

ready for a product launch.

Fortunately the stressors are easing up, at least slightly, so I've been able to get back to a little reading. I've continued to watch some television shows, too. I have watched a few more episodes of the drama *Halt and Catch Fire*. I finished watching the BBC mini-series based on *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. That mini-series ended just about as well as one could reasonably hope for, given the complexity of the original novel. Ultimately it wasn't absolutely stellar, but I would still rate it quite highly, and recommend it.

***The Magicians, The Magician King, and The Magician's Land* by Lev Grossman**

I re-read Lev Grossman's trilogy of fantasy novels *The Magicians*, *The Magician King*, and *The Magician's Land*. I enjoyed them even more than I did the first time. I think they hold up well, and should be read by anyone with even a passing interest in "urban" or "contemporary" fantasy. Even if you think you don't like the fantasy genre and just read fiction, you might find yourself pleasantly surprised.

The first book starts slowly, and the reader can tell that Grossman's style is still developing as he writes. In particular, in the early pages of the first book he tends to do a little too much telling instead of showing, and his characterization uses a fair amount of heavy-handed description. But the book picks up rapidly; in fact, more rapidly than I remember. The whole of Quentin and company's undergraduate education at Brakebills is finished in the first half of the book. But it has some really memorable storytelling, and so the first half of the book looms large in my memory. Especially vivid and tactile is the trip to Brakebills South, in Antarctica.

***The Magicians*, the Syfy TV Series**

The television series rearranges things drastically, so that each episode can have a dramatic arc and almost every episode can have a cliffhanger ending. This, in my view, is not as necessary as the producers of modern television shows seem to think it is; it produces a sort of dramatic "arms race" which ultimately flattens out the shows and requires all shows to up the ante, until all the fights are bloody, all the conflicts are violent, and all the romance neurotic.

In the books, Penny is almost nonexistent as a character until we hear that he has punched Quentin in the face, for no apparent reason. He is "off-screen" for scores of pages, until the last part of the first book. He is "off-screen" again for most of the second book, and only really has scenes of any significance in the third one. Similarly, Julia is barely there in the first book, while the second book recaps her story, inter-cutting it with Quentin's. Fillory is barely a thing at all for most of the book, until the fact that it is a real place comes as a shock to the characters.

All of this has been rearranged for the television story. Penny is a major character. Margo, a significant character in the show, is promoted from a minor character named Janet in the book. The students are older in the show, not undergraduates but graduate students. The Beast shows up very early on — in fact, the Beast’s visit ends the pilot episode. Dean Fogg is a much more serious, important character. Fillory is “realer” and more present earlier on; the place haunts Penny’s dimensional travels, and Jane Chatwin haunts Quentin’s dreams. The show frequently cuts between Brakebills and Julia’s story; she doesn’t disappear from Quentin’s life for years at a time. Fillory as a *place* is significantly downplayed, at least so far, in the television story; it is a place of dreams and brief episodes, gradually infiltrating the real world. And in the television story, a large number of things that happened sequentially in the books are happening in parallel. Because I’ve read the books, I don’t quite know whether this simply seems overly busy and confusing to a viewer who hasn’t read the books, or not. Do I have any readers who are watching the show who haven’t read the books? If so, what do you think?

I have watched the first eight episodes of the series, and while I am still feeling somewhat positive and optimistic about the show, it is definitely a mixed bag. Budget is obviously a huge factor in the production of this series. On the one hand, a tight budget forces the producers to be more creative and clever than they might be otherwise. But on the other, spending too little money can look cheap or silly on the screen.

It seems like the producers might have shot their budget wad early, spending a lot on the pilot, and so in episodes like “The Mayakovsky Circumstance,” the sets are laughably cheap; it looks like it was shot in a state college dorm. The wind and snow howling outside the building is an effect you might expect in an Ed Wood film, a spotlight and someone tossing fake snow. They actually used some of those electric space heaters that have simulated flames, pretending they are wood-burning stoves. This is distracting. But at the same time, that episode has some really impressive acting, and lovely moments. The scenes allegedly in Antarctica are inter-cut with some really weak scenes of Eliot and Margo back in Brakebills, which is frustrating. After that episode, I was pretty sure the show would be cancelled, but apparently it has been renewed for 2017. I’m really not, at this point, at all sure whether I will continue watching it, although I will probably finish watching season one, unless it goes completely off the rails.

I am still watching, mainly, because the main characters are very well-done. Jason Ralph simply does a terrific job with Quentin. Stella Maeve is really fascinating as Julia. And although at first I thought that Olivia Taylor Dudley was just a bad actress, playing Alice as an utterly stilted and blank character, it turns out that she’s not; instead we are watching Alice really unfold and open up as a character, so it appears that the initial stiff, blank characterization was intentional. While I don’t entirely like the way her romantic arc with Quentin is written, she is displaying some of the strongest acting chops among the cast.

