

# The End of Summer

Today is Monday, August 28th, 2017. (Well, that was the date when I started writing this piece — but it has been taking me increasingly longer to finish these little essays, and so here I am on September 5th, and I haven't come close to capturing everything on my mind this week).

## Summer in Michigan

Summer in Michigan is not like summer in Ohio. After hot weeks in July I still find myself gritting my teeth waiting for things to *really* heat up in August — but then, it mostly doesn't happen. And by the end of August, it is often time to break out long-sleeved shirts and some extra blankets to throw on in the middle of the night. Google tells me that the summer temperatures here peak, on average, on July 19th.

As I write this, the stalled-out Tropical Storm Harvey, previously known as Hurricane Harvey, is flooding parts of Texas. Today sites like Weather Underground are reporting that “total rainfall could reach 50 inches in Texas.” That's terrifying, and it is not finished. Long-term, this kind of massive build-out, across hundreds of square miles of concrete and soils with poor drainage, in hurricane zones, is simply not going to be sustainable. Whether you believe in anthropogenic global warming or not, internally displaced “climate refugees” are already a real phenomenon, and the number will increase every year for the rest of your life.

Closer to home, our new house in the woods south of Ypsilanti is serving us admirably. The kids can play in the woods. We have not really furnished it much yet, so we're lacking a lot of things, like a couch in the family room. We don't have a television, although we occasionally watch a TV show such as Doctor Who on my iPad or on a laptop. I find that I really like it this way, living with a sort of minimalism, although we are planning to have a couch eventually. It's a bit like being on vacation in the woods, every evening and weekend. I don't love the amount we had to finance, to buy this home, but I do love the house, and I'm glad we held out in our house search until we finally found a place we could look forward to coming home to.

At long last, we're getting very close to the end of our work at our old house in Saginaw. I've been making round trips each weekend to bring carloads of

stuff, while Grace has been taking the kids up there during the week to work on cleaning things, out, sorting stuff, taking things to Goodwill, and packing. It's been a real slog. I've tried to calculate the number of times I've made the drive between Saginaw and Washtenaw County, and it's a very large number. I've put almost sixty thousand miles on the Element since June of 2015. It's held up really well, fortunately. I think it helps that most of those miles have been freeway miles, although freeways in Michigan, with constant construction and potholes, can still be awfully hard on a car.

## The Blueberry Book Barn

To help motivate myself to make the drive, on the last couple of trips I've taken a side trip to Russell's Blueberry Farm and Book Barn, which I usually abbreviate in my head to just the "blueberry book barn." It's a you-pick blueberry farm with a used book store on the premises. They've got a pretty impressive collection of science fiction and fantasy books, although I have picked it over quite a bit over the last few years, and they don't restock that often. As the building is not air-conditioned, unfortunately the books tend to suffer over time from too much exposure to humidity.

I've had to pass over a lot of books that I'd like to have, because they have mildew spotting and strong smells. I'll take a book home if it is just a little musty. In my experience, after a few days in a dry environment, and maybe an hour or two in the sun, those books will dry out and smell better. If there are some bits of powdery mildew on the cover, those will generally wipe off with a damp cloth. But if the pages are stained or spotted, I pass them up.

## Science Fiction Book Club Editions

I've got a particular weakness for Science Fiction Book Club editions. They are widely available and usually not considered highly collectible, and so you can often get them at reasonable prices. They aren't really well-made hardcovers, though, so aren't much more rugged than a paperback. In general, the older ones are better-constructed. I found an SFBC hardcover edition of J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* bound together with *The Wind from Nowhere*, from 1965. Aside from a little bit of fading and browning on the edges of the dust jacket, it's in quite good condition, and less fragile than many of the much newer SFBC editions that I own. I also found a copy of *Radio Free Albemuth*, which is particularly nostalgic for me because, if I recall correctly, I received this book from the SFBC back in 1985, when I had a membership. That copy is long-gone, but it's nice to have it again.

