

# Read It, Early June 2016

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## Groundhog Year

June 15th was the one-year anniversary of my current work arrangement. Each Monday morning I drive from Saginaw south to Ann Arbor, work in Ann Arbor four days, then drive back to Saginaw Thursday evening. The plan has been that as soon as possible, I will relocate my family closer to work. That is still the plan, but “as soon as possible” has been pushed back a while as we figure out how to cope with the vast difference between the Saginaw and Washtenaw County real estate markets.

Fortunately, I have friends in Ann Arbor who have been kind enough to put me up in a spare bedroom all those nights, and on many nights feed me as well. This has made it much more bearable — the cost of renting even a small one-bedroom apartment in Washtenaw County would have made this arrangement nearly unworkable without their help; we would have made far less progress on paying down debts and putting money into savings.

This has been a godsend in many ways, because it has allowed me to stay at employed at a good job that I enjoy a lot. I also like quiet time — it’s often scarce at home, what with five children at home — and there is no doubt that I’ve had plenty of quiet evenings alone. I’ve been able to do a considerable amount of reading and a fair amount of writing too.

But in other ways it has been very hard, and has gotten harder the longer it goes on. I don’t have an exact figure, but I haven’t taken very much vacation time or sick time, and so I think that I’ve actually been away from my family for about 200 days out of the last calendar year.

That’s nothing compared to the situations of, say, soldiers who deploy continuously for a year or more at a time. I do see my family every week, and my wife isn’t actually afraid for my safety.

But on the other hand it isn’t entirely *unlike* their situations. One weekend my daughter wouldn’t talk to me. I asked her if we could spend some time catching up. She said “why should I bother? You’re just going to go away again.” That was a bit of a gut punch.

Each week the adjustment to the solitude and peace is a bit of a shock to my system, and then the adjustment to a noisy, chaotic gaggle of children is *another*

shock to my system. So I'm constantly getting used to having left home, or having returned home, and I spend very little time feeling *at* home.

So, we need to do something about this. There is a plan in development that would allow me to work more days from home. We're considering a plan that would allow me to work just two days a week in the Ann Arbor office, and stay overnight one evening. I think that is much more sustainable and bearable for everyone. If we can do that for another year, I think we can be much better prepared to relocate, details to be determined, even if we have not sold our old house yet.

I don't know exactly when I'll be able to switch to that reduced schedule, but I am doing my best to make it happen soon. And so I might actually have less free time soon. So I might have less time to devote to this blog. But maybe I can be a much happier and better father and husband for a while.

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## The Book Project

I have made quite a bit of progress on the project of collecting up and editing my old articles. In fact, I have just about completed a manuscript. The tentative title is *The Films that Formed Me, Book 1: Reviews 1992-2016*.

The collection will be about 40,000 words. As a printed book, it would be about 100 pages, depending on the exact format. As an e-book, well, that varies depending on how many words your particular e-book reader can show on the page. Using the default layout of CoolReader for Windows, it comes to about 400 pages. Using the default layout for iBooks on my Mac, it's more like 250. So I don't think "pages" is a very valuable way to measure the book's length when talking about **.epub** files.

The individual essays range greatly in style. Some are shorter than one page. Some go into considerable depth. Some are serious. Some are actually parodies. To whet your appetite, here are the names of the essays:

- *The Thief of Bagdad*
- *Jurassic Park: The Marketing Extravaganza*
- *Good Will Hunting*
- *Oscar and Lucinda*
- *The Sweet Hereafter*
- *Strange Days Indeed*
- What is *The Matrix*?
- *Magnolia*
- Where's Tom Bombadil?
- *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*
- Internal Spotlight of the Shiny Camcorder: a Review of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
- *To Be and To Have (Être et Avoir)*

- Grosser By the Dozen: a Review of *Cheaper By the Dozen*
- *The Triplets of Belleville*
- God, Nitrogen Sulfide, and Sweaty Vulcan Butt: Notes on *Enterprise* and *Joan of Arcadia*
- Three Films for Grown-ups: *Nine Songs*, *Y Tu Mamá Tambien*, and *The Dreamers*
- *Star Wars*: Through the Binoculars
- *Deleted Magic*
- Restoration versus Cartoonization: Thoughts on *Star Wars* Revisionism
- “The Negatives of the Movie Were Permanently Altered”
- *House of Flying Daggers*, *Memento*, and a Few More Thoughts on *The Lord of the Rings*
- A New *Unicorn*
- Two Noir Films: *T-Men* and *He Walked by Night*
- Doctor Who, Old and New
- “The Girl in the Fireplace”
- *Blood Tea and Red String*
- *WALL · E*
- *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*
- *An Unexpected Journey* in Fifty Words
- *Lexx* is Wretched
- *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*
- If You’re Not Cop, You’re Little People: *Blade Runner* in Perspective

They are all pretty-much complete, except for the last one; I’m still working on that essay. Everything else, I’ve proofread and tweaked, both on screen and on paper, but they probably need another pass.

