

Read It and Watched It, November 2017

Today is Monday, November 13th, 2017.

Fall is moving along, although as often happens, we are only about halfway through the season and it has already started feeling like winter. The weekend before last, it rained all weekend, so we didn't get out for a walk. This past weekend, we had a nice clear day on Saturday, so we got all the kids bundled into the car and headed out to a park so we could get a nice walk in. When we got there, we found that one of the six Potts children — and I won't name names — had prepared for a walk in the just-above-freezing weather by getting in the car with a t-shirt and Crocs on. He didn't even have socks. We had asked the three older kids, who we refer to as the “varsity team,” to carefully scrutinize the younger kids and make sure, as they got strapped into their seats, that they were prepared for the cold. That didn't happen. So Grace and I had to just drive back home. Given that the rest of the day was already scheduled, this meant we just wouldn't get a walk in. And then on Sunday, we had rain all day. So Grace and I spent most of the day yesterday glaring at each other and at the kids. Given that the days are already very short and the weather is uncertain, the opportunities to get a little exercise outdoors are very precious to me. We felt just a bit like the poor kid who got locked inside a closet in Ray Bradbury's classic story “All Summer in a Day.”

Revisiting Reynolds: *Deep Navigation* Continued

I finally finished Alastair Reynolds' story collection *Deep Navigation*. I wrote a little bit in October about how I found the first few stories disappointing. I am pleased to report that they improve considerably as the book goes on.

“Feeling Rejected” is a very short send-up of the peer review process, in the form of an anonymous evaluation of a scientific paper. The story throws out some intriguing ideas about how we might one day detect and classify distant civilizations, while academic publishing is still apparently just as petty and cut-throat as it is now (some things never change).

“Stroboscopic” is a very fine story that speculates about how life might evolve orbiting a pulsar. I was struck by how much this story reminded me of Greg Egan's work. This is my favorite story in the collection, although not by a wide margin.

“The Receivers” is an alternate history story in which World War I didn’t end, and on the British coast the giant parabolic acoustic mirrors, made from concrete, are still in use, as part of the early warning system for detecting enemy aircraft. They are on their way out, though, due to the invention of radar. This story is just a touch Lovecraftian; I’m reminded of Lovecraft’s story “The Music of Erich Zann.” Reynolds does an excellent job here invoking the culture of an exhausted Britain in which there wasn’t a break between the wars.

“Bird Land Six” is set in the Antarctic and is a bit evocative of John W. Campbell’s famous story “Who Goes There” — not in any plot particulars, *per se*, but in the setting and style. It is the type of story that would have made a good episode of *The X-Files*.

I’ll briefly mention a few others — “The Star Surgeon’s Apprentice” reads like it is part of the Revelation Space universe. “Viper” and “Tiger, Burning” both combine space opera and police procedural to one degree or another. They are good reminders that Reynolds always seems to have fun with police procedurals in a science fiction setting, as he demonstrates in his novel *The Prefect*.

In October I wrote “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.” I was wrong. The initial stories are weak, but at least a half-dozen of the remaining stories are quite strong and some of them are really excellent. So I recommend this collection for anyone who enjoys Reynolds’ other novels and stories. Just keep in mind that they are uneven in quality.

God of Thunder, Hear My Cry: *d’Aulaire’s Book of Norse Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017 film)

Way back when I was a kid, in the twentieth century, I remember taking books about Norse mythology out of the McCord Memorial Library in North East, Pennsylvania. I am not sure I can remember the titles, but one of them was probably *Norse Gods and Giants* by Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire. This book has been reissued several times. We have a copy of the 2005 version, published by New York Review Books, now called *d’Aulaires’ Book of Norse Myths*.

Sam has already read it, and I’ve previously read the kids some other material on Norse myths, but this book is much easier for them to enjoy. It includes fantastic drawings. It’s really striking to notice how many bits and pieces of the Norse myths were adopted by a wide variety of modern fantasy writers, from Tolkien to Donaldson.

