

The End of my Forties

Today is Monday, September 25th, 2017.

Tomorrow is my birthday. I'll be fifty. It will be the end of my forties, but also it means tomorrow I will have completed my fiftieth year. A few years back it was the twentieth century, until the end of 2000, not the end of 1999. There was no year zero. Does that mean I'll be in my forties until my birthday in 2018, when I'll turn 51? No, because I had a "year zero," my first year, from my birth to my first birthday. I find this endlessly confusing. Maybe it's only confusing to old people.

It feels like age has been catching up to me recently, with a bit of a vengeance. I've certainly felt myself aging over the decades, usually gradually and relatively smoothly. But lately it has seemed to be accelerating. We've had a couple of stressful years. The situation with our old house in Saginaw, empty and unsold, is weighing heavily on me. Living in Saginaw was stressful in its own way, what with repeated periods of unemployment, but I was getting regular exercise, and my diet was better. Here the family is in one place again, but we are not fully settled. I'm not really in a sustainable daily routine. A lot of things are on hold until we resolve the situation with the old house. For example, we still don't really have furniture in most rooms in the new house. I am trying to carefully keep as much cash in reserve as I can, every week, spending money only on critical items. Most of my books are still in boxes, because I am waiting to set up custom bookcases; ordinary bookcases from Ikea or elsewhere are just not going to cut it for our library of almost 4,000 books. I am looking forward to the day I can have everything shelved; it may take some time, but it will be glorious. On the day that everything is shelved, I intend to have a party. But that is still in the future.

We have surprises. For example, the water coming from our softener was not up to snuff. We had a guy come out to look at our iron filter. He told us that it's meant to last for ten years, and it's now in year fifteen. Surprise. Changing it out cost seven hundred dollars. When we set up the appointment, I put a line item in our spreadsheet, "water system service (TBD)," for \$250. Oops. Well, it's hard to regret spending that \$700, because our water now looks, smells, and tastes substantially better. It should also help keep our water heater from clogging up and corroding. But we didn't have the information that the water system was way overdue for an expensive filter replacement. I'm also trying

to keep a balance set aside for the next big water system expense, which will probably be the water heater itself.

We also didn't expect the water leak in the ceiling of the garage, or the washing machine blowout upstairs. Ultimately I'm grateful that I'm now earning enough, and setting aside enough, that we can absorb these shocks without crashing our bank account. But there's no way I can earn enough, or set aside enough, to handle a worst-case scenario with our old house in Saginaw, just as very few people would have the cash on hand to pay for a baby's open heart-surgery out of pocket. (I've been watching the paperwork go by, as our insurance company negotiates and pays portions of the bill. It's like watching Godzilla jockey for a wrestling hold on Megalon, and vice-versa. The amount our insurer has already paid for her hospitalization, after surgery, was almost as much as our asking price for our old house. I don't know what the final bills will look like, all told; there are dozens of Explanation of Benefits, each of which is the tip of an iceberg of bills and line items. All us civilians can do is hope we don't become collateral damage in the fight, crushed under a falling giant).

Big Plans, Small Steps

I'm pleased to announce that Grace and I have managed to stick to a podcast schedule for eight weeks running. The "big plan" is to grow the podcast as best we can, and add in more content and guests via Skype. The "small steps" are just more of what we've been doing — continuing to do our best to get a show out each week, whether we have a lot of material prepped, or not, whether we are feeling our best, or not. I announce the episodes on our project blog, here:

<https://pottscast.blogspot.com/>

On to the reading.

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

I finally, finally, *finally* finished reading *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* to my kids. I'm so glad we finished. Book 4 is a slog. It has some great moments, and great scenes, but it's just too long; there are too many sub-plots, and for every exciting chapter or scene, there are three that slow down and drag out the story. There are several villain monologues worthy of the James Bond franchise. Because there are so many plot strands, right after the climax of the book we have a long denouement, and a series of infodumps. One of them is a confession. Barty Crouch is given veritaserum, a truth potion, and spills his guts. It goes on for *pages*. You might find, reading it, that you are pleased that everything eventually fits together and makes sense, but at the same time, feel as if you no longer really care.

I'm not in any big hurry to move on to book 5. For one thing, as our three most avid bedtime story listeners are 12, 10, and 8, I think we might be getting ahead of their ages.

***Absolution Gap* by Alastair Reynolds**

After finishing up *Redemption Ark*, it was pretty natural to segue directly into the sequel, *Absolution Gap*. In this book, Reynolds has to keep ratcheting up the strangeness and the darkness, but has to keep the reader interested in an active, human-centered story. So we have a major character tortured to death, because morally, in context, it's the necessary thing to do; we have a woman killed horrifically, by an accident that saves the life of her partner; and we have a child brought into existence around a neutron star and modified to be a conduit for information from the future.

In Reynolds' worlds, technology is always a little frightening, and the higher the technology, the more frightening. But despite feeling the existential claustrophobia of an increasingly dangerous future closing in on them, the people in his world often still have some wiggle room to make moral choices in order to make the best they can of that future, and some of the choices they make are inspiring.

Meanwhile, his world-building of a future religious sect on the moon Hela is breathtaking, and very, very cyber-punk. As the moon slowly turns, a convoy of giant cathedrals must crawl in an endless convoy around the moon, keeping the gas giant Haldora always in view overhead, so that legions of religious pilgrims can watch the planet, around the clock, waiting for it to — for just a fraction of a second — vanish. As the story unfolds, this bizarre scenario starts to make perfect sense.