I also found a copy of *Galactic Pot-Healer*, the book club edition from 1969. This copy is a little worse for wear, but still pretty clean. Back in the late 1980s through early 1990s, before Philip K. Dick's novels were reprinted, the only way to read them all was to track down brittle old paperbacks. I owned pretty much every one of his novels in old editions, including some of the odder rarities

like *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*. I had to sell most of those years ago, during various periods of unemployment. But these days just about everything he wrote is in print, and with the forthcoming release of the *Blade Runner* sequel, I don't expect his work to become hard-to-find anytime soon.

Other authors are less secure, and harder to find these days. I love story collections, and I've brought home a number of them from the Blueberry Book Barn. I once found a copy of *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* by R. A. Lafferty, which is a somewhat scarce book. I have been collecting books from Donald A. Wollheim's *Word's Best Science Fiction* series. Those aren't particularly scarce. I also found a single-author collection, *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, edited by J. J. Pierce, from 1975, and another, *The Best of C. M. Kornbluth*, edited by Frederick Pohl, from 1967.

### **“The Little Black Bag” by C. M. Kornbluth**

When I skim through these books I'm inevitably happy to run across a story I remember reading before, usually decades ago. This time it was the story “The Little Black Bag,” by Kornbluth. Kornbluth was apparently a strange guy, and he died tragically of a heart attack at the age of 34, but his stories remain brilliant. I have no idea just when I first read “The Little Black Bag,” but it must have been back in my own “golden age of science fiction,” about age twelve. (The original jokey phrase, “The Golden Age of science fiction is twelve,” is likely due to Peter Graham).

I was twelve in 1979-1980, and spending a lot of my time trawling through library stacks. I don't remember where I came across “The Little Black Bag,” but it was probably in an anthology. I also remember reading Kornbluth's other famous story, “The Marching Morons,” which was published in *Omni* magazine in the October 1980 issue; I had a subscription, as proper nerds did.

In Kornbluth's story, a black doctor's bag full of extremely advanced medical tools and drugs is sent into the past, where it is found by an elderly alcoholic physician. He begins to use it to treat patients, with miraculous results, quickly becoming a successful physician again, although he must blindfold his patients so they don't see the anachronistic contents of the black bag and start asking questions. Things are going well until his assistant gets greedy, and then they get very dark, very fast. It's a justifiably famous story and I was pleased to find that “The Little Black Bag” has been turned into an episode of *Escape Pod*

### **The Grace and Paul Pottscast**

Grace and I have been releasing a new podcast episode every Sunday for a few weeks, and hope to continue that schedule (although with six young kids at home, life does tend to intervene in our plans). I announce the podcast episodes on a blog, here. The blog posts have direct links to the MP3 files, or if you use a program like iTunes to manage your podcast listening, you can subscribe to

the feed here.

In order to get episodes out more regularly, I've been working to make my production process easier and less time-consuming. To make this work well, I need to be able to go from a recording of our conversation to a finished podcast quickly, completing the production the same day we record. I'd like to be able to complete all the post-recording steps in under an hour, ideally, and that includes the time needed to transfer the audio file across the network, generate the completed audio file, convert it to MP3 format, and upload the MP3 file. The process should be simple enough to let me finish it without having to backtrack and fix technical mistakes even when I'm tired and distracted and rushing, late on a Sunday evening. I need to be able to drop the two-channel recording into a Logic Pro project, and export a finished audio file. I can't take hours to edit the conversation, even if it cries out for editing; I just don't typically have enough free time in a given week. I can either get it done quickly and shrug at the flaws, or wallow in my usual obsessive-compulsive perfectionism and not get it done at all.

