

2018 Week 7: The Week Ending Saturday, February 17th

Paul R. Potts

Sunday

Yesterday was pretty exciting, and long — we were buried in deep snow. We managed to get the truck out of the driveway and made it to Mass (very late). Barely. We haven't used the truck's 4WD capabilities very much because it is fairly tricky to get it to shift between 4WD high, 4WD low, and 2WD modes. You have to get the thing going on a straight shot and put it in neutral, then switch mode. It has to be rolling, but it can't be rolling too fast. So if you're on the road and you know you are going to need to go into deep snow, or you're leaving an area of deep snow, and want to change modes, you can't do it easily, not at speed and certainly not in traffic. So part of the difficulty was finding a closed business with an empty parking lot where I could successfully get the truck into 2WD, which seems to work better than "Automatic 4WD" for mildly slippery roads, then doing something similar on the way back. We got the truck stuck in our own driveway, and right at the entrance to our driveway off of Crane Rd. Both times I managed to get it unstuck, but just barely.

After Mass we drove to Bombay Grocers on Packard, and got a few ingredients we were lacking to make chana masala, as well as some papadam and Indian desserts.

We tried to go to Costco, but it was closed, so we went to Cost Plus World Market, where we found some licorice candy. I was no longer in the mood for allsorts, but we got some different kinds of black licorice including the "double salt" which is both kind of horrible and also strangely addictive. My personal favorites are the "salt herring" type in the shape of fish, "Katjes Salzige Heringe," which is lightly salted, and the spicy "firetrucks" (the full name is "Gustav's Dutch Licorice Hot Petter Fire Trucks") which are kind of like the old Freshen Up gum with the liquid center, but designed to hurt you (in a good way).

Finally, we went to GFS and picked up some pasta, some frozen meatballs, some vegetables, some frozen stuffed cabbage rolls, some hot dogs, etc. Basically, we were trying to make sure we would have enough food for the week, and also thinking we were likely to be snowed in all day Sunday, and that it might still be hard to get out and drive anywhere on Monday.

The forecasts were all predicting another 2-4 inches of snow today, but it didn't actually happen. Which we're honestly happy about; with another few inches it seemed likely I wouldn't be able to get my car out of the driveway to go to work tomorrow.

This afternoon Grace and I did some deep-cleaning in the kitchen and then we made the chana masala. Grace did almost all the prep and made the rice. I was extremely grateful for that as I was feeling kind of spaced out and scattered. It turned out to be quite a meal: chana masala over brown rice made with chicken broth, served with cumin seed-flavored papadam, two kinds of Indian pickles that had been patiently waiting in the basement for our next Indian meal, and then the sweets for dessert. I had been a little concerned that the kids would not eat it, but in fact they all did, and most of them loved it, although Benjamin and Pippin complained a bit about the spiciness (and I'll just note for the record that we didn't add the green chile peppers the recipe called for at all, opting instead to add a small amount of Grace's homemade green chile sauce, and the result was not very hot).

It's after 7:00 and Grace and I still have to prepare a podcast for the week. So I'm going to set up my laptop so the kids can watch some Doctor Who and then we'll head down there.

Monday

Back at work. It was not easy to get my car out of the driveway, but I managed. I'm a little concerned about our gutters and roof. There's a lot of ice building up on the gutters over the front door. I'm not sure how we could get that out of there safely. I'll have to take a look at it tonight.

This morning was a good example of the drive time problem. I was leaving my driveway at 8:15. At this time of day it took me 45 minutes to make the drive to work, which takes 20 minutes if traffic is not an issue. That's an extra 25 minutes sitting in traffic sucking up exhaust fumes, trickier, more dangerous merges, and overall a much higher likelihood of getting into a nasty traffic accident. If I leave a bit later, say 8:50, I can make the drive in 20 minutes, but I'll arrive 10 minutes late.

I think those extra minutes, sitting in traffic, may be a significant source of my ongoing daily cough. I'm still coughing. This morning I was still coughing up green mucus. It's certainly better than it was last fall, but it's still a bit of a thing.

I got the podcast finished right about midnight, and came upstairs wanting desperately to get right to bed, because my alarm is set for 6:45. Instead we had Benjamin coming into our bedroom asking to sleep with us. Then he wandered off to use the bathroom, but I didn't hear sounds indicating that he was using the bathroom. I went in to check on him. He had apparently taken some of the LED bulbs from our Christmas tree, put toothpaste on them, and was trying to

use them to brush his teeth.

