

Read It, Early December 2016

Paul R. Potts

We are winding down our house search. After viewing hundreds of houses online and maybe 40 in person (I can't remember for sure), we have made an offer on a house in Grass Lake. It's somewhat small and about 25 minutes from my workplace. This is literally the only house we've been able to find in these two whole counties where the home is pretty much ready to move in, the building is attractive and functional, and the lot is attractive and not next to some kind of eyesore or adjacent to a major road, dump, natural gas plant, electrical plant, or sewage treatment plant. From what I can tell, the only reasons it is affordable is that is because it is too small and too remote to be of interest to real estate flippers, and since it has just been completely renovated there is no money to be made by putting in granite countertops and painting it beige and trying to sell it for \$100,000 more.

The Western boundary line of the property actually lies along the Western boundary line of Washtenaw County. So it is literally as far away from Ann Arbor real estate prices as we could get while still being in a county where we qualify for a rural development home loan. Most of the neighbors are cows. I don't mean they are fat people, I mean they are domesticated ungulates of the sub-family *Bovinae*, so they shouldn't complain about the noise my kids might make while playing in the yard, or bother us at all, unless their fence breaks and they come looking for handouts.

If our offer isn't accepted, we'll have to go with Plan B. Plan B may involve renting a home somewhere in the area, or it may involve trying to stick with my current work arrangement, commuting from Saginaw, until May or June of 2017, and then taking our chances again in the Washtenaw County or Livingston County housing markets. However, I don't expect the real estate market to look *better* for buyers in six months. I think dramatically higher interest rates are not out of the question.

Renting would be far riskier for our finances — rents are extremely high in these counties. So we might be more inclined to try to continue the commuting arrangement.

I know that a lot of fathers have it worse, commuting even farther and spending even less time with their families in order to meet the material needs of those families. But the fact remains that my wife is stressed, and my children are stressed, and I'm stressed. For our youngest, I've been spending half my time

away from home for half his life. The others are missing my attention, too. They tend to react by either clinging aggressively to me when I am home, or nearly ignoring me, on the grounds that there isn't much point in getting to know me because I'm just going to go away again in a few days. I'm not sure which approach is worse.

If we manage to purchase the house in Grass Lake, it will not have room to hold much of our library. There won't be space for a home office like the one I have now. The finished square footage is less than half of the space in our current home. So as soon as we can, we will try to build some sort of outbuilding; perhaps a garage with extra rooms upstairs. We will only be able to unpack a small portion of the books and other media, so we will have to put some thought into just what portions of the collection we unpack and shelve.

Meanwhile, whether we will be moving to Grass Lake or not, we are planning to move *somewhere*, so our packing continues. Since I started packing things up in September, I've moved just over 100 boxes into storage. It's startling and a little disturbing to stand in our storage unit and see over 100 cubic feet of books, CDs, and DVDs stacked up. I do want to purge some of the books. But I agree with Grace who told me that what we mostly need is a sort of "mission statement" — an actual library collection development policy. We've got to think about what our library is actually *for*. Over the last few years as I've acquired media, I've had different aims in mind, and some of them are contradictory, or at least divergent.

The Start of a Collection Development Policy

We want to collect, and continue collecting, and refine our collections of:

Classics

These are books that are part of the Western canon, or at least associated with the Western canon. These should be "reading copies" (that is, none of the books should be valuable or hard-to-replace artifacts *per se*).

We should purge from this part of the collection awkward, heavy, hard-to-read, disintegrating, or fragile volumes — basically, books that aren't actually easy and pleasant to hold and read. Our acquisition of hardcover books from the Library of America, and trade paperback books from the Penguin Classics Deluxe Editions, fit in with this goal.

These Library of America and Penguin volumes are satisfying to hold and read, not scarce, often available used, and not expensive. Purchasing copies of the *Harvard Classics* and Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World* series also helps us meet this goal. This part of the collection also includes books about these classics, such as *How to Live: Or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* by Sarah Bakewell.

