

nicely, though, and Hughes is pretty effective at “raising the stakes” while also bringing the big story elements down to sharply-defined decision points in time, and a deepening relationship between the protagonist, Adam, and his love interest and co-worker, Detective Isabella Cherabino, a tough cop figure who, like Adam, has a complex back-story that makes her quite an interesting, three-dimensional character.

I remain curious about the *Mindspace* world and I’d like to see her go deeper and flesh out the past of that world. The writing is quite businesslike where I’d like to hear a little more music now and then. This is a minor complaint, but I came across a few noticeable editing errors where sentences apparently got away from both writer and editor. There are also a couple of shorter works available for Kindle and as Audible audiobooks, *Rabbit Trick* and *Payoff*, but I won’t buy either of these unless they come out in print form because of my opposition to DRM copy protection: <http://www.defectivebydesign.org/amazon-kindle-swindle>.

2312 by Kim Stanley Robinson, Concluded

I finished reading a big book from Kim Stanley Robinson, *2312*. Robinson’s loose and occasionally experimental style in this volume probably isn’t for everyone, but I enjoyed it. The book is a sort of police procedural about a conspiracy to destroy targets that are part of the flowering of terraforming and migration in the solar system, but that does not describe it very well, since the book isn’t really *about* that; the plot is sort of just enough of a frame to hang a story on. The real story is a travelogue of the solar system, which allows KSR to stretch his legs and do what he does best, which is talk about environments, human-made and natural, and cultures, and the fundamentals of human aspiration and suffering, and think quite deeply about how these things influence each other.

It’s the story of two main characters, a woman, sort of, named Swan, who grew up on Mercury in KSR’s city Terminator, a location he’s written about before, and a man, sort of, named Wahram, who grew up on the moons of Saturn. I say “sort of” when mentioning their genders because gender is much less binary in KSR’s *2312*; Swan is a “gynandromorph” and Wahram is an “androgyn.” At some point I laughed out loud when I realized that Swan is mercurial in personality, and Wahram is saturnine — yes, KSR went there, in a big way. I find it pretty amazing how little physical description he uses, when writing about his characters — just the vaguest, oddest hints of how they look — but yet they become very vivid in my imagination, because through their conversations and actions they come to seem so convincing.

Anyway, this is a long book built of short episodes, so it is easy to read a few chapters at a time. I enjoyed it quite a bit. It shows an optimistic view of life in the solar system. Life on Earth? Maybe not so much. Earth is a mess by *2312*; KSR describes some very bad years in store for us. I don’t think he’s wrong. But at the end, we wind up back on Olympus Mons, which I found very moving, having recently re-read the Mars trilogy.

In just a month or two KSR's next novel, *Aurora*, will be released. This one is supposed to cover the beginnings of the expansion of the human race beyond the solar system. I am really curious about that. KSR generally has stuck to science fiction of the hard-ish variety, which means that I don't expect him to hand-wave his way around the speed of light limit. Writing hard science fiction about interstellar travel is, well, hard, because everything takes a long, long time, and you have to find some way to make that convincing. I can't wait to see what he does with it. Meanwhile, I am going to order copies of his *Three Californias* trilogy and see what I think of that. I could read *Shaman* but something about that whole sub-genre of ice age historical fiction just turns me off, although back in the day I read Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* and the next couple of books (they were pretty titillating for a 16-year-old nerd boy!)

Working Again

I am working full-time again, which is a great thing and a huge relief. I still am getting up early to get a little reading in, maybe 30 minutes, each morning, before I have to leave for work. It's the best quiet time I've found. When I try to read in the evening, before bed, I am usually either nodding off and can't focus on what I'm reading, or distracted by the kids. So I will try to continue my morning reading time. I miss my daily walks, though. With about an hour and twenty minutes of total time spent commuting per day, and Daylight Saving Time back in effect, which means that it is still dark when I leave for work, I just haven't figured out how to fit walking into my day. I could try giving up my reading time and walking in the dark, but that doesn't seem very appealing. So I have managed only the occasional walk. I have set up a standing desk at my new job, though, and spend a portion of my work day standing, so that's something.

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville, Concluded

I finished re-reading *Moby-Dick*. I feel like I got much more out of the book this time, especially the humor. The book is very uneven, though, and the last third lacks dialogue and character development, except in occasional dribbles, and is filled with long, meditative chapters on whaling and whale anatomy. Maybe I had unrealistic expectations, but the ending felt anti-climactic. I would like to look at some critical writing about *Moby-Dick* and see if other readers feel this way. I have received a book called *Why Read Moby-Dick?* by Nathaniel Philbrick, the author of the introduction to my Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition. It's a slender, small book, really an essay, so it shouldn't take long to read, but I suspect it is not the in-depth reader's guide to *Moby-Dick* that I'd like to read. My criticism isn't to suggest that one *shouldn't* read *Moby-Dick*. It is just to say that, at least this time, my interest level in the book's last third diminished markedly, compared to my interest in the first two-thirds. It might not be the book's fault that my mind was wandering a bit, given that I've been a bit sleep-deprived for most of the month of March. I am wondering if I want

to read more Melville. I have all his major works, I think, in the nice compact editions from the Library of America, as well as a few separate volumes.

***Vacant* by Alex Hughes**

I happened to come across the next of the *Mindspace Investigations* novels by Alex Hughes, *Vacant*, at my local Barnes and Noble, so I read that one too, finishing it this morning, the 31st of March (just under the wire!) This book has better pacing than the last one. We learn just a little more about our protagonist's mental abilities, but his abilities, and the whole Guild world, continues to feel a little under-developed. Still, this is better than the last one. This time, I only came across one or two glaring editing errors.