I have a usable workflow now. I start with Markdown-formatted, 7-bit ASCII text files. These are the source files. They are marked up with headers and underscores for indicating italic and bold sections. I have HTML entities in place for special accented characters: for example, the title of *Y Tu Mama Tmbien* reads, in the raw source file, `_Y Tu Mam; Tambien_`. But anyway, the point is that in my source files, written in Pandoc’s dialect of Markdown, the source code remains quite readable, because I only *occasionally* have to use HTML entities for accented characters. I don’t use HTML entities for typographer’s quotes, dashes, apostrophes, ellipses, or other special characters.

So the next step in my workflow is to use a script called SmartyPants to transform the source into source with HTML entities for those special characters. It does a great job, and I haven’t yet found a case where it has made a mistake. The derived file is all marked up with HTML entities, and so is harder to edit and proofread, so I don’t modify those files by hand.

I also have a step that does the SmartyPants conversion, and then converts all those HTML entities into characters. This is then no longer a 7-bit ASCII file, so I save it as UTF-8 with no BOM. This file is useful for proofreading, because all the accented characters and typographically correct quotation marks show

up, but it is still basically a Markdown file. I use these to visually verify that the accented characters and SmartyPants conversion all looks correct.

The Markdown file with HTML entities then gets fed to Pandoc. Pandoc can spit out all kinds of formats. Really it's quite an amazing program. The primary formats I'm interested in are:

- Simple HTML with headings, bold, and italics, with special characters encoded as HTML entities (usable for blogging)
- **.epub** (e-book)
- **.docx** (Microsoft Word)
- **.pdf**

Right now the **.epub** looks pretty good; I think it is about as good as I can get it, except that at the moment it lacks a cover. There are some places where URLs look funny, or lines break funny, but in an **.epub** file I don't think I have total control over that kind of thing; for example, the reader decides whether to fully justify the text, or hyphenate it:

CoolReader Displaying an E-book

Maybe I could supply a stylesheet that helps clean that up? I'm not really sure. In any case, I don't think I want to put hard breaks in the source file. If I put hard breaks in URLs or long titles or subheadings they might look OK in one derived format, but then they will be broken oddly for the other derived formats. So my basic philosophy has to be, I think, to ignore the handful of spots where the limitations of the format cause some ugly formatting.

The **.docx** looks good, except it are not formatted exactly as I need it for publishing a paper book. For example, it isn't set up with page breaks at the start of each chapter, or left/right pages. This is something that I could set up to match the style sheet for a particular publisher, but I am hesitant to put time into it unless I need to — for example, if I decide to offer paper copies through some publisher.

The **.pdf** format, which is generated using Latex, looks *mostly* very nice. But there are places where lines are too long and overflow their boxes. For example, in this case, at the top of a page, a chapter with a long title is rendered with the title running right off the edge of the page:

A PDF Title Overflowing the Page

I don't actually want to change my titles to fit the LaTeX template, and I wouldn't even know where to begin to fix the template to better handle my file. I suppose I might be able to just reduce the text size, but it looks fine everywhere else. LaTeX is a *very* deep rabbit hole. People put in years to gain deep expertise in TeX and LaTeX, and, honestly, I'd rather spend my time writing than typesetting.

I haven't decided exactly when and how I'm going to offer this book for sale. I've read a little bit about the services offered by Smashwords and Hulu and

they both seem reasonable. I've also been operating under the assumption that a traditional publisher would have no interest in this material, but perhaps I shouldn't assume that.

### **Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe***

I completed this book in June 2016, having read the last of it to my children. It is perhaps the best of the *Hitchhiker's Guide* five-book trilogy (no, that isn't a typo). It gets very dark, but it forms a fairly continuous story arc. It's also the first one in the series that I read, back when I was in high school. I selected it as one of my choices from the Science Fiction Book Club, not realizing that I was supposed to read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Even coming into the story already in progress, I found parts of it laugh-out-loud hilarious, and still do.

