

# 2018 Week 19: The Week Ending Saturday, May 12th

Paul R. Potts

## Sunday

I wasn't too perky on Sunday morning. I had one box of dehydrated hash browns from Costco left, so made that, and threw in some corned beef. There wasn't very much, and one of our kids actually took a bunch and went into another room to eat it, so he wouldn't have to share. I'll leave him anonymous, but what an asshole!

Grace and I didn't get any, but instead ate reheated nachos. I threw a fried egg on mine.

The afternoon was busy: Grace took Joshua to perform at a choir concert, which overlapped with our friends' May crowning ceremony and potluck. So I took most of the kids out to Grass Lake. It's always great to get out there, although it is quite a long drive.

Somewhat late on Saturday night Grace managed to get one of her Facebook friends, Angie, to join us for an interview. So we had an interesting conversation which became Conversation 41.

One strange note: I've recently seen my Twitter account "unfollow" a number of left-leaning Twitter accounts such as "Our Revolution," the Sanders PAC account. I have noticed this because I'll sometimes see someone else share a tweet from an account such as Our Revolution, without ever having seen it show up in my own timeline. So I'll then check the account and find out that I'm no longer following it. I didn't do anything; Twitter put its thumb on the scale to reduce the apparent popularity of left-leaning accounts. And I've seen many smaller leftist Twitter accounts reporting that this seems to be happening to their accounts, too: they are losing a lot of followers, apparently without the followers actually unfollowing the accounts.

As of Sunday evening I'm following 293 accounts. I'm making a note of this just so I will be able to tell if that number suddenly drops.

## Monday

### *Unspeakable* Concluded

Before work today I finished *Unspeakable* by Chris Hedges with David Talbot. It consists of a series of short chapters in which Hedges is interviewed by Talbot. This is quite a short book, and so it may seem curious that it took me so long to finish it. My excuse for finishing it slowly is two-fold: first, I wanted to be able to give it my full attention, and not read it while tired or distracted. And second, it is *emotionally* challenging; I might say also, *morally* challenging. Reading Hedges is a not a warm bath, but an ice-bucket challenge. His writing is a challenge to liberal self-congratulation and any level of comfort with fascism, elitism, militarism, racism, or our other sins. He sets the bar very high and his thinking always challenges me to get to the root of things.

I feel that I have much in common with Hedges, especially when he describes his education. In this article for Truthdig he writes:

Starting at age 10 as a scholarship student at an elite New England boarding school, I was forced to make a study of the pathology of rich white families. It was not an experience I would recommend.

I attended a private grade school for 3 years, the Erie Day School. My brother and I were living in a trailer in North East, raised by my mother, a single mother working at Hamot Community Mental Health. She'd take us early in the morning to my grandmother's house where we would wait for a van to drive us to school. The details are a little hazy, but I recall that the van ride took over an hour, and so my brother and I spent upwards of 3 hours getting to and from school every day, for the sake of a tolerable education — I was not thriving in public schools, but having terrible trouble with sensory overload, triggering severe daily headaches on the bus, and intense boredom. At the Erie Day School I was surrounded by the children of the wealthier strata of the Erie area, such as they were: the children of bank presidents and nursing home owners. Compared to the wealthy Hedges was surrounded with, these children's families' net worth was probably tiny, but I recognize the pathological entitlement and bullying mindset that he describes in this excerpt from the book:

...I watched how the elites and the children of the elites treated those "beneath" them. I saw my classmates — boys of eleven or twelve — order around adults who were their servants, cooks and chauffeurs. It was appalling. The rich lack empathy for those who are not also rich. Their selfishness makes friendship, even among themselves, almost impossible. Friendship for them is defined as "what's in it for me." They are conditioned from a young age to kneel before the cult of the self. I do not trust the rich. To them everyone is part of their elite club or, essentially, the help. It does not matter how liberal or progressive they claim to be. I would go back to Maine and it would break my heart. I knew what my classmates thought of people like

my relatives. I also knew where I came from. I knew whose side I was on. And I have never forgotten. My family was a great gift. They kept me grounded.

After 3 years at the Erie Day School, I was pushed back into the public school system for grades 8 through 12. For a few years I felt like my developing mind, which had been teased with much better classes in Chemistry and Algebra, was being smothered in mediocrity — which it was. After a few years in classes teaching me things I had already gone beyond, I was able to get some good things out of my high school, including Chemistry and Physics and some advanced English and History. But the transitional period stunted my education, at least to some extent, especially my math skills. I didn't learn to what extent my education was "stunted" until years later, when I started college and discovered how little math I had learned in high school.