Once I've got a finished audio file (a WAV file), there are a lot of fiddly steps remaining. I need to convert it into an MP3 file. I need to tag the MP3 file, so that it shows up properly in iTunes or other programs that folks use to manage their podcasts. I need to upload the tagged MP3 file to my web hosting company's server. I need to write a description of the episode, which then has to go into an entry in the podcast feed's XML file, along with links and metadata. Links require Percent-encoding (also known as URL- or URI-encoding). The required metadata fields include the file size in bytes, the running time in seconds, and the date and time in an RFC 2822-compliant format.

Then I also need to write a post on the podcast's blog. Rather than write my blog posts directly on Blogger, I've developed a workflow that lets me write them in Markdown format and using the wonderful program Pandoc to turn them into HTML. This lets me edit my own files on my own computer in Markdown, which is much nicer than using Blogger's online editor. I still get nicely formatted HTML that lives up to my standards for web typography, with properly accented characters and curly quotation marks. Doing it this way guarantees that I keep the source text in my own archive and it can't disappear at Google's whim.

A lot of the different pieces of text to assemble all the pieces — the file name, the MP3 file tags, the XML feed file entry fields, and the blog post — are identical, or similar. Typing out dates and file sizes and file durations and percent-encoded URIs is extremely tedious and prone to error. A typo in a link in the feed file or the blog post means that the podcast will not work right for a potential listener. So I've long wanted a nice clean way to automate this process as much as I reasonably can. I'd like to be able to write the title, short summary, and long description of each episode *once* and save it in a text file. I'd like to have everything else — all those other steps — happen pretty much automatically, by running a script.

## BBEdit Worksheets

I have finally put some work towards such a script. I have a BBEdition worksheet for the podcast. The BBEdition worksheet is a wonderful invention — an homage to the worksheet user interface used in the old Macintosh Programmer's Workshop (MPW). A worksheet is a text file that you can edit and save and load, but it is also a sort of interactive shell script. You can select lines from the file and press the Enter key, and they will be executed in your shell, which in my case is **bash**. The results will appear right in the worksheet along with the commands, so to store a log of the session, all you have to do is save the file. Long-running commands animate a little spinner in the status bar at the bottom of the window. So I've come up with commands I can run right in the worksheet to encode and tag the MP3 file exactly as I want, and generate the percent-encoded link, and create the properly formatted date and time. There's a set of commands for each episode, and they are saved in the worksheet right along with the audio projects, so if I want to change the source files and re-generate everything, I can.

Here's the section of the worksheet for Episode 13. Some of these lines are the commands, and some are their output:

```
#####  
# EPISODE 13: Dude, Do You Even Protest?  
#####
```

```
EPISODE_TITLE="Conversation #13: Dude, Do You Even Protest?  
    (September 3, 2017)"  
EPISODE_MP3_FILENAME="Conversation #13_ Dude, Do You Even Protest?  
    (September 3, 2017).mp3"  
EPISODE_SUBDIRECTORY="Conversation 13 - Dude, Do You Even Protest?"  
EPISODE_BOUNCE_FILENAME="EP13.wav"
```

```
$CUSTOM_LAME -V4 --silent --id3v2-only --id3v2-utf16 --ta "$ARTIST"  
    --tl "$ALBUM" --tt "$EPISODE_TITLE" --tg "$GENRE" --tc "$LICENSE"  
"$PROJECT_PATH/$EPISODE_SUBDIRECTORY/Bounces/$EPISODE_BOUNCE_FILENAME"  
"$PROJECT_PATH/MP3/$EPISODE_MP3_FILENAME"
```

```
EPISODE_SUMMARY="Grace and I discuss protest, using as a jumping-  
off point Nathan Heller's book review article from the August 21st issue of _The New Yorker_,  
picking some points made and quotes included from the books Heller is reviewing, before sett
```

```
EPISODE_SUBTITLE="Grace and I discuss the question of whether public protest is useful and m  
if [ ${#EPISODE_SUBTITLE} -ge 255 ];  
    then echo "subtitle field must be 255 characters or less";  
    else echo "subtitle field length ok";  
fi
```

```
echo "File size in bytes:"
```

```

stat -f%z "$PROJECT_PATH/MP3/$EPISODE_MP3_FILENAME"

File size in bytes:
95485557

echo "Current date/time:"
php -r 'date_default_timezone_set("America/Detroit"); echo
    date(DateTime::RFC2822);'

Current date/time:
Mon, 04 Sep 2017 01:27:05 -0400

echo "File duration:"
ffmpeg -i "$PROJECT_PATH/MP3/$EPISODE_MP3_FILENAME" 2>&1 |
    grep "Duration" | cut -d ' ' -f 4 | sed s/,//

File duration:
01:17:49.28

echo "URI-encoded filename:"
ENCODED_FILENAME=$(php -r
    "echo rawurlencode(\"$EPISODE_MP3_FILENAME\");")
echo "$SERVER_PROJECT_PATH/$ENCODED_FILENAME"

URI-encoded filename:
http://thepottshouse.org/pottscasts/gapp/
    Conversation%20%2313_%20Dude%2C%20Do%20You%20Even%20
    Protest%3F%20%28September%203%2C%202017%29.mp3

pandoc --ascii --smart --old-dashes -f markdown_strict -t html
    -o "$PROJECT_PATH/blog posts --- pottscast/generated_html/
    2017_09_04_conversation_13_dude_do_you_even_protest.html"
    "$PROJECT_PATH/blog posts --- pottscast/
    markdown_ascii_source_accented_entities/
    2017_09_04_conversation_13_dude_do_you_even_protest.md"