Un-classics

These are books that aren't part of the Western canon, but which seem to me to be significant and important works of literature. These include books like *The Radiance of the King* by Camara Laye, *Stoner* by John Williams, *The Long Ships* by Frans G. Bengtsson, novels by Haruki Murakami and stories by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. Many of these are works in translation, and many of our editions come from the New York Review Books Classics series.

This category also includes older obscurities that I find in used book shops. This part of the collection will continue to undergo a fair amount of "churn" as I add and remove books. The challenge here is to avoid adding works that are odd or obscure *because* they are odd or obscure. I love the odd and obscure, but we want the library to contain books of lasting value.

I also need to force myself to purge the collection of books by authors I like that don't represent that author's best work. In doing so, I have to fight my impulse to collect a writer's complete work. Given my various obsessive tendencies, I find this to be quite difficult. For example, I definitely want Murakami's novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* on the shelf. I've read it twice, and believe it is a masterpiece. But some of his later novels such as *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* just don't compare, and we don't need to give them shelf space. It's painful for me to give these away, though.

Pulps

These include some of the best and most interesting pulp science fiction and fantasy mass-market paperbacks. This includes well-known novels such as the Dark Tower books by Stephen King, and less well-known novels such as John Brunner's *Born Under Mars*, or Stanislaw Lem's *The Invincible*, which is a significant work by an important writer, but which has been out of print for forty years.

A lot of these aren't very good, but they are often interesting. Sometimes a book from this "backlist" turns out to be an utterly fascinating work that most definitely deserves to be read, such as Christopher Priest's *Inverted World*. Sometimes there is a gem that I think deserves to be better known, and I like to write about these, and advocate for bringing them back into print.

Unfortunately, a lot of our copies of these works are fragile, old paperbacks printed decades ago on acidic paper, and so this part of the collection has to be kept in semi-closed "stacks" — many of the volumes are not replaceable, and become less replaceable by the day. So I do want the kids to read them, but don't want them lying all over the house.

This is tied up with my interest in recording or adapting out-of-copyright work, for example the stories and novels of William Hope Hodgson. The current sad state of copyright law makes this very frustrating; many books that I read as a young child, even those published ten, twenty, thirty or forty years before I

was born, may never pass into the public domain in my lifetime. This actually dooms many worthy books to utter obscurity, as they become orphan works https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orphan_works. I want to be an activist and advocate for keeping these works alive.

Books about Recent History and Politics

This part of the collection is hard to manage and I am not working on it very much at present. In the past, acquiring books in this category results in acquiring a lot of books that I read once and then dispose of, or never finish reading. This includes books like *Columbine* by Dave Cullen, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, and *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* by Ian Haney López. A lot of topical books become less relevant as time goes on, and I am unlikely to consult them again. And while some were very interesting at the time — for example, I read *Disarming Iraq* by Hans Blix, and several books by Scott Ritter — but unless I was teaching the Iraq War or studying it again to “re-litigate” the war in some way, these books would sit unread on our shelves for years or decades, and we may not want to give up that space for that long. I think the key to this corner of the library is to keep this part of the collection small, only acquiring copies of books that look like they will be important for reference or have high “re-readability.”

Science Fiction and Fantasy Works by Specific Authors

This is the most personal corner of our collection. This includes books by authors such as Gene Wolfe and Greg Egan, in editions that are special to me in some way: scarce first editions, signed books, limited editions, and uncorrected proofs. This corner of the collection is problematic and I find myself wondering what I’m really trying to achieve here. Will I treat some of these books as investments, and hope to one day sell them for more than I paid? This seems like something I certainly shouldn’t count on, although I might be able to do it with some specific books.

I find that I have warring impulses: on the one hand, I love to collect and keep in fine condition some special copies of books that I love. On the other hand, I believe that fundamentally, all books should be read, and enjoyed, and re-read, and circulated. They should be handled with some care, but ultimately they should be read to death, until they disintegrate from the attention of many hands. Books shouldn’t simply disintegrate due to old age.

