

The book is slightly difficult to describe. It is, essentially, a very cunning piece of fakery, wrapped in more cunning fakery. It's a fake copy of an old novel allegedly published by a fake press in 1949. But then the fake book is filled with fake marginalia and ephemera — in fact, stuffed with notes and clippings and postcards and photographs and other oddities. The yellowed pages are fake. The “clothbound” cover is fake; it is textured paper of some kind. The marginal notes are in multicolored pen and pencil writings (not really, but it looks pretty convincing unless you get out a magnifier). The notes are a conversation between two students in a fictional University library, talking about the book, and about the controversy over the author's identity, and his mysterious disappearance, and his translator's identity as well.

The notion of an unreliable narrator is an old one, and so is the notion of an unreliable literary executor, and translator, and critic. I think the book was inspired by some great work of other authors. In particular, Nabokov and his novel *Pale Fire* seems like an obvious antecedent. The main text, a phony novel called *Ship of Theseus* by the nonexistent author V. M. Straka, has clear references to Lovecraft and Dante (actually my friend Meredith pointed out the references to Dante). More recently, there have been epistolary novels like the *Griffin and Sabine* books ; this book reminds me a little bit of those.

It's an interesting piece of work. When you get into it, you discover that pretty much nothing is as you expected. The introduction, by Straka's supposed translator, seems hackneyed, and unbelievable. The main text is very unevenly written; the first chapter contains long sections of truly horrible writing — deliberately “purple” and filled with “telling” instead of showing. Later sections are much better. This suggests that the book is at least partially a forgery. There are lots more theories and conspiracies at work and I'm not going to go into all of them here, but I am enjoying it, while also refusing to go too deep down the rabbit hole (there are cryptographic puzzles in the text to solve, and online clues; I just really have neither the interest or the time for that kind of thing).

It's funny — if you were creating a real forgery of a known painting, you'd do your best to make the canvas, and the paint, and the brush strokes, as convincing as possible. I know that this whole project is, as I've called it, a “cunning fake.” I unwrapped it. But if you are willing to suspend disbelief, and treat it as if you really found this old book, say, at a library book sale, you discover that in the fake introduction to the fake book there is fakery upon fakery, and in the fake marginalia, fake people obsessed about the fake fakery, and somehow, like great fiction always does, the lies become somehow true.

***Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* by D. T. Max, Concluded**

So I have finished only a single book this month, at least that I can recall. It was the biography of David Foster Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*.

I didn't finish listening to the unabridged audio version of *Arguably*, the essay collection by Christopher Hitchens (although I am deeply impressed by some of the essays). I didn't even finish reading the first Harry Potter book out loud to my kids. We're almost done, but I lost my voice. However, I am going to count it, because I got the kids to read the last few chapters, so we'll add *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to my list as a book that I (barely) completed (re-reading) in January.

I did, though, do something I rarely do. I started watching some TV shows. Recently some shows have become available online that I wanted to watch. There are three, and all are adaptations: the SyFy network production of *The Magicians*, the BBC adaptation of *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, and another SyFy production, the adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*.

Thoughts about Television

I try not to sound like some kind of a snob about this, but I really don't enjoy TV shows any more. I spent a lot of time as a child and a teenager soaking up TV shows: *M*A*S*H*, *Star Trek*, *Hill Street Blues*, and a lot of sitcoms. I've watched a lot of the big science fiction shows. We have, on DVD, all of *Stargate SG-1* (which stands for Stargate Stargate 1), ten seasons long, and I have seen all ten, along with *Stargate: Atlantis* and *Stargate Universe*. (Apparently, no one can agree on whether the titles of the Stargate franchise shows should include a colon or not). I've watched so much mediocre TV, and some good TV. I watched the first season of *Game of Thrones* and the first season of *Mad Men*, although I have not continued either of those. We have seen all of the rebooted *Doctor Who*, although I am growing sick of the franchise.

I think what I've grown sick of is the lack of emotional and intellectual payoff in TV series shows that do not follow a closed arc, but exist only to exist, and expose eyeballs to advertisers, for as long as they can — literally, as long as the producers can drag them out. I find that often so unsatisfying. I was an X-Files fan, for example, but to this day I've never seen the last three seasons.

