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Venomous, carnivorous centipedes horrify in Insect Fear Film Festival

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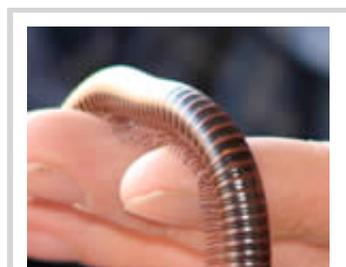
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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — “Centipede Cinema” is the theme of this year’s Insect Fear Film Festival at the University of Illinois, even though everybody – with the possible exception of horror movie writers, directors and actors – knows that centipedes aren’t insects.

“We can still call it an Insect Fear Film Festival because generally the people who are in movies with centipedes or millipedes call them insects,” said May Berenbaum, a professor of [entomology](#) who heads the department and founded the festival in 1984.

Millipedes, which are slower, gentler and usually more legged than centipedes (and which belong to an entirely different class of arthropods), will also make an appearance, although not on the big screen. They will star in the insect petting zoo part of the event, since centipedes can bite and inject venom and as a result aren’t accustomed to petting.

The evening will include two short animated Disney films, “Woodland Café” (1937) and “Mickey’s Garden” (1938). A recurrent gag in animations involving centipedes has their segments going in different directions “and then eventually reconstituting themselves,” Berenbaum said.



“What everybody wonders is how you coordinate when you have anywhere from 15 to 191 pairs of legs,” she said.

A poem written in 1871 by Mrs. Edmund Craster illustrates the human fascination with the movement of all those legs,



Click photo to enlarge

Rob Mitchell designed the winning image for the 2009 Insect Fear Film Festival T-shirt.



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Photo by Art Zangerl

Millipedes will star in the insect petting zoo part of the festival since centipedes can bite and inject venom and as a result aren't accustomed to petting.

Berenbaum said:

*The Centipede was happy quite,
Until a Toad in fun
Said, 'Pray, which leg goes after which?'
And worked her mind to such a pitch,
She lay distracted in a ditch
Considering how to run.*

Another short to be presented at the event, a 1954 episode of "Watch Mr. Wizard" that explores the mysteries of insect locomotion, will shed light on

the issue.

Being venomous, carnivorous, fast and multi-legged makes centipedes good subjects for horror movies, and the two feature movies, "Centipede!" (not rated) and "Centipede Horror" (rated R) exploit those qualities. In "Centipede!" the filmmakers supersize the arthropods and give them other traits not yet observed by trained entomologists, Berenbaum said.

"At one point the giant centipede that's chasing the humans is cut in half and becomes two giant centipedes, which isn't exactly the way it works," she said. Although many centipedes can grow new segments (each of which includes a pair of legs) later in life, "once they lose their heads that's the end of that," she said.

"Centipede!" does refer to an actual centipede, *Scolopendra gigantea*, which grows large enough – up to 12 inches long – to catch and eat bats.

"Centipede Horror" includes sorcery-induced centipede attacks and several scenes of humans spitting up centipedes, Berenbaum said.

Doors will open at 6 p.m. on Feb. 28 (Saturday) at the Foellinger Auditorium, 709 S. Mathews Ave., Urbana. Early activities include an insect petting zoo and Bugscope (courtesy of the U. of I. [Beckman Institute's Imaging Technology Center](#)), which will provide a peek through a scanning electron microscope for an "up close and personal look at various insects," Berenbaum said. Face painting will be available, and the winners of a centipede art contest will be announced at 7 p.m. "Centipede!" will begin at 9:30 p.m., followed by "Centipede Horror."

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