```

That's a mess of different little tricks. For reporting the file size, I use the standard **stat** command. To get the date and time in the right format, I call out to execute a tiny program in PHP. To get the file duration, I use **ffmpeg**, and feed its output through **grep** and **sed**. Ideally it would round to the nearest second, but I can do that adjustment by hand. To get the URI-encoded filename I use a PHP one-liner again. Then as part of the same worksheet, I generate the HTML for the blog post.

My worksheet won't yet upload the MP3 for me, or write the entry to the feed file and update the file on my web host, or publish the blog post. This is by design, since I want to make sure I get a good look at each of these things before

I publish them. The next step is to generate the whole feed file entry that I can copy and paste into the feed file.

### **The Pottscast Feeds**

Because the process is so prone to error, I use two feed files. One is the “staging” feed. I add the podcast entry to the staging feed, and then tell iTunes to update my subscription to the staging version of the podcast. I verify that the new podcast entry shows up correctly in iTunes, and verify that I can download and play it. I check that the MP3 file is complete, and that all the tags and metadata fields look just the way I want. Often I double-check the feed files using the free feed validator. And I frequently find errors — for example, apparently the subtitle field in my latest feed entry was too long (the limit for the itunes:subtitle field is apparently 255 characters, and I exceeded that). So I fixed that, and added a length check to my script to avoid running into that problem in the future. When it all looks good, I add the feed entry to the “official” feed file. All this is time-consuming but it avoids breaking the feed.

Like many standards that were originally designed when computers were more resource-constrained, the podcast feed format is archaic and ugly. This 2008 blog post from Coding Horror still applies today. It’s hard to write, and it’s hard to read. It’s increasingly hard for me as I get older and my eyes get worse. You can argue that files like this are meant to be machine-generated, but I think that’s a weak argument. It also imposes a burden on anyone writing code to generate this kind of file. And the standard is so fiddly and full of arbitrary limitations, like the 255-character limit I mentioned, that people do in fact often have to debug their feed files. A new simpler feed format would be a nice start, perhaps in JSON or YAML. But there’s a huge chicken-and-egg problem.

