

modern publishing, produces some wildly inconsistent work. It is so bad that I will not keep it in my library; it is going on the giveaway pile.

***The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu, Translated by Ken Liu**

I read *The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu, translated by Ken Liu. This is a weird and wonderful book, originally published in Chinese as a trilogy. It reminds me just a bit of *Ice Trilogy*, but it is considerably shorter. This must have been a very difficult work to translate. The style varies from section to section, and something is inevitably lost in parts where, I think, the original style was intended to humorously invoke different genres, for example, crime thrillers in one section, and hard science fiction in another. The book is about an alien invasion, but a strange one, and more about the human reaction to the invasion, which does not arrive in the timeline of the book. The author posits a planet in a complex orbit in a system with three stars, which renders the planet's ability to support life very chaotic and unpredictable over time. It's a little far-fetched but fascinating, and the implications are explored through an immersive video game. It's also set against a backdrop of the bloody Cultural Revolution. I'm sure it has lost a lot of context, despite the translator's best efforts, but what is left is still fascinating.

***Echopraxia* by Peter Watts**

I read *Echopraxia* by Peter Watts. Every time I start a science fiction novel by Peter Watts, I find myself pretty much incapacitated, unable to do anything else useful at all until I finish it, so I had to read this in one day. It's not entirely a comfortable feeling, a bit like being dragged behind a speeding car, but the destination is worth it. Watts is a writer of big ideas, but he also writes stories centered around small actions and characters, human and post-human, and his work is very dark. I exchanged e-mail messages with Watts a few years ago and he agreed at the time to get on Skype sometime to discuss his novels for a podcast episode. This happened and that happened and I wound up with several more kids and almost no time to work on projects like this but I would still like to talk to him someday. *Echopraxia* is not quite so gripping a book as *Blindsight*, which really should be read first, but it is still excellent. It is not an effortless read and it has not and probably will not achieve the level of sales the author deserves and hopes for. That phenomenon, of the dumbed-down driving the great and challenging out of the marketplace, is really starting to become a recurring theme in my reading list and I wish it wasn't so.

***The Rhesus Chart* by Charles Stross**

I read *The Rhesus Chart* by Charles Stross. This is the latest book in the Laundry Files series of novels that started with *The Atrocity Archives*. I really like many of Stross's novels and of them, I enjoy the Laundry Files books most

of all. My favorite is probably *The Jennifer Morgue*. *The Rhesus Chart* is a Laundry Files take on the vampire myth. I started reading this the day after *Echopraxia*, which is funny because they are both, in a way, vampire novels. This episode sees an older and wiser Bob Howard who is no longer the inexperienced IT geek, but a man becoming a major player in Laundry affairs. But this has a great cost, and so this one is quite dark. This book flows a bit unevenly and there are moments when the narrator has to intervene to explain what is going on, which seems like a writing band-aid; I'd say it probably needed some heavier revision, but didn't get it, perhaps due to scheduling reasons. It feels like an "in-between-isode," a bridging story, introducing some major changes for Bob, but not that strong a story in its own right. Stross has the pieces in place for some long-feared developments in the world of the Laundry Files, where the stars align for CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN. I am looking forward to it!

***The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin**

I read *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin. (Full disclosure: I finished it on February 1st, but I'm still gonna call it a January book — so sue me.) I should have read this one years ago, but somehow didn't. This is one of the deep works of science fiction, a confirmed classic. It is a simple and fast-moving story about a human ambassador making first contact with a world called Winter. The inhabitants of Winter are very similar to the humans we know and love, but the approach their bodies take to gender and sex is very, very different. They are truly hermaphroditic, and only periodically become sexually active, going into a cycle of enhanced hormone activity. Each time they may become physically male, or physically female; at different points in "his" life, the same individual might father children, or mother them. This is not presented in graphic detail in any way, but yet explored quite deeply. What would their culture be like, and how would they react to a visit from a "regular" human male? This is explored in the story itself, not in a discursive or talky way, and it's very thought-provoking.

Programming Books

I read bits of a number of programming books, including *JavaScript for Kids* by Nick Morgan, *JavaScript Enlightenment* by Cody Lindley, *Effective JavaScript* by David Herman, *Thinking Functionally with Haskell* by Richard Bird, and *Swift Pocket Reference* by Anthony Gray, *Effective Modern C++* by Scott Meyers, and *Learning Web App Development* by Semmy Purewal. After NewtonScript, JavaScript is a perpetual disappointment to me: an overly-complex language, spawning far too many dialects and preprocessors. I spent many years avoiding web development with JavaScript, but it looks like I may have to master it if I want to work in this job market. I keep going back to Haskell instead; when I study Haskell, I always feel that I'm learning something that makes me a better programmer, as opposed to just learning some trivial gratuitous thing that is broken about a language design. One of the great frustrations of spending

decades programming — I first learned programming when I was just a child, in the late 1970s — is that you have to watch the same thoughtless language design problems happen over and over again. There is some progress, but the state of the art for mainstream programmers, as opposed to a very small minority of programming language researchers using Haskell, is really not much better than it was in the nineties. But there *is* progress.

Swift is the new language for Mac and iOS development and I haven't studied it enough to have a strong opinion about it yet. Tentatively, I'm just happy that it will be possible to use Apple's libraries for MacOS X and iOS without Objective-C, and also keep in mind that it is a new language. Meanwhile, JavaScript is twenty years old and although some of the new features look promising, the original botched, hacked language design still pulsates within.

Moby-Dick

I started re-reading *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville. I've read this novel before. I wound up getting through college with an English degree without ever reading it, probably because more of my classes covered British writers than American writers. The first time I read *Moby-Dick*, I was impressed that a book with such a reputation for difficulty was, at its core, really a very engaging adventure story. Re-reading it now, I am impressed at how philosophical, how iconoclastic, and how funny it is. I am reading the Penguin deluxe paperback, ISBN 978-0143105954, which is a big chunky paperback with white hand-drawn text on the cover, and wonderful artwork. It is a real pleasure to hold in the hands. This time I am reading the book more slowly, and savoring it, reading portions out loud to my children, doing silly voices for the characters. I did not finish it in January. I will probably not finish it in February, but I'll keep going.

In February, I'm also planning to take on Barry Miles' big biography of William S. Burroughs, *Call Me Burroughs*. We'll see how that goes. I also want to re-read Tom Robbins' *Another Roadside Attraction*, a book that was important to me in high school, and see what I think of it thirty years later.

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