

Read It, Early May 2016

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I am working on a book project. Some of the content from this blog will be in it, as well as pieces of my writing dating back to the early 1990s. If this goes well, there may be other book projects.

The project has occupied a significant amount of my time, but I am still progressing through a couple of books.

The Dark Forest

I am almost done with *The Dark Forest* by Cixin Liu *aka* Liu Cixin, translated by Joel Martinsen. This is the second book in the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy. This is a pretty big book, at 512 pages. I've got about 100 pages to go and it is picking up speed on the way to the conclusion.

The writing in translation seems a bit indifferent. For the most part it just lacks literary quality, but there are also some figures of speech and phrasing that must be highly idiomatic, and don't translate well. They "clunk" a bit — kind of like listening to the dialogue in a dubbed Godzilla movie. In other places, conversations drag. I think Martinsen's translation of this second volume is more literal than Ken Liu's translation of the first, which makes it more straightforward but in some ways less enjoyable to read, as some of the strangeness of the original is muted. Per Wikipedia, it looks like Ken Liu will be translating the third book, *Death's End*, due later this year. I might need to re-read the earlier book to firm up my impressions on the different approaches taken by these two translators. And of course I'm hampered by knowing absolutely nothing about the original Chinese.

But even if the language can be a little clunky, the reason to bother with this book is that it is a very imaginative work, crossing hundreds of years of human history. And it is full of interesting ideas. Let me describe just one of them, while trying not to spoil the book too much.

The earth is awaiting the invasion of an attack fleet from Trisolaris. Meanwhile, the fleet has deployed tiny "sophons," proton-sized particles that can communicate with humans as well as monitor and limit some technological activities on earth. The aliens have thus established a "lockdown," literally causing experiments that depend on quantum effects to fail, preventing scientific breakthroughs on Earth. This is to prevent Earth-based science from catching up with the

Trisolarans, during their long trip to earth — because faster-than-light travel is not part of the universe of these books, which makes this science fiction lean towards the “hard” side of the genre.

Thus there are hard limits on what Earth science can achieve. Earthlings can’t achieve quantum computing, or certain other breakthroughs. But the Trisolarans seem to have a limit; while they themselves share thoughts with each other openly, they are unable to read human minds. This has, apparently, to do with the idea that human thought already involves quantum effects — in the scientific community today, a controversial idea.

And so a project is initiated, the Wallfacer project, in which a small group of humans are given access to nearly unlimited resources and tasked with designing secret strategies to defeat the anticipated invaders. Earth must put unshakable trust in the Wallfacers, without being able to learn of their planned strategies. And so, there is a very clever, story-based reason for the somewhat convoluted plotting that follows, and nicely explains why the *reader* does not learn the motivations and plans of the Wallfacers up front. This is literally a meta-plot device — a plot device that creates a need for secret plots-within-plots. This makes the unfolding of *The Dark Forest* resemble, faintly, a spy novel, where the reader may be unclear on just which side a character is working for.

Three of the Wallfacers go off to start on various projects involving armaments, human cognition, and space flight. One retreats to a beautiful villa, smokes cigars, and drinks top-shelf liquor. There’s an odd subplot involving an imaginary woman, a fantasy creation of the fourth Wallfacer, who is, it turns out, real. This bit of wish-fulfillment seems strange in the context of the story. I’m guessing there must be antecedents in Chinese literature.

The story starts to get interesting when we follow the lives of the Wallfacers, and the antagonists who, directed by the sophons, become their “Wallbreakers,” dedicating their lives to uncovering the true plans. So it *is* a “spy versus spy” story, to some extent. But don’t imagine that this is just a Le Carré novel set in space. It’s too big to be put into a single genre box; it’s science fiction, but like the first book, uses other genres as touchstones.

Portions of the book move too slowly, making for a frustrating read at times. But then, at times, the story makes big jumps in time and space, and things start to kick into high gear. If you can tolerate the initial slow pace, and the occasional bit of leaden or clunky dialogue, Cixin Liu’s extremely imaginative world-building makes the story itself rank up there with some of my favorite writers of Big Ideas science fiction, such as Vernor Vinge and Greg Egan.

I’m assuming the book will end reasonably well, so that I’ll have no reason to change my assessment. But, of course, I’ll come back to complete my assessment when I’ve completed the book.

Not all promising works end well. It’s time for me to get back to...

