



And now we've got one of the weirdest Presidents Elect in history, a bizarre, intemperate, openly racist and misogynist bully who lies and brags reflexively, who revels in his anti-intellectualism, and who just agreed to a twenty-five million dollar payment to settle three separate lawsuits over his "Trump University" real estate classes. Real estate, of course, being the last part of the American economy with any residual value to be extracted, at the expense of those losers like me and my family, who would like to simply live in a home, not invest in one, or extract the maximum possible profit from it.

This is not unprecedented in history; we've had crass, ignorant presidents before. We had Franklin Pierce, an alcoholic who openly supported slavery. We had Warren Harding, whose administration is remembered for the depth of its corruption. We had Ronald Reagan, who openly pandered to racists, promised to restore "states' rights," and invented stories about "welfare queens." His administration was, at least on paper, the most corrupt presidential administration of the twentieth century, with over a hundred officials investigated, indicted, or convicted.

The country survived.

One thing seems certain: we are all students of Trump University now. He hasn't even been sworn in yet, but already seems to be melting down, lashing out at the media, his critics — basically, at any adults in the room who dare to furrow their brows instead of nod along at the ranting of the "short-fingered vulgarian."

Is it too late to hope for some faithless electors?

Hopefully we will learn more than his earlier students did, as we have the opportunity to study, in real-time, the unfolding of a real estate scam of historic proportions.

In 1787, it is alleged, Benjamin Franklin was asked:

"Well, Doctor, what have we got — a Republic or a Monarchy?"  
"A Republic," Franklin replied, "if you can keep it."

It was a nice Republic, while it lasted. Sort of. OK, at least for a few people it was.

Anyway.

## Packing Up the Books

We continue to pack up our possessions. I've packed up 95 boxes of books, CDs, and DVDs so far, with a few more in progress. 91 of these are now stacked in a storage unit in Ann Arbor. Of these boxes, 78 of them hold books.

I've got all the books and DVDs in a database, managed by the program Delicious Library. The database lists the contents of each box. I have also made a chart

showing where, in the stacks, each box rests, so that if I need to get at a particular box, I should only need to take apart a portion of the book-box edifice.

When the last book is packed, or otherwise accounted for, I should be able to view the books and DVDs that *aren't* assigned to a box, and delete them, thus cleaning up the records for a number of books and DVDs that are accidental duplicates, or that I've given away, or lost. Then the database should closely reflect what we actually own.

The CDs aren't in the database, although I did photograph them as I packed them. Maybe I can add them when I unpack them.

According to my records, the 78 book boxes contain 1,793 books, or about 23 books per box.

## Stacks and Stacks

The boxes on the bottom two layers are U-Line S-18916 double-wall boxes, specified to hold up to 160 lbs. On top of those are two layers of U-Line S-4712 boxes, specified to hold up to 80 lbs. I chose to pay extra for super-sturdy boxes in the hopes that I could stack them high without wondering if the boxes on the bottom would collapse.

Friends on Facebook suggested that I just get boxes free from stores. I don't think they understood the sheer size of the library I am trying to move and protect or the value of some of the volumes. It's inherently hazardous to the books to move them at all, but I am doing my best to subject them to as little damage as possible. Of course, many of them aren't valuable or irreplaceable at all, but I still feel that it would be wrong to let them come to harm, if I can avoid it by taking modest precautions.

The weight varies dramatically from box to box. A cubic foot of large hardcover textbooks and magazines, printed on coated paper, weighs a lot, while a cubic foot of assorted paperbacks are surprisingly light.

The storage unit is heated and air-conditioned, which should at least help avoid some of the potential problems with moisture. I've seen what happens to paper stored in a basement that isn't de-humidified, and it isn't pretty.

With any luck they won't be in storage that long, although given the way our house-hunting is going, it could be a while.

## Shelf-Feet

As I packed each 12" by 12" by 12" box, I recorded the estimated number of shelf-inches that the contents would take up. This varies dramatically by box. In a 12" by 12" by 12" box I can fit four stacks of small mass-market paperbacks, or about four feet of shelf space, while boxes holding large hardcovers will hold

only a bit more than a linear foot of books. I did not actually measure every book, but eyeballed the rows of books as I arranged them in the boxes.

The totals tell me that I now have, in storage, so far, about 150 shelf-feet of books.

This sounds like a ridiculous number, but it corresponds (very roughly) to 19 short 3-shelf Billy bookcases, or 9 tall 6-shelf Billy bookcases. Many of them are mass-market paperbacks, which could be shelved in a more compact way, since the books themselves are shorter.