I am not quite sure how to reconcile these impulses. My current strategy often involves owning both a signed hardcover first edition (of, say, Gene Wolfe’s book *Urth of the New Sun*), and also owning one or more copies of the trade paperback edition which I read, re-read, and feel comfortable handing to the kids, or loaning out.

But what should I do about fine traditionally bound books such as publications from Subterranean Press? Some of these books have the “collector price” built-in. I’m somewhat opposed to this, but on the other hand, they build books with sturdy covers, nice thick paper, and sewn bindings. It is worth it to me to pay extra for well-made books, but these should be read, not just hoarded.

My approach has usually been to willingly pay more for some new, very well-made editions, signed or unsigned, but *not* to pay the extremely high prices they often ask for new limited-edition signed, numbered, lettered, leather-bound, or tray-cased books.

Books for my Professional Library

This category includes books about computer science, programming, electronics, mathematics, specific programming languages, and the history of programming languages. This includes books about digital signal processing, Haskell, Scheme, C, Python, Lisp, Lua, etc. These are books I often use, either to answer specific questions that come up in my work, or just to study for my own enjoyment and enlightenment.

Books about Logic, Technology, Puzzles, Paradoxes, and the “Laws of Thought”

This category includes books like *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* by Douglas Hofstadter, and *To Mock a Mockingbird and Other Logic Puzzles: Including an Amazing Adventure in Combinatory Logic* by Raymond Smullyan. It includes books categorized as “recreational mathematics.” I read these for enjoyment, and sometimes share the puzzles with the kids, with mixed results; some of the kids find them fascinating, and some don’t.

Books Specifically for Homeschooling

This includes a wide range of books, everything from coloring books and books teaching basic handwriting through books of essays and textbooks about chemistry and algebra.

Books that are Controversial, Extreme, Radical, Banned, or Censored

I collected a lot of books like this in the nineties — books from RE/search Publications, the Apocalypse Culture books by Adam Parfrey, and books by the Marquis de Sade and Kathy Acker. I used to also collect films by Pasolini and Bertolucci, comics of R. Crumb, paintings of Robert Williams, and J. G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition* (the first edition of this book was actually withdrawn and shredded due to an obscenity challenge). Technically, some books that are now considered classics are in this category, such as James Joyce’s

Ulysses. Some are still of ambiguous status now, like *Naked Lunch* by William S. Burroughs; one rarely hears of calls to ban books like this, but it is certainly rarely taught, and any teacher who wanted to teach it today would still probably find themselves thinking over just how secure their job really is.

As an advocate of artistic freedom and the First Amendment, I have long felt that it was my duty to support artists pushing the accepted limits of free expression. As I've gotten older, though, I have lost some of my interest in pushing these limits for the sake of pushing them, and I've given away a lot of the more extreme things that were in this part of our collection. Going forward, I expect that this will remain a modest part of our larger collection, but I don't intend to get rid of it entirely.

I retain an interest in radical philosophies and controversial works — for example the novels and essays of J. G. Ballard, performances of Lenny Bruce, and works about Dada, the Situationist International movement, the Fluxus movement, and the Futurist movement, because they contain elements of philosophy and political and cultural critique. Two of my personal favorite books from this corner of my collection are *The Futurist Cookbook* by F. T. Martinetti, edited by Lesley Chamberlain and translated by Suzanne Brill, and *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* by Greil Marcus.

For now, most of my books are in storage. In a few more weeks, just about all of them will be there. I'll keep a handful out — books I'm currently reading and plan to read immediately. The rest aren't *that* inaccessible; I could dig out a box if we need it. But it's going to be strange not to have our whole library on hand, perhaps for quite some time.

Anyway. Onward!

***Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens**

I'm almost halfway through the unabridged audiobook version of *Great Expectations*. It's a good read. Miss Havisham in particular is a delightfully disturbing character. I have also become very fond of Joe.