I was fortunate to attend the College of Wooster, and to get enough financial support to attend, but my experience *there* was somewhat as Hedges describes his experience as a "scholarship kid:"

I was given a scholarship to attend a boarding school, or pre-prep school, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, called Eaglebrook when I was 10. I went to Loomis-Chaffee, an exclusive boarding school — the Rockefellers went there — after Eaglebrook. The year I graduated from Loomis-Chaffee, John D. Rockefeller III was our commencement speaker.

Boarding school made me acutely aware of class. There were about 180 boys at Eaglebrook, but only about ten percent were on scholarship. Eaglebrook was a school for the sons of the uber-rich. I was keenly aware of my "lower" status as a scholarship student. I saw how obscene wealth and privilege fostered a repugnant elitism, a lack of empathy for others and a sense of entitlement.

C. Wright Mills understood how elites replicate themselves. The children of the elites are, as Mills pointed out in *The Power Elite*, shaped not so much by the curriculum of exclusive schools but by intimate relationships with teachers, who often went to the same schools and prep schools, and by each other. This acculturation takes place through sports teams, school songs and rituals, shared experiences, brands and religious observances, usually Episcopalian. These experiences are often the same experiences of the boys' fathers and grandfathers. It molds the rich into a vast extended fraternity that, because of these unique experiences, are able to communicate to each other in a subtle code. No one outside this caste knows how to speak in this code. This is what Gatsby finds out. He can never belong.

I don't agree with all of Hedges' priorities; for example, I'm not a vegan, although I experimented with it, and I don't expect to become a vegan again. He seems

to share the widespread fear of dietary fat, which I believe is based on captured research and politicized nutritional guidelines promoted by the food industry. And I find his writing about Antifa to be a challenge to my beliefs about the importance of not tolerating intolerance. I haven't quite figured out how to reconcile those priorities yet.

In my view, some of the best parts of this book are the parts where Hedges recounts his history as a war correspondent for the *New York Times*. His righteous anger towards the *Times* and its institutional support of America's imperialist wars practically shines off the page. I highly recommend this book as an introduction to Hedges, and I also highly recommend watching a couple of his talks: first, his commencement address at Rockford College, with the full text available here, and then his speech at Moravian College, with the full text available here.

These talks are both sobering reminders that if no one is trying to shout you down, you're probably not actually reaching anyone, and probably not saying anything worth saying.

### **Story Time**

I hoped to read the kids another chapter, or at least half a chapter, of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but I could not convince the kids to get their after-dinner cleanup chores done and get ready for bed. So instead I read Grace chapter 4 of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson.

### **Tuesday**

I slept a little bit better last night, although not well. Our baby girl Elanor has been sleeping unevenly and has developed a habit of becoming very active right about the time Grace and I are finally ready to go to sleep, and throwing a tantrum when we turn out the lights.

This morning I read the first chapter of Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*. This is May's book selection of the Ann Arbor/Ypsilanti Socialist Reading Group. I probably won't finish the book in time for the discussion meeting, or even manage to make it to any of the get-togethers, but since this book has been on my "to-read" pile for a long time anyway, it seems like a good month to at least start reading it.

I was able to get a little time last night to try configuring a Chromebook, one of the devices loaned to us by our online charter school. I tried creating a Google account for my daughter Veronica. My reading had suggested that it was possible to create a "custodial" account. But even though I put in her birthdate, the configuration wizard seemed to be creating an ordinary Google account. When I got to the point where I had to agree to their terms of service, I realized that I just couldn't do it — I couldn't agree to give Google permission

to store and exploit every keystroke and click my children generate while using these Chromebooks.

We're going to return them with an explanation.

DreamHost webmail is unreliable today, for the third time in a week.

### ***We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, Continued**

Last night instead of spending 40 minutes trying to push the kids to get ready for bed so I could read them a story, I read Grace chapter 5 of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson. She was a much more appreciative audience. We're now halfway through this short novel and I'm deeply impressed by Jackson's writing, especially her terrific dialogue. In these chapters, Mary Katherine reveals more of her strange habits of mind: her magical thinking, her sense of unreality and depersonalization. She refers to cousin Charles as a "ghost," and deliberately smashes a glass:

"Cousin Charles is still asleep," she said, and the day fell apart around me. I saw Jonas in the doorway and Constance by the stove but they had no color. I could not breathe, I was tied around tight, everything was cold.

"He was a ghost," I said.

Constance laughed, and it was a sound very far away. "Then a ghost is sleeping in Father's bed," she said. "And ate a very hearty dinner last night. While you were gone," she said.