In particular, I really don't enjoy shows about nothing. I was never a fan of *Seinfeld*. *Big Bang Theory* is, as far as I can tell, also pretty much a show about nothing. It is too mild to be genuine satire. It is too privileged and too unrealistic and, I'll just go ahead and say it, too white. It's about overgrown children with no significant struggles in their lives fighting to continue to live as selfish children and pursue their own irresponsible self-gratification. Without their endless adolescence, they would settle down with each other and learn not to be so abrasive; they would grow as people and if they grew as people there would be no story. It's been going on for, what, a decade now? And someone finally consummated a relationship?

I really enjoyed the look and feel of *Mad Men* — the sets and costumes alone are worth watching, at least a bit. But the story arc felt like it was taking too long to get anywhere, and becoming too melodramatic, setting up too many

self-conscious, unrealistic mysteries, and so I basically lost interest. I've been advised to watch *Halt and Catch Fire*, a period drama about the early days of personal computers. The setup sounds fascinating to me but, basically, I'm again afraid that without a defined arc it will just be another soap opera, and I've got enough soap.

Three Recent Adaptations: *The Magicians*, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, and *Childhood's End*

I was drawn to three recent science fiction and fantasy adaptations *because* they are adaptations, and follow defined stories, with arcs and character development. Or, at least their source material does. I am a fan of Lev Grossman's *Magicians* books — they are a great sort of homage to Narnia and Harry Potter but a little darker and a little older. I have watched the first two episodes of the adapted series. I am surprised how much I like the adaptation. I was also surprised at how dark it is, and how well-edited and tight. The author is involved with the adaptation and the storyline has been somewhat restructured; things are happening more in parallel, and faster, so that the first episode can end on a cliffhanger. I don't mind if a show takes some time to build drama, but I guess that just isn't done these days.

Even so, the show seems to respect its audience in that things go by really fast and you have to pay attention. The producers don't explain everything right away but the bread crumbs are all there, and the foreshadowing. So I recommend this show, but I think it would go down better after reading the trilogy, which I recommend more. The first episode is free on the iTunes store if you want to see one before spending any money.

I have some real questions over where they are going to go with the show, though. I don't think they have the budget to do much with the actual magical land of Fillory. That is sort of the beating heart at the center of the books. What will it do to restructure the story to downplay Fillory? I don't know. How long are they planning to run? I don't know. Are they going to cover the events of the trilogy? At this pace, that should only take about a dozen episodes, or one season. Or are they planning to add new material? I don't know. I fear that if they try to turn it into more than one season, the initial thrilling pace will give way to a lot of filler and back-pedaling as the writers try desperately to keep up with the need to fill air time. But we will see. The first two episodes are really quite impressive, although I should emphasize that they are most definitely not for children.

I am a fan of the 2004 novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke. It is a big novel, ambitious and discursive and strange. The first time I tried to read it, I gave up halfway through, because the story was moving too slowly and I lost my momentum, but I loved the atmosphere, the language, the mood, and alternate history aspects of the book. I tried again a few years later and finished it, and I regard it as a wonderful book, likely to be regarded as a

fantasy classic, although a challenging one that is not for everyone.

I was curious about the BBC adaptation because it is a closed, seven-part miniseries. I have watched the first three parts and it is really impressive. The mood, the atmosphere, the world-building, the sets, the costumes, and especially the casting, are wonderful. It seems so far to be a very faithful adaptation, although there are inevitable cuts because the book is absolutely massive, with many subplots and digressions. I am really looking forward to the rest of it. Grace is watching it with me, and she is enjoying it too — and she has not read the book, although I have filled her in on a few details. I recommend it for anyone who likes historical drama and/or fantasy, and is willing to tolerate a story with a lot of characters and a lot of plotting and scheming. The scenes of Strange doing magic — in his intuitive, physical way — are just gorgeous. It's really nicely done.

Finally, I have heard good things about the adaptation *Childhood's End* but I have not started watching it yet; I should have something to report later.

The One Book I Completed in January

Unfortunately, in January 2016, I completed only one book:

- *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* by D. T. Max

Here's to a healthier February!

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
January 30, 2016

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