At about the 1/3 mark, I made some predictions about how the story would end. Then I decided to go ahead and spoil it for myself by reading the plot summary on Wikipedia. It turned out that my predictions were mostly accurate.

Warning: Spoilers

This next section contains spoilers about a novel published more than one hundred and sixty years ago, in case you care about such things.

Prediction 1: Miss Havisham Isn't Pip's Benefactor

She did give him the money that allowed him to become an apprentice blacksmith, but she isn't the one to give him his "expectations." I got this one right. Dickens sets up the reader's expectations, just as Miss Havisham expected to be married, but her expectations were foiled.

Prediction 2: Biddy will Eventually Marry Joe

I got this one right, too. This kind of practical marriage doesn't seem that odd in the context of England in the 1800s.

Prediction 3: Pip will Not Marry Estella

They don't marry before the end of the novel, but the novel certainly suggests that they *will* marry. So, I only give myself partial credit for this prediction.

I discovered that the *original* ending Dickens wrote left Estella married and Pip single, which is closer to what I thought would happen. Dickens changed the ending to suggest that Pip and Estella *will* marry, but note that even in the altered story, their romantic relationship can develop only after Estella has gone through some challenging circumstances that force her to change the way she thinks and feels about other people. And apparently some critics to this day believe the first ending was more consistent with the way the overall story begins and proceeds, so I don't feel bad about missing the mark.

After I finish it, I'll have to track down the original ending and see which one I think works better. Some even think that the book would be better if Dickens had just left off *either* ending. Soon, I shall have my own opinion in this very important matter, and I'll be sure to convey it to you, dear reader. (All right, I couldn't really keep a straight face writing that last line).

***Last Call* by Tim Powers**

A few years ago I picked up a copy of *Earthquake Weather* by Tim Powers. I found it interesting and enjoyed the writing style, but I didn't really become engaged with the story and so I couldn't finish it. I've spoken to some other people who have read more books by Tim Powers and they have told me that *Earthquake Weather* is far from his best work. They recommended *Last Call*. So I borrowed my friend's copy; in fact I've been carrying it around in my car for several months. I've finally started reading it. It is much more engaging than *Earthquake Weather* — a dark "weird tale" about gamblers where the stakes are far larger than just piles of money. This work may be classified as "low fantasy" but it seems like it also might be one of the foundational documents of the "urban horror" sub-genre that includes such writers as Jim Butcher, Simon Greene, and Kat Richardson.

Arrival

I usually have dinner on Monday evenings with my friends, the friends who are so kindly providing me a place to sleep a few nights each week. This past Monday they were busy, so after work I grabbed a quick meal at the Uptown Coney Island and then went to a showing of *Arrival* at the Quality 16 theater on Jackson Road, very close to my office.

I have to confess that I have not read the story this film is based on, a story entitled “Story of Your Life” by Ted Chiang. I have read a couple of Chiang’s other stories, including “Tower of Babylon,” which is a fantastic story. I own his book *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* and enjoyed it, and I own the collection *Stories of Your Life and Others* which contains “Story of Your Life,” but I didn’t finish it, and now it is packed. So it may be a while before I read the story. Anyway, this is my long-winded way of saying that at the moment, I can’t comment about how well the movie adapts the story.

Warning: This Review of *Arrival* Contains Spoilers

Arrival is a visually striking film right off the bat. In some of the very first scenes, the cinematographer uses lenses that give a very shallow depth of field. This means that if a subject in the foreground is in focus, subjects in the background are quite blurry, and vice-versa. The effect seems to indicate that the characters may not be able to truly see each other clearly, because they don’t quite exist in the same “frame.” This is a hint to the viewer that we must not assume too much about what is going on in these apparent “flashback” scenes, in which the protagonist, Louise Banks, seems to be reminiscing about the short life of her daughter.