"I dreamed that he came. I fell asleep on the ground and dreamed that he came, but then I dreamed him away." I was held tight; when Constance believed me I could breathe again.

"We talked for a long time last night."

"Go and look," I said, not breathing, "go and look; he isn't there."

"Silly Merricat," she said.

I could not run; I had to help Constance. I took my glass and smashed it on the floor. "Now he'll go away, I said.

Later in chapter 5, she recalls several times that "today was to be a day of sparkles and light."

There were sparkles at the sink where a drop of water was swelling to fall. Perhaps if I held my breath until the drop fell Charles would go away, but I knew that was not true; holding my breath was too easy.

And then later:

There were sparkles in the mirrors and inside our mother's jewel box the diamonds and the pearls were shining in the darkness. Constance made shadows up and down the hall when she went to the window to look down on Uncle Julian and outside the new leaves moved quickly

in the sunlight. Charles had only gotten in because the magic was broken; if I could re-seal the protection around Constance and shut Charles out he would have to leave the house. Every touch he made on the house must be erased.

“Charles is a ghost,” I said, and Constance sighed.

Merricat’s sense of depersonalization and disconnection gets stronger, until she seems to be deliberately confusing her sense of up and down:

I polished the doorknob to our father’s room with my dustcloth, and at least one of Charles’ touches was gone.

When we had neatened the upstairs rooms we came downstairs together, carrying our dustcloths and the broom and dustpan and mop like a pair of witches walking home. In the drawing room we dusted the golden-legged chairs and the harp, and everything sparkled at us, even the blue dress in the portrait of our mother. I dusted the wedding cake trim with a cloth on the end of a broom, staggering, and looking up and pretending that the ceiling was the floor and I was sweeping, hovering busily in space looking down at my broom, weightless and flying until the room swung dizzily and I was again on the floor looking up.

If she can confuse up and down, it seems like she could easily talk herself into confusing right and wrong. And she makes ominous plans:

I thought of books, which are always strongly protective, but my father’s book had fallen from the tree and let Charles in; books, then, were perhaps powerless against Charles. I lay back against the tree trunk and thought of magic; if Charles had not gone away before three days I would smash the mirror in the hall.

Her small, deadpan lecture about the toxic effects of the *amanita phalloides* mushroom (aka the “death cap”), is chilling! I really love the way that Jackson gradually raises the stakes here, and allows the characters to reveal themselves through their thoughts and dialogue. We should have no trouble at all staying awake for the second half of this novel.

### **Tonight**

After work I’m running out to Costco with a short list: instant hash browns, chicken legs, a pot pie, and coconut milk. If they still have them, I might pick up a pair of cargo shorts. Yeah, I’m that guy: a middle-aged man who buys his oh-so-fashionable clothing at Costco. How did this happen?

### **Wednesday**

I called Grace from Costco last night to see if she felt that the kids deserved a movie: in other words, had they done their chores, stayed on their task lists, done their schooling, and avoided fighting?

She told me that yes, they had done a good job and yes, they would love a movie. And more, because they had helped with getting loads of dishes run through the dishwasher and kitchen clean-up, dinner was almost done.

So at Costco I bought: one of their giant chicken pot pies; a package of organic boneless chicken thighs; a six-pack of boxes of coconut milk; a six pack of dehydrated shredded potatoes for hash browns; and a package of corned beef. I also bought a couple of bags of popcorn to watch during a movie.

I got the cargo shorts. I haven't tried them on yet.

Then I went to Best Buy. I kind of despise Best Buy, and avoid it, but they had a few movies I wanted. So I actually bought four movies. The one for last night was *Ant-Man*. I'll reveal the others as we watch them. Two of the movies I bought are Blu-Ray discs in Best Buy's "steelbook" cases. I picked these up not so much because of the cases, but because they were marked down, and so either cheaper, or the same price, as the regular packages. I'm wondering if they will stand up to child abuse better than the standard cases. (In this case of course I don't mean abuse *of* children, I mean abuse *by* children.) I suppose I'll find out!

Dinner was the boneless beef rib meat, roasted broccoli, and potatoes. Grace cooked the ribs in the Instant Pot and then roasted them in the oven with a homemade barbecue sauce. The result was really good!

### ***Ant-Man* (2015 Film)**

This is one of the better-reviewed of the recent Marvel movies and so I had at least modest hopes for it. I was not disappointed. From reviews and the trailer, I expected this movie to lean more towards comedy, and it did.