This book, though it is a big, sprawling story, moves along a little quicker than *Redemption Ark*. It's complicated, intercut in time and space, but it's a fitting ending to the Revelation Space books, and sets up events that are continued in the stories in *Galactic North*. I should probably re-read *Galactic North* and *The Prefect* and *Diamond Dogs*, *Turquoise Days*, but in a day or two I should be receiving a copy of the story collection *Deep Navigation*, containing Revelation Space stories I haven't yet read, so that will come first. There's another collection, *Beyond the Aquila Rift*, that I don't have, but I'm scratching my head a bit because it looks like this collection consists mostly of material already collected in his previous story collections, and so I'm wondering if I need it.

Finally, I'll note in passing that a sequel to *The Prefect*, called *Elysium Fire*, is due in 2018, and a sequel to *Revenger*, called *Revealer*, is due in 2019.

A Pile of Non-Fiction

I'm reading and skimming several non-fiction books: *A Fighting Chance* by Senator Elizabeth Warren; *Our Revolution* by Senator Bernie Sanders; *Demagoguery and Democracy* by Patricia Roberts-Miller; *False Choices: the Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton* edited by Liza Featherstone, and *What Happened* by Hillary Rodham Clinton. I probably won't finish all these, but I'm using them as fodder to create notes and articles for eventual inclusion in the Pottscast.

And... Stories!

One of my finds from the Blueberry Book Barn is a collection called *Fifty Years of the Best Science Fiction from Analog*. The copy I got there is unfortunately pretty foul-smelling, and I spent some time cleaning bug poop of the page edges and letting it dry out. It still sets off my allergies a bit, but it contains some great stories. Last night I read the kids two of them: “— And He Built a Crooked House —”, by Robert A. Heinlein, first published in 1941, and “The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimeline” by Isaac Asimov.

“— And He Built a Crooked House —” by Robert A. Heinlein

“Crooked House” is sexist in execution but still hugely entertaining. An arrogant young architect, inspired by the purely mathematical object known as the hypercube, wants to build a house that would take up only a very limited volume in our three-dimensional space, but actually contain much more space. Unable to realize this in three dimensions, he satisfies himself with building an “unfolded” hypercube, a *net* of the 4-dimensional hypercube. The night before the owner is to see the house for the first time, there is a minor earthquake, and the house folds up, collapsing into a quote-real-unquote hypercube. The story is a great example of a science fiction story that requires the reader’s disbelief to be suspended only about one particular question: could such a structure, that occupies four spatial dimensions, *exist* in our normally accessible three-dimensional space, in such a way that we could enter it, and traverse through it? The answer is undoubtedly “no,” but if you’re willing to say “maybe” for a few pages, you’ll love this story, in which the premise is fully explored.

“The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimeline”

I first read “Thiotimeline” in a paperback copy of *The Early Asimov, Book 2*, which I came across back in grade school, when I was at the Erie Day School, somewhere between grades 4-6. This story is written in the form of a paper, published in a journal of chemistry. It starts out innocently enough, explaining a series of experiments in purifying (resublimating) an unusual compound called thiotimeline (note that this compound is fictional; Asimov might have given it this name because it sounds a bit like “timeline”). We learn that in the process of measuring the time it takes thiotimeline to dissolve, the author discovered that in some cases the compound dissolved *before* the solvent was added — that is, it anticipated that the solvent would be added in the future and so dissolved in negative time. In one of the greatest jokes ever contained in the fewest possible number of words, the author notes that while he tried to fool the compound by getting it to dissolve without ever adding the solvent, it was too smart for him, and would only dissolve if he eventually added the solvent.

I remember laughing uproariously at this story back when I first read it as a kid. I “got it.” Reading it to my kids last night, a couple of them “got it” and also started laughing and yelling “what???” and interrupting the story to express

their disbelief.

There's a little more to the story-slash-scientific paper. Apparently the speed with which thiotimoline dissolves *in advance* is dependent on the exact nature of the solvent. This implies that thiotimoline is somehow "smart" enough to know "in advance" not just *that* it is about to be dissolved, but *in which solvent* it is about to be dissolved, implying even more strongly that either it somehow knows the future, or it can do instant analytic chemistry at a distance on the approaching beaker of solvent.

Thiotimoline is kind of like Shrodinger's Cat — just as Shrodinger's Cat is a thought experiment about what quantum uncertainty looks like, "scaled up" to an observable *size*, thiotimoline is a thought experiment about what a quantum causality violation might look like, "scaled up" to an observable *duration*. And it raised hilarious philosophical questions as well: does a chemical compound have free will? Do we?

All these implications popped into my head in a single "flash" as I read the original story.

As I re-read the story, I also recalled how alienated it made me feel, to "get" the elaborate intellectual joke in a *gestalt* flash. Of course, lots of other people have read the story and laughed at it, but back then, I was a lonely child who had been labeled "gifted" and was reading many years above my grade level. Because of this I felt that there was no one around me — not a parent, not a teacher, not a sibling — who would laugh at this joke, even if I could make them understand it, because laughing at it required that the reader "get it" in a flash of insight; if someone has to explain it, and slow-walk the reader through the counter-factual concepts and philosophical implications, the story just won't seem laugh-out-loud funny.

Decades later, I often don't "get" my son Sam's jokes, and it's really not helpful when he tries to explain them to me, for similar reasons.

My universe will end someday, perhaps sooner than I hoped. My kids will carry pieces of it forward and use them as building blocks for their own unique voices and points of view.

On my way out, today, I'll just leave this here for you, dear reader, to peruse, at your own convenience.

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