The Magicians, Season One

A season of a television show can only really be as good as the ending of the season. I came to this series with some trepidation and I was right to be concerned. The pilot was very impressive, but the pace was hugely accelerated, compared to the pace of events in the books, raising a lot of questions as to what the writers were going to do with the plot over the course of the season.

Well, now we know.

I continued to be impressed by the acting work in this series. Jason Ralph (Quentin), Stella Maeve (Julia), Olivia Taylor Dudley (Alice), Arjun Gupta (Penny), and Hale Appleman (Eliot) are all really impressive. Some of the minor characters are also worth noting. Rick Worthy plays Dean Fogg as a character very much unlike the Dean Fogg of the book, but very intriguing.

No, my gripes don't have much to do with the casting. I'm also willing to overlook, for the most part, the low budget, although it occasionally limits what the show can do. My gripes are with the screenwriters. They have worked too hard to make this show a soap opera, rushing and blowing up elements from the original series, turning everything up to eleven, while at the same time padding a number of episodes with material not based on the books — material which is often weak compared to the text.

Spoiler Warning

Before we go on — there are spoilers in the paragraphs to come.

Episode 4, “The World in the Walls,” is a good example of weak material. The storyline, involving Julia, is loosely adapted from the book, but it is told in parallel with Quentin, portrayed in a mental hospital — or at least he thinks he is. The “gaslighting” is a pretty overworked trope by now.

In episode 10, “Homecoming,” Penny is trapped in the Neitherlands, which apparently are occupied by zombies, for no apparent reason, in a storyline that Lev Grossman, I hope, would have been ashamed to write.

I've already described some of the unevenness of episodes such as 7, “The Mayakovsky Circumstance,” and the occasionally ridiculous effects the show's low budget generates. But there are some episodes that are quite strong, too — episode 9, “The Writing Room,” is powerful, and there is little or nothing I would change.

In the last few episodes, we learn that a story element revealed quite late in the trilogy — the idea that Jane Chatwin can use a magical watch to try repeatedly to defeat the Beast — has been adapted to include Quentin and friends. They have attempted this before, many times, and failed each time. And not only that, but this is the last time they can try. This attempt to “raise the stakes” feels a little gratuitous, as does the magical investigation of alternatives, which leads the gang to determine that every possible course of action in which they

don't travel to Fillory will result in disastrous failure. And so, they go, because it is literally the last chance and least bad thing they can do.

The final episode of the series, number 13, is called “Have You Brought Me Little Cakes?” In this episode, there’s a lot of story business left to take care of. Too much, in fact. I’ve been wondering all season if we’re going to meet a talking sheep, and just how stupid that might look. We don’t, exactly; we meet Ember in the form of a humanoid sheep-man, who reminds me of a character from Haruki Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Fortunately the costume looks pretty convincing, especially when he is shot in dim light.

Ember has seen better days, as has Fillory. He’s living in a degraded state, but he still has godlike power, which our heroes desperately need to tap. There’s a funny *and* nauseating gag about drinking — well, I’ll let you watch that for yourself. It is one of the moments that makes you really scratch your head and wonder why you are watching this, and what the hell the writers were thinking. In fact this constant jumping between humor and horror is what makes the finale so hard to watch.

We learn that Julia didn’t actually have a wonderful experience contacting Our Lady Underground and in fact the Reynard the Fox storyline from the book is close to what really happened. This involves a scene of murder and rape that is really hard to watch.

I get that the show is dark at times, and the book is dark at times. But with all the changes to the plot, couldn’t we have allowed Julia even a moment of light and hope for the time being, and possibly play out the Reynard the Fox storyline in season two? Can’t this magical world contain both darkness and light? Apparently not. Anyway, it’s pretty grim.

The low budget becomes ridiculous when our heroes need to encounter a castle. Quentin gamely explains that in the early days of Fillory, the creators ran out of budget, and so they left the castle invisible. So, we’re given an invisible castle, because the budget wouldn’t cover a visible one. This was mildly comic, as a form of “lampshading,” but it just emphasized that there really have been a lot of things over the course of the season that should have looked better, and that the audience deserved better than this gag.

Between the shock, horror, and humor, I was thrown out of the storyline again and again, to the point where I had a bit of whiplash.

In fact, I watched the finale three times, trying to decide if it was really as ineptly done, and hard to watch, as it seemed on my first viewing.