Michael Douglas plays Hank Pym, and serves as a sort of back-stop to the film and gives it a little emotional weight when it is in danger of tilting too far towards the romantic comedy side of things. Evangeline Lilly is great in this movie as Pym's daughter Hope. Paul Rudd plays Scott Lang (*Ant-Man*). The story line is clearly hooked into the larger Marvel movie world in a number of ways, but fortunately you don't really have to pick up all the dropped names in order to understand the plot. I was scratching my head a bit when Pym refers to the Avengers, but in the film's world, the Avengers are real. Which means, I suppose, that these movies don't exist. (Or do all the ones previous to the events in this movie exist, but as documentaries? Hmmm...)

The three main characters work well together and the script is quite tight. There are many scenes where you start the scene believing you are watching one particular tired trope play out: for example, a prison fight. But then the perspective changes and the scene takes a left turn and you realize the script is toying with the tired old tropes to make them fresh.

There are a number of supporting characters but I want to mention Michael Peña in particular — he's very funny in this movie, with the grin that seems to

stay on his face no matter what happens.

The movie has a number of really great deadpan sight gags. I won't give the best ones away, but they are among the funniest sight gags I've ever seen in a movie. I especially liked the way a number of them involve the soundtrack, either in the form of the film's sound effects, or diegetic music (music that actually has an on-screen source). What's particularly funny about them is the way they make fun of the entire *concept* of the huge, dramatic fight scene in these superhero films; viewed from a larger perspective, the dizzying action and whirlwind of sounds are revealed to be tempests in teapots (or perhaps lightning storms in "farms" of animation-rendering servers).

The movie script seems to make particular reference to the famous novel by Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man*, published in 1956. I thought that was a nice touch. In that story, at the end, Scott Carey is continuing to shrink, and appears to show no signs of stopping. We are left hopeful that as he continues to shrink, he will continue to exist, in some inconceivably alien world. In *Ant-Man*, the writers throw in the concept of a terrifying "quantum realm," indicating that if the Pym Particle technology is pushed too far, the user will shrink into the quantum realm and continue shrinking forever in a world that is inconceivable to our minds, where "all concepts of time and space become irrelevant." Of course, this is not actually what quantum mechanics tells us about the realm of the very small; in fact, it sort of suggests the opposite, that there is in fact a "minimum size." And also it suggests that as Ant-Man shrank, the relative velocity and location of the particles that make up his body would become less and less determinable, which has got to play hell with one's digestion, among other things.

As far as the shrinking technology goes: well, it's best not to think about it too hard. If you really start to wonder how the suit can shrink Ant-Man down to the size of an ant, you quickly run into a lot of questions. How does he breathe? Where does his inertia go? (Side note: physicists would like you to think we've got the universe pretty well wrapped up, but we really don't understand inertia all that well). In *Ant-Man*, Scott's mass and inertia simply do whatever the screenplay needs them to do, with no real attempts made to keep these things consistent between scenes.

In general, I find that my mind wanders to this kind of nitpicking when the movie isn't that engaging and my mind is wandering. *Ant-Man* does a pretty good job of keeping my attention on the screen, so I didn't find myself with enough processing time leftover to write a snarky blog post in my head. I was generally able to maintain my suspension of disbelief. I remind myself that this movie is not, and not supposed to be, hard science fiction. Despite this, a couple of things did jump out at me: for one, the way that full-sized actions still seem to happen fast from Ant-Man's perspective. That didn't make a lot of sense. And also, the way that his voice could still be heard and understood by people existing at a normal scale, and the way that, similarly, he could hear sounds from the full-scale world around him. The speed at which ants could get across a city

also seems ridiculously inflated — again, the ants do what the script requires of them. If you'd like to enjoy some nitpicking about the physics of *Ant-Man*, you can find a fun interview with physicist James Kakalios here.

There are a few minor downsides to the movie. It feels just a touch too long, even though it comes in just shy of the two-hour mark. And there are a few plot elements that just feel a bit too much like the screenwriters are ticking off boxes: now let's explain this character's back-story, and now let's explain that other character's back story. This feels a little awkward. The romantic element, likewise; it feels inevitable. But this attention to detail in the screenplay pays off, because everything that happens later in the movie seems to have a setup, even if it is a subtle one. And so it definitely feels like the screenplay received a lot of attention and careful revision.

I wondered, buying the movie, if it really would be suitable for the kids. *Ant-Man* is rated PG-13, like most of these Marvel films. But PG-13 covers a lot of ground; I had to censor some opening scenes in *Doctor Strange* because of a graphic beheading, and there was some shocking violence in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. But there's really nothing horrifying like that in *Ant-Man*.

