



little better for me, mood-wise, since I arranged it to I can look out my office window at a slice of sky and our neighbor's unremarkable house and garage.

The office is a perpetual mess, although I periodically make half-hearted attempts to organize the tides of books and papers and photographs and junk that flow and recede over the pretty pine wood floor that I had refinished when we bought this house. In fact I'm in a wooden box, with pine-paneled walls; it's my man-cave, the highest point in the house save the attic; the captain's cabin, and it reflects my tastes, which evidently tend towards hoarded art supplies, cables, USB memory sticks, bubble wrap, rolled-up posters, compact discs, guitar amplifiers, receipts, notebooks, index cards, pens, and the computers to actually do my work, but mostly books. Make a note — I'll circle back to the books.

I'm getting to what could optimistically be called middle age. If this winds up actually being the middle, I'll have done well, to live to ninety, to be around for my family for another forty-five years. But let's not make any predictions, to tempt the universe into making this ironic.

It's impossible to understand the present without understanding the past, and understanding the stories we used to tell ourselves about the future. My life has been shaped by books — by which I mean mostly books, although I'll allow some short stories, films, and perhaps albums into the discussion now and then. I read early, so early that I can't remember learning to read or being unable to read, and voraciously. And the story of what I've read, and what I took from it, is probably the single most coherent way to understand the arc of my life and my life's interests and work, my aesthetic, my judgments, my opinions. I read about technology and science, fantasy and history, and most importantly *the* literature of the twentieth century, science fiction. These books will be my subject. And I'll be their subject as well.

## Under the Influence

Under the influence of these books, I learned to live in fictional worlds — to stretch out and set up camp, and inhabit and explore them, to love their inhabitants and scenic vistas and smells and sounds. But that has a dark side — the early critics of novel-reading weren't entirely wrong to consider it a vice, and living in worlds can have its downsides, both in one's resulting absence from this world, and the eventual disappointment one feels at returning to the everyday world, even if one is able to bring home a magical ring from Middle Earth, or a bit of spice from Arrakis.

Under the influence of these books, I developed an interest in, and faith in technology, that led me eventually into computer programming, and my career. It's been pretty good to me. But it has a dark side — technophilia, and the delusions of technology.

Under the influence of these books, I developed a belief in progress. The history of human beings here on this planet is amazing. Neal Stephenson has likened

it to finding ourselves at dawn paddling in the sea, surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of a massive shipwreck. While fending off sharks and pirates, we managed to build the ship and we're now sailing in it. But the dark side, of course, is that civilizations founder, and we can't get cocky. We can still drown.

Under the influence of these books, I developed a love of mathematics, and pure abstraction of thought, and systems thinking, of architecture and form. But that has a dark side — impracticality, an inability to smell a rose, a failure to see the trees in the forest.

Under the influence of these books, I developed a love for writing, my second great vocation after reading, which I've also occasionally been paid to do; it's been good to me in other ways. Writing has been my hobby, my way of shaping my thoughts, my way of testing hypotheses, my way of learning, and my way of thinking since I was quite young. I have yet to see its dark side.

## **The Impulse to Autobiography and the Nature of Self**

Under the influence of these books, I grew up thinking that death might actually be something that would eventually be cured, or at least postponed so long that it wouldn't be troubling. I considered that I might be able to stop aging, or get a shot and become younger. I considered that if death came along I might be put into storage, or made virtual, to continue in the distant future, or on a chip.

Any of those options would significantly complicate those funeral plans I'm supposed to be making, not to mention my life insurance arrangements. But when my wife isn't talking about cremating or perhaps composting me, she sometimes mentions memoirs. I've thought about it before; I've thought of different forms, of anecdotes, of short stories, of episodes, chronological or reversed; in fact, I've written some short stories about my life, but most of them are now over twenty years old, and I've done a little more living since then.

As I realize that I'm getting older and deader, and I haven't ever finished a novel, or written any more stories for some time, or finished any long essays in a while, or completed an album, and the blogs and podcasts aren't going to make a very coherent autobiography, I've come to think that maybe this project, writing about the stories that shaped me, the books that wrote me, might actually create something that could stand in for an autobiography, if you squint.

If Samuel R. Delaney can consider time as a helix of semi-precious stones, perhaps I can consider time as a series of books that molded my thought, my actions, my world view, and my identity. And maybe that would be interesting, and you'd even come to look forward to reading or listening to the next one.

