

Read It, October 2017

Today is Monday, October 9th, 2017.

The leaves are beginning to fall and the weather is really getting comfortable. In a few days Grace and I will celebrate our sixteenth wedding anniversary. This month three of our children have birthdays, two on the same day. I've had some kind of lingering cold or sinus infection that is leaving me tired and listless and slightly feverish. Usually when I finally give in and go to a doctor, the doctor examines me and says "well, it doesn't look that serious; your lungs are clear. I'd say just get some extra rest and fluids and give it a few more days." I don't want to take rounds of antibiotics if my condition isn't actually life-threatening, in part because oral antibiotics just often don't really work that well for sinus infections.

I tried the "getting some extra rest" thing this weekend. Grace and the kids picked up a lot of the slack when I wasn't cooking or doing dishes. That was nice. I did get a little more rest than usual. But I just find it really hard to nap with any noise happening at all. This means, basically, that I can rarely really get a nap, even if I desperately need one, when the kids are home. Nearly fasting, and drinking a lot of hibiscus tea with honey, helped. As did a little whiskey. A good peaty Islay scotch seems to be at least as effective for a sinus infection as an over-the-counter cold medicine, if not more.

Yesterday's Pottscast turned out to be more work than we planned. Grace and I recorded a long chat — almost two hours. Because, apparently, I was not as alert as I usually am, I managed to merely *imagine* that I got Logic to start recording. Instead, it was playing. So Grace and I spoke while the computer looked like it was recording, and we listened to our monitor mix. The computer didn't record anything at all.

Later in the evening we basically staged the whole conversation again upstairs, in our bedroom, using a portable recorder. I think we got just about everything out that we said originally, although I was noticeably tired and hoarse.

I still have something like six or seven blogs. Every once in a while, I consider deleting one or two of them completely. But then I get a comment on something I wrote years ago, and it's a real comment, not spam. So I reconsider.

I've been chipping away at a number of different books, in my usual disorganized way. But first I want to mention that we watched *Doctor Strange* (the 2016

movie).

***Doctor Strange* (2016 film)**

I was never a big comics fan, although I used to read my stepbrother's leftover comics, back in the late 1970s to early 1980s. I vaguely remember Doctor Strange as, well, *strange* (go figure), in that he explicitly used magic and sorcery, instead of vague science-based powers and abilities.

The movie comes very close to being very good. At no point is it really a bad movie, and it scores a lot of points for outlandish visuals (although, it seems to me, the special effects are sometimes quite derivative of the effects in *Inception*). It's also quite funny in places. Strange is an arrogant young doctor, a neurosurgeon. Speeding in his sports car, Strange crashes, shattering his hands, leaving them weak and trembling. The finest surgeons are unable to repair the damage. Desperate to save his career, he travels to Nepal, hoping to find a way to restore his hands. He's following a lead — his physical therapist knew of a man with a severe spinal cord injury who traveled to Nepal and found a way to restore his ability to walk, and even to play basketball.

Strange is a materialist and an atheist, but when he meets the “Ancient One” (Tilda Swinton), she punches him right in the *chakras* so hard that his astral body blasts out of his material body, and he finds himself staring down at himself in shock. Then she opens his third eye, and it's an acid trip on the screen. Strange wants to blame it on the tea, or a drug, but he can't; he's just been shoved through a door into the undeniable knowledge that the universe is stranger than he could have imagined. And so he flips immediately from a materialist atheist to a mystic who wants to master it all, as quickly as possible.

Swinton is quite good (although an odd casting choice). I agree with the filmmakers who, in interviews, noted that since the original characters were often based on very negative Asian stereotypes (“Fu Manchu” and “Dragon Lady” tropes), they were afraid of being accused of racism for re-creating any of those characters. Instead, they chose whitewashing. I'm not sure this was the best way to navigate that particular minefield, but I *am* glad that the Asian characters are, at least for the most part, free of these stereotypes.

