

Read It, Late June 2016

Paul R. Potts

I'm a little late getting this one posted — I wound up updating it a few times, and then it sat for a while, and I'm posing it on July 6. I'm trying to post at least twice a month, but I've fallen short of that recently because most of my spare time has gone into my book project. I'll try to do better in July.

I've finished *Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn. *The comments that follow contain spoilers.*

***Eifelheim*, Continued (June 20)**

In my last post, I described what I saw as an annoying flaw in the narration of *Eifelheim*, in which the narrator would drop in direct commentary on the events of the story. It turns out that a little later on in the text, the narrator actually outs himself as a character, in the book's present, around page 195 in the mass-market paperback edition:

And so I came into the affair, although at first only in a peripheral way. I was teaching still at the Albert-Louis, and Tom sent me an e-mail asking me to find the manorial records for Oberhochwald.

So things are getting curiouser and curiouser. With this, existence of the narrative intrusions that occasionally peppered the narrative make a little bit more sense. And now the question “who is this narrator?” is something left hanging for the reader to ponder. I'm reminded more than ever of Wolfe, and hoping that this puzzle actually has a satisfying answer.

***Eifelheim*, Concluded (June 24)**

Having finished *Eifelheim* I can put my previous comments in perspective. I must regretfully rate it only a good book, but not a great book.

To recap: *Eifelheim* is a first-contact story, but an odd one; the contact takes place in the years 1348-1349. The alien vessel crashed in Medieval times. But the book is partly set in our own time, or a time near to it, as two scientists uncover clues about the deep past *and* cosmology, both of which help to explain those past events.

In my previous comments I mentioned the intrusive, overly “knowing” narrator. Flynn does eventually bring the narrator into the story, but only in the last few pages. The narrator’s identity is not actually very important, except that he is sympathetic to Tom, the character researching the lost town of Eifelheim and uncovering the weird mystery of what happened. The narrator is just a person ready and willing to assist him.

Because he has such a brief role in the story, I don’t feel that the narrator character’s earlier intrusive comments, where he offers judgments, opinions, and predictions about the main characters, are justified in any sort of storytelling sense. They distract the reader from the “now” of the story, without offering any kind of interesting or surprising reason for the interruption.

If I could edit the book freely, I might remove this narrator character completely, or expand him so that he has more of a presence in the “now” storyline throughout the text, or merge him with Tom. There are already only a small handful of characters in the “now” storyline of the book, and we don’t learn much about them. In fact, the “now” storyline itself is quite thin, and so fine-tuning it would not even touch the bulk of the book.

Come to think of it, the fact that the “now” interacts so weakly with the main storyline, set in the medieval past, is a weakness of the book.

Eifelheim started out as a novella published in 1986. I have not read that novella, although I am going to track down the magazines it was published in and read it. My impression is that it consisted entirely, or almost entirely, of the “present” storyline. In adapting it into a novel, Flynn wrote a second, much bigger and deeper narrative, and created a narrator to tell it, but that “weak interaction” between the “now” and “then” storylines makes it feel like they don’t really need each other all that much. In fact, I think when he adapted the story into a novel, Flynn could have abandoned the “now” narrative completely and written a very good book set entirely in 1348-1349.

And while I really like much of the *Name of the Rose*-like details about medieval life, and the way the author uses languages, there are definitely parts of the text that drag. We come across passages like this:

“So.” Einhardt counted off on his fingers. “Karl holds the Bohemian vote himself, and his brother Baldwin is also bishop of Trier. That’s two. And when House Luxemburg says, ‘frog,’ Archbishop Waldrich asks how high he should jump. Except *he* thinks he is King of Frogs. Ha-hah! So Köln’s vote makes three. As for the Wittelsbachs... Well, little Ludwig holds Brandenburg, as I’ve said; and his brother Rudolf is Count Palatine, which makes two votes. With Mainz uncertain, both families play court to the other Rudolf, the Duke of Saxe-Wittenberg. Hah! House *Welfen* holds the balance!”

All I can think of when reading this sort of passage is that, aside from the author, and perhaps one or two readers who happen to be academics specializing in

the history of the Middle Ages, *no one cares* about any of this — not even the character listening to Einhardt.

Nor should they. Some context is necessary to understand the basic events of the story. That required context does not include all the political intrigues of the time and place. This isn't *Game of Thrones*. If it were, we might care more, because the *Game of Thrones* saga is *about* the various kings, queens, heirs, and bastards. Our story is not about those sorts of characters, and so this kind of digression is superfluous.