This is more shelving than we actually had available in our home, and so a lot of these books were never properly shelved or organized in our current home. Many remained in boxes and stacks, in closets, or, sometimes, just stacked in piles.

## Organizing

I've packed them as best as I could, trying to group them in boxes in rational ways — by author, by subject, in collections, etc. I could not do this organizing as thoroughly as I would have liked, because to do it thoroughly would have required that I be able to spread out all the books at once, see them all, and sort them all *before* packing them. Not only did we not have that shelf space, but that would have exposed them to the tender mercies of my youngest son, who has a particular penchant for destroying books, either by drawing on them, or by simply tearing them apart.

I don't know where we are moving, yet, but my hope is that we will be able to set up enough custom-made or, err, "off-the-shelf" shelving, and get all our books out of the closet, and put into some kind of useful and attractive arrangement, with some protection from baby Nemesis. This will also, I hope, allow us to do the sort of organized purge, or decimation, of their ranks that I've long wanted to do.

There are more books to pack, although I have emptied the bulk of the shelves now. I am not quite sure how many more boxes I'll need to pack the rest; my best guess is about fifteen. The count of books will go up dramatically, as I will be packing a lot of thin children's books.

I find it hard to put away all my books. To me our library is a living, growing collection; I am still reading and re-reading books from our library. I took my best guess at the books I would want to read, over the next few months, and they are on shelves to pack last. But my butterfly mind keeps demanding that I read books which are now sealed up in boxes at the bottom of a stack of more heavy boxes, and giving me new ideas for how to organize the collection. I've got to just tell my mind to find something else to obsess about, for now.

## Memories

There is good news about my computer. I spent some time swapping around memory modules, trying to figure out which DIMM was bad. The memory behaved unpredictably. I wasted a lot of time and never could figure out exactly which DIMM was bad. I swapped all the DIMMs between riser cards, and that was also inconclusive. To try to rule out a marginal riser card, I ordered a used riser card from an eBay seller. It seems like all the riser cards worked fine, but I still could not figure out which DIMM or DIMMs were bad.

I considered ordering 8 GiB of new RAM in 2-GiB DIMMs, to get my computer up to 12 GiB. But finally I decided to just go ahead and order 16 GiB of new memory in the form of eight 2-GiB DIMMs.

The memory, from macsales.com, arrived quickly, and seems to be working flawlessly. Memory is a lot cheaper than it was in 2008! Even so, I was hesitant to spend this much on refurbishing an eight-year-old computer. Fortunately I can get at least a little bit back, in the form of a rebate on the old memory. Maybe it will work for another eight years.

My scant time at home has been spent, largely, packing and organizing stuff. A person with several different hobbies accumulates a lot of junk in seven years. And in the last eighteen months of commuting, living away from home half the time, I just haven't been able to do the kind of regular tidying-up that was needed. So my office/studio is truly a mess.

In my quiet evenings in Ann Arbor, when I should be writing, I find myself back on Facebook, or Reddit, reading about politics, and trying to understand just what has happened, and why.

There's so much left to do.

And there's so much, Left, to do.

As Baudelaire said,

There is no such thing as a long piece of work, except one that you dare not start.

On to today's notes about books.

## *Revelation Space* by Alastair Reynolds

This was a re-reading. I plucked this paperback out of a box of paperbacks as I re-packed them into a new, sturdier box better suited for stacking. This was Reynolds' breakthrough book, published in 2000, the first novel set in the Revelation Space universe.

Reynolds writes "dark space opera," involving plenty of grim tropes: viruses that bridge the gap between organic life and electronics; "servitor" machines

with razor-sharp claws that occasionally go berserk and turn human beings into long pig *tartare*; giant, nearly-abandoned spaceships filled with unspeakable technology; uploaded minds, human and otherwise; world-sized, and bigger-than-world-sized, inscrutably alien minds; and vast engineering projects that re-shape space-time itself.

More than a dozen years later, *Revelation Space* feels a little tedious. It has some really wonderful images and scenes, but it moves quite slowly in places, and there are bleak stretches of info-dumps, where a character author-splains the back-story, in detail, instead of conveying this information in a scene, or in dialogue. And there's quite a bit of back-story.

The last third of the book moves along better, and I found myself eager to get to the ending, which is reasonably satisfying, and not as grim as the setup might suggest.