Many people apparently use tools for handling podcasts that just allow them to upload a source file, and handle all the rest. I’ve seen the feed files that are generated by these tools. They are horrible. The generated MP3 file podcast tags are horrible, too. I’ve been asked on several occasions for help cleaning up someone’s podcast feed because these tools make such a hash of it. I hear horror stories from podcasters all the time who use a service or web site, and when it does wrong they find out the hard way that without tight control of their feed, they are at the mercy of an indifferent hosting company. And so it’s 2017 and I’m doing it the hard way, because it seems to me like the hard way is still easier.

Oh, and there are gratuitous compatibility issues *everywhere*, even in 2017, even between programs that are the *de facto* standards for podcasting, LAME and iTunes. To make my new workflow generate files that are fully compatible with iTunes, I had to modify the code to the LAME encoder and build my own custom version. I describe how I did that in a blog post [here](#).

As I get older, I’ve got less and less patience for this kind of thing; but at the same time, I want to do my work the way I want to do my work. And I’m cranky and persistent enough to plod along at solving the problems that stand in the

way, even if they require time-consuming, ugly hacks... and they do.

Anyway. That's a long, long explanation that nobody asked for. On to the books.

### ***Proxima* by Stephen Baxter**

I have mixed feelings about the work of Stephen Baxter. I love his Xeelee stories. I love many of his short stories and novellas. But he writes a lot of other books. Many of them show a basic competence and some imagination, but they just aren't inspired. So when I first came across *Proxima* in bookstores, I did not jump on it. I waited a while. And then bought it in paperback.

*Proxima* is a planetary colonization and planetary exploration story in the mode of some of the old masters; think Clarke and Asimov. Baxter clearly has a lot of respect for the old school.

The premise of *Proxima* seems pretty convincing. A political prisoner named Yuri (not his real name) has been sent to Mars. He has gotten himself into some sort of trouble, and was put into cryogenic sleep. As the story opens, he's just woken up, and finds himself on a ship carrying colonists to Proxima Centauri. There's a space race and the powers that be need colonists; prisoners will do fine. Baxter makes a nice historical parallel with the colonization of Australia because one of Yuri's fellow unwilling colonists is actually a crew member named Mardina, an aboriginal Australian forced to stay behind with the colonists at the last minute.

These seem like promising characters, but while Baxter does some nice things with Mardina's character, he doesn't seem to ever get around to giving Yuri much in the way of drives, or personality, or indeed, characteristics of any kind. This is unfortunately in keeping with the typically shallow character development found in Golden Age science fiction. Yuri has a vague drive to keep surviving and keep moving — to keep going through one door after another. And he's curious. He never seems to enjoy Mardina's company very much, nor does she enjoy his. But there's a robot, which humorously references Robbie the Robot, and although Yuri is not very kind to him, together they learn a lot about the planet and the indigenous life. The life on Proxima is deeply strange. Baxter's work here is excellent, and welcome. It fits into that Asimov/Clarke tradition, even channeling some practitioners of harder science fiction like Robert L. Forward and Hal Clement.

This all goes along in a pretty engaging manner, although Baxter glosses over an awful lot. The biochemistry on Proxima isn't compatible with human biochemistry, but where Kim Stanley Robinson in *Aurora* makes this a critical plot driver, Baxter pretty much ignores it. He reserves a lot of thought for the role of artificial intelligences in this future. That part is quite fascinating, and quite dark. There's an intelligent space probe that is vaguely reminiscent of Lieserl, the originally human AI sent to live inside the sun in Baxter's novel *Ring*.

There's also another technological MacGuffin, the "kernels," discovered under the surface of mercury. These are tiny energy sources, perhaps wormholes of some kind. They seem to be artificial, planted there at some point in the solar system's past. I would have liked to see more development of the kernels, since Baxter is good at this sort of thing. But he doesn't do much with them.