Anyway, I can recommend *Ant-Man* as a really fun superhero movie. I regret that I didn't get to see it in the theater, because I think the sight gags would have been even more effective on a big screen. But it was still fun on a small screen. There's a sequel coming out, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*. This movie has set up plenty of hints about what we might see in the sequel. The trailer for the new movie, in which (surprise) people and things get *big* as well as small, suggests that it is going to stretch both physics and my credulity well past their breaking points. So I'm already scaling down my expectations. (See what I did there?)

## Thursday

### ***The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 7: "In the House of Tom Bombadil" and Chapter 8: "Fog on the Barrow-downs"**

Last night was a little difficult. The kids were not very cooperative when it came time to do some basic chores, such as setting the table for dinner. So we ate dried-out chicken, late. They did finally get their poop together in time for a bedtime story, though. So I read them part of *The Fellowship of the Ring*: the rest of chapter 7, "In the House of Tom Bombadil," and all of chapter 8, "Fog on the Barrow-downs."

The action is gradually ramping up, although we still have to sit through several more hobbit meals. These are strangely under-described. We just learn that our characters ate yet another meal, but not what they ate. It's like being invited to dinner and then having to wait while everyone else eats the meal behind a screen, where you can't see it.

There are a few interesting things in these pages. We learn that Tom Bombadil

is not affected by the Ring: he can put it on his finger, and doesn't vanish. And when Frodo slips on the ring and vanishes, Bombadil can see him. Again, this reinforces the idea that Bombadil does not fit neatly into the framework of what we know about Middle-Earth: its history, and its taxonomy of powers.

### A Far Green Country

Frodo has another dream, or maybe a vision, and this one is quite evocative:

That night they heard no noises. But either in his dreams or out of them, he could not tell which, Frodo heard a sweet singing running in his mind: a song that seemed to come like a pale light behind a grey rain-curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under a swift sunrise.

This is a passage that is reiterated at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, and quoted almost verbatim in the movie; it represents Frodo's eventual passage into the blessed realm, via the "Straight Way" way that was closed to most when Eru changed the world and drowned Númenor.

The hobbits then have a sort of "starter" adventure when they are lost in the fog and captured by a Barrow-wight. As an adventure, it's not that strong. It's like the experience with Old Man Willow. The hobbits get into trouble; they yell for help; Bombadil shows up *immediately*. Either he was following just behind them, or he can fly. It's a bit silly. Both the adventure with Old Man Willow and the adventure in the Barrow resolve too quickly, with too much Tom as *deus ex machina* to really build up dramatic tension, but they both set some things up for later. Old Man Willow prepares us to meet the Ents, and the dagger of Westermarke, found in the Barrow, prepares us for Merry's confrontation with the Witch King of Angmar, hundreds of pages in the future.

### The Past Isn't Past

To me, the adventure on the Downs is interesting because of the way Tolkien brings the ancient past right into the present, suggesting that the past is never gone, and also that events in Middle-Earth currently — the rise of Sauron — are stirring it up, literally raising the dead. In this case the dead are the ancient victims of the Witch King of Angmar, and it may be because the Nine are back in Sauron's service that they are restive.

Tom dispels the wight, singing:

*Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!  
Shrivel like the cold mist, like the winds go wailing,  
Out into the barren lands far beyond the mountains!  
Come never here again! Leave your barrow empty!  
Lost and forgotten be, darker than the darkness,  
Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended.*

This is evocative of the banishing of Morgoth (Melkor):

Morgoth was utterly defeated and stood at bay, but was yet unvaliant. He fled into the deepest of his mines and sued for peace and pardon, but his feet were hewn from under him, and he was cast upon his face. He was bound with the chain Angainor, his Iron Crown was beaten into a collar for his neck, and he was thrust through the Door of Night into the Timeless Void.

There's a bit where Merry seems to "channel" one of the early inhabitants of the Downs, reliving his death:

'What in the name of wonder?' began Merry, feeling the golden circlet that had slipped over one eye. Then he stopped, and a shadow came over his face, and he closed his eyes. 'Of course, I remember!' he said. 'The men of Carn Dûm came on us at night, and we were worsted. Ah! the spear in my heart!' He clutched at his breast. 'No! No!' he said, opening his eyes. 'What am I saying? I have been dreaming. Where did you get to, Frodo?'