The weaknesses of this movie have little to do with the visuals and acting, and everything to do with the screenplay. The film feels a little long, but it feels long because by the halfway point, we're able to guess how it all will end. The symbols are pretty heavy-handed. There's a scene where Strange breaks into the library of forbidden sorcery books, and as he pulls down the forbidden book, he takes a bite of an apple and places it on a desk, center-screen. It doesn't take a degree in English to realize that he is eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, and what will happen next. I actually stopped the movie here and explained to my kids this symbol and its significance, and told them “by the way, here's what's going to happen next.” I explained, based on the setup so far, who would die, how the plot lines would play out, and where the various relationship issues

would end up. I took no great joy in being right. If it had been a better movie, I would have been guessing right up to the end. That predictability, together with a number of characters one doesn't really feel all that interested in, make the movie feel longer than it is.

Angelica Jade Bastien has a review here on rogerebert.com. She makes a number of good points in her review. She writes:

One of the most glaring sins of “Doctor Strange” is how quickly Strange masters magic. There isn't much tension in his arc. While he struggles briefly at first to keep up with other students The Ancient One has taken under her care, he's soon stealing sacred books out from under Wong (Benedict Wong), the sharp-eyed master who protects the texts at The Ancient One's behest. Strange plays by his own rules, growing far beyond the skills of those around him. He even goes as far as bending time, secretly reading from forbidden texts and wielding the Eye of Agamotto. When Karl Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor) remarks that Strange seems destined for this, I couldn't help but roll my eyes. Of course he was.

Bastien also points out that Swinton's character “seems to be from another film entirely — one that would truly embrace the weirdness of the premise beyond the trippy visual effects.” Yes — I'd like to see *that* movie.

There is the promise of at least one sequel. I enjoyed this one enough that I would probably go see that sequel on the big screen.

On a final technical note: I watched this movie on a Blu-ray disc, playing the audio through an old Onkyo receiver into a pair of bookshelf speakers. This was a mistake. The audio track contains a huge amount of low-frequency energy — when the sorcerors fire off magic spells, the audio is made to show off the gut-shaking capacity of a movie theater's THX sound system. My poor speakers looked like they were going to fire their woofers across the room, and the thundering sub-bass frequencies came out sounding like a wet fart.

I'm not quite sure how to fix this — maybe I needed to set the Blu-ray player to play the stereo track instead of the 5.1 track? My Blu-ray player doesn't seem to have an option to apply a high-pass filter to the audio output. Maybe I need to protect the speakers with a capacitor network that rolls off low frequencies the next time I try to watch *Doctor Strange*. In any case, be cautious if you are going to listen to this movie on ordinary stereo speakers. You might well blow them. Mine are still working, but one sounds a bit damaged, and may not be long for this world.

***Deep Navigation* by Alastair Reynolds**

I picked up a copy of Alastair Reynolds' story collection, *Deep Navigation*. This is a lesser-known story collection, available only in a NEFSA (New England Science Fiction Association) Press printing. I ordered a used copy from Alibris,

and it arrived damaged, shipped only in a plastic bag. This always enrages me — the whole book was bent, as if someone placed it across a gap between two chairs, and stood on it. It is still readable, but why couldn't the seller ship it with a little more protection? They saved a dollar, but I will never order a book from them again.

But anyway, how is it?

So far it is confirming my initial guess — that this collection represents the bottom of the barrel of Reynolds' output, and is for dedicated fans only.

The first story, "Nunivak Snowflakes," involves a teenager with an artificial arm who can do healing magic, and receives strange messages on pieces of paper inside fish that fall from the sky. After a weird setup like this, and the introduction of several intriguing characters, I was ready for a surreal novella. But this is only a short story, and next to nothing happens before the story abruptly ends. This was his first published story and it shows — the setup is imaginative, but he didn't really build it into anything.

The next one, "Monkey Suit," fits more-or-less into the Revelation Space universe. It's a decent enough story, a little creepy. It reminds me of the Doctor Who two-parter, "Silence in the Library" and "Forest of the Dead." I can see why it was left out of other collections that contained Revelation Space stories, though — it's just not quite strong enough, or dark enough, to fit in with the other RS material.

