

Hurrying Up and Waiting

Today is Monday, March 13th, 2017.

January was very difficult. February was difficult. March looks like it will be (wait for it) difficult. But we have gotten through some huge changes, and we're all alive and mostly well! Thriving, even. Although also exhausted.

It's been a case of "hurry up and wait" over and over — frantic activity alternating with anxious delays.

We successfully finished the long "hurry up and wait" process involved with purchasing a new home. The original planned closing date was January 24th. We sailed right past that. Every few days, we'd get a note saying that our loan underwriter needed more paperwork — documentation, letters of explanation of something-or-other, or water tests. Lots of water tests.

We thought we had completed all the required water tests back before Christmas, but then suddenly were told that a nitrite test result ("nitrite," not "nitrate") was needed. We thought they had all the tax documents they could possibly need, but then suddenly they needed more. Each time this happened, we'd scramble frantically again to get them more paperwork.

Since I was in Ann Arbor half the week, and I didn't have every one of my old files with me, this often meant more delay, until I could get back to Saginaw and dig through my files. For example, I had to dig up a letter from 2007 documenting an annuity that I inherited from my mother. 1099 documents which showed that I *was* receiving it weren't enough. The house deal could have fallen apart over failure to adequately document an income source that amounted to less than \$100 a month. I'm just fortunate I still had that letter, because it was pretty much the only documentation I had that indicated *why* I was receiving those payments.

The wear and tear on our nerves was hard, and got harder the longer the process went on. My hands shook a lot, and my heart raced constantly. I'd cut out most caffeine, and had to remember to take deep breaths, try to eat healthy food, and try to let go of the idea that I could control not just *everything* but pretty much *anything*. Whenever an e-mail message came in from our loan officer, I'd have a mild panic attack. Each time there was another series of demands, I'd work as hard as I could to get everything done that I can possibly could. Then I'd have to just tell myself, again, "I've done everything I can," and let it go, and

let the professionals working on our behalf — who were motivated to get the deal done so that they got paid, too — do what they could. Trying to maintain my equanimity was a real challenge.

Elanor Susan

To raise the degree of difficulty a bit, we had a baby. Our plan had been to buy the house, move, and then have the baby. But the baby had other ideas. Elanor Susan Potts was born on January 24th, ten years after the death of my mother, Susan, on Susan's birthday. Is that creepy, or sad, or wonderful? Well, it seems like a little of all three. Baby Elanor was early, by about three weeks. Grace needed a C-section, her third. I made a *lot* of trips up and down US 23.

We have not yet sold our home in Saginaw. It is on the market, but it is not really ready to show; it is a terrible mess of half-packed boxes, and we have not moved our furniture out yet. We are living in our new home with no furniture except some beds. I think we've grown to actually enjoy the minimalist lifestyle in the new house. But every Sunday I've been back in Saginaw working on sorting and packing, and bringing carloads of stuff back down to Ypsilanti.

As for the books: I've been bringing boxes of books to our basement from storage; they are stacked on pallets. I have moved about 115 boxes so far. The final count will probably be close to 150 of the 12" x 12" x 12" boxes, with a few extra open boxes that held books that their owners didn't want to seal up in boxes. The final total will be well over 3,000 books.

We don't have any shelving for the books yet. I estimate that they will require almost 250 feet of shelving. That would amount to something like 16 tall Billy bookcases. And that's just for the books, not counting any CDs, DVDs, or Blu-Ray discs.

I intend to purge a number of them as I unpack, but the numbers are still a bit stunning. What with the many expenses coming up, I am scratching my head, wondering just how and when we will be able to get shelving installed. Given the weight and number and variety of sizes of the books, I don't think just buying some Billy bookcases from Ikea is going to cut it. We need to get a carpenter into the basement and have some custom, heavy-duty, floor-to-ceiling, properly-anchored-in shelving built with the specifications that we need.

What with everything going on, I have not gotten a lot of reading done. But I've gotten a little bit done, by listening to audiobooks while driving.

***Washington: A Life* by Ron Chernow**

I picked up an abridged audiobook (on CD) of Ron Chernow's biography of George Washington, simply called *Washington: A Life*. I have the book in print form and started to read it, but had to set it aside. I just wasn't up to reading such a long book. The unabridged Audible version runs for over 40 hours. This

abridged version runs for just 12 hours. So a lot is missing. But I'll give credit where it is due: the abridged version doesn't seem disjointed or choppy.