But the show is struggling, in my view, to establish a consistent tone, and part

of that has to do with the budget for magic. Fake blood and gore are, apparently, really cheap, and so the producers are feeling free to use buckets full of both. In fact the repeated gross-out horror scenes exceed the violence in the novels, which only comes in certain critical scenes. What they did with the “beast” in the first episode was unnerving and fantastic, but arterial spray is not very magical. Magical effects are apparently expensive, so they are used sparingly. I don’t know what they are actually going to wind up doing with Fillory, or the Neitherlands, as places. It’s hard to watch a show based on a book that takes place, in large parts, in Fillory, without Fillory. It’s not terrible, but it has the feel of something that isn’t entirely working out. And straying so far from the structure of the novel, it is hard to see how, and if, they intend to give the overall story a defined arc. With an arc, a show is always looking ahead to its own ending. Without one, I start to lose interest, because it is ultimately a soap opera that exists only to perpetuate itself.

Those three books are the only ones I have finished during the last five or six weeks, but I have read bits of a number of other books. I’ll mention a few of them. I’m sure I am forgetting some, but here goes:

***The Greek Myths* by Robert Graves**

The Greek Myths by Robert Graves is interesting, and looks to be a great resource for researchers or writers, but it is not quite what I expected. It is hard to read the capsule versions of the myths in this text. For one thing, many are not really appropriate for children, since Graves pulls no punches including all the “classical” rape and incest. For another thing, they are not really written as narratives, but more like collections of footnotes; each myth has a narrative, and then an explanatory section, which seems mostly to indicate how it fits together with the other myths as described by various classical sources. So I can’t really recommend this book if you want to read the myths, but only if you want to really study them in depth.

***The Norse Myths* by Kevin Crossley-Holland**

Setting aside the Greek myths for now, we started to read *The Norse Myths* by Kevin Crossley-Holland. Sam is particularly interested in the Norse myths. I recall that at his age I dug into the myths in the children’s section of the McCord Memorial Library in North East, Pennsylvania, and the myths I found most fascinating were these. We have read a few, but this text is a bit hard for the kids to get through; we might need an easier-reading version.

***The Sagas of Icelanders* by Robert Kellogg**

For my own enjoyment, I picked up a copy of *The Sagas of Icelanders* by Robert Kellogg, the Penguin Classics Deluxe Paperback edition. I have *Moby-Dick* in this edition, and they are very nice to read — chunky, with print large enough to read, but without so much weight that you feel like they are uncomfortable

to hold. I haven't started in on this yet, but after reading *The Long Ships*, I would like to give it a try.

And now for something completely different.

***Hamilton: An American Musical* by Lin-Manuel Miranda**

Hamilton, the musical by Lin-Manuel Miranda, is simply amazing, at least in audio CD form. Yes, it really and truly is a musical that tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, and really and truly was inspired by the book *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow, which I'm also reading. This seems like it must be a parody, or something silly, but it isn't at all. Although at times it is funny, it is a serious piece of biographical storytelling.

I've had several conversations with people about the musical and tried to convince them that they should listen to it. White folks seem to have a lot of resistance to the idea of listening to a musical that has hip-hop music in it. I think that's a shame. I'm not an unqualified fan of the whole hip-hop genre, but the musical makes incredible use of a whole bunch of different genres, mashing up rap and torch songs and patter songs and choral numbers; the instrumentation ranges from turntables to synthesizers to strings and harps. It deserves, as far as I'm concerned, every accolade it has received. I think it may in fact be the first "postmodern" musical.

I started to read Chernow's book, but after the first chapter I set it aside, realizing that I may not have quite the background I need to get the most out of it. I intend to pick it up again, but meanwhile I started reading *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* by Joseph Ellis. I read a portion of this book out loud to Grace during long road trips. The first chapter contains a detail account of the Burr-Hamilton feud and duel. That chapter alone was more than worth the price of the book. I'm planning to continue reading Ellis, and hoping that Ellis will lead me back into Chernow's book.

***The Turnip Princess and Other Newly Discovered Fairy Tales* by Franz Xaver von Schonwerth**

Meanwhile, I've also been reading bedtime stories to the children from *The Turnip Princess and Other Newly Discovered Fairy Tales* by Franz Xaver von Schonwerth. These tales are a wild, terse, and dark, asking the reader to really exercise imagination in visualizing the action. The title story is far from the best one we've read so far. "The Iron Shoes" is a better story. These stories teach moral lessons, sometimes uncomfortable moral lessons, and are often deeply strange, which reminds us that the past is a strange place indeed.

***Childhood's End*, the Syfy TV Miniseries**

We watched the first two parts (of three) of the television adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*. I also re-read the first part of the book. My re-reading confirmed for me that the mini-series changes the tone of the story pretty dramatically, larding it here and there with horror tropes. It also seems to change the character of Karelle, making him darker and much more ominous. And while the book describes the Overlords as, literally, black devils, the show makes them red. That might seem like a trivial change but it has consequences for the audience; they are more blatantly "devils" than portrayed in the original, where they were very suggestive of devils but not literally red.