"The Fixation" again has a fascinating setup involving the restoration of the Antikythera mechanism, and some mumbling about quantum mechanics and the many-worlds hypothesis, but then, like "Nunivak Snowflakes" it ends, without ever really getting the story arc to, well, arc. It's another atmospheric disappointment. Honestly, it probably should have stayed on his hard drive until he found a way to flesh it out.

I'll continue, but so far what I've read is largely discouraging, so I may not even keep this book in my permanent collection. And I'll be hesitant in the future to buy any special limited editions released by NEFSA Press. Sometimes unpublished material really is unpublished for good reasons.

***The Compleat Enchanter: The Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea* by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp**

This volume collects three novellas, collaborations between L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, with the first two stories dating back to 1940. Stylistically, they feel a bit dated at times — an unmistakable ambient sexism flows through them. But they are also quite funny, and I can detect a very strong through-line between these stories and the writing of contemporary authors such as Jim Butcher. They are sort of a hybrid between low fantasy and high fantasy, and the bridge between the two levels, that keeps the conceit working, is their humor.

I think Heinlein may have had homage to de Camp and Pratt in mind when he created *The Number of the Beast*. In that book (not Heinlein's finest, but an interesting failure), there is a finite, but very large, number of universes, some of which closely match the worlds sketched in famous science fiction and fantasy stories — for example, Oz, Barsoom, and Pellucidar — and some don't. In Heinlein's story a technological device is used to travel between universes.

In de Camp and Pratt's formulations, the original authors of myths and legends were so crazy that their brains ran on alternative logic, so their minds could "jump the tracks" to these next-door universes and experience these alternate realities. Harold Shea learns to travel to parallel universes via a "syllogismobile," not really a vehicle, but a mathematical model of the rules of an alternate reality, which he simply studies. Each literary world can be reached by a different model, or set of rules.

In "The Roaring Trumpet," Shea sets out to enter the world of Irish myth, but makes a mistake, and winds up in a world of Norse myth, where the gods are getting ready for Ragnarok. In this world, the gods are very real, very powerful, and very dangerous, and the humans live in uneasy alliance with them, trying to avoid getting trampled. It's a greasy, cold place:

The meal consisted of various meats, with beside them a big slab of bread, looking as though it had been cut from a quilt. There was no sign of knife, fork, or any vegetable element. The meat he picked up rather gingerly was apparently a boiled pork chop, well-cooked and well-seasoned. But as he was taking the second bite, he noted that the shield girl, Aud, was still standing beside him.

As he looked round Aud made a curtsy and said rapidly: "Lord, with this meal as with all things, your wishes are our law. Is there aught else that you desire?"

Shea hesitated for a moment, realizing it was a formula required by politeness and that he should make some remark praising the food. But he had had a long drink of potent mead on an empty stomach. The normal food habits of an American urged him to action.

"Would it be too much to ask whether you have any vegetables?" he said.

For one brief second both the girl and Thjalfi stared at him. Then both burst, into shrieks of laughter, Aud staggering back toward the wall, Thjalfi rolling his head forward on his arms. Shea sat staring, red with embarrassment, the half-eaten chop in his hand.

There are quite a few funny scenes, and the story moves along quickly. This is a world of magic. But while some fantasy authors lazily use magic as a generic plot device, capable of doing anything that is needed at any time, "playing tennis with the net down," de Camp and Pratt set themselves the challenge of trying

to come up with a magic that is not just a set of recipes and spells to learn, but which has rules, that the characters can learn and exploit. For example:

“The law of similarity may be stated thus: Effects resemble causes. It’s not valid for us, but primitive peoples firmly believe it. For example, they think you can make it rain by pouring water on the ground with appropriate mumbo jumbo.”

The first novella moves along quite speedily, but the authors were writing a novella, and were not interested in the challenge of describing the events of Ragnarok itself. So, wisely, they end the story, and pull the fish-out-of-water Shea back to his own world before he gets himself killed.

