

BOOK REVIEWS

Leonard Maltin's Film and Video Guide 1995 (Penguin)

You've been here before. You want to rent something new. Your five friends have seen it already. You all stand around for hours, getting angrier and angrier as one film after another is proposed and shot down. Eventually the situation deteriorates into fisticuffs and bloodshed behind the Barney and Friends rack. By the time the police arrive, the kiddy section looks like the horror section, the horror section resembles Golgotha and you could fit the remains in a shoe box. If only you'd brought a video guide, you wouldn't be dead right now.

That's why you really ought to pick up a copy of *Leonard Maltin's Film and Video Guide 1995*. It'll settle most of your arguments, and fill your brain with useless bits of interesting trivia besides!

That's right, I said 1995. This book was designed to be the most up-to-date video guide currently available, and it is. It even has listings for films in current release that weren't on video when it was published, like *The Lion King*, *Speed*, and *Jurassic Park*.

What else? How about 1500 pages of little, tiny, compressed reviews for everything from *The Guyver* to *Yor, Hunter From the Future*? Stars and directors are cross-indexed, sequels helpfully pointed out, and alternate versions, titles and running times are listed. It's one big alphabetically organized orgy of the best and worst of the celluloid jungle!

This is also the only guide in the pack that lists made-for-television movies not available on video, just in case your local station runs them unannounced. There's even a complete cross-reference of the Amy Fisher biographies!

But the ultimate test of any video guide is whether you agree with the reviews. Just because it's endorsed by a bigshot movie critic who's a regular on *Entertainment Tonight* does not mean you'll like what he says about *Blade Runner*! Well, no worries there. With a few exceptions, Leonard is a pretty easy guy to agree with. He's a fairer critic than most, and that tone comes through in this book. It's a far better bet than the pointlessly hostile Siskel and/or Ebert video guides, and much more personal than the various dry 'Consumer Guides' that swell the market.

Lest I rave too much, I should point out a few flaws. Like Leonard Maltin himself, the book has a tendency to rave about very old movies that frankly aren't deserving of the space. It even wastes tons of space listing and cross-listing old movie series you've never even heard of. Do we really need to know about the endless *Blondie* or *Lone Wolf* sequels, much less read all about them, when they weren't even watchable? Lemme think for a min-- NO!

Overall though, this is the best guide going (and yes, I actually checked the others out). At a reasonable \$9.95 Canadian, it's a must have for the budding videophile; for the rest of you, it's a great way to cheat at *Trivial Pursuit*. It's also the most up-to-date guide available... Until the 1996 edition, that is...

-- Trent Drake

One Step Closer to Home (Andrews & McMeel)

By John MacPherson

The format of these reprinted comic strips alone would invite comparisons to Gary Larson's famous *Far Side* series. One-panel gag cartoons with occasionally meaningful captions are all over the place these days.

Unfortunately, the similarities don't end there. MacPherson's artwork is an almost direct copy of Larson's style. Drones with hunched shoulders slouch, cringe, stretch and pose almost exactly like the grotesque creations of that other, more successful strip. The major difference is in the area of facial expression, and here's where the trouble really begins. MacPherson's characters express surprise through heavily circled eyes; whether they're scared or excited or surprised, they all look like they haven't slept in weeks.

But art in a comic strip is secondary to the jokes, right? Strike two. For the most part, these jokes are retreads of old jokes or *Sienfeld*-esque observations that just aren't that funny. They even repeat themselves. This seems to be a deliberate attempt to make the humour more familiar, unlike the relatively alien tone of (here we go again) the *Far Side*. It falls short somehow. Moreover, the captions are often over-written and cumbersome. There are a few cartoons I have a certain affection for (the 'Video rental counsellor' is a personal favourite), but overall they're flavourless.

If *The Far Side* is *The Simpsons* of comic strips, then *Closer to Home* is *Full House*. At \$9.95 for a very small book, your wallet won't be laughing, and neither will you. Read it in the store while ducking the clerk.

-- Trent Drake



Bob Swilnard was a lifeguard with an attitude.

Waves: An Anthology of New Gay Fiction

Vintage Books (a division of Random House Inc.)

Edited by Ethan Mordden.

This book is a compilation of 14 short stories by gay authors, expressing their views and personal expe-

riences as gay men. The first story ('Homo in Heteroland' by John Weir) is eye-opening and a bit scary for my hetero_sensibilities, and the third story ('Satan' by Brad Gooch) is down_right disgusting. I'm not trying to say this was a bad book; there were a lot of good stories. It's just that, in my naivete, I found many of them shocking. This book is definitely meant to be read with an OPEN mind. The book's editor explains it best in the introduction: "There is an air of urgency about [this] collection that one misses in the usual 'best of' omnibus -- a feeling that gay writers are recording and analyzing their lives because, if they didn't, no one would know that they had been here, including themselves."