The mind boggles.

We took the LED bulbs away and got him to use the toilet. He then seemed to forget that he wanted to sleep in our bed and wandered off to his bed. We managed to fall asleep again, but then about thirty minutes later he came back and woke us up.

Then Elanor had a difficult night. Every couple of hours she woke up and screamed her head off for a minute or two, for no discernable reason.

It wasn't a great night's sleep, in other words. I shut off my alarm and fell back asleep until 7:30, then got showered and dressed and made coffee with some honey and coconut milk, got the car warming up, and was out the door scraping the car. The coffee was breakfast and helped me manage to drive safely, but I needed a real breakfast. I'm tired.

Cash Flow

We managed to squeak through, money-wise, but it was not good for our cash flow when I had to go to Costco Thursday night, before my paycheck went through. Things are just a lot tighter than we'd like. We need to get back to having more of a buffer to absorb unplanned expenses. We are headed in that direction; if we can get through a few months without a big unexpected expense, we'll be back there. I've learned that there isn't really much point in planning for optimistic scenarios; we *will* have unexpected expenses. Long-term our financial security depends on getting out from under the Saginaw house, which would free up some money each month. And I'm still terrified of what losing this job would do to us.

Grace and I are having some difficulty with the podcast. We both like recording it, and feel like the resulting shows have promise, even though they are rough and uneven. But we both know it would be better if we could put more time into it. We both feel like we can't get that time, and so I've been hoping she will take the lead in developing some material for the show, and she's been hoping I will do the same thing. So we're in this frustrating situation. We're talking about solutions that will help us do prep a few days in advance.

Tuesday

I left work pretty late, 8:15 or so. As often happens on Mondays I didn't feel like I could get my brain fully engaged until late afternoon. So I wasn't really making progress with my code until the office was quiet and almost everyone had gone home. Then once I was engaged and making progress without distractions, of course I didn't want to leave until I had made some significant progress.

This is pretty much the pattern I've had, trying to work 8 to 5 or 9 to 6 jobs, for my whole career. There's been a constant tension between my natural

productive hours and my desire to get deep into the work, without distractions and interruptions, and the demands of an office with standard hours. It's been like this not just since I was first working, but since I was a child, staying up late to read and write after everyone in the household was asleep.

I got a better night's sleep last night, although because I was so tired, I wound up canceling my alarm and sleeping until 7:42. I jumped in the shower and was leaving the driveway by 8:15. I had breakfast at Harvest Moon Café (the "grand breakfast" with sausage, bacon, ham, eggs, and hash browns), and left there right at 9:00. With no traffic to speak of, I made it to my office at about 9:18.

So that's another source of conflict, as I've mentioned before: I can have a 20 minute drive and get to work 20 minutes late, or a 45-minute drive and get to work on time.

My car seemed to be vibrating more than usual during the drive. I had noticed this in my drive home last night. My first thought was that a tire was going flat, but they look fine. I think it is possible I damaged something in the drive train while driving in deep ice and snow. It's not noticeable at slow speeds.

***Firefly* (TV Series)**

No story last night. We had some hot dogs with brown rice and fried cabbage. I like to put raw cashews on the rice and add a little sriracha sauce. The kids have been watching *Firefly*. I haven't watched those shows in a few years, which means that some of the kids have no memories of ever having seen the show before. The show is a *little* too adult for some of them (too violent, too suggestive), but it's interesting to note how the younger kids tend to censor themselves by wandering away.

I think it's time to re-evaluate *Firefly* and think again about whether it is actually good, or just pushes some comfortable genre buttons. Like I said, it's been a long time since I've watched these stories. My recollection is that some of the screenplays are just great — for example, "Objects in Space." In other episodes, I recall some clunky and unconvincing dialogue, and a somewhat laughable adversary, the Reavers. The Reavers are featured more clearly in the spinoff film, *Serenity*, but Grace and I are pretty clear that the movie is definitely too violent and dark to show the kids.