There are some more interesting visions out of the past, after their rescue, as Bombadil speaks to them:

'Old knives are long enough as swords for hobbit-people,' he said. 'Sharp blades are good to have, if Shire-folk go walking, east, south, or far away into dark and danger.' Then he told them that these blades were forged many long years ago by Men of Westnesse: they were foes of the Dark Lord, but they were overcome by the evil king of Carn Dûm in the Land of Angmar. 'Few now remember them,' Tom murmured, 'yet still some go wandering, sons of forgotten kings walking in loneliness, guarding from evil things folk that are heedless.' The hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded, and they were back in the sunlit world.

The Barrows were once the home of the Dúnedain. The man with the star on his brow might be Aragorn's ancestor Elendil, who wore the first star of Elendil on his brow, and passed it on to his son Isildur. It was lost along with the One Ring. Aragorn was later to wear the second star, a replica of the first, on his brow during the Battle of Pelennor Fields. He would also name himself King Elessar, the "elf-stone." Still later, he would wear the *first* Star of Elendil, recovered from the ruins of Orthanc.

The "knife" that Merry takes to carry as a sword — echoing the dagger Sting, which Bilbo carried as a sword in *The Hobbit* and passed on to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* — is one of the daggers of Westnesse, its blade preserved through the long years by spells. This is significant because Merry will eventually

help Eowyn defeat the Witch King of Angmar, with a blade enchanted for that very purpose. Tom Bombadil chooses these weapons for the hobbits, suggesting that his role in the books isn't just to pop into the story and perform a few *deus ex machinations*, but that he is acting, like Gandalf, as an agent of divine Eru. Just as Bilbo was "meant" to find the Ring, Tom was "meant" to help the hobbits in this way.

Tom's been around for a long time; he seems to not only know what happened on the Downs, but to remember the people buried there:

He chose for himself from the pile a brooch set with blue stones, many-shaded like flax-flowers or the wings of blue butterflies. He looked long at it, as if stirred by some memory, shaking his head, and saying at last: 'Here is a pretty toy for Tom and for his lady! Fair was she who long ago wore this on her shoulder. Goldberry shall wear it now, and we will not forget her!'

And it's suggested that he can see the eventual outcomes of his actions there, as well. And so one theory, as plausible as any, is that in addition to representing a sort of *genius loci*, Bombadil here also represents Tolkien himself, clearly meddling in the unfolding of the story. It's sort of the opposite of Joyce's approach to authorship, in which

"The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails."

All this setup is quite clever. But there is silliness in this chapter as well. Why do the hobbits run about naked, like toddlers? Why won't the hobbits find their clothes again, as Tom tells them? What happened to their clothes? Did the banished wight somehow take a bunch of sweaty hobbit clothes with him?

With the end of chapter 8, we've gotten through some of the slower parts of *Fellowship*. We've eaten lots of leisurely meals and taken lots of naps. But things are going to pick up considerably, until they really get moving in the rush to reach Rivendell. Events in the book will also start to match up again pretty closely with events portrayed in the movies, which my kids know well. That should help keep them awake!

## Parenting

This morning I dragged myself out of bed at about 8:10 after staying up too late reading to the kids. I got in the tub to soak for a few minutes and wake up. Joshua came in to ask if I wanted coffee or tea. I told him that I didn't want either yet. Shortly after that, the smoke alarm went off. He was boiling water and also heating up the cast-iron griddle, because he was making hash browns.

He had everything too hot, and didn't put any oil on the griddle, and it was smoking like crazy. He did get the fan on, but it takes a while to reduce the

smokiness enough for the smoke detector to stop shrieking. No one asked (or particularly wanted) Joshua to be making breakfast unsupervised in the 8:00 hour, especially our housemates; one of them works second shift, and had only gotten to sleep a few hours earlier. Nevertheless, a number of us came to the table and sat down to try to eat. Besides the hash browns, Joshua had also scrambled some eggs, but they were nearly inedible. And apparently Benjamin had made some toast.

I was planning to leave, but Joshua was really hoping I would eat his breakfast. I tried. The hash browns were quite burnt-tasting. And so I ate a little bit of the less-burnt parts, and a little bit of nearly-inedible egg, and sipped some tea. I was going to butter a piece of toast and eat it to try to get the taste out of my mouth. But I turned over the toast and it was burnt completely black on the bottom. I put it back down, put my fork down, and said that I had to go to work.

Joshua's face just *crumpled* with disappointment and he sat there, sobbing to himself. Instead of feeling like the hero of Thursday morning, he felt like a failure.

(Come to think of it, that's pretty much how I feel every morning... welcome to adulthood, son?)