When I was sixteen, I don't think I realized just how dark and existentialist a world view this book really expresses. It's actually quite thought-provoking. My recollection is that the third book is pretty readable, but the fourth and fifth become very uneven and episodic. I am not quite sure if I will be reading the rest to the kids, re-reading them on my own, or just putting the set back on the shelf for another day.

### ***Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn**

This is a fascinating book, a mash-up of medieval life as described in Umberto Eco's masterpiece *The Name of the Rose*, and a crashed-spaceship first-contact story. I'm about 150 pages in and it opens a bit slowly, but it is speeding up. This is a philosophical work of science fiction and the clash of cultures between a medieval priest and a group of aliens, whose ideas of "the heavens" are very different, is very thought-provoking. We learn a great deal about the medieval world-view of a highly educated character. Here's a passage in which our priest protagonist, Dietrich, interacts with one of the insectoid aliens:

Krenkish heads were smaller and so the harness fit poorly. Nor ere the creature's ears properly positioned, so that when Dietrich had inserted the "hearing-mussel" in his ear — as he saw the Krenk had done — the other piece, the mikrofoneh, did not hang by his mouth. The Krenk vaulted the table and seized Dietrich.

Dietrich tried to pull away, but the Krenk's grip was too strong. It made rapid passes at Dietrich's head, but they were not blows and, when the creature stepped away, Dietrich discovered that the straps now fit more comfortably.

"Does now the harness sit well — question," asked a voice in his ear.

Quite involuntarily, Dietrich turned his head. Then he realized that the earpiece must contain an even smaller *Heinzelmannchen* than the box in the Krenkish apartments. He turned to stare at his visitor. “You speak in your mikrofoneh, and I hear you through this mussel.”

“*Doch*,” said the creature.

Since there could be no action at a distance, there must be a medium through which the impetus flowed. But had the voice flowed through the air, he would have heard the sound directly, rather than through this engine. Hence, an aether must exist.

I love these characters’ attempts to reconcile their world views. The author is clearly very well-versed in medieval history. The cast and locale is somewhat complex, and I’m happy to have a list of characters and a map. A glossary would be welcome, though, and even an introduction going over the terms and rituals and routines of both priestly and peasant life. I think some of this is mentioned in an afterword, but I shouldn’t have to turn to an afterword first.

The Krenken are big bugs. I am not a big fan of the human-sized insectoid alien trope. I am immediately put off because the square-cube law tells us that true insects that large can’t exist. We know these can’t be just scaled-up Earth insects. I think it is a strength of the book, rather than a weakness, that the Krenken are not described clearly; this allows the reader to fill in some of those troublesome details. Flynn elevates the portrayal of insectoid aliens, in my eyes by making the real questions about the Krenken’s *culture*, even pertaining to issues of class, and how it proceeds from their physiology and genetics. That’s fascinating because when we start thinking along these lines, we can’t help but consider what our mammalian physiology and genetics affect *our* culture and thought.

While the author is clearly very knowing, I have a gripe with his writing. At times the *narrator* becomes very knowing, too, in a way that takes me out of the story (the narrator is telling rather than showing, and in a way that, honestly, is more like showing off). For example:

Abruptly, she cleared the machine. *Don’t be silly*, she told herself. But that made her think of something Tom had said. And that made her wonder, What if... ? And nothing was ever the same again.

Here the narrator is injecting a judgment which I think is best left to the reader. Elsewhere, we read:

“I have a smart phone,” she told him, tugging on the string that bound the folder she held. “My phone is smarter than some people.”

Tom laughed, not yet getting the joke.

Here the narrator is having a laugh of his own at the expense of his characters, and again, I’d rather come to my own conclusions about the characters.

Fortunately the dialogue is generally very good, even conversations which serve as info-dumps, and it really is an excellent book in most respects. I mentioned *The Name of the Rose*, which I think is a clear influence here, but I also think that Flynn may have been influenced by Gene Wolfe, with his general respectfulness of the reader's intelligence, presenting serious ideas without a lot of hand-holding. There is a lot to think about in the ideas the author has literally pitted against each other. I don't have a final verdict but I expect it to continue, as it begins, quite well.