I’m afraid it is.

We’ve also got ourselves a major cliffhanger situation — more of a cliffhanger than the book ever had. So again, we’re amping up the elements of the story to make everything darker and stronger, and not only is it unnecessary, but it is

frustrating. I expect that quite a few people who watched all of season 1 won't bother to return next year.

Personally, I'm hoping that the producers can get it together and kick off season two, due next year, with a bigger budget and some cleaned-up writing. I'd like to see more of Lev Grossman's story elements used. So I'm willing to give season 2 a try, for an episode or two, but I'm not planning to blindly purchase a season pass. And if the first couple of episodes of season two are as distressing as the season one finale, I'm done with SyFy's *The Magicians*. And it will be a shame, because Grossman's tale really deserved a better treatment.

Childhood's End, the SyFy Miniseries

Incidentally, I tried to watch the third and final part of SyFy's adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*. After the first fifteen or twenty minutes, I found that I just couldn't go on. I may wind up deleting it unfinished. Stuffing the production with cheesy horror-movie tropes — the menacing glowing eyes, the feel of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Damien: Omen II* — just really destroys the thought-provoking, spiritual storyline of the original book. It's an embarrassment to the whole genre of classic "golden age" science fiction. This is why the miniseries has only a 69% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Actually, that seems generous.

I wonder if any of the same folks at SyFy worked on *The Magicians*?

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

I'm continuing to read my kids bits of the funniest of *Hitchhiker's Guide* books. I get to do the voices of Ford Prefect and Marvin. I can't quite do justice to the original radio show, but we can have some fun. I'm also going to put the radio show on the kids' iPad, because they asked me to.

The Turnip Princess

We're also close to finishing up *The Turnip Princess and Other Newly Discovered Fairy Tales*. This is a fun book. The tales are wildly uneven, and sometimes disturbing — "everyone dies" is not necessarily a good ending for a fairy tale — but the better ones are very entertaining. One of my favorites is a short, simple tale about the anthropomorphic moon, who comes down to earth to speak to a tailor and order a suit of clothes, which, when he comes back to pick it up, does not fit him well. It's funny and a great puzzle to discuss with the kids.

Light

There's one more book I've been reading this week. This is a slim volume, a quick read. It's *Light* by M. John Harrison. I picked this up after reading numerous recommendations. This is the first book of the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy.

As described, it seems like the kind of imaginative, arty science fiction that I would enjoy.

As written, though, it seems very reminiscent of the work of Jeff Noon's *Vurt* and the cut-up novels of William S. Burroughs, but tainted with the amorality of works like Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, a "hard-boiled" cyberpunk novel stuffed with gratuitous murder. While I enjoy the prose, and the chaotic imagination, so far this book isn't really doing it for me.

Really, really soft science fiction that allows magic and synchronicity and hallucinatory goings-on can sometimes remind me of Robert Frost's famous quotation about free verse: "writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down." Not all books like this are necessarily bad; I enjoyed *Vurt*, and I enjoyed *Noir* by M. K. Jeter, and I enjoyed *Signal to Noise* by Eric S. Nylund. All are sort of in that highly imaginative mode. But I'm not enjoying *Light* as much as those other works. Maybe one reason is that I'm simply getting old and curmudgeonly, wanting my stories to actually make sense.

It has some very beautiful moments, and three strange story-lines woven together, but there is a constant undercurrent of misogyny and violence that I find really distasteful. One of our point-of-view characters is apparently actually a serial killer, for no good reason that I can discern. Another character, Seria Mau, murders a whole group of passengers aboard her spacecraft. Only one of the three point-of-view characters doesn't seem to be actively homicidal.

I'll probably finish it, but unless it comes together and there is some reasonable explanation for the way the book portrays its characters, particularly the women, I think I'm done with the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy. I'm scratching my head as it is, wondering how this work possibly received the Tiptree award. Maybe it will become clearer. Maybe Harrison will bring it together in a way that makes the "free verse" seem like a poem after all. But maybe not.

I am still interested in reading Harrison's earlier *Viriconium* stories, collected in an omnibus edition, that is waiting for me on the shelf.

So, again, a poor showing — since my last post, I can't say that I've finished a single book! That's not very satisfying. But there are several that are nearly finished. And I hope to soon have some news to report on my book project.

Until next time — keep reading!

Saginaw, Michigan
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