I'm not entirely sure I want to watch the third and final segment, or show it to my kids, although they are asking to see the ending. We'll see. I think this criticism of the show is quite fair. And after reading this wrap-up, I think it is possible that I will just delete part three un-watched, so that it doesn't become the version of the story implanted in my memory for the years remaining in which I have memory left to remember.

I need to wind this up soon, as I don't have hours to ramble, but I want to mention that we have been watching the original cast's *Star Trek* movies. I saw these, of course, each in turn, back when they were released in theaters. I have not seen most of them since. It is interesting to discover how my perception of the movies have changed.

***Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979 Film)**

The first one, called *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is a failure in some ways, as it is quite slow-moving. In fact, I won't argue with you if you want to call it boring. Parts of it *are* pretty boring. But there are some gorgeous scenes. This scene showing the alien probe remains really powerful and creepy, largely due to the amazing sound and light design. The whole look of the film, by Douglas Trumbull, remains impressive. Trumbull, of course, went on to design *Blade Runner*, which had its own completely different, but completely gorgeous, look. I would argue that *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is pretty much the only *Star Trek* that really deserves to be studied in earnest as an art film. It's full of gorgeous imagery and symbolism.

***Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1979 Film)**

The second film, *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, in my memory was a much more exciting movie. But the DVD version, at least the one I bought, looks terrible; it must have been scanned from aged film without effective color-correction. Ricardo Montalban is glorious in Khan, but other aspects of the show are often muddled and stupid. The costumes are laughable; at one point, Kirk's son shows up on the bridge with a sweater tied around his shoulders, like something out of [The Official Preppy Handbook](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Official_Preppy_Handbook)

cial_Preppy_Handbook). Despite the fact that it contains Spock's famous death scene, and sets up a smooth transition into the second of a three film trilogy, this film just doesn't hold up as well as I hoped. Saavik was played by Robin Curtis instead of Kirsty Alley in the second and third movies Alley's Saavik did not seem great to me, but, and I hate to sound cruel, Curtis's Saavik is simply bad, especially in the third film. She delivers her lines like a deer caught in the headlights, her face frozen, eyes darting back and forth. It's painful to watch.

Star Trek III: The Search for Spock (1984 Film)

The third film, *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, is a true train wreck. It is the second part of a story trilogy, and second movies in trilogies often don't stand up well by themselves. But even taking that into account, this one is hard to watch. It features laughably bad villain makeup, an agonizingly slow pace, ridiculous dialogue, and even stupider costumes. Kirk's son, a potentially interesting character, is discarded in a fight scene that doesn't even occur on-screen. At one point a starship is unable to pursue the Enterprise due to engine trouble (that is, sabotage), and we hear, dubbed in, the sound of an old car engine sputtering and dying. It feels like what is happening to the film itself. I could go on about this movie, but let's move on to number four.

Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home (1986 Film)

In my memory, the fourth film, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* stood out as the worst, because the tone angered me. Specifically, I recall a scene at the end where the cast is hanging on the side of the Klingon ship, in what was no doubt really a pool of some kind on a Hollywood backlot. The crew are horsing around, jumping off the ship into the water. Nimoy is grinning and laughing. This was such a violation of his character that I was simply offended, regarding this as a slap in the faces of fans.

In 2016, I see this scene for what it was — an outtake, in which the cast was horsing around, not on script, but having so much fun that the producers threw it in as a bit of fan service. In 2016 it is one of my favorite scenes in the movie. The irreverent tone, and moments when characters practically parody themselves, now seem, if not hilarious, at least funny. The plot that I found contrived and stupid, involving whales, is revealed as a big dumb excuse to get the gang back together and film some funny scenes. The psychedelic time-travel sequence is now funny, as in the moment in *Galaxy Quest* where Tony Shalhoub's character comes to the ship via some kind of cosmic matter transporter, and his reaction is just to say, deadpan, "that was a hell of a thing." There's even a Mary Sue character who gets to go to space. So this one is definitely the most fun and light-hearted.

Tonight we will watch the last two. In my memory, *The Final Frontier* is almost unbearably silly, while *The Undiscovered Country* is an allegory about the fall of the Soviet Union that was a little ridiculous in places but was much more

compelling; as I recall, Christopher Plummer was very good in the film. Let's see if I still see it that way in 2016 — twenty-five years later!

Books Completed in February and Early March

So, lots of reading and viewing, but only a few books completed. They are:

- *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (bedtime story reading)
- *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman
- *The Magician King* by Lev Grossman
- *The Magician's Land* by Lev Grossman

I'll see what I can complete in March. Onward!

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
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