### ***At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails* by Sarah Bakewell**

I have only completed the first chapter of this book, but I really enjoyed the first chapter. I have long been interested in the existentialists, but my attempts to read the actual works of existentialism, such as *Being and Nothingness*, have repeatedly left me baffled. Bakewell, author of *How to Live, or a life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*, really starts well here, putting Sartre in context, where "in context" means in a café, with Simone de Beauvoir, and friends, and admirers, and also in context, at his funeral; Bakewell's description of that funeral is amazing.

I have read some Montaigne in translation, and read some of Bakewell's book about approaching Montaigne as a reader, but it is another book that I have not finished. It's time to finish it. It's also time to finish reading the essays in *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays, A Selection* by Michel de Montaigne, translated by John Florio — challenging, often obscure, but fascinating.

### ***Cosmicomics* by Italo Calvino**

This is technically a re-reading, since I've read both *Cosmicomics* and *t-zero* before, but it has been some time, and these incredibly creative and beautiful short stories are worth re-reading many times; it is one of the few books that one might read at different life stages, and get different things out of it each time.

In *Cosmicomics*, Calvino tells stories inspired by contemporary cosmology, particularly our ideas about how the universe began, how dust clouds formed, how planets and stars condensed, and how life formed. The narrator is a character called Qfwfq (part of the fun of reading these out loud to my wife and children is figuring out how to pronounce the names). Qfwfq is ancient; he existed before the big bang, and has existed in different forms throughout the history of the cosmos, but he and his friends and relations also seem to share most of personality characteristics of middle-aged Italians.

Calvino cheerfully does not attempt to explain this; Qfwfq just *is*, because the stories need a narrator. The stories are almost always *about* much more than they are about. In one of my favorites, "A Sign in Space," Qfwfq has marked a

point in space as he rides around the galactic disc, so that he can note when he has gotten back to his starting point. Calvino takes the modern idea that there is no privileged frame of reference and turns it into something about *signs* — in semiotics — in which our narrator no longer has the privilege of understanding what signs are intentional or whether it even matters:

...signs kept growing thicker in space; from all the worlds anybody who had an opportunity invariably left his mark in space somehow; and our world, too, every time I turned, I found more crowded, so that world and space seemed the mirror of each other, both minutely adorned with hieroglyphics and ideograms, each of which might be a sign and might not be: a calcereous concretion on basalt, a crest raised by the wind on the clotted sand of the desert, the arrangement of the eyes in a peacock's tail...

It's the English major's nightmare; if everything is a sign, or symbol, than nothing is. But I've done you a disservice if I've made these tales sound dry or abstract or academic. Although the settings are sometimes baffling, and the characters may barely exist in any sense that we understand, these stories are really about relationships, and love, and loss. That's Calvino's triumph, turning the dry equations of cosmology into *stories* set in a universe that is both stranger than we can imagine, but as familiar as the faces of our loved ones.

I started out reading my old Penguin paperback, but realized I had on the shelf the new 2015 Mariner edition of *The Complete Cosmicomics*, so I'm switching over to that book. The Mariner edition has all the stories from *Cosmicomics* and *t-zero* and I'll re-read those. It also has a number of other stories I haven't read, some never before published in English.

Just to be clear, since the dates on the title page are confusing, I'm talking about ISBN 978-0-544-57787-9, a white paperback with a simple gray and black line drawing of planets in their orbits. If you're interested in reading *Cosmicomics*, this is the edition to get.

### ***Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets***

I've been reading this one out loud to my kids. I do a pretty hilarious Dobby impression, or so I'm told. But really I'm just channeling the voice of Dobby in the films, Toby Jones. Because that performance is so very memorable, it's hard to imagine Dobby sounding any other way.

In this, the second book, things get a little darker and more perilous for our cast of characters. We have scary stuff going on, like the petrification of animals and people.

Of particular interest, I think, is the way in which the students are starting to be able to come to their own judgments about characters who are authority figures. They learn to recognize that while they are expected to show respect the adults, some adult authority figures really are frauds and not worthy of admiration



or emulation, but at the same time are deserving of compassion. So we have the ridiculous celebrity fraud Gilderoy Lockhart, but also the miserable Argus Filch, surrounded by faculty and students who can practice magic, while he, as a “squib,” cannot. Both are authority figures, and both deserve their compassion, but only one deserves their ridicule.

And so, back to work.

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