

Read It, Late May 2016

Paul R. Potts

Attempting Normal

On my way home from Ann Arbor this week I stopped at the Book Warehouse in Birch Run, at the outlet mall. I used to get books there pretty frequently, but lately their prices have been increasing and their selection going downhill. While a few years ago they would sell books “10 for \$10” or “3 for \$10” or similar deals, now they tend to be marked down from publisher’s list. The markdown from list price may be 60% off, but it’s still a lot more expensive than they used to be.

I’ve also gotten some good audiobooks at the Book Warehouse — for example, I bought Christopher Hitchens’ *Arguably* in unabridged audiobook form there. The set of 24 CDs cost me, I think, \$20. I had found an unabridged audiobook of David Foster Wallace’s book of essays *Both Flesh and Not* there, too. But when I looked around on Thursday for some other audiobooks that I might be interested in reading, I found nothing at all.

The outlet mall seems to be going downhill in other ways. It looks like a couple of other stores I liked are closed. There was a place that stocked a lot of discount DVDs, including boxed sets of TV shows. It seems to be gone.

Anyway, I did find a slim book by Marc Maron called *Attempting Normal*. I have been a fan of Marc Maron for many years. I got to meet him in person when he performed a show in Pontiac, Michigan a few years ago. I’ve been curious about his books but never curious enough to order one.

Marc is a literate guy and was an English major, like me. He’s a storyteller and observational comic. His book contains some of his longer-form storytelling; not jokes, but short anecdotes of a few to a dozen pages.

If you’ve listened to hundreds of episodes of his podcast, some of this material will be familiar. I know I’ve heard him tell some versions of these stories on his podcast. I heard versions of a few of them in his live show. But they are a little more detailed in the book, and they interlock with each other to form an arc over time.

This is a funny book. He waxes philosophical, but always brings things very much down to an earthy, unpretentious level. I very, very rarely laugh out loud when reading funny books but I got a few laughs out of this book. Maron writes honestly about the ways we delude and distract and comfort ourselves. He had

a meeting with Lorne Michaels, to be considered for Saturday Night Live, in 1994, and it didn't work out. He wound up in a strip club afterwards:

I was sitting in the back of the strip club looking vulnerable with the book I was reading at the time, *The Poetry of Arthur Rimbaud*, when one of the girls asked me if I wanted a table dance.

I agreed. She started dancing for me. I tried to focus. I made small talk. I said "What do you do during the day?"

She put her tits in my face and said, "I'm a student."

"What do you study?" I said, face full of boobs.

"English literature" she said as she stood up, turned around, and bent over and shook her ass at me and spanked it. She looked back over her shoulder and said, "I'm minoring in political science."

His style is deadpan and unassuming, but it is his relentless honesty that makes the whole thing cathartic and worth reading. I'm reminded in small ways, actually, of the multi-volume novel *My Struggle* by Karl Ove Knausgaard. I'm also reminded just a little of Charles Bukowski and Lenny Bruce. I'm not claiming Maron is really a literary guy or that this is an autobiography or novel for the ages. But it's a fun and quick read that might provoke laughs, wincing, and a little self-examination.

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Jan/Feb 2016

I still occasionally pick up issues of the venerable *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, although not very often. This issue features three stories about Mars. The best of these is a very short story by Mary Robinette Kowal, called "Rockets Red." Her style reminds me a bit of Kage Baker — she wastes few words. It makes me want to read more of her stories.

"Smooth Stones and Empty Bones" is an unnerving little story by Bennett North. "The White Piano" by David Gerrold is pretty but marred by a schmaltzy, conventional view of the afterlife. Terry Bisson's "Robot from the Future" is a fun, weird piece. "Touch Me All Over" by Betsy James creates an intriguing world of the Native American past. I didn't quite click with "Squidtown" by Leo Vladimirovsky — the world he was building just didn't feel quite like a place, to me.

Most of the stories in this issue are, in short, quite good, competently executed, but only a few really shine. I have a few more to finish but in general, it reaffirms my belief that I don't need to keep up with everything published in *Asimov's* and *F&SF*. It's enough to pick up an issue once a year or so and see what is happening in genre short stories.

Solaris

I am finishing up the new translation of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, in audiobook form; see my last post for details.

This was quite a rewarding listen. *Solaris* can be a challenging book. In some chapters, Lem does a deep dive into the back-story, not of the planet Solaris itself but of the history of the scientific investigations into Solaris. Much of this is laid out in chapter 8 where we learn about the mysterious structures that emerge from the planet-wrapping ocean, evolve, and then crumble and collapse. This gets into some pretty deep waters, so to speak — Lem is asking us to consider the nature and limits of science and scientific consensus as a human. As a work of philosophy this actually puts *Solaris* on the shelf with Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

It might sound silly to equate a science fiction novel with a respected book on the philosophy of science, but I'm dead serious. Lem really was that deep a thinker — one of our ("our," in the sense of humankind's) deepest. And so the real movement and action and story arc of this book is largely an arc of *thought* — Kelvin's developing understanding of Solaris, the manifestations produced by the ocean, and his dwindling hopes of being able to really communicate with this alien intelligence.