It took me a while, because I only listened to it while driving, and sometimes I just wasn't concentrating well enough to follow the story and so had to shut it off, but I finally finished it. (I did a *lot* of driving over the last few months). Washington's story is amazing. I knew the big picture of his life, but there are plenty of details here I wasn't very familiar with. I did not know, or did not remember, that Washington inherited slaves. I knew that pretty much all the founders were from aristocratic families (Hamilton being a notable exception), but I did not realize quite how wealthy Washington's family was, how much advantage his early connections gave him, and the details of his eagerness to acquire land. I was not aware of some of his close shaves in the French and Indian War. I knew he had the typical ambivalence towards slavery, but hadn't realized quite how contradictory his writings and actions on the issue of slavery could be. Chernow describes one letter where Washington starts out defending the rights of slaveholders not to have their "property" seized in abolitionist states, but then he "suddenly remembers that he opposes slavery."

Listening to even this abridged audiobook, I found myself having to confront the general, long-standing difficulty I seem to have with reading history. I think I tend to dislike reading history not because I dislike names and dates, but because I like narratives and stories. In historical accounts like this narratives are necessarily fragmentary because the evidence and source materials are fragmentary. When the writing can focus on a particular incident that forms a narrative arc, like the story of Benedict Arnold's bizarre betrayal, and his wife Peggy's strange role in the story, I'm riveted. This is a fascinating incident and, listening to this part of the book, I found myself wishing that I was listening to the unabridged version of the text. But Chernow's text can be difficult, especially given my limited knowledge of the political and historical background. I found myself often realizing that my "ears had glazed over" and I had lost track of what I was hearing, and backing up the CD by a few minutes to listen again. Chernow's writing can be both really compelling and a little soporific. Oh, and I learned a new word: "truckle." In context it means "to submit" or "to yield." But in other contexts it can mean a small wheel, as in a pulley, or a small wheel of cheese, or a low bed that is stowed by sliding it under a higher bed (also known as a "trundle bed").

When I approached the end of the book, I hesitated to listen to the ending. Biographies of historic figures have to end, and they have to end in death. Listening to the details of Washington's death, even in abridged form, affected me deeply. But he faced his death with his trademark emotional restraint, as a stoic. The details about the eventual emancipation of his slaves, and the provisions he made for them, ends the narrative on a hopeful, humane note.

***Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow**

After finishing *Washington: A Life*, I switched right over to *Alexander Hamilton*, another book I had started to read in print and set aside. I am nearly finished with the abridged audiobook now. I knew a bit more about Hamilton's life than I knew about Washington's. Chernow gives side-stories and back-stories of other fascinating figures, such as Burr. I was not aware of the depths of Burr's villainy. Chernow writes with undisguised rage at the awful fraud of the Manhattan Company, a company ostensibly founded to provide clean water in the midst of a multi-year outbreak of yellow fever. One can understand, a little, how Hamilton wound up in his fatal duel. In other episodes we learn a bit more detail of Hamilton's views on the national debt: he believed it was important to create one, and for the Federal government to assume the debts of the states. But he didn't intend that debt to be permanent. (Why have we never had a "sinking fund?")

As a fan of the musical I knew the basic outline of Hamilton's life. His strange, assertive personality is more deeply illuminated here, even in the abridged version. His many personal faults align with a seeming death-wish. In modern terms, he'd be considered a risk-taking individual. There clearly were connections between his horribly death-saturated early life, his lowly origins, and his combative, driven career. Compulsively confessional, and driven to wordiness, his faults remind me in some ways of my own faults.

In many ways my view of the world is quite "Hamiltonian." I'm not a royalist; I was appalled to learn that Hamilton at one point considered the idea that the American presidency should be a hereditary office. I hold a much more egalitarian world view than Hamilton did. But like Hamilton, I believe in the value of education, expertise, professionalism, and experience. This book forces me to examine my beliefs about the world, and who should govern people. The differing views of the founders on populism, democracy, meritocracy, immigration, and other very "modern" topics makes Hamilton's life incredibly relevant today.

***Wintersmith* by Terry Pratchett**

I finished reading my children *Wintersmith* and we are now slowly working our way through *I Shall Wear Midnight*. These books confirm my opinion that these are not Pratchett's best work. *A Hat Full of Sky* was more compelling, but even that one felt over-long. Pratchett seems to continually fall back on the Feegles as comic relief to lighten overly talky books that are a little light on plot. When they come together, they have some really beautiful scenes and moments. There just seem to be a lot of pages in between these scenes and moments.

***Chasm City* by Alastair Reynolds**

I re-read the second of the Revelation Space novels. Its darkness feels a little quaint and even a bit silly now, like a cheesy horror movie whose big bad villain is not nearly as scary as you remember. But the book moves along well, with flashbacks to a second narrative that parallels the main storyline nicely, and growing mystery over the narrator's identity. Reynolds shows in this book that he is learning how to move a plot along, and compress time reasonably well, so that the narrative doesn't have to cover every moment. It's still a pretty big potboiler of a space opera, but I found myself looking forward to reading a few chapters each morning.

This book has gone through many printings and so I am a little puzzled to keep finding typographical errors and apparent editing errors. For example, on p. 621 of the mass market Ace paperback:

The thrust beams of the two deceleration ships were not to be underestimated as potential weapons, but neither Armesto or Omdurman would have the nerve to sweep their torches over my ship.