I still recommend *Revelation Space*, although I seem to recall that *Chasm City* was a better read, so it might actually be better to start with that one. I was going to re-read *Chasm City* next but it is packed in a box, and I probably won't dig it out just now. We'll see.

## The Book of Exodus

I finished re-reading Gene Wolfe's *Exodus from the Long Sun*. Because there doesn't seem to be an audiobook version, I re-read a paper copy, which is now packed. *Exodus* wraps up the four-volume Book of the Long Sun series and concludes Patera Silk's whirlwind tour of the Whorl, as he becomes the catalyst which triggers the long-overdue overthrow of the government of Viron and the beginning of the literal Exodus, where the Cargo begins to disembark to Blue and Green, the two planets of the Short Sun Whorl.

By the time we reach this volume we've gotten quite a complicated cast of characters, and many events are happening in parallel. Auk becomes a prophet of Tartaros. Crops are failing and it seems that the Whorl itself may not be able to support life much longer. Just about everything is explained, or nearly so; the story told in the Long Sun books is a little less cryptic, in part because the narrator isn't as unreliable as Severian was (although as Horn is not really in the center of most of the action, it is hinted later that he had to take some liberties in re-creating crucial scenes and conversations based on the best information available).

Still, Wolfe can be difficult, even though this work is not nearly as difficult as *Return to the Whorl*. A number of important events happen off-stage, and Wolfe expects the reader to pick up on critical details. The Long Sun books are not for everyone, although I believe they will appeal to a wider audience than the more challenging and less rewarding Short Sun books, and recommend them for anyone who enjoyed the Book of the New Sun.

## The Space Trilogy

### *Out of the Silent Planet*

As a reader of the Narnia books, I have long been curious about the Space Trilogy by C. S. Lewis. Not curious enough to read them, though. With many dull hours in the car due to my commute, I decided to take a chance on unabridged audiobook versions of *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*.

*Out of the Silent Planet* is a quick read, and forms a really lovely and moving account of a space voyage. It is inspired by the work of H. G. Wells and also by David Lindsay's book *A Voyage to Arcturus*, which I also want to read someday soon.

The plot moves along quickly, getting our hero, a professor named Ransom, caught up in a plot to travel to Malacandra, which we learn is actually Mars, with two companions, Weston and Devine, who have ill intentions both towards Ransom and the planet itself, which they wish to exploit.

The description of Ransom's space voyage is truly poetic and lovely. Lewis conceives of outer space not as a dead void, but as a heavenly space, filled with wonderful, nourishing light, while Earth itself is the dead place, cut off from most of the wavelengths of energy that fill the spaces around it.

In this novel Lewis overturns the tropes of early science fiction, in clever and entertaining ways. Space is a beautiful place; the aliens are not horrific insects or hungry monsters but highly cultured and peaceful beings.

Lewis sets up what initially appears to be a colonization narrative in which Ransom and his companions reveal their sense of superiority to, and disdain for, the natives of Malacandra. But Ransom has "gone native" and developed an understanding and appreciation for the culture, philosophy, and ethics of the different types of natives.

The climax of the novel involves a meeting with a divine being, Oyarsa, the avatar and protector of Malacandra. In this meeting we learn that Earth also has an avatar, a divine being responsible for life on Earth (also known as Thulcandra, the "silent planet"). But the avatar of Thulcandra is evil, or "bent," and so has been imprisoned on Thulcandra to protect the rest of the universe from his malign influence.

I wrote to a friend the following notes about *Out of the Silent Planet*:

I started [reading the book] a year ago but got a bit disgusted with Ransom's condescending, colonialist attitude towards the Hrossa. This time I have gotten further and realized that Lewis has set all this up in order to deconstruct it. As "science fiction" the science is kind of laughable, but I really love the attempt to reconcile a post-Copernican world view with a theological view. The description

of space travel remains gorgeous and moving, much more beautiful and uplifting than real space travel which involves stuffing people into a fart can, irradiating them not with beautiful health-enhancing rays, but with cancer-causing cosmic rays, and spinning them until they throw up. And I'm intrigued by the way that it fits in with Tolkien's theology (Illúvatar and Maleldil, the Ainur and Eldil, etc.)

This is a philosophical novel that also moves quickly, and is beautifully written. It is not quite what I expected, and surprised me repeatedly by surpassing my expectations; in it, Lewis expresses a Christian world view that is larger, more visionary, and more compassionate than I had dared hope it would be.