Existence, Continued

I've got only about 200 pages left to finish *Existence*. I read a couple of chapters during breakfast. I found my mind wandering. I want to talk a bit about Brin's use of neologisms. He has created a whole bunch of words that use the letters "ai," as an indication that a thing is enhanced with artificial intelligence. For example, an implant that fits in the eye and projects information on the visual field is called an "ai-patch." Presumably the idea is that the characters would pronounce this as "e a pæt" (IPA), like "ayy eye patch," to differentiate it

from “eye patch.” There are a lot more examples that are dropped into the text. For example, “aiwear,” “aivatar,” and “ai-craft.” Many of these look clever on the page but seem awkward to pronounce. Would people really change “avatar” to “ayy eye-vatar?” Would they change “aircraft” to “ayy eye craft?” When spoken out loud, the connections to the original words are not so clear. I find myself unable to believe that words that are rendered so awkward by additional syllables would pass into common usage.

This is one set of neologisms; there are a lot more. The alien crystals, artifacts that contain emulated or uploaded alien intelligences, give us the neologism “artilens,” a mash-up of “artifact aliens.” This seems to be a word in common usage, but less than a year after the discovery of the artifacts. Again, that seems a little unconvincing. Neologisms take a while to propagate and catch on.

Like a lot of modern science fiction — too much, in fact — the story hinges on the idea of uploading, or emulating, the minds of organic entities in silicon (or some other computational equivalent). But Brin just does this entirely with hand-waving. It’s just assumed that this is possible and desirable. There is *much* better thinking out there, about this idea. For example, I recommend Greg Egan’s story “Transition Dreams.” That story is from 1993. If you’re not familiar with Egan, start with this article, “Why Isn’t Greg Egan a Superstar?”.

It’s frustrating, because Brin does have some good ideas. I just read a scene in which a character’s “ai-patch” shot a blue-green laser out of his eye to establish a network connection with a communications buoy. There is difficulty getting a good connection through a window, so the ai-patch asks its owner to press his eyeball directly against the window. That’s a great bit — funny, with a bit of a squick factor, and also pretty plausible. I work for a company that makes laser instruments. In 2018 laser diodes are *tiny*. And air gaps between different optical media with different refractive indices cause a whole lot of different issues, impeding bandwidth and power. It seems like this kind of gritty, detail-oriented, realistic science fiction belongs in a different book, perhaps something by Bruce Sterling. It is scenes like this that keep me from abandoning this book. This is the kind of scene that can really glue together a science fiction story. But unfortunately this degree of “showing” only crops up occasionally, in this very long novel.

Can I complain about something completely different? Brin has a character named Tor, a heroic journalist. The book is published by Tor. Does this bother anyone else? Doesn’t it seem, to anyone else, like “kissing the hand that feeds you,” and too precious by half?

Elanor

Elanor can stand unsupported now, for brief periods of time. She isn’t quite walking, but she’s “cruising” fairly well. She can get across floors and around rooms. This means I have to start putting things away. She’s been digging into my pile of old issues of the New York Review of Books and shredding them.

She's getting into piles of books and piles of clothes. Our networking gear is not very secure; there are dangling cables. We keep our dishes on low shelves. She hasn't broken anything yet, fortunately. We've got to do some organizing.

Wednesday

I got home a bit earlier last night. Grace had gone out, after some struggles with the truck involving getting it back into the right four-wheel-drive mode, and gotten some *paçzki* and candy to celebrate Fat Tuesday. For dinner we had chicken sausages and roast broccoli. The kids had the option of putting their sausages on a bun, but Grace and I were all carbed out and appreciated not having to eat any more bread.

Veronica decided to skip last night's story, which was somewhat delayed while the kids dithered and argued about tooth-brushing. When we finally got settled down for the story, I picked up *Peter Pan and Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. This contains the unabridged, original text.

***Peter Pan and Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J. M. Barrie**

I think I mentioned before that I have never read the original 1911 text of *Peter Pan*, which was, confusingly, also published under the titles *Peter and Wendy* and *Peter Pan and Wendy*. It's a very odd children's book. The narrative is quite complex in structure, and it bobs and weaves, shifting between present and past events very rapidly. By the end of Chapter 2, in between funny bits, almost standup comedy-like, about the parents and the dog, it becomes clear that we are learning about the events that led up to the disappearance of the children, Wendy, John, and Michael.

As an adult it is kind of shocking to realize that *Peter Pan* is really part of a whole genre of fantasies about the afterlives of children who died young. In the early 20th century in London, death in childhood was still very common. Books like *The Water-Babies, A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863) follow the transformation of children after their apparent deaths. William Hope Hodgson's story "The Valley of Lost Children" has a similar theme, where after their premature deaths, children play happily forever in an afterlife tailor-made for children.

