact showed that tiny particles of silica were part of the paint.

The effect of this glass-in-paint technique was to allow light to shine through top layers of paint and illuminate lower layers of paint. Such paint had other non-aesthetic purposes as well. This just reinforces the fact that the ancients (or, as in this case, people from the Renaissance) had a trick or two up their sleeves that we have forgotten.

Bill Rupp