***Burning Chrome* by William Gibson**

I received a used paperback of William Gibson's story collection *Burning Chrome* and I'm re-reading those stories, but have not finished them yet. I've read this collection before. I used to have a signed first edition. It has been quite a few years, though, and it is interesting to re-read it after recently reading all Gibson's novels.

These stories hold up amazingly well. I read a number of them in *Omni* magazine when they were originally published. I especially remember "Johnny Mnemonic" in 1981 (I was thirteen years old, and I subscribed to *Omni*). Then, "Burning Chrome" in 1982, and "Dogfight" a few years later. Gibson's stories remain some of the best science fiction short stories I've ever read; in my view, there are just two writers of the science fiction short story whose work outshines that of all the other practitioners. Those two are William Gibson, and James Tiptree Junior. Tiptree is gone, alas, and Gibson seems to have pretty much abandoned the short story form, but he is still creating excellent novels. There are plenty of other science fiction short story writers I admire, but those two stand out for me.

***Cinderella* (2015 film)**

They aren't books, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention a few movies. We took the kids to see the new live-action *Cinderella* movie, and despite initial misgivings the film won me over. It is beautiful and funny, with a lyricism and eroticism I really wasn't expecting. It reminded me a bit of Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*. Kate Blanchett is wonderful as the wicked stepmother. The costumes are just stunning, too. There is a lot of oohing and aaahing over the dresses, but the men's costumes are amazing as well, with those cool embroidered vests, masculine but very dressy.

We've also been having a multi-evening Philip K. Dick film festival, inspired by readings I submitted for a Science Fiction University segment of the Professional

Left Podcast: <http://professionalleft.blogspot.com/>. I'm in episode 276, starting at about the one hour, eleven minute mark.

Films Adapted from the Works of Philip K. Dick

A number of Dick's novels and short stories have been adapted as films, with more or less success, and more or less similarity to the original stories. I found a number of used DVDs and Blu-Ray movies at our local Media Reload store. They include the ones that you've probably heard of, *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and the new *Total Recall*, and a couple that you've probably never heard of, *Next*, *Impostor* (because they did not do well at all), and some in between, *Paycheck* and *The Adjustment Bureau*.. There's one that I couldn't find but remember fondly, *Screamers*, and I'll have to track down a copy. That movie is a sort of dystopian action horror movie, and it is built on horror tropes and definitely a bit of a "B" movie, but I really enjoyed it for what it was, and I feel that even the extended ending Dick didn't write is still quite congruent with Dick's dystopian vision.

I had never seen the new *Total Recall*. Grace and I both found that to be very entertaining, and a much better movie than the original Schwarzenegger film. *The Adjustment Bureau* is a promising film that doesn't quite work — it's beautifully done, with a great look, and well-acted, but the storyline just doesn't pay off in the end. *Paycheck* is an expensive action movie that winds up feeling very long and boring. It takes far too long to get to the meat of the story, and then pads it out endlessly with chases and fight scenes to the point where the audience loses all interest. I'm looking forward to watching the low-budget oddity, *Radio Free Albemuth*, which I suspect will be the most true to Dick's vision. It also looks like quite an amateurish production, though, and I can't yet say whether that is off-putting and causes the viewer to fail at suspension of disbelief. That movie is not available on DVD or Blu-ray at all, but I downloaded a copy to my iPad via the iTunes store.

Books in the Queue

I ordered a few more books from the New York Review Books Classics series of trade paperback reprints. I received *The Letter Killers Club* by Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, translated by Joanne Turnbull. You don't need to be able to pronounce his name to know that his stories in the collection *Memories of the Future* are memorable and weird in the best possible way, so I expect good things from his other work. I also picked up a copy of *A High Wind in Jamaica* by Richard Hughes, a novel that gets a lot of praise. My NYRB Classics shelf is almost full, but I've only read perhaps a quarter of them, so I've got a lot in my "to-read" pile. In addition, I received a copy of *Orfeo* by Richard Powers. I've also got a copy of *The Martian* by Andy Weir on my to-read pile. Sean Hurley had positive things to say about it, which was enough to convince me to pick it once it came out in paperback.

Non-Fiction in Progress

Finally, there is the non-fiction. I will pick up a copy of a book I've been meaning to read, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. I also really want to read *Alan Turing: The Enigma* by Richard Hodges, and *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* by Lawrence Wright. I've been picking at several books on programming and electronics topics, including *Make: AVR Programming: Learning to Write Software for Hardware* by Elliot Williams, and the third edition of *Practical Electronics for Inventors* by Paul Scherz and Simon Monk. There's an old book, new to me, on Haskell programming that I'm enjoying: *An Introduction to Functional Programming Systems Using Haskell* by Anthony J. T. Davie. This text came out in 1992, and I don't think there's a newer edition. Maybe there should be. I like Richard Bird's work but it is not nearly as coherent an introductory text.

Back in 1992, Haskell was a very new and experimental language, I'm not sure if the author's code examples will compile as-is in the Glasgow Haskell Compiler of 2015. But the writing is extremely lucid. The introduction is one of the best presentations I've read on the nature and goals of functional programming. There isn't anything in it I haven't heard about elsewhere, but it brings together the concept of the Von Neumann bottleneck, mutable state, parallel programming, and other issues into a very compelling presentation. The first few chapters are largely review for me, but the exercises look interesting enough to try writing in modern Haskell. The book goes a bit into the lambda calculus underpinnings of functional programming, proof, program correctness, and implementation of functional programs, which looks a bit deeper than most of the Haskell textbooks out there. I am not sure exactly when monads were introduced, but I think the implementations of Haskell used in the book did not yet support them. There was a different mechanism used: channels. I am curious about that.

I'll have another update in a month, if I can. Meanwhile, happy reading!

Saginaw, Michigan

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