In related news, a couple of Fridays ago I took my daughter Veronica, age 13, to see *Thor: Ragnarok*. We did something we very rarely do — went to see a movie on opening night. I expected that a late showing of a brand-new superhero movie on a Friday night would be packed with young people, and rowdy. It was packed, but the audience was silent. I was a little puzzled. Do people never

laugh out loud at funny scenes anymore, or applaud when a villain is defeated? I'm not talking about side conversations — that's always annoying. I'm talking about audible reaction to the film. There seemed to be none at all.

I found this especially strange because *Thor: Ragnarok* is quite funny. In fact, the humor saves the movie from collapsing under its self-importance. The movie has a lot of plot, with a big prophecy and ominous events happening left and right, leading up to Ragnarok itself — literally the Norse apocalypse. Without jokes, you have something like the ponderous dullness of M. Night Shyamalan's *Avatar*. With them, you have a movie that is basically a big day-glo party.

The Norse mythology around Thor is dark and complex and weird. Odin sacrifices one of his own eyes, and hangs himself from a branch of Yggdrasil. Loki is so dedicated to some of his pranks that he manages to get himself, in the form of a horse, impregnated by another horse, giving birth to an eight-legged horse. The stories overlap, and conflict, and come to us from various ancient sources.

d'Aulaires' Book of Norse Myths keeps some of this, while simplifying it so that it is comprehensible to young readers. The Marvel Cinematic Universe throws out just about all of this complexity, and the parts it doesn't throw out completely, it rearranges into simpler structures. In the original Norse myths, there is no Hela, Goddess of Death. Thor doesn't have an older sister. But there's no good reason Marvel can't invent such a character — there are no copyrights to contend with. And so we are given Hela, Goddess of Death.

There are many things to like about this movie. Just to mention a few: Chris Hemsworth is terrific as the energetic but slightly dim-witted Thor. Cate Blanchett gets to play a completely unapologetic villain, Hela, and she does a great job being nasty; she was also terrific as the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*. There's a character known as "Scrapper 142" or simply "Valkyrie," an actual Valkyrie, played by Tessa Thompson. I had not previously imagined Valkyries putting away quite as much hard liquor as she does, but it's a great portrayal. Jeff Goldblum also does a hilarious job playing... well, Jeff Goldblum. And I would be remiss if I didn't give a special shout-out to Mark Ruffalo as Bruce Banner and the Incredible Hulk. Thor has some wonderful "bromance" scenes with both Banner and Hulk.

I have seen very few of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films (*Thor: Ragnarok* is — wow! — the *seventeenth* film in this series). I've seen none of the *Iron Man* movies, none of the earlier *Thor* movies, no *Captain America*, and no *Avengers* films. In fact, I can barely keep track of which comic characters are DC, and which are Marvel; my kids are always correcting me. Honestly, though — although it would have been nice to know more of Banner's back-story, since the last time I watched the Hulk, he was played by Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno. It didn't seem to matter much at all, though. Veronica and I had a good time anyway, and I think we picked up just about everything we needed to know on the fly. I think it's also worth noting that this is one of the best-reviewed of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, and the best-reviewed of the *Thor* films. So

it seems that maybe we haven't missed all that much by not seeing the earlier movies.

I have seen *Guardians of the Galaxy* (the first one), and *Doctor Strange*. The good Doctor makes an appearance, and it's pretty funny, but far from essential. So even if you have seen *none* of the other Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, I still recommend *Thor: Ragnarok*. It slows down a little in the middle of the movie, and the CGI can become a little tedious (although the rendering of Surtur, the fire demon, involves some of the best computer animation of fire that I've ever seen). For the most part it moves along really well, it has great (if occasionally ridiculous) fight scenes, terrific costumes, and will not leave you scratching your head over any deep, dark puzzles or waking up with nightmares. In the dark days of late 2017, that's not nothing.

Paul R. Potts
Pittsfield Township, Michigan
November 13th, 2017

This work by Paul R. Potts is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.