Now late for work, I had him come and sit on my knee, rubbed his back, and tried to explain that I really appreciated him taking the initiative to make breakfast, but that we didn't really want him to do that. I told him he needed more practice cooking, with supervision, to get better at it. And also, that we have a planned menu, to try to make best use of our food budget — and not to waste food. The bread that Benjamin ruined was our housemate's bread.

I'll try to follow up with him tonight: to reinforce the parts about this that we love: his initiative and his enthusiasm, but also to remind him that no one likes surprises like this, especially not surprises where we find a loud, wasteful mess.

It's hard sometimes. In the morning, I really, really want (and need) peace, to read a chapter or two of whatever book I'm reading, bathe, and slip out quietly, in time to get to work on time, without having to engage in a lot of conversation. I'm really not ready to interact with people when I first wake up, and when I'm forced to, it tends to go badly. Little things can send me into an emotional tailspin. I don't have any emotional *resilience*, first thing in the morning. And Josh is clearly my son.

I want Joshua to never lose his ambition to punch above his weight, to try things that are above his skill level. But we also don't want the kids burning down the kitchen before the rest of us are even fully awake. And I personally I really, really don't want them to waste food.

I'm probably also going to have to spend a chunk of this evening scrubbing the griddle, and scrubbing burnt hash-browns off the stove, and maybe scrubbing out the oven. It's hard to be enthusiastic about that. I can ask the kids to do it,

and they will try, but I will, at a minimum, have to go back over their work. It's hard to get that burnt stuff off, but getting it off makes the difference between the smoke alarm going off every time we fire up the stove and oven, or not.

It's hard to convey all that to a kid. I really long for more time to spend with my kids. Especially time to *do* things, not just argue with them about their chores, or about getting ready for bed. But most nights, that's all we have time for. It will, mostly, probably continue to be that way, until they can help us get the basic daily routine down.

I wish I had some wisdom to offer, other than "I really want a vacation." But that's about it.

### House News

We still don't have an appraisal. Apparently when the plumber left last time, after repairing some leaks, he left the main water valve in the basement shut off. And so the appraiser couldn't verify that the plumbing worked.

I offered to take half a work day and go up and turn it on, but Grace arranged to get the plumber back out to turn on the water for the appraiser. He didn't want to leave it on with no one currently living in the house to catch problems. I think that's probably wise, although it delayed things. We never actually *wanted* to leave our old house unoccupied at all, and certainly not for this long.

Grace continues to try to work on the insurance claims and arrange repairs.

### Friday

#### LabVIEW

Last night I wound up staying at work quite late, trying to refresh my memories of how to program in LabVIEW. I took LabVIEW training, but it was about three years ago, and I have forgotten some of the details. It's coming back to me. I'm remembering what I like about LabVIEW and what I don't like.

Among the things I don't like: there's still no easy way to zoom in to a block diagram. Screens have gotten higher-resolution since the early versions of LabVIEW, and my eyes have gotten lower-resolution. So the objects on a LabVIEW block diagram are painfully hard for me to distinguish. But there's no zoom. The basic mechanics of labeling VIs ("virtual instruments") still relies on 1980s-era icons and icon editing. It feels kind of like writing code using Bill Budge's Pinball Construction Set, hooking up the logic with cross-stitch.

It's possible to make a mediocre but functional user interface very quickly and easily; in fact, it mostly happens automatically. That's kind of cool. But when it comes to trying to *refine* your user interface — to precisely adjust the layout of your text boxes, for example — it's horrible. So I've got a VI with 18 text boxes on it, and I'd like to be able to specify their position in pixels. There's

no way to do that. The GUI looks OK on a Windows 7 PC downstairs, but on my Windows 7 PC upstairs, the text box labels are in a different font and they aren't the right size. I can't figure out why there is a difference. When I start tweaking the text boxes, I can't get them to look consistent, especially their borders, which seem to create random drop shadows. The environment just really fights me. A GUI designer program like Qt Creator gives me much more attractive results for far less effort, and with finer-grained control of the end product.

It just really seems like just about any aesthetic or usability concerns are far down National Instruments' list of priorities, and have been for a long, long time.

The installers for the device support took *hours* to run. Literally hours. I've never seen an installer take so long, unless it was installing Windows itself from scratch.

On the plus side, it works. And it does provide pretty reliable instrument support. Personally I'd rather be writing this in a scripting-oriented programming language like Python, with some device support libraries (although I am not actually a huge fan of Python). I just haven't been completely won over to the virtues of a proprietary, graphical, data-flow language. It has a lot of nice features, but also a lot of awkward features. And I generally find it far better and much more "future-proof" to avoid proprietary tools. Having been programming for over 40 years, I have some perspective on how languages come and go and why "niche" and proprietary languages are often, long-term, a bad choice.