Mrs. Darling remembers:

...after thinking back into her childhood she just remembered a Peter Pan who was said to live with the fairies. There were odd stories about him, as that when children died he went part of the way with them, so that they should not be frightened.

He represents a *psychopomp*, a being that introduces the newly deceased to the afterlife.

To put it bluntly, Peter Pan is creepy as hell. The first two chapters set up the idea that the parents have lost *all three* of their children, and they have been taken away by Peter Pan to an afterlife for children. The parents blame themselves for using the dog, Nana, as a nurse, presumably because this wasn't sanitary and so they were exposed to a fatal disease. The parents will get the three children back — perhaps they were just deathly ill, and survived — but the setup is *suggestive* of their deaths. Peter Pan has even left behind his “shadow” as a calling card — the shadow of the valley of death.

I don't remember him that way at all, probably because I was only ever exposed to derivative works that downplay the darker sides of the story, making it all about growing up, or refusing to grow up, and not about children who died young.

Apparently Peter Pan first appeared in the opening chapters of a book called *The Little White Bird*. After the success of the play, these opening chapters were later published separately as *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. In this story, Peter is an infant only seven days old. In the later novelization of the play, apparently he is still so young that he hasn't lost any of his baby teeth yet. This usually starts happening around the age of six, although there is a lot of variation. This would make Peter Pan in the book much younger than he is usually portrayed in theatrical versions, but his behavior suggests he is older, a pre-teen. And apparently Barrie was quite deliberate in giving him a number of psychopathologies. There's a recent book about this, *Peter Pan and the Mind of J. M. Barrie: An Exploration of Cognition and Consciousness* by Rosalind Ridley.

From an article in *The Guardian*:

According to Ridley, Barrie is here illustrating his observation and understanding of a fundamental stage of child development: having a “theory of mind,” or the ability to understand that one's knowledge, beliefs and feelings may not be the same as someone else's. This is learned naturally by most children around the age of three or four, but the term was not used until the late 1970s. In 1985, psychologists would show that failure to employ theory of mind is a symptom of autism, Asperger's syndrome and some psychiatric conditions.

See: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/02/peter-pan-was-pioneering-work-of-child-psychology-claims-new-study>

I'm looking forward to reading more.

Ash Wednesday

Today is Ash Wednesday, and also Valentine's Day. We celebrate the first but not the second. This coincidence of dates led to a long conversation of lunar and solar calendars and how the dates of holidays are established. (Spoiler: it's quite

confusing.) This also means that Easter will be on April Fool's Day. Apparently this has not happened for 73 years!

I'm planning to meet Grace and the kids at St. Francis for 7:00 Mass, and I hope they get there early. We'll see how many people turn out on Valentine's Day.

Existence, Prolonged

Hey, on page 658, two characters and their two storylines finally come together in a significant way!

And I realized that the bit I mentioned above, in which a character has to press his eyeball directly against a window, may be more not-very-well-thought-out nonsense. At least, it would not work for me. People no doubt have wide variation in the exact shape and profile of their heads and eyes, but I think for most people, their eyes are recessed far enough into a little cavern created by the nose, brow, and eye socket that it would be impossible to get the surface of your eyeball flush with a flat surface. Try it with your cell phone. But whatever. Maybe the character in question has protruding eyeballs, or maybe the window in question is convex. It's just another clue that in this novel Brin has created, mostly, an enormous first draft. He's written a lot, but clearly not taken the down time to think very hard about what he has written.

Thursday

I left work about 6:25 and made it to a seat St. Francis about 6:50. Grace came in about 7:20, so missed part of Mass. She had to park blocks away; it was very crowded last night. Benjamin did not behave very well and kept attempting to wipe boogers on a woman sitting next to us. I held Elanor for a while so Grace could try to wrestle with Benjamin, but meanwhile Elanor would not settle and kept trying to fight her way free, which is awkward during communion.

Grace had prepped a large pot of cream of broccoli soup using some leftover steamed broccoli that got a bit overcooked. I stopped at Trader Joe's and got some par-baked bread to eat with it. Two kinds, including their olive bread, which is quite tasty.

***Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, Chapter 3**

Last night's story was chapter 3 of *Peter Pan*. Tinker Bell is saucier than I remember her. She's described by the author as an actual tinker, someone whose job it is to mend pots and pans. She calls Peter a "silly ass," which made my kids laugh uproariously. She's described as "slightly inclined to *embonpoint*." I had to look that up. It's a word from Middle French that literally means "in good condition," but came to mean buxom or voluptuous. (Remember, this is a children's book.) Wendy sews Peter's shadow back on, apparently stitching it right to his feet. It's, again, kind of dark. Peter tells Wendy that

“...every time a child says, ‘I don’t believe in fairies,’ there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead.”

Grace took Elanor to sleep upstairs, so I would have had the bed to myself, except that Benjamin insisted on sleeping with me. Fortunately he was not too bad a sleeper last night so I got a reasonable night’s sleep, although he was snorting and coughing a lot.

I think the broccoli had gone off slightly in the fridge, as I’m a little queasy this morning. I was standing in the tub coughing up a bit of green goo and started gagging and feeling like I might vomit. Normally first thing in the morning my stomach would be completely empty, but I think it might still be holding on to the soup.

I’m nervous that we’re going to bring the flu into our home. The flu season has been quite bad this year. After I got dressed, Grace came downstairs to have coffee with me. I was running late again in part because I was debating if I should even go to work, feeling queasy. I decided to sit at the kitchen table for a while and sip some coffee and see if my stomach settled. If I vomited, I told myself, or definitely felt worse, I would take a sick day, although it is so frustrating to lose possible vacation days, involuntarily, this way.

After sipping half my coffee, It didn’t feel any worse so I decided to go in to work. Traffic was slow in parts even after 9:00 a.m., which seems wrong. It was not slippery, just wet. I was leaving my driveway at 9:00 and in the office at 9:23. I just feel defeated, again.

I guess I should take it as a minor victory that I haven’t thrown up yet, although my stomach is still a bit touchy. Benjamin doesn’t have a fever, and I don’t have a fever. My joints were a little stiff but that happens when I eat a lot of bread. So I’m hoping that this is just a slight case of food poisoning and not the flu virus. (In the past when I’ve had the flu, it has come on fast and I’ve known what it was; it doesn’t feel quite like anything else. Noroviruses will make you extremely sick, and tie your stomach and intestine in knots, but they don’t put your whole body in as much pain as a real flu virus that has overrun your barricades and gotten the better of you.

Friday

I had a pretty successful day at work yesterday and since I get paid early Friday mornings, I think of making it to Thursday night as making it to another paycheck. The ground is covered with melting snow and it was in the forties, so all day yesterday it was gray and foggy. The drive home was difficult and spooky due to this poor visibility.

When I got home Grace was sitting in the dark in our bedroom. Her day with the kids had not gone very well and she feeling “defeated,” as she explained it. The kids had pretty much refused, all day, to make progress on their chores and schoolwork.

Going Out for Dinner

I was feeling pretty good despite my queasiness yesterday, because we had not spent any additional money on food this week. But it was pretty clear that everyone could benefit from getting out of the house. So I proposed we go to Harvest Moon for dinner, because it is a very short drive. Most of the kids just happily got shoes and coats on, but a couple dragged it out, and our problem child decided he wasn't going anywhere. So he screamed the whole way there. So much for soothing everyone's nerves by getting out of the house.

Dinner at Harvest Moon was not bad and our problem child settled down quite a bit. Grace wanted the beef tips special but it was gone, so she had meatloaf. Their meatloaf is apparently deep-fried, which is a big gross but pretty tasty. I had a club sandwich which came with American cheese, which is also a bit gross. But they had fries and bread and chicken fingers, so the kids had everything they could possibly want in life. Sam was the only kid who ordered something from the grown-up menu: shepherd's pie.

The Ice Warriors (1967 Doctor Who Fan Edit)

Anyway, dinner went reasonably smoothly and we got out and back home safely and with enough time to watch another *Doctor Who* fan edit, *The Ice Warriors*. This is a partly-missing serial, originally 6 episodes long (two and a half hours). The missing episodes were reconstructed with animation. The fan edit trims it down considerably, to less than half the original length, leaving behind a single show about 70 minutes long. Despite this, it still feels too long. The audio level is very low. We had it turned way up and I was still having trouble hearing all the dialogue. It doesn't help that the original audio track was not all that well-recorded to begin with, and with a couple of episodes lost, who knows what audio source was used to fill in the soundtrack for the reconstructed episodes?