-- Kathy Giesbrech

Enormously FoxTrot (Andrews & McMeel)

By Bill Amend

If you think family funnies are limited to *For Better or For Worse* and the *Family Circus*, think again. For proof, look no further than Bill Amend's *FoxTrot*, gentle family humour with a liberal dash of wackiness; it's one of the funniest comic strips currently in publication.

Amend's creations are back on the bookshelves with *Enormously FoxTrot*, the third *FoxTrot* treasury. *FoxTrot* chronicles the life and times of the Fox family: parents Roger and Andy, plus kids Peter, Paige and Jason (and of course, Jason's iguana, Quincy). The framework is standard family situation comedy, but Amend embellishes this venerable concept with his own innovative humour.

While Amend lacks the lyrical naturalism of *For Better or For Worse*'s Lynn Jonhstone (particularly in his rather generic *Garfield*-esque drawing style), he is a wellspring of wit. Crisp dialogue, flawless comedic timing and a keen sense of the absurd keep *FoxTrot* fresh. It's addictive, laugh-out-loud stuff, and one could easily devour *Enormously FoxTrot* in a single sitting-- though the smart reader will ration these gems and savour them.

FoxTrot isn't shallow stuff: the characters are varied, likable, believable and very familiar--there's a strong sense of family values in the strip, and almost everyone can identify with the Foxes' world: school blues, TV addiction, family vacations, mid-life crises, computer illiteracy, quality time, dating, Nintendo and sibling conflict (Amend's specialty) are among the topics of discussion, but always with a twist.

It's that twist, the sense of the absurd, that really sets Amend apart-- especially in the person of Jason. The precociously brilliant, deviously mischievous and eerily deadpan kid brother is on a never-ending quest to freak out his fellow beings and find new and different ways to torment his long-suffering older sister, Paige (papier-mache spectres of death, vampire pumpkins and Elvis-impersonating Iguanas are only a fraction of his weird and wonderful arsenal). Jason and Paige alone are worth the price of admission (and the bespectacled kid brother seldom fails to steal the show out from

under his elders).

For those who like family humour with smart, witty dialogue and a touch of the absurd, *Enormously FoxTrot* is a must-read. It's more fun than you can shake an iguana at.

-- Sean McQuaid

Mister Bean's Diary (Andrews & McMeel)

Compiled by Robin Driscoll and Rowan Atkinson

Fans of British comedian Rowan Atkinson know him better as the near-silent slapstick character he plays on television-- the hapless Mister Bean, a resourceful but eccentric misfit with a penchant for landing in sticky situations. While Bean's Chaplin-esque bumbling is often hilarious by itself, many have no doubt wondered what goes on in the fevered brain of this near-mute numbskull. Now it can be told.

Andrews & McMeel has released *Mr. Bean's Diary*, which is just what it sounds like: the book is Bean's diary/day planner for 1993, and gives us an amusing, bizarre and sometimes genuinely scary peek into Bean's warped brain.

His diary entries (complete with spooky doodles) dole out the gory details of a year in the life of Bean (much of it drawn from Atkinson's television sketches): we follow his ill-fated romantic obsession with librarian Irma Gobb, his bitter feud with the neighbour in apartment # 3, his crusade against discarded doggie-doo, and even his attempt to give blood (by mail). Scary stuff (funny, but scary).

Stranger still are the various keepsakes pressed into the diary's pages: Bean's entomology collection (assorted crushed bugs), pressed plants, correspondence with everyone from Inspector Morse to the Queen, his old school report card (a harrowing glimpse of his formative years) and photos galore (ranging from a self-made automotive repair guide to candid photos of Irma).

Also sprinkled throughout the book are various to-do notes (i.e. "seek professional help"), poems, and wacky brainstorming, such as his attempts at a better mouse trap. Plus, keep an eye on the top-of-the-page doodles: you may not notice at first, but they serve an ingenious purpose which becomes clear if you flip through the pages properly.

Mr. Bean's Diary is a very clever, inventive book, a revealing and hilarious character sketch presented in a uniquely visual medium. Bean fans will be thrilled with this definitive portrait of their hero, and even the uninitiated should find some amusement in this scenic stroll through an absurdly twisted psyche.

-- Sean McQuaid