Banks is a linguist, and when aliens arrive on earth (in twelve identical stone objects, each silently hovering), she is recruited to try to make sense of the noises they make. Every eighteen hours, a hole opens into the interior of the stone objects, allowing humans to enter. Inside the stone objects, gravity is altered, so that humans can ascend by walking “along” a hallway to a chamber that features a large window. Behind this window, in a chamber filled with mist, are two “heptapods,” giant beings with seven tentacles that look like crosses between squids and elephants. The heptapods arrive for an interview, and Banks must figure out how to communicate with them. The stakes are high, as all the nations are nervously wondering if this arrival portends an invasion or an attack on the earth, and they all want to win the race to figure out why the aliens are here.

Amy Adams is terrific as Louise Banks. She is courageous but not fearless, if that makes sense — the actress very clearly shows us what her character is feeling, including the vertigo and fear as she enters the alien object. She is not “fearless” but she is extremely courageous, which is different — Banks gives the aliens her name, which triggers them to use a new mode of communication:

spraying a sort of ink or smoke onto the window to create circular symbols. This is a breakthrough in communication between the aliens and humans. In a later scene, she becomes the first person to remove her protective clothing inside the object, so that the aliens can actually see her human form. Due to her efforts, communication with the aliens continues to improve.

Things aren't moving quickly enough to pacify the military running the contact operation, though; tensions are rising around the world, with riots and looting and conspiracy theories spinning out of control all over the media. Meanwhile, Banks and her team are stymied by the confusing nature of the alien glyphs.

This is a slow and philosophical film, about the nature of language and how our language delineates our ability to think. I joked on Facebook that this is "one of the best movies ever made about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis!" As Banks works with the alien language, she comes to understand that their conception of time does not match our own. They do not seem to experience time in a linear fashion, but to experience every aspect of their lives, and perhaps even events outside their lifespans, in a kind of simultaneous present. Because she has started to *think* in the Heptapod language, she begins to experience time in this way as well. And in light of this, we as the audience have to reinterpret everything we've seen in the "flashback" scenes.

It's a brilliant and beautiful movie. The aliens are gorgeous and minimalist. The music is beautiful and understated; it reminds me of some of my favorite film scores such as Michael Nyman's score for *Prospero's Books*, Mark Isham's score for *Mrs. Soffel*, and Philip Glass's score for *The Hours*. I'm also reminded of Claire Hamill's 1986 album *Voices* (although that album has not aged well; I'm thinking more of the technique it employs, rather than the resulting music).

This is "sense of wonder" science fiction; you might also consider it "soft" science fiction. If your experience with the genre is limited to *Star Wars*, the multiple *Star Trek* TV series, and other space operas and space soap operas, you might be disappointed. This film is meditative and slow. It is for fans of *Star Trek: the Motion Picture* (the 1979 film), *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Silent Running*, *La Jetée*, *Solaris* (the 1972 film), *Moon*, *Primer*, and other philosophical science fiction films. Everything is eventually explained, but you'll have to work a bit to understand it; you'll have to meet the director halfway. But if you do, I think you'll be richly rewarded. If you can, catch this one in the theater; unless you have a truly massive home theater, the film will lose a lot when shrunk to a small screen.

That Hideous Strength

I finished *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis. It didn't get better. The ending featured, as G-d is my witness, dancing elephants. I'm still scratching my head trying to figure out what, exactly, Lewis was thinking when he wrote this one. Whatever it was, the end result is not actually good. While the book does

raise some interesting moral dilemmas and contain some beautiful passages and imagery, whatever it might have achieved is buried under the book's laughable pot-boiler plot and bloated page count.

Scorecard

Completed since last time:

- *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis (in unabridged audiobook form)

In progress:

- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (in unabridged audiobook form)
- *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle (bedtime reading for the kids)
- *The Wintersmith* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime reading for the kids)
- *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments* by Ali Almosawi and Alejandro Giraldo (bedtime reading for the kids)
- *Last Call* by Tim Powers

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