Alien intelligence was a big topic for Lem. He didn't believe in a comforting, anthropically-oriented universe that was going to fit into our preconceived notions of what comprises life, and what comprises intelligence. Lem's aliens also weren't going to conform to our desires to find buddies in space — people who were like us, but maybe with green skin or antenna or different kinds of latex appliances on their noses or brows. Lem's aliens are really alien. We're not sure they are conscious; we're not sure they are intelligent; we're not sure they are alive. They are not necessarily interested in communicating with us. To them, we are probably just as bizarre. For the right reader this is really heady stuff.

From a young age, when I was first exposed to Lem's stories collected in *The Cyberiad*, I found Lem both wonderfully funny and fantastically deep. As I read more of his novels, the depths got deeper. I read an excerpt from his novel *Return from the Stars* in *Omni* magazine. That was my introduction to a type of science fiction that I think is still hard to classify, but I might call it post-optimistic science fiction. It is characterized by the view that our naïve view of the future, expressed nowhere as clearly as the original *Star Trek* television series, was not an accurate view of humanity's future.

In modern genre fiction, this view of Lem's has many adherents. One of the best contemporary examples is found in the Peter Watts novel *Blindsight*, but there are plenty of others. Some weird fiction and even "new weird" fiction, such as Peter Vandermeer's novel *Annihilation*, uses the notion of the incomprehensible alien.

The science fiction trope in which people we have lost — parents, lovers, etc.

— appear to us as simulacra, to facilitate communication with aliens, is now commonplace and clichéd, and might seem that way to contemporary readers of *Solaris*. For example, it appears in the Carl Sagan’s novel *Contact*, and it is one of the reasons that the climax of the book (and movie) feels a bit disappointing. But I believe one of the reasons this trope has become clichéd is simply that so many later screenwriters have borrowed the idea from Lem. Lem didn’t originate the notion of the doppelgänger, but perhaps this particular version of it.

Several of Lem’s novels explore the contact-with-incomprehensible-aliens theme. I wrote my junior thesis paper on his novel *Fiasco*. Another Lem novel, *The Invincible*, expresses similar ideas. So does *Eden*. At some point I really should dust off that thesis paper and put it online...

But anyway, I have wandered far away from the original point of this review. The point is that a better translation of *Solaris* is most welcome. Any excuse to re-read, or listen to, *Solaris*, is also most welcome. It is a book where the science is dated in some significant ways, but the ideas are not. It is challenging and fascinating and I think there is no better place to start than this translation in audiobook form. I just hope that it will be available in paper form soon.

Lovecraft Country

Years ago I read Matt Ruff’s novel *Sewer, Gas, and Electric: The Public Works Trilogy*, on the recommendation of an intern in the University of Michigan department where I was working at the time. I found it to be amusing, but chaotic and lacking in character and plot, and so I haven’t thought of Ruff in years. Recently on Boing Boing, I came across Cory Doctorow’s review of Ruff’s new book, *Lovecraft Country*, and it sounded fascinating.

Doctorow writes:

The novel involves a large, extended, accomplished African-American family living in Jim Crow Chicago. These characters — a young soldier, a radical printer, a grifter’s daughter turned landlady, a travel agent, a budding comics creator, and many others — don’t need Elder Gods to experience horror. They live it in their daily lives, through harassment, violence, expropriation, and the legacy of slavery that is anything but ancient history for them.

I can’t really improve on that basic description. I will add that in addition to being about an accomplished family, this is a very accomplished book, in several ways.

First, it isn’t structured as a single novel — it is written as a series of inter-linked episodes, centered around the different family members. This makes it easy for a busy person to read. This includes someone like me, who might only have limited bits time to read — a half-hour here, an hour there.

Second, the book really moves along. There’s not a wasted word. This is, I

assume, the product of very careful editing and rewriting as much as the original writing. A book doesn't get honed to a single point like this without some very careful and considered revision. For some reason 2016 is an era of big, big sprawling novels. It's great to see a book that goes against this trend.

The book is in part an homage to different kinds of classic pulp literature — not just Lovecraft, but Burroughs, Bradbury, and others. And right off the bat, we are introduced to the ways that this genre fiction is problematic for black readers:

Edgar Rice Burroughs, for example, offered a wealth of critical fodder with his Tarzan stories (was it even necessary to list all the problems Montrose had with Tarzan, starting with the very idea of him?), or his Barsoom series, whose protagonist John Carter had been a captain in the Army of Northern Virginia before becoming a Martian warlord. “A Confederate officer?” Atticus’s father had said, appalled. “That’s the hero?” When Atticus tried to suggest it wasn’t that bad since technically John Carter was an ex-Confederate, his father scoffed. “*Ex-Confederate?* What’s that, like an ex-Nazi? The man fought for slavery! You don’t get to put an ‘ex-’ in front of that!”