### **Sufficiently Advanced Technology**

Where I start to lose interest in the story is, unfortunately, where I start to lose interest in several of Baxter's stories: it's the point where he gives up on any scientific plausibility and introduces magic. Or, if you prefer, it's the point where he introduces such a "sufficiently advanced" technology that I lose my ability to maintain suspension of disbelief. This seems to be a pattern. He's scrupulous about his technology — until he reaches the point in the story where suddenly, he isn't. In some of his other books, it's the introduction of ghosts from parallel universes. In this book, it's the introduction of magical portals. Oh, and parallel universes. You can't have portals without parallel universes. And then, as if Baxter doesn't feel like he has enough of a story to tell, he decides to raise the stakes very, very high. And then we meet some ancient Romans, or something.

It's all set up for a bang-up sequel, and it's available — I could buy it and read it. I'd satisfy my curiosity as to how it all comes out. A few years ago I definitely would have pressed on, to get that information. But you know what? I just don't *care* very much. Baxter hasn't given me a whole lot to care *about* in this book. It's a little too epic, spinning out rather than in. So at least for now, I'll skip it. The review on tor.com mentions Chris Beckett's *Dark Eden*. Maybe I'll check that out. Or maybe I'll order up a copy of *Xeelee:Endurance*. Meanwhile, if you'd like to read a much more character-oriented story that deconstructs the generation starship sub-genre, I suggest you read *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson instead of Baxter's book.

### ***Redemption Ark* by Alastair Reynolds**

Sometimes when I feel skeptical of new releases — and rightfully so, it seems — I just want to go back and read something I enjoyed before. So I dug into a box (most of my books are still packed, but catalogued so I can find them), and pulled out *Redemption Ark*, the next book in the Revelation Space series.

I'll finish up this book in a day or two. It has been fun to refresh my memory about this story. We learn some interesting things about the deep history of the Conjoiners, and the Inhibitors. I just criticized Stephen Baxter for introducing science indistinguishable from magic into his story. Reynolds gets a little close to that at times. We learn that the Conjoiners have actually changed their future by sending information back through time. All I can say in my defense is really that I like the way Reynolds introduces magical technology a lot more than I like the way Baxter introduces it. In Reynolds' work, it's deeply scary stuff, even to his most badass characters, who themselves are deeply scary, such as Skade.

In many ways, Reynolds' space opera is very visual and very heavily influenced by the horror genre. There are several really grim and gruesome injuries and deaths in *Redemption Ark*. I don't intend to point that out as a flaw, just an observation. These stories could give a person nightmares, although ultimately they are not nihilistic *per se*, and are even hopeful about the future. But getting there requires a pretty dark ride.

I think these books could make excellent films, if adapted properly, but telling the story arcs of the Revelation Space universe properly would require multiple films, and each would probably be monstrously expensive. It's hard to imagine a project like that coming together anytime soon. But meanwhile, I can still enjoy them on the IMAX screen inside my head. I'm reminded that while I'm re-reading Reynolds, I should definitely re-read his story collections, *Galactic North* and *Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days*. They are terrific. I should also track down a copy of *Deep Navigation*, which I haven't read yet.

### ***A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. LeGuin**

Casting around for more books to read to my children at bedtime, I pulled out an omnibus edition of *The Earthsea Trilogy*. I had this trilogy as a child in a paperback boxed set. My father gave it to me, I believe. I'm not quite sure what age I was at the time. I don't think I fully appreciated the quality of Le Guin's writing at that age; I remember completing the books, but don't recall that they were particular favorites. I appreciate this work much more now.

Those copies are long-gone, sadly. But I've been reading *A Wizard of Earthsea* to the three older children at home, ages 12, 10, and 8.

Their reaction is mixed. It's a very vividly-described book, but in some chapters the protagonist, Ged, goes for many pages without much in the way of dialogue or action sequences. So I might be reading along enjoying the beautiful language myself, while they are yawning. But then Le Guin will abruptly — sometimes very abruptly — introduce something quite shocking:

The shapeless mass of darkness he had lifted split apart. It sundered, and a pale spindle of light gleamed between his opened arms, a faint oval reaching from the ground up to the height of his raised hands. In the oval of light for a moment there moved a form, a human shape: a tall woman looking back over her shoulder. Her face was beautiful, and sorrowful, and full of fear.