This show has its moments. The TARDIS materializes on a snow-covered planet, and lands on its side, sliding down a small hill. The Doctor and his companions have to climb out. That's a pretty funny gag. The futuristic skin-tight costumes are truly head-scratching; they look like the scientists are dressed for Olympic speed-skating. There's a talking "computer." At one point the Doctor enters a chemical formula into it by using a rotary telephone dial. This provides one of the few actual funny bits in the show. The original *Ice Warriors* are pretty weird-looking, and we had a great classic *Doctor Who* childhood moment with Benjamin, who watched them from behind a chair (insert animated GIF of an Italian chef kissing his fingertips.) Grace watched some of these terrifying scenes from behind her closed eyelids, while snoring gently, but that's perfectly valid, too; each of us must deal with terrifying things in our own way.

This morning at work our Internet connection is down and our local file server is down too. It's a Dell RAID server and it's been throwing errors; drive 3 keeps failing, and we keep replacing the drive with new drives. It recently became clear a few days ago that this was a bit too much of a coincidence, and the RAID

controller was failing. So the engineers who work pretty much entirely with files from our local server are milling around talking to the I. T. and tech support people.

I was coughing and a bit queasy again this morning, spitting up green goo yet again. I was running late, again, and did not even make coffee at home, just drove in. I poured a can of Café Bustelo into my mug and added a little water to top it off, and microwaved it. It's not bad. It has some milk in it, though. I've got to avoid all dairy completely, it seems. Even that bit of is-it-even-real-cheese on my sandwich last night was enough to aggravate my sinuses.

None of my frozen pot pies are looking very appealing for breakfast. I need to pick up some more paleo-ish snacks to keep in the office, maybe some more jerky and rice crackers and nut bars.

Because the Internet is down I can't sign in and verify that I got paid, and set up the transfers between accounts that I do every week.

I've made progress this week on code to calibrate the analog-to-digital converters in the MX family of instruments. I'll work on that a little more today, but it seems like the code is almost finished. That probably deserves a full technical writeup at some point, but I'm not feeling up to it right now. I just want to get through this day, get some groceries, and start the weekend. I had hopes to do some prep work for the podcast in the evenings this week, but I've gotten almost nothing done.

Windows on my work laptop is handling things like loss of the local server and Internet access with its usual grace and aplomb. That is to say, Windows Explorer is crashing.

I have some Rosemary and Sea Salt Wasa Thins that don't seem too unappealing, so I guess that's breakfast today. I'll probably go to the Coney Island for lunch, maybe lemon rice soup.

I saw an article yesterday that says the polar vortex has split into two lobes, and so we're going to have very strange weather for the next couple of weeks, possibly getting up into the 70s in the Eastern United States. I haven't seen confirmation from any other sources, though. I'm curious to see what the Weather Underground guys have to say about this.

Later

It's about 8:30 p.m. I went to Costco. It turned out to be a big grocery run including big bulk packs of diapers and toilet paper and a plastic bags. So the total was over \$300.00. I also filled up my car with gas, \$20. If I only drive to work and back, that's about all I need to spend on gas in a week. Earlier today I transferred most of my paycheck to our Team One account to pay house-related expenses, and now we've spent the rest of it. It's always a little disheartening to have the paycheck gone as soon as it arrives. But all our big expenses for the

week are paid for and we have a week's worth of food in the house. All that's really left to cover is gas for Grace and any small contingencies. We have about \$200.00 left in our shared account until my next paycheck, but that isn't much when filling the truck up with gas costs \$50.00.

When I got home everyone was taking a nap and the kitchen was a mess, with stuff piled on every surface. That was a little disconcerting as I was on my way home with groceries to put away and dinner to cook. But now we're baking the Costco salmon dish we often have for dinner and Grace is making a fruit smoothie out of a pineapple that sat on the counter a day or two longer than it should have. Maybe we'll watch another old *Doctor Who* serial tonight. Grace seems to be feeling a little better than she did last night.

Saturday

The Mind Robber (1968 *Doctor Who* Fan Edit)

Last night we watched *The Mind Robber*, a Second Doctor serial. I have seen this one before, but it was much more fun watching the condensed fan edit.