As I've aged, I've come to agree with David McCullough's commencement speech, telling his students that they aren't special. I've even come to doubt the special nature of human consciousness, and individual identity. It seems to me more and more than the only things unique about me in all of historic time and universal

space — which I’m beginning to believe may not exist, as such, either, are my DNA, and my point of view, this precise perspective from which I see the world.

I once complained to my father that I knew almost nothing about who he was as a person. To this he responded that who he was, wasn’t that interesting — what we are is a particular bundle of “tendencies, and excrement,” but he allowed that the things he had learned from others might be worth conveying.

I’d say that on a bad day, especially B. C. (before coffee), I do in fact mainly comprise a bundle of reactions, nervous tics, and trivia. Increasingly, I think self-consciousness itself is just a sort of party trick the brain does, and is often a liability that we just might evolve out of, as it often just gets in the way of propagating our selfish genes. Christian by upbringing, I am nevertheless not able to put much stock in supernatural outcomes. Entropy will win, but there might be some comfort to be had in passing on my memes. It’s what I’ve got to say. And when you’ve thought about these things along with me, maybe we’ll have something in common.

So this is the end of my introduction. What’s next? The first book I want to talk about. The books are in no particular order, although this one seems particularly relevant in the summer of 2012.

### ***Dar Tellum: Stranger from a Distant Planet* by James R. Berry**

#### **Your Humble Author Circa 1973**

In 1973 I turned six years old and entered the first grade. I was a nervous, weedy little boy. Raised by a single mother, I lived in a trailer, I had platinum blond hair, and my pants were too short. Hyper-sensitive to noise, the chaos of the public school bus triggered blinding headaches. Now I understand that I had symptoms of what is known as mild autism. Then I was clumsy, and painfully intraverted, a target. I don’t remember much about those years, in the same way that abuse survivors often block out whole swaths of their lives, but I had poor vision, I was labeled as gifted, and always on the defensive — over-stimulated. I remember the headaches and the nausea and the allergies.

My brother was a more typical boy and wanted to play with me, but I was extremely conscious of my desire for personal space, and for quiet, and so our fighting was not sibling rivalry so much as panicked self-defense. Personal space was scarce. I had gone to a Montessori kindergarten, and learned to understand powers of ten and volumes and areas and, as I recall, the metric system of measurement, with their colorful space-filling blocks, although that might be a confused memory.

At some point, perhaps in first grade, I was taught the I.T.A., or “Initial Teaching Alphabet.” This was a simplified writing system in which English sounds could be rendered into characters in a way that avoided some of the confusion of English

spelling. All common sounds in spoken English were represented with characters. For example, the “i-n-g” in the word “sing” had a special character, an “n” with an extra curlicue. The doubled “o” in “book” had a special character, which was distinct from the doubled “o” in “ooze.” They both looked like altered “w” characters.

I recall reading storybooks written in I.T.A., although I cannot now remember all the characters, but at the same time I could already read well above grade level, and so in some sense I was bi-textual. My mother told me that she believed I.T.A. mostly just slowed down my reading, and she didn’t recall it fondly. The idea was that children would learn to read I.T.A. and so be able to say all of the different types of sounds of English speech, following consistent rules, and then somehow transition into reading the inconsistent standard written English, although I can’t imagine how that would yield anything but a sense of dismay and cynicism, like renting an apartment based on the model, only to find that the one you had to live in had a leaking roof, no hot water, and a stove that wouldn’t work.

### **The Scholastic Book Club: Neither Scholastic nor a Book Club (Discuss)**

Although I might have been slowed down temporarily by the detour into I.T.A., it certainly failed to destroy my love of reading, and so one of the things I remember most about second and third grade was the Scholastic Book Club. We got Cricket magazine at home — and I still have most of them — but at school we got newsprint flyers, with boxes to check, and then we could bring in cash or checks, and could order our own copies of discounted books. I remember that I had to be selective, because I did not get much money allocated to this, although I can’t remember the details. I recall the flyers, and the “total number of items” and “total amount due” boxes. I recall that my choices were invariably unique in the classroom of perhaps 25 students, with the exception of *Dynamite* magazine. I chose science fiction and fantasy — A.E. Van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, and other writers — and awaited the books so eagerly I would make myself quite sick with anxiety, sometimes literally. One of them was *Dar Tellum: Stranger from a Distant Planet*, by James R. Berry, illustrated by Ken Longtemps.