Only for a moment did the spirit glimmer there. Then the shallow oval between Ged's arms grew bright. It widened and spread, a rent in the darkness of the earth and night, a ripping open of the fabric of the world. Through it blazed a terrible brightness. And through that bright misshapen breach clambered something like a clot of black shadow, quick and hideous, and it leaped straight out at Ged's face.

As I read that last sentence, the children actually screamed. So they were definitely paying attention.

The themes of the book are quite deep and quite dark. Le Guin doesn't make a soft or cuddly world for younger readers. There is no reason why the Earthsea books shouldn't be considered a major work of fantasy for readers of any age. The kids loved Ged's encounter with the dragon:

No creature moved nor voice spoke for a long while on the island, but only the waves beat loudly on the shore. Then Ged was aware that the highest tower slowly changed its shape, bulging out on one side as if it grew an arm. He feared dragon-magic, for old dragons are very powerful and guileful in a sorcery like and unlike the sorcery of men: but a moment more and he saw this was no trick of the dragon, but of his own eyes. What he had taken for a part of the tower was the shoulder of the Dragon of Pendor as he uncurled his bulk and lifted himself slowly up.

When he was all afoot his scaled head, spikecrowned and triple-tongued, rose higher than the broken tower's height, and his taloned forefeet rested on the rubble of the town below. His scales were grey-black, catching the daylight like broken stone. Lean as a hound he was and huge as a hill. Ged stared in awe. There was no song or tale could prepare the mind for this sight. Almost he stared into the dragon's eyes and was caught, for one cannot look into a dragon's eyes. He glanced away from the oily green gaze that watched him, and held up before him his staff, that looked now like a splinter, like a twig.

Le Guin's writing here is some of the most terse and beautiful I've ever read, in any genre. Really, I find it humbling to read. It does seem like she's not quite as facile in world-building as one might hope; I find myself longing to know more about the setting. Earthsea doesn't have a lot of gratuitous detail in it, at least not so far. But the deceptively minimalist music of the language, and the measured pace of the story, keep the reader thoroughly engaged.

### ***I Shall Wear Midnight* by Terry Pratchett**

I had been reading bits of this to the kids, but I'm setting it aside. The themes are just a bit too mature for them. There's infanticide, and attempted suicide, and the like. Maybe I'll finish it myself, but for now I'm not going to continue reading it at bedtime.

### ***Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling**

I've been trading off, reading chapters from *A Wizard of Earthsea* some nights, and chapters from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (or at least half-chapters, since many of the chapters are very long) on other nights.

*Goblet of Fire* is really dragging. Reading it out loud reveals this; I read it years ago and don't remember it as being so weak and scattered. There are fun episodes — for example, the scene with Potter in the Prefect's bathroom, visited by Moaning Myrtle. But there are a lot of parts that feel muddled, and some scenes don't make a lot of sense, with details apparently pulled out of thin air and then abandoned. For example, we learn that the village of Hogsmeade apparently is right next to an un-named, and previously un-mentioned, *mountain*. Rowling seems to have created this so she would have a place to put a cave, the cave where Sirius Black and Buckbeak are hiding out.

Rowling also describes a stile and I had to look that up, as I was initially imagining a turnstile. There's not much sense of place. It's just a location somewhere vaguely in space near Hogsmeade, sort of like when you walk past all the scenery in a video game.

Also in this novel, one small owl can't manage it, but two screech owls can, between them, fly while carrying an enormous ham. That's a thing that happens in the story and we're supposed to believe it. It's magic, I guess. Picture my eyes rolling.

Meanwhile the plot is dragging, and although there's a vague sense of menace from the goings-on with Barty Crouch, Mad-Eye Moody, and Snape, it doesn't seem to be taking us anywhere. This one really needed some more editing. It's one of the episodes where the movie is actually better than the book.