This is a particularly strange *Doctor Who* story. We see the TARDIS menaced by a lava flow, which looks a lot like a toy being covered in soap suds. The TARDIS explodes into pieces, but what we see is the top and the walls coming off and the console popping out. I'm not sure what the stories had established about the TARDIS at this point — was it supposed to contain multiple rooms and corridors? In any case, what we see in this serial looks like a toy coming apart. Then things get really strange. Gulliver, the Minotaur, Medusa, a Redcoat soldier, Lancelot, Cyrano de Bergerac, Rapunzel, and Blackbeard all make appearances. It's low-budget as usual, but many of the scenes are arranged like pieces in a black box theater, without visible backgrounds or ceilings. This makes the cheapness of the settings much less intrusive.

Unsettling and surreal things happen; part of what makes this serial effective is that several times, the *companions* undergo strange transformations. Jamie becomes a cardboard cutout, and then his face goes missing. The Doctor finds flat pieces of faces, and has to reassemble Jamie's face, by choosing the right eyes, nose, and mouth. He gets it wrong, and so Jamie is briefly played by a different actor! Apparently there is a real-world reason for this: Frazer Hines developed chickenpox and could not be on-set for episode 2. So even though this story element was written in at the last moment, it is one of the more memorable elements of the episode, and fits perfectly with the general sense of strangeness it establishes. Later in the serial both Jamie and Zoe are squashed between the pages of a giant book and appear as altered versions of themselves, who can only say a handful of phrases. That's also pretty creepy.

So what is the rationalization for all this strangeness? Apparently the TARDIS has materialized in the Land of Fiction, and everything the Doctor and his companions experience is being created, in real time, by "The Master," apparently

not directly connected to the Time Lord and the Doctor's nemesis in later stories. The Master of the Land of Fiction wants to trap the Doctor in the land of fiction so that the Doctor can take over his job, and he can leave and return to his own time and place, Earth circa 1926.

All this could come across as entirely ridiculous, but it's presented with such earnest good humor and disbelief on the part of the Doctor and his companions that it works pretty well. It reminds me a little bit of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, in which

the sorcerer Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan, plots to restore his daughter Miranda to her rightful place using illusion and skillful manipulation. He conjures up a storm, the eponymous tempest, to cause his usurping brother Antonio and the complicit King Alonso of Naples to believe they are shipwrecked and marooned on the island.

See Wikipedia's article about *The Tempest*.

I'm not really claiming that I think this *Doctor Who* serial is as timeless and classic a work as *The Tempest*, but I am claiming that both works explore the nature of fiction, and the relationships of the creator to the thing created. The "meta" nature of this *Doctor Who* story makes it quite a bit more interesting than a typical monster-of-the-week story.

So how did audiences at the time respond to this story? According to Wikipedia,

The BBC's Audience Research Report showed a mostly negative reaction from viewers, with "just under a third" reacting favourably. The complaints mainly were around the story being more fantasy-oriented rather than the more dignified science fiction, making it seem "silly." Others liked the concept, but felt it was too complicated for children.

I almost laughed out loud at the phrase "the more dignified science fiction." Despite my lifelong fandom, I am hard-pressed to come up with a strict definition of science fiction, but I do know that science fiction is not a *tone* or even a *style* of story; it isn't inherently "dignified" or "undignified" per se. You might call *Dune* dignified, or serious, in that it isn't intentionally funny or campy at all (although the David Lynch film achieves unintentional campiness). But there is plenty of science fiction that is light-hearted and even deliberately funny, and much of it is British. There's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, of course, and *Red Dwarf*. There's *Snow Crash*, and the Laundry Files novels of Charles Stross, the recent *Red Shirts*. *Firefly* likes to introduce very humorous situations in which violence and death can happen unexpectedly. There's the weirdness of *Farscape*. And if you want to get meta, *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. And of course you can also go back to stuff that I read as a kid, like Sharon Webb's *The Adventures of Terra Tarkington*, and Mike Resnick's Tales of the Velvet Comet novels.