Don't get me wrong — I do like this book quite a bit. I've mentioned Wolfe and Eco; it is also reminiscent of *The Doomsday Book* by Connie Willis. I'm a big fan of complex novels, and I don't mind a good digression. *Moby-Dick* consists almost entirely of digressions. I really enjoyed the *philosophical* aspects of the novel. The premise is intriguing, and the way the author works out the implications of that premise is top-notch. The book is in large part *about* not just the events, but the class of cultures and philosophies. I don't even consider that material to be digression. The dialogue is really at the heart of the novel. I learned some new words from this book: *enfoeffed* and *ferial*. *Enfoeffed* means given title to land in exchange for a pledge of service. *Ferial* denotes an ordinary weekday as opposed to a religious festival or fast day.

I also gained a deeper understanding of the medieval mind. That is not a small gift, and so I don't regret spending my time reading *Eifelheim*. But it also reminds me that it is high time I re-read *The Name of the Rose*.

***Eifelheim*, the Novella**

I bought a copy of the November 1986 issue of *Analog* magazine that contains the original *Eifelheim* novella. (Some sources online claim that it appeared in the December 1986 issue, but the copy I've got in my hand says otherwise). I will read this novella and have some notes on it next time.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep

I have re-read *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, the deeply strange Philip K. Dick novel that inspired the film *Blade Runner*. In fact, I actually re-read it completely through twice, making notes, and then went back through it a third time typing out additional notes and quotations comprising a chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel, about ten thousand words in length. I'm going to try to turn that into a more condensed summary, and add some analysis, and then that's going to become part of a longish essay on *Blade Runner*.

The idea is that this long essay will finish out my collection of film reviews. It will serve as a sort of bridge between the collection of film-only reviews and later collections of book reviews.

Still Pending

I'm just about done reading the second Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, to my children.

I've been reading the first few chapters of *Viriconium* by M. John Harrison, since the Reddit **printSF** community is reading it as part of their SF Book Club series. I read *Light* earlier and found it incoherent and distasteful.

The book is actually a collection of novels and stories; the first one is called *The Pastel City*. If it matters to anyone, I'm reading the 2005 Spectrum Books trade paperback omnibus edition, the one with a foreword by Neil Gaiman, and cover artwork showing gears and a metallic bird hatching from an egg. I haven't gotten very far, as the prose is dense and worth slowing down for, but so far I can say that I am enjoying the first novel more than I enjoyed *Light*.

Harrison says that *Viriconium* is a "metafictional critique of" and "a deconstruction of" of "epic" fantasy and it is hard for me to tell yet how seriously to take that. I jumped around a bit, and read the final story "A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium." That story reminded me a bit of the *Hav* by Jan Morris, which I've mentioned previously in this blog.

So far, I do appreciate the "Dying Earth" setting, as in the work of Jack Vance and Gene Wolfe. I also appreciate the anti-heroic hero. Harrison also says it is "a conscious disruption of the American ideological/narcissistic overmyth 'Hero with a Thousand Faces'" and again, it is hard to tell yet how seriously to take that, but I like what I've read so far.

I'm still reading several other books to the children, including *The Story of Earth and Sky*. I want to mention one other old book I've been reading: *One Two Three... Infinity: Facts and Speculations of Science* by George Gamow. This is another science book that was significant to me as a child.

I also started reading to my kids an old young adult novel that I remember fondly from childhood: *Secret of the Marauder Satellite* by Ted White. The main character is a teenage boy named Paul; the fictional Paul was born about the same year I was. The book itself has a very workmanlike style, with young characters that are a bit unconvincing, as they are too "knowing" for their ages, but I was startled to discover that the book's writing style looks an awful lot like **my** writing style. I think that book may have heavily influenced the way I write, including the way I use hyphens and the specific rhythm and meter I tend to fall into when writing prose. It's startling. Like *Dar Tellum: Stranger from a Distant Planet*, this book also predicts climate change, so here is another book I read as a child which accurately described the straits we would be in, decades later.

Amazon reviewer R. Christenson describes it as "a reasonably successful attempt at emulating a Heinlein juvenile," and I think that's accurate, except that White's teenage protagonist doesn't seem to have quite a convincing voice as, say, Max

Jones of *Starman Jones*, or Podkayne Fries of *Podkayne of Mars*. Although, to be honest, it has been decades since I have read a Heinlein juvenile, and it is possible those protagonists might not seem convincing to me now. I remember really enjoying *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*. I will finish *Secret of the Marauder Satellite* and if it still seems as good to me as it did when I was a kid, I'll see if I can track down some of White's other work.

Meanwhile, keep reading!

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