I was mentioning something about *The Goblet of Fire* on Twitter and got a recommendation to listen to The Quibbler Podcast. The show's description reads:

A Harry Potter book club for grownups. Heather Price-Wright and Alex Dalenberg make their way through the Harry Potter books, chapter by chapter. We analyze *avada kedavra*. We dissect Dumbledore. We question quidditch. And we hail Hermione. Join us as we go as deep as you've always wanted to into the books that defined our childhoods. *Alohamora* — the door is open.

I've listened to a couple of episodes. It's two nerds having fun talking in excruciating detail about the books, literally chapter-by-chapter — what's good, what's bad, and what's an interesting reference or call-back. It's well-produced. Interleaved with the discussion are clips from the audiobook. It just so happens that they're releasing episodes now that correspond exactly to where I am in my re-reading of *Goblet*. I'd like to play some of the episodes for the kids, but they aren't quite for kids. As the description says, these are for adults re-reading the books, who want to go deep down the rabbit hole.

I really admire the effort that the creators are putting into the podcast, but the truth is that I am just not quite a big enough fan of the originals to love this podcast the way it deserves to be loved. The Harry Potter books did not define *my* childhood. The first one wasn't even published in the United States until I

was thirty, and I don't recall hearing about them at all until the start of the year 2000, a couple of years later. As a result, I don't love them uncritically; while I think the first one is unimpeachably great, a wonderfully written, well-paced and fun book in every regard, I tend to look at the later ones with a pretty jaundiced eye. More's the pity, honestly. I would love it if I had more books that I could simply love uncritically, but my mind doesn't work that way, especially as I get older.

## The *Glen Carrig* Remastered

Now that I have a reasonably good-sounding recording studio setup for podcasts, I've started to chip away at a project I've wanted to do for a long time: re-recording *The Boats of the Glen Carrig*. In 2006 I recorded a reading of Hodgson's novel and mixed it with music that was available under a Creative Commons license. The original episodes are still available and you can read the blog post for the first chapter [here](#).

I was never really happy with the audio quality I achieved in that project. I've written at exhausting length in the past about all the technical problems I had with various microphones, and I won't rehash that all here. I *do* still like my choice of music and the atmospheric combination of music and narration I achieved back then. Listening in 2017, I know I should be able to do better, both in technical quality and in my performance.

So, I've started re-recording the narration. It's hard. Here's a little bit of the text:

We had gone a little way among the trees, when, suddenly, one who was with us cried out that he could see something away on our right, and we clutched everyone his weapon the more determinedly, and went towards it. Yet it proved to be but a seaman's chest, and a space further off, we discovered another. And so, after a little walking, we found the camp; but there was small semblance of a camp about it; for the sail of which the tent had been formed, was all torn and stained, and lay muddy upon the ground. Yet the spring was all we had wished, clear and sweet, and so we knew we might dream of deliverance.

Hodgson uses a deliberately archaic style in the book, since the text it presents was supposedly written in 1757. His sentences are crazy. Try reading that out loud and getting all the pauses and breaks in the right place. How do you even pronounce "determinedly," anyway?

I'm not sure if I'll be able to complete this project anytime soon; after all, it took me months, back in 2006, and back then I had both more time to myself, and more stamina. But we'll see.

## On the Horizon

I've got a heap of books from the Blueberry Book Barn, including more story collections, and some Ballard. I also picked up a recent edition of E. R. Eddison's Zimiamvian books: *The Worm Ouroboros*, *Mistress of Mistresses*, *A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and *The Mezentian Gate*. I have read *The Worm Ouroboros* before, and it's an amazing book. I've long wanted to record it. A couple of nights ago I stayed up reading part of it to my wife, Grace. But although I've owned old copies of the other three books before, and tried to read them, I've never really gotten a foothold on the so-called Zimiamvian Trilogy. It's time to give it another try.

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