“Deceleration” here should read “decelerating.” I came across a half-dozen or so similar errors, and I found them a bit surprising. And I am still puzzling over the book's final line, and why Reynolds included it. But it's a fun book, and holds up well for what it is — a dark space opera and thriller.

***Death's End* by Cixin Liu**

I am nowhere near finished with this doorstep, the third book in the Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy, but I'll finish it eventually. The best I can say about this third book so far is that the author has, in each volume, managed to startle me with his untamed ideas. The storytelling itself is not always worthy of the originality of the ideas, at least in translation, but it is the ideas that keep me interested.

***The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown**

I came across this book in a church classroom library, and decided it would make a great bedtime story book. It did. Brown wrote and illustrated this book about a robot marooned on a forested island and her attempts to understand the lives of the animals. She becomes the foster mother of a young duck called Brightbill. The kids absolutely loved this story, and I enjoyed it quite a bit myself. The chapters are very short, so it is easy to read a few chapters at bedtime and then find a stopping point. I recommend it for kids of a variety of ages. My five, eight, ten, and twelve-year-olds were all very much engaged by the story. It didn't hurt that I gave some of the animal characters funny voices.

***Wollheim's World's Best SF: Series 4* edited by Donald A. Wollheim**

This collection was originally titled *The 1975 Annual World's Best SF*.

I've made it a small "side quest" in recent years to track down the science fiction anthologies I remember from my childhood. They are long out of print, but if you manage to find the right hole-in-the-wall bookstores, you can often find copies still in good condition. I remember this one very well; I probably read it when I was somewhere around the age of twelve. Things I read at that age seem to have been burned into my brain and I remember them with exceptional clarity.

In particular, I remembered one story very well: "A Full Member of the Club," by Bob Shaw. This is a story about branding and consumerism and it seems even more relevant now than it did then. I read it aloud to Grace and she agreed that it was a great story.

Other notable stories in this collection include "A Song for Lya" by George R. R. Martin (hey, does anyone remember when George R. R. Martin could write? Those were good times!) In 1975 some of the strangeness of the New Wave movement in Science Fiction was still present, and so we have some surreal and beautiful stories including "The Sun's Tears" and "The Bleeding Man." There's an Asimov story too, "Stranger in Paradise." Reading this story, second-rate Asimov even at the time, is a reminder that while Asimov could craft beautiful scenes and ideas, his writing was painfully utilitarian. He stands out in this collection like a sore thumb, his clunky sentences and awkward exposition pretty much smothering a story with some interesting ideas about autism and robotics, which could have been much more effectively told by a better stylist.

Oddly, I also had very clear memories of Wollheim's introduction, which begins:

Utopia ended in 1972. Unfortunately most of us didn't know we were living through the world's Utopian Age when it was on. For most of the world it did not exist then or now. But for some of the world, a small minority of people living in the United States and Western Europe, it was as near Utopia as human history had ever produced since the dawn of history — and may not produce again for a long, long time.

This struck me as insightful then, at (I think) the end of the Carter administration, and now it strikes me as prophetic, since the slow collapse of the American dream is no longer just a fringe idea. Wollheim continued:

What we are saying is that the period of the Sixties represented the highest technological level of society ever achieved and the most unlimited expenditure of the planet's resources and energy for the whim and pleasure of those who could afford it. They represented perhaps ten percent of the inhabitants of the U.S.A. and Canada, and

a smaller percentage of people in Britain and the adjoining European areas. As for the rest, the vast majority, they received a few odd drippings from the overflowing table but mainly they had to keep on working to make ends meet and worrying about the same things that people have worried about since the rise of Sumeria.

And so here we are. Wollheim asserts that the stories in the book all represent visions of utopias, or perhaps dystopias. That's a bit of a stretch given that a number of the stories do very little world-building. They're all worth reading, and of at least historic interest, but I wouldn't call them all "good." As I'm able, and as I get them unpacked, I plan to continue to read through more of these old anthologies, and see what else I can come to understand about the present by reading about what writers in the past thought about the future.

Next Time

There are several other books in progress. I've been reading *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* to my kids. This was a book that was hugely significant to me; it was probably the root of my lifelong interest in abstract thought, logic, recursion, paradox, proof, puzzles, formal systems, and a range of other topics. Even talking about the book itself is a big topic. The kids are loving it and I'm loving it too.

I've also been reading the kids chapters from *Oliver Twist*. And we've seen two movies in theaters recently: *The Lego Batman Movie* and *Hidden Figures*. I have things to say about both of those movies.

I'm sure there are more books I've either finished or abandoned; I'll have to look through my box. There's so much more I'd like to write about, but it's been a long time since I posted a blog entry, and I don't want to wait any longer. Until next time!

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Saginaw, Michigan
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