I have a copy in my hand now. It isn’t my original copy. I bought this copy last year from a used bookstore online. When it arrived, I was suddenly seven or eight years old again.

The illustrations show a young white boy with clear, intent eyes and wavy hair. The cover features the boy, and above and behind his head is a whorl of watercolor shades of blue and green and purple, with a pinched, odd face in the center, like a face you might find in the center of a cabbage. The interior is black and white, with spot color in two shades of a faded, queasy green. It is the first printing of the Scholastic edition, from February 1974. It seems unlikely that there was a second one. The first sentence reads “They’ve called me a dreamer

ever since I can remember.”

I may have read the book only once back then, and not read it again until 2011. They’ve called me a dreamer ever since I can remember. Some things are burned in my memory. But the mundane — the faces, the locations, the days — they drift from view. I have memories of memories, or memories reinforced by looking at photographs, of scenes that might be partially imagined, or reconstructed later from things my mother told me.

### **The Child and the Alien**

The story follows a common storytelling trope of an invisible friend that adults can’t perceive, and won’t believe in. In the end the narrator is no longer certain that the events he’s recounting really happened. He says “I can’t tell grown-ups about him. I tried, but all I got was funny looks. Once my mother felt my forehead. So I know they wouldn’t believe the whole story. That’s why I’m writing this down for other kids to read.” So immediately I was a confidant, someone who would understand. Like Mulder, I wanted to believe.

Our narrator, Ralph Winston, is daydreaming in a spelling class — I was exceptionally good, and quite bored, in spelling — when he receives a “tug” at his mind, like “getting poked,” inside his head, and a voice, and a faint vision. It fades, but returns later. He hears and sees it best in his sleep. He says, “I saw a kind of hazy shape, like something through a window covered with mist from your breath. I tried to get closer to what it was. I sort of thought myself closer.” The shape becomes clearer and the voice becomes louder.

His visitor is Dar Tellum, and Dar Tellum is just as confused as our narrator as to just how the two of them are communicating. To each other, they look vague and out-of-focus, like lights in the fog. Dar Tellum tells Ralph about telekinesis. With Dar Tellum’s coaching and assistance, Ralph is able to move a baseball in his room, but this only works when he is in contact with Dar Tellum.

### **The Crisis**

In the second chapter of this short book, we learn that what might have been a dream was real — the baseball is in the place that Dar Tellum and Ralph put it. In math class, the two of them distract his teacher by levitating a notebook and flinging it at his teacher, before she can examine his work and realize that he has been distracted. The other students witness it.

That night, Ralph gets up to have a snack before going to sleep, and finds his parents talking in the kitchen: “...I found out what my Dad really does. I always knew that he was some sort of an engineer.” He eavesdrops, and discovers that Earth is in crisis; dozens of cities are in danger of flooding. The ocean levels are rising. “From what I understood, and I’m sure there are gaps here and there, the smoke from cars and factories goes into the air. A part of this smoke called carbon dioxide gets into the atmosphere of Earth. It lets the sun’s heat in, but

it won't let much heat out. This carbon dioxide makes a kind of one-way lid on Earth. Heat in, but not much out. And this extra heat was warming up the north and south poles. So the ice was melting and the oceans were getting higher."

Ralph's father is working on a secret project to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and failing.

This may sound vaguely familiar.

### **The Truth**

The truth is, the global warming concept is not new. Scholarship on the subject goes back for some time. By 1961, Charles David Keeling had documented a steady annual rise in carbon dioxide levels. His projections have been entirely confirmed. The National Science Foundation issued a warning in 1963 and President Johnson's Science Advisory Committee raised the alarm in 1965. By 1971, the SMIC (that's Study of Man's Impact on Climate) conference reported on the possible danger of rapid and serious anthropogenic climate change. Al Gore didn't invent the concept in the nineties; there have been over fifty years of steadily convincing warning signs and confirmed predictions. You can look it up — but since a lot of these documents are pre-Internet, you might have to sign off Google and go to a library.

This has been, it seems, a minority report, but I don't think it will be so for much longer. Sometimes in my darker moments I begin to think that one of the reasons I'm here — and perhaps the only reason — is to bear witness to the end of the world I grew up in.