### ***Perelandra***

This second book is longer, deeper, stranger, and more philosophical than *Out of the Silent Planet*. In this volume Ransom travels to Venus (Perelandra) in a coffin-like spacecraft, where he arrives stark naked and entirely at the mercy of what he might find there. In doing this he is obeying the will of Oyarsa, and is told that he is going to defend Perelandra against an attack by the ruler of Earth (Thulcandra), a Satanic figure.

Ransom discovers an ocean-covered planet, and learns to live on the floating islands, made of vegetation. These are beautifully portrayed as “lands” that are in constant motion. All of Ransom's material needs are met; he eats fruits that provide wonderful flavor and nourishment. But for some time he finds no companionship, and Oyarsa does not speak to him.

But then one day he meets a green woman of human form, Tinidril, the Queen of Perelandra. And here the story begins to take a turn which I did not really appreciate. The novel now becomes a very blunt allegory of the story of the temptation of Eve, from the book of Genesis.

In his introduction to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, J. R. R. Tolkien (another Inkling) writes:

...I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history — true or feigned — with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse applicability with allegory, but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.

Was Tolkien's inclusion of this comment *specifically* a jibe at *Perelandra*?

Weston arrives, in a conventional spaceship, and begins to debate with Ransom. He begins to show signs of demonic possession, and the story gets very dark very quickly. Weston begins to try to convince the Queen of Perelandra to disobey the will of the divine being, Maleldil — specifically, to disobey his orders and live on the “Fixed Land.”



And now, I'm going explain what happens next, from a wholly rationalist/materialist perspective, to put it into one particular light, before considering it again in what I think is its intended light.

### **What Happens Next: a Rationalist/Materialist Perspective**

Ransom, following his compulsion to protect the Queen, argues with Weston. Weston apparently develops symptoms of psychosis. He has a seizure, begins to display flattened affect, and starts to harm animals. He begins to go without sleep, staying up each night to argue with the Queen and to engage in childish, endless harassment of Ransom.

Ransom, driven into psychosis himself by Weston's torment and sleep deprivation, attacks Weston. Weston flees. Ransom, believing he has been ordered by God to kill Weston, chases him across the ocean to the fixed land. Weston begs for his life, in a rambling and disturbing monologue that expresses his utter terror of death. Ransom drowns Weston, nearly drowning himself in the process.

Weston returns from death as a horrifying zombie-like figure, pathetically following Ransom, who ultimately pulverizes his head with a rock, and throws him into a volcano.

Ransom now enters his messianic delusions completely, and experiences a vision of the King and Queen together, who thank and reward him; he listens to a very long sermon, and has a very long vision, and is then sent back to Earth.

That sounds pretty troubling, doesn't it? (And maybe vaguely like the climax of *The Return of the King*?)

### **I Have Questions**

If you believe that those kinds of things literally happen, and that God really might one day ask you to murder a man, violently, multiple times, then you'll enjoy this book without hesitation.

Personally, I have some questions and some doubts.

Did Lewis *intend* to "teach the controversy," if you will, inviting his readers to question the motives and facts behind this story — to see it with a "dual consciousness," from both a materialist/rationalist perspective, and from Ransom's perspective, and to question which one is correct?

Because if he didn't — and even if he did — I don't understand the theological lesson he's attempting to convey here.

I attended Sunday School (in the Presbyterian tradition) for 18 years, and the theology I learned teaches me that the God of the New Testament simply would not ask us to bash in the skulls of our colleagues when they get on our nerves. Are we supposed to understand that Ransom himself is led astray by a false God, not of love but of petty jealousy and vengeance, just as Weston is possessed by a

Satanic being? Are we supposed to pity these two delusional men? And what are we to make of the King and Queen, and by extension Ransom's whole experience? Have both Ransom and Weston been forced to participate in a skirmish between God and Satan, or between two superhuman alien beings engaged in a territorial pissing match, using humans as pawns?

In other words, is this a theological allegory, or a bad episode of *Star Trek*? What does God want with a spaceship, anyway?

While *Perelandra* has some passages of real beauty, I consider it to be an altogether more troubling and disturbing work than *Out of the Silent Planet*, and it leaves me scratching my head, wondering about Lewis himself — his motives, his character, and his theology. I'm not sure that's what he intended.

### ***That Hideous Strength***

Wallace Stanley Sayre is quoted as saying "Academic politics is the most vicious and bitter form of politics, because the stakes are so low."

C. S. Lewis, an Oxford professor, must have sat in on plenty of faculty meetings, and so been moved to write a story about a faculty meeting in which the stakes are much higher — the highest possible — and determine the outcome of the battle of Armageddon.