But it is still some sort of industry standard, and it works pretty well for this application. So here we are. I have to become an expert in LabVIEW.

### ***We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, Continued**

When I got home, the kids were watching a movie, and they seemed far more interested in watching a movie they've already seen several times than in listening to a story they haven't heard. That was discouraging, but it meant that I read Grace another chapter of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. In this chapter, Merricat asks cousin Charles to leave, and he says no. She's getting increasingly disturbed, and saying disturbing things about him. Constance seems to be obedient to Charles. Charles asks to see her father's papers, shows a suspicious interest in the family's money and jewelry, and does some of the shopping that Merricat normally does. Merricat is growing increasingly disturbed. Uncle Julian seems to be getting increasingly weak and ill. There's a neat bit of foreshadowing when Charles' pipe leaves a small burn on a chair.

This morning, my left rear tire was pretty flat. I drove it (slowly) up to the Discount Tire shop on Carpenter Road and checked in. And then, I waited. They told me it would be about an hour and a half, but in fact it was almost a three-hour wait. So I didn't get out of there until after noon. Then I had to go to Meijer on Jackson Road and pick up my prescription. I got some lunch and

some Mother's Day cards while I was there. The upshot of the whole morning was that I didn't get to work until about 1:00 p.m. Fortunately, I stayed late several nights this week so I can still get my full work week in without having to use any of my paid time off.

It's quite cold today — it was in the low 40s this morning. Naturally I dressed for yesterday's weather. So I've been near to shivering all morning. This evening we will go to a potluck dinner for Joshua's youth choir, in Dexter. So I won't be going to Costco tonight. We ought to have enough food for the weekend anyway.

## Saturday

I'm writing this on Sunday, just after noon. We had a pretty big day yesterday. We were invited to the wedding of a family friend in Davison, Michigan, a suburb of Flint. The wedding was held at a golf course and it was a beautiful occasion. The family is of the Bahá'í faith. I had never been to a Bahá'í wedding before. The Flint area must have absorbed a lot of rain over the last two days, so at one point water started rising up through the building drains and flooding the floors. But fortunately it stopped before the flooding spread too far.

## Barnes and Noble

After the wedding, on the way home we stopped at the Barnes and Noble store in the Brighton area. I let the kids each pick out a book. Five of them did, but Benjamin was fixated on getting a Lego kit instead, and so brought home nothing.

Grace and I are nearly finished reading *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and I wanted to find a copy of *The Haunting of Hill House* to add to our library. But the only work by Shirley Jackson on hand at the Barnes and Noble was one copy of the same edition of *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* that we are already reading.

This Barnes and Noble, the one in Green Oak Township, seems to have a huge fiction and literature section, and a generous science fiction and fantasy section, and even a large current affairs section. But yet I could find nothing at all to interest me, because the selection is a mile wide and an inch deep. In the science fiction and fantasy section, which is quite large, George R. R. Martin takes up an obscene amount of shelf space, but there was not a single book by Gene Wolfe. The current affairs section has lots of books by Fox News pundits, but there was not a single book by Chris Hedges. The fiction and literature section was bloated with romance and contemporary historical romance, but contained next to nothing of the classics. It's ironic that this Barnes and Noble features a big mural over the café area, a fantasy café showing Woolf, Joyce, Hemmingway, and other famous authors, but the store holds almost no works by these authors. So along with Benjamin, I also left the store empty-handed.

It's not surprising that I find little value in browsing at chain bookstores. I still

come across interesting surprises at Nicola's in Ann Arbor, but mostly I browse online now. I order some books from Nicola's, and some from Alibris. I should try browsing at some of the bookstores that still do business in downtown Ann Arbor — there are a few. But since I no longer live near downtown, I always find it an unpleasant challenge to try to get downtown during business hours.

I did consider bringing home a copy of *Open Veins of Latin America*, but I'm actually backed up with unread non-fiction at the moment, and I have a copy of *Mistaken Identity* on order.

We didn't manage to schedule an interview for the podcast this week. About all I've got to talk about is my notes on recent reading and viewing. So maybe we'll talk about *Ant-Man*.

## 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.*

- *Unspeakable: Chris Hedges Talks with David Talbot about the Most Forbidden Topics in America* by Chris Hedges with David Talbot
- *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson
- *Ant-Man* (2015 Film)
- *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 7: "In the House of Tom Bombadil" and Chapter 8: "Fog on the Barrow-downs"

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan*

*The Week Ending Saturday, May 12th, 2018*

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