In fact, from the perspective of 2018 many of the best examples of stories that

mix humor and science fiction are — wait for it — *Doctor Who* stories. Douglas Adams *wrote* a number of *Doctor Who* episodes. Recent episodes “The Return of Doctor Mystero” and “The Husbands of River Song” are both quite funny. I think one could make an argument that *Doctor Who* is a big reason that science fiction writers in 2018 feel comfortable blending overt humor into their stories. And so in 2018 I find it pretty ironic that this unpopular serial is now considered one of the best of the older *Doctor Who* stories while viewers in 1968 feel that it lived up to the “dignity” of the genre. It illustrates, I think, the mental gymnastics and semantic contortions people go through to reassure themselves that they aren’t enjoying “trashy” genre media. *Doctor Who* is dignified science fiction, and *Game of Thrones*? Why, that’s not a somewhat pornographic fantasy series — it’s historical drama!

***The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 11: “On the Doorstep”**

After we watched the *Doctor Who* serial, I read the kids chapter 11 of *The Hobbit*, called “On the Doorstep.” In this chapter the party finally finds the secret entrance into the Lonely Mountain. It’s interesting to note a few things in this chapter. Gandalf is not with the party, and has been away for some time. And when the “setting sun with the last light of Durin’s Day shines upon the key-hole,” this happens:

A gleam of light came straight through the opening into the bay and fell on the smooth rock-face. The old thrush, who had been watching from a high perch with beady eyes and head cocked on one side, gave a sudden trill. There was a loud crack. A flake of rock split from the wall and fell. A hole appeared suddenly about three feet from the ground.

This scene seems to turn what was portrayed as an astronomical site, configured to channel the light of the sun and moon at a specific day of the year, into a site that also involves magic. This seems like an unnecessary addition. Are we supposed to believe that the dwarves used magic to set up this site so that it would pop open the keyhole when the right astronomical events were *observed* by Thorin’s people? Or are we supposed to believe that the thrush has something to do with opening the keyhole?

In any case it seems like a needless complication. I guess Tolkien had written himself into a bit of a corner; the keyhole needed to be at a normal height in a door designed for dwarves. But the dwarves had already carefully examined and tapped on every square inch of the rock face. So for them to miss it would have impugned their powers of observation and their knowledge of dwarvish construction. Hence this bit of hand-waving. It seems like a seam is showing. It’s interesting to see this frayed edge in the work of an author that I usually think of as a master of convincing naturalistic depiction of a fantasy world that is high fantasy, not low; a thrush that can trill to open a magical door is something, it seems to me, out of lower fantasy, like a talking bear.

And also, I note that the movies, which take a lot of liberties with Tolkien, change the scene. In the second movie, the keyhole is revealed because the light — although moonlight, not sunlight — falls on it just so, while Bilbo is watching. I don't like the way this takes liberties with the original text, but Durin's Day is a tricky thing to pin down, astronomically speaking since it is defined by a combination of solar *and* lunar calendrical events. I'm not sure it is possible to configure an outdoor site to channel light from the moon only on one day a year, given the way the lunar calendar wanders against the solar calendar. But this scene has a certain magic to it. It's magic in the same way that ancient astronomical sites are magic, not the way that Winnie-the-Pooh is magic. You can probably guess which kind of magic (and storytelling) I prefer.

Almost Done with *Existence*

This morning I made some more progress in *Existence*. Brin speeds up the storytelling considerably starting around page 700. By page 700, I had reached chapter 70 or so, which means that on average these first 70 chapters have been about ten pages long. But there are only about 150 pages left in the novel, and there are 30 chapters left, so the remaining chapters will be, on average, five pages long instead of ten. I'm imagining that perhaps Brin's editor started leaning on him at this point, or he started to feel the deadline looming, because the story has now jumped forward in time by a few years. And as a result, it seems like a number of the characters and plot lines that ate up hundreds of pages earlier in the novel are now derelict. Any of these characters and plot lines that don't have anything to contribute to the conclusion of the novel *were never necessary* and should have been cut. So I think it's pretty inevitable at this point that while the conclusion might contain interesting ideas, it will completely fail to justify the existence (see what I did there?) of most of the pages that came before it. In fact I think my final verdict will be that *Existence* doesn't even deserve to be called a novel.

Books, Music, Movies, and TV Shows Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 11: "On the Doorstep"
- *Peter Pan* and *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J. M. Barrie (Arcturus paperback)
- *Peter Pan and the Mind of J. M. Barrie: An Exploration of Cognition and Consciousness* by Rosalind Ridley
- *Serenity* (TV Series)
- *Existence* by David Brin
- *The Ice Warriors* (1967 *Doctor Who* Fan Edit)
- *The Mind Robber* (1968 *Doctor Who* Fan Edit)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, February 17th, 2018

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