Having children changes one's perspective. This is now their world; they are my replacements in it. And they will not know a world in which they don't know — not just fear, but know — that the climate is changing rapidly, and becoming a climate that is not hospitable to our human world. The ship of civilization has been listing, and now it's visibly taking on water. There is a bright side — we've reached a tipping point in public opinion, and deniers will soon be the lunatic fringe. But the dark side is that we've reached a tipping point, and we're tipping. The best we can hope for is to reduce the worst-case scenario. It isn't the Earth that is in trouble; it's us.

### **Back to the Book**

Dar Tellum is from Sidra, a planet with five moons, circling a double sun. Strain as hard as he might, Ralph cannot see Dar Tellum clearly; at best, he remains a vague shape surrounded by "waving things" — flat paddle shapes — that move up and down. Dar Tellum may be an aquatic creature. He may understand algae as someone who has an up-close-and-personal relationship with it. He mentions learning by "sharing from the fact colonies" and his species does not seem to have written language, or technology like ours (he does not understand what a

“rocket” is). His species could be in a post-technological state, whose technology is now biological. He may understand climate change and sea level rise so well because his perspective is that of a member of a race that has survived it.

The rest of the plot is somewhat predictable; Dar Tellum suggests a solution, to launch algae into the upper atmosphere, where it could stay, and absorb carbon dioxide. While Ralph examines an encyclopedia, Dar Tellum identifies a promising species. Ralph decides to write Dar Tellum’s idea onto a piece of paper, and puts it in his father’s briefcase, into a file folder marked “New Proposals.” His father discovers the paper. Ralph confesses to placing it in his father’s briefcase, and claims to have come up with the idea in a dream. The idea is vetted. Ralph is invited to the launching of the rocket. But there is a crisis — a different type of algae has been tested, and chosen, and it isn’t the one that Dar Tellum selected.

Ralph knows that it won’t work, and Dar Tellum confirms this. At the last second, the two of them are able to use telekinesis to switch the containers and put the correct type of algae into the spaceship.

The plan works, and more rockets are launched with the correct algae. And Earth is saved. But Ralph can’t tell anyone. And in the last sentence of the book he asks us to also keep it a secret.

### **Stand Back — I’m Going to Try Science!**

So there’s a lot going on here. If I’ve done my job here, you can see why this book made such a strong impression. An alienated child, I found an awful lot to like about a story of a child and an alien. I knew that I was gifted; I believed that I had secret knowledge. I didn’t have much success with the telepathy, telekinesis, or remote viewing, but I continued to hope that I might eventually work that out. And implicit in the story was faith in science — specifically, the idea that progress in our ability to fix things would stay ahead of our tendency to break things. My adult understanding of the history of civilization and technology does not, to me now, seem to bear that out. But do we have too much faith in science — or not enough?

We remember the winters of our childhood — the tremendous snow drifts, the snow days, the sun. But we were a lot shorter then, the lenses of our eyes were clearer, and the world was a lot newer to us. But as humans, with our short human lives and fallible memories, we are very poor at understanding changes to the world that take longer than a human childhood to play out. This is where science must come in. It’s the very tool that we’ve devised to overcome the limitations of our senses and memories.

And so we are where we are. There isn’t a lot of value in wringing hands and assigning blame — but we should remember who, and what kind of person, was on the wrong side of history. For years, anthropogenic global warming mostly has had a public relations problem — the advocates of the theory were



consistently outspent, as if we could vote the problem out of existence. There's a quotation by Richard Feynman that is relevant: "I believe that a scientist looking at nonscientific problems is just as dumb as the next guy." And so the scientists were good at the science, but a hypothetical average American watching the teevee machine over the course of the last decade might come away from it convinced that the data wasn't in, or that the hypothesis itself existed due to a conspiracy to take away his sport-utility vehicle.

We have thermometers, and other measuring devices. We have the properties of matter, of solids and gasses. We can make predictions and test them. We have Occam's razor. But what we don't have is a populace that is sufficiently educated to discern the signal from the noise, and to realize that arguments based on one's preferred sports team or one's religious beliefs are not likely to be convincing to reality. When Richard Feynman presented the results of the investigation into the causes of the Challenger disaster, he wrote "Reality must take precedence over public relations, for Mother Nature cannot be fooled." Another quotation, attributed to Lincoln, is relevant here — I'm sure you've heard it — something about fooling people, not Mother Nature. But not all of them, and not forever.

### Media Discussed in This Post

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

- *Dar Tellum: Stranger from a Distant Planet* by James R. Berry

*Saginaw, Michigan*

*August 1, 2012*

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/>.