In the next novella, “The Mathematics of Magic,” Shea travels with his colleague, Chalmers, to the world of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (an epic English poem from 1590 which, sadly, I have not read). Chalmers takes to magic like a fish to water, and actually likes life as a magician in the land of faerie more than life as an elderly psychologist in New England. And Chalmers is quite powerful, as a magician, although apparently one must learn how to carefully calibrate spells, or they can easily produce results that are multiple powers of ten bigger, or smaller, than expected. When Chalmers summons a dragon, he and Shea are delighted to find that the spell worked! But then:

A second draconian head was pushed through the smoke. This one was squirted out in a few seconds. It looked at the three men, then wandered over to a clump of bright-colored flowers, sniffed, and began to eat them. Now a third and a fourth head were already in sight. As fast as the dragons were extruded, more followed them. The field down to the very confines of the trees was crowded with them, new arrivals butting the others to make room or scratching their sides on trees. Shea was counting: “Thirty-three, thirty-four...”

I have not yet finished the third novella, “The Castle of Iron,” but I will be done with it soon, and I will decide whether I want to track down more of the novellas. de Camp and Pratt collaborated on “Wall of Serpents” and “The Green Magician.” But after the fifth one, I believe that Pratt unfortunately died. de Camp then continued working on several more stories in the series, collaborating with Christopher Stasheff and other authors. I have no idea if these later stories are as good as the original collaborations, but I suspect that they are not.

While I’ve characterized these stories as funny, I have to admit that funny is not always enough. Reading them in 2017, they seem to have a sort of “neither fish nor fowl” aspect. They aren’t serious or epic enough for me to really sink my teeth into, like E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros*. But they also aren’t quite silly and energetic enough to make good bedtime stories for the kids, and the aforementioned sexism and mild dirty jokes make them unsuitable for bedtime reading:

“Now, what I want to say is that this here is a very useful little

collop of jewelry, both for the lady and her knight. It has a double enchantment on it. For the lady, it makes her ten times fairer the minute she puts it on, and it also, it won't stay around the waist of any wench who's not perfectly chaste and pure. That's for the benefit of the knight. The minute this lady can't keep her belt on he knows she's been up to tricks."

Although I definitely acknowledge that these are historically significant and can see their influence all over modern fantasy, I'm not sure they are really going to be among my favorites. Writers like Butcher that they influenced, directly or indirectly, to me seem like they have clearly outdistanced the original concept, keeping the humor while also creating compelling characters and plots.

And despite reading dozens of fantasy novels in my youth, in general I'm not really a big fan of most fantasy. It really takes the very exceptional stuff, the best of the best, to convince me. Generally, I'll forgive science fiction that is written at a mediocre level, if it contains fascinating ideas, while in fantasy the ideas are rarely very original, and so the writing has to be compelling.

In the case of *The Compleat Enchanter* the story still feels fresh, and I love the idea of trying to build a scaffolding of rules under traditional magic, a bit like what Whitehead and Russell attempted to do for mathematics with *Principia Mathematica*. But they just don't seem meaty enough to want to re-read.

Maybe I'm just getting more jaded, as at 50, if you hand me a new (new, or new to me) work of science fiction or fantasy, the odds are that I've read something like it before, something that does what the new book does, but better, and maybe even does it backwards and in high heels. There's a river of new work published every year, and ain't nobody got time for all that.

I'll finish these, and maybe I'll continue. Maybe they'll seem better to me then. Time will tell. Maybe they'll become your favorites. Or maybe they already are?

Non-fiction and Fiction On Deck

I've got a lot of books in piles around my bed. There's *Unspeaking* by Chris Hedges and David Talbot. Hedges is a very challenging thinker. This book is an extended interview with Hedges, carried out over several days. You can dip into it out of order, but if you read the sections in order, it forms a sort of autobiography of Hedges.

There are many more non-fiction books piled up, and I'm not going to list them all now; some of them will be mentioned in the podcast.