That risks making it sound as if the book is polemical. That particular character is polemical, but the book isn't really structured that way. The story is instructive, about the history of American white supremacy and structural racism, but it has the feel of historical accuracy and personal narrative. But the really impressive thing about Ruff's text, here, is that his thesis is pretty much all in the text, not the subtext.

This is America — it's a racist place. No educated person can doubt that, and no honest person can deny that. But some people might find any sort of recounting of the lived experience of black folks in racist America in the 1950s to be unbearably accusing. In fact, there's a review on Amazon that starts out:

I should start by saying that I have not read a single word of this book, but from glancing over the lead and a few customer reviews, I gather that this is a progressive treatise dressed up as a work of fiction. This disingenuous rubbish has no place in the library of a discerning, cultured gentleman and should be consigned to the flames along with *Mein Kampf*, and other similarly racist rants. Lovecraft country is not a story, it is a manifesto. Instead of trying to divide people and agitate minorities, why not write an honest story without a hidden agenda?

This reviewer must be one of those “sad puppies” trying to make science fiction great again, by trying to turn it from truth back into propaganda, suppressing the stories that make him uncomfortable. But one of the interesting things about Ruff's book is that, contrary to this review, there is, literally, no “hidden agenda.” The book does exactly what it says on the tin. It's a story about the lived experience of black Americans, which is structured and defined by their

race. The fact that some modern revisionist doesn't want to believe this truth doesn't change it. He probably believes racism, structural and otherwise, isn't real in 2016. Indeed, *his* hidden agenda — of fear — comes out in the phrase “instead of trying to... agitate minorities.” God forbid this book should rile up the blacks by bringing up a lot of inconvenient truths — why, no white person would be safe!

Of course, this brings up the real problem with this book, which is a problem that has nothing to do with Ruff's impressive piece of storytelling. It's the same problem that plagues non-fiction works like *The New Jim Crow* and *Dog Whistle Politics*. The people that are likely to read it are those who are already amenable to the truths expressed in the text. The book isn't going to change a lot of unchangeable minds. I used to have hope that racism would die out as older Americans died off. But the sad, or rabid, puppy who wrote that Amazon review is probably young. In Trump's America, decades of dog whistling have led to overt racism becoming acceptable again, and so we're in for an awful lot of white whines and ridiculous claims about how privileged white people are the real victims of racism.

Indeed, the only “hidden” part is the particulars of the ways in which it references, plays with, satirizes, and puns on Lovecraft and other pulp fiction sources, and that's not deeply hidden to anyone who has read Lovecraft. It also isn't really necessary to enjoyment of the book, although it deepens the reading experience a little bit, and brings a smile to my face. The overt story, about racism, *is* the story. The blurb right on the back cover says “A chimerical blend of magic, power, hope, and freedom that stretches across time, touching diverse members of two black families, *Lovecraft Country* is a devastating kaleidoscopic portrait of racism — the terrifying specter that still haunts us today.”

Here's a taste:

I heard a big bang like a bomb going off. My father stopped shaking me and he hugged me to him and he started running. And you know, it's funny, but once we got away from the smoke and the flames, it was almost nice, him carrying me like that... I dream about it sometimes, and in the dreams there's no gunfire, it's just an ordinary spring night and my dad's carrying me home, like from a movie or a ball game. Like he should have been.

We must have been about halfway home when a car came up behind us, moving fast. As it got close I saw it was all shot up, bullet holes in the hood, glass all knocked out, and I opened my mouth to say something, but there was no time. A white man leaned out of the back with a pistol and fired two shots. Then the car was past us and gone into the night — I never knew what happened to it, or who that man was.

I thought the shots had missed us. I knew I wasn't hit, and my father didn't break stride. He ran on for another block or so and then he

just stopped. He put me down, careful, put a hand on my shoulder like to steady himself. Then he fell over.”

Reading the sad puppy gripe about SJWs (“social justice warriors”), there’s a phrase about sexism that comes to mind. I’ve heard my wife, a black feminist, use the phrase. The precise origin seems unclear, but it may be due to Margaret Atwood. It goes something like this:

Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.

The sad puppies know that the world has passed them by, and that they no longer represent either the majority or the majority’s world view. But as they are privileged white people, the worst that the rest of the world can do to them is point this out, and try to educate them about the lived experience of people outside their experience, although this is usually pointless. But black people in Trump’s America have far more to fear; Jim Crow racism is far from dead and gone, and indeed seems to be enjoying a resurgence. And so, I would make the claim that this book actually is “an honest story without a hidden agenda.” The agenda is not hidden in the least — nor should it be.

Books I completed in May 2016:

- Marc Maron, *Attempting Normal*
- Stanislaw Lem, Bill Johnston (translator), Alessandro Juliani (narrator), *Solaris: The Definitive Edition* (unabridged Audible audiobook)
- Matt Ruff, *Lovecraft Country*

Books I might complete in a few more days:

- *Arguably: Essays* by Christopher Hitchens (unabridged audiobook)
- Gavin de Becker, *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect us from Violence*

Saginaw and Ann Arbor, Michigan
May 28th, 2016

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