

# Read It, Mid-July 2016

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## ***The Nightmare Stacks* (with Spoilers)**

This post is late. I was hoping to finish reading *Eifelheim*, the novella, so I could finish discussing it this time, but the inimitable Charles Stross interfered with my reading plans by releasing his latest Laundry Files novel, *The Nightmare Stacks*. When a new Laundry Files novel comes out, I am pretty much helpless to do anything else until I have finished reading it. The series is a little uneven, with deliberate changes in style as Stross experiments with different kinds of pastiche. I think the second book, *The Jennifer Morgue*, is still my favorite, but not by a wide margin. Anyway, this one is a little slow to get going, but once all the chess pieces are on the board, a lot starts happening *very* quickly, and it becomes a page-turner.

In this one, the narrator (of some chapters) and point-of-view character (of others) is Alex Schwartz, one of the group of PHANGs from the two-books-ago novel *The Rhesus Chart*. Alex is a fun character, nerdy and terrified of women, but unexpectedly resourceful. Then there's Cassie. Cassie's an elf. Her people are invading Earth and plan to slaughter or enslave all of humanity. Wait, what?

Stross's version of elves is, I think, at least partly an homage to the late Terry Pratchett's elves, from the Discworld novel *Lords and Ladies*. They're not cute, although they *are* attractive, the way a cobra is attractive. Yeah, this book is pretty dark — they've been getting darker. But it's also quite funny. There is a terrific "bringing the significant other home to meet the parents" scene. There are quite a few callbacks to people and things introduced earlier in the series.

Interestingly, the whole world of the *Laundry Files* series, unlike the worlds in a lot of other urban fantasy, and soap-opera-ish TV fantasy and science fiction, is *going somewhere*. Although the Laundry works in secret and is charged with keeping the truth and the general public far apart, enough shit is hitting enough fans that a few cover stories and *Men in Black*-style memory wipes aren't going to cut it anymore.

We already have an outbreak of superhero powers among the populace. And with this book, we've got the aftermath of a foiled invasion. There was some significant collateral damage. So I am really looking forward to seeing how the Laundry lives up to its name and attempts to clean up this mess. I hear that Bob will feature in the next novel. I have enjoyed the other characters while

Bob is on hiatus, but I am looking forward to hearing from Bob again, although because he is now a Very Scary Sorcerer, he can't ever be the same old Bob again!

### ***Eifelheim*, the Novella (with Spoilers)**

In the last couple of posts, I wrote at some length last time about the novel *Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn. I mentioned that *Eifelheim* started out as a novella of the same name, originally published in *Analog* magazine, in the November 1986 issue.

Back issues of *Asimov's* and *Analog* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* from the eighties, when a lot of people like me subscribed to them, are not scarce and not very expensive — you can readily find copies on eBay. So I bought a copy and it arrived in just a few days, and I've now read the original novella. It's pretty short — about 35 printed pages in the magazine. I didn't count words, but I don't think it could be more than about 20-25,000 words. That puts it pretty squarely into “novella-length,” although the exact limits are vague. Wikipedia cites a definition of novella by Warren Cariou:

The novella is generally not as formally experimental as the long story and the novel can be, and it usually lacks the subplots, the multiple points of view, and the generic adaptability that are common in the novel. It is most often concerned with personal and emotional development rather than with the larger social sphere. The novella generally retains something of the unity of impression that is a hallmark of the short story, but it also contains more highly developed characterization and more luxuriant description.

That pretty accurately describes the way in which *Eifelheim*, the novella, differs from *Eifelheim*, the novel. In the novella, the somewhat mysterious narrator character from the “framework” story of the novel has the stage, and he introduces himself earlier, and we are aware of him as a character. The two main “present-day” characters are there, and the third librarian character, but the point of view never actually shifts to medieval times. We learn about Dietrich and the past events only in scenes that take place in the present.

Flynn is good at writing dialogue that gets across a lot of information. It only *occasionally* sounds like a contrived storytelling info-dump, and that's nice. He does not insult the reader's intelligence and the details fly by relatively quickly, but all the critical plot points are there. There are a few minor differences that I noticed:

- In addition to the “copper wire” MacGuffin, the novella mentions some metal brackets that the aliens needed humans to make for them. I don't think these are mentioned in the novel at all.
- In the novel, the alien ship manages to *depart*, leaving a few aliens behind. We don't learn whether they make it back to their own world (and it is

strongly suggested that they likely won't). In the novella, either the ship never manages to leave, or the characters in the present day don't know that it managed to leave, and so they anticipate finding the remains of the ship.

But overall I find it impressive how the novel mostly just deepened and expanded the original, without making any annoying or somehow "incompatible" changes to the overall story.

It is clear that Flynn's ability to write dialogue evolved a bit between 1986 and 2006, so there are some slightly clunky, slightly cheesy bits of monologue by our narrator character — although these are less annoying and distracting, to me, than the way in which the narrator character is not fully integrated into the later novel.

Overall this is a well-written science fiction novella, and the **ideas** are good. I think it's great that Flynn was able to expand the novella into a good, if not quite *great*, novel as well. If I were teaching a seminar class on genre fiction, I think it would be a very interesting exercise to take apart these two works, and learn from them. I recommend both of them to anyone who would like to study just how this sort of thing is properly done.

## Finished

Since last time I finished:

- *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* by J. K. Rowling (bedtime reading for the kids)
- *The Nightmare Stacks* by Charles Stross
- *Eifelheim* (the novella) by Michael Flynn

## Still in Progress

- *Viriconium* by M. John Harrison
- *The Story of Earth and Sky* by Carleton Washburne, Heluiz Washburne, and Frederick Reed, illustrated by Margery Stocking
- *Secret of the Marauder Satellite* by Ted White

## Just Started

- *Authority* (The Southern Reach Trilogy, Book 2) by Jeff VanderMeer

*Saginaw and Ann Arbor, Michigan*  
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