***The Sword in the Stone* by T. H. White**

I've also dug out a book that was very significant to me in childhood — *The Sword in the Stone* by T.H. White. Speaking of "neither fish nor fowl" — it's an Arthurian romance, a fantasy, set in medieval Europe, but also, dripping with

anachronisms. It was reworked slightly and toned down to serve as the first part of *The Once and Future King*, a considerably darker story, which I also read as a child. I also read the separate, sad finale, *The Book of Merlyn*. I probably bought my paperback copy of *The Once and Future King* at a Waldenbooks store in the Millcreek Mall in Erie, Pennsylvania. My copy is crumbling now, the brittle, browned pages breaking when handled, and nothing make me feel older than outliving my favorite books. I also bought a copy of *The Book of Merlyn*, I believe, via the Scholastic Book Club, probably in sixth grade.

The Sword in the Stone is very, very funny. I'm now reading chapters from this book to my children at bedtime. I've been running around the bedroom pretending to be King Pellinore in his massive suit of armor with padded helm:

"Traitor knight!" cried Sir Grummore.

"Yield, recreant, what?" cried King Pellinore.

They fewtered their spears again, and thundered into the charge.

"Oh," said the Wart, "I hope they don't hurt themselves."

But the two mounts were patiently blundering together, and the two knights had simultaneously decided on the sweeping stroke. Each held his spear at right angles toward the left, and, before the Wart could say anything further, there was a terrific yet melodious thump. Clang! went the armour, like a motor omnibus in collision with a smithy, and the jousters were sitting side by side on the green sward, while their horses cantered off in opposite directions.

"A splendid fall," said Merlyn.

The two horses pulled themselves up, their duty done, and began resignedly to eat the sward. King Pellinore and Sir Grummore sat looking straight before them, each with the other's spear clasped hopefully under his arm.

"Well!" said the Wart. "What a bump! They both seem to be all right, so far."

Sir Grummore and King Pellinore laboriously got up.

"Defend thee," cried King Pellinore.

"God save thee," cried Sir Grummore.

With this they drew their swords and rushed together with such ferocity that each, after dealing the other a dint on the helm, sat down suddenly backwards.

"Bah!" cried King Pellinore.

"Booh!" cried Sir Grummore, also sitting down.

"Mercy," exclaimed the Wart. "What a combat!"

This is another book that has been hugely influential on modern fantasy. If you've seen Peter Jackson's portrayal of Radagast in *The Hobbit*, you might have a shock of recognition when you read White's description of Merlyn the magician:

Merlyn had a long white beard and long white moustaches which hung down on either side of it. Close inspection showed that he was far from clean. It was not that he had dirty fingernails, or anything like that, but some large bird seemed to have been nesting in his hair. The Wart was familiar with the nests of Spar-hawk and Gos, the crazy conglomerations of sticks and oddments which had been taken over from squirrels or crows, and he knew how the twigs and the tree foot were splashed with white mutes, old bones, muddy feathers and castings. This was the impression which he got from Merlyn. The old man was streaked with droppings over his shoulders, among the stars and triangles of his gown, and a large spider was slowly lowering itself from the tip of his hat, as he gazed and slowly blinked at the little boy in front of him.

And if you've ever enjoyed Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, with its singing teapots and candlesticks, you might raise an eyebrow as you read about Merlyn's mustard-pot:

"Have some mustard," said the magician, when they had got to the kidneys.

The mustard-pot got up and walked over to his plate on thin silver legs that waddled like the owl's. Then it uncurled its handles and one handle lifted its lid with exaggerated courtesy while the other helped him to a generous spoonful.

"Oh, I love the mustard-pot!" cried the Wart. "Wherever did you get it?" At this the pot beamed all over its face and began to strut a bit, but Merlyn rapped it on the head with a teaspoon, so that it sat down and shut up at once.

"It is not a bad pot," he said grudgingly. "Only it is inclined to give itself airs."

This Potts is also inclined to give himself airs as well, and could write about the books that wrote him all night. But it's time to go have dinner with my family. Perhaps there will be mustard.

*Paul R. Potts
Pittsfield Township, Michigan
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