And so we have an even stranger novel than the allegorical *Perelandra*, in which Ransom returns, but as a minor character, and the struggle is for the soul of a Sociologist, and also for the fate of the planet and all the souls on it, as a sinister scientific institute, called the N.I.C.E., attempts to take over a University town and gain access to a forest reputed to be the resting place of Merlin, while Ransom has assumed the role of Pendragon, the heir of King Arthur, and has surrounded himself with a motley crew of spiritual warriors including a Scotsman and a dancing bear.

Yes, really, it's called the N.I.C.E., which stands for National Institute of Coordinated Experiments. And yes, he's referring to *the* Merlin of Arthurian legend. And no, I could not keep myself from laughing while I typed out that brief plot summary.

This is a pot-boiler for sure. There's a surprising amount of violence, including torture with cigarettes. The Sociologist is framed for murder. There are storms and mystical portents. Ransom lectures us about marriage, employing a number of very dated and heavy-handed tropes about the relations between the sexes. There's a severed human head, kept alive, and Oh, God, I can't go on. I think the pot-boiler has boiled over, and what's left is a horrible smell of burning plot.

Is it supposed to be *satire*? Much of the dialogue and descriptive language is actually quite funny, and so it seems to lean that way, at least at times. But when Lewis tries to get inside his characters heads — for example, when Ransom is imprisoned and begins to dredge up memories of his sad and pathetic

childhood, throwing out the names of characters from his past which will never be mentioned again — or when we read a passage written from the perspective of the *bear* — Dear God, I am tempted to pitch my iPad out the car window. Why did Lewis think that these passages would improve the book? They drag down the book, which would have been greatly improved if an aggressive editor had been able to successfully fight for the leaner story buried inside this grotesquely over-elaborated one. It's a shame, because some buried moments of language and philosophy in the text are, in fact, quite striking and beautiful.

*That Hideous Strength* is much longer than either of the first two books of the Space Trilogy, and I'm honestly not sure that I'll be able to finish it. While I can see that it was an *influential* book, and it certainly is an *interesting* work, I don't find it to be a *good* work.

I think this may be in part because, as original as it was at the time, it has been widely imitated. And so when I read it, I may not be experiencing it as it was experienced at the time, but as it reads now in the shadow of seventy years of pulp fiction that recycles the same tropes, which once were not quite so tired. But contemporary critics were not very kind to it either; Orwell wrote:

Much is made of the fact that the scientists are actually in touch with evil spirits, although this fact is known only to the inmost circle. Mr. Lewis appears to believe in the existence of such spirits, and of benevolent ones as well. He is entitled to his beliefs, but they weaken his story, not only because they offend the average reader's sense of probability but because in effect they decide the issue in advance. When one is told that God and the Devil are in conflict one always knows which side is going to win.

His review is quite generous to the book, but his conclusion is faint praise indeed:

However, by the standard of the novels appearing nowadays this is a book worth reading.

By the standards of the novels appearing *nowadays*, I would advise you not to bother, unless you, like me, are fascinated by train wrecks, and find writing which fails laughably at its own muddled aims to be worth studying, as an example of how *not* to write a novel.

## On the Pile

I keep getting iTunes gift cards, since I have a credit card that gives me these things periodically as rewards for my bad spending habits. I have just about paid off this card, and will shortly cancel it\*, but meanwhile I felt the need to read some classics, and I still have to do a lot of driving, so I used my iTunes gift cards to purchase unabridged audiobook versions of *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House*, both by Charles Dickens.

*\*Author's retrospective note, added while editing this text in January of 2022: I finally canceled this card last week. Things didn't quite go as planned between 2016 and 2022. If you have credit cards with high interest rates, I urge you to save yourselves future pain and kill them off as soon as you can. Don't keep any accounts with high interest rates open, even to use in an emergency, because financial emergencies are likely these days even if you do everything right, and any debt incurred with a high interest rate will rapidly pile future pain on top of current pain. I realize if your credit rating is not high, this may be impossible, but please do your best to think and act strategically about interest rates, as I should have done back in 2016. Of course you know this already, just like I knew it in 2016, but if you haven't already put this knowledge into practice as best you can, please learn from my mistakes and do so.*

These audiobooks are long; *Great Expectations*, a relatively short novel as Dickens novels go, clocks in at over 16 hours. *Bleak House* clocks in at over 32 hours. Both versions are read by Peter Batchelor. I've only listened to the first hour or so of *Great Expectations*, but I'm enjoying it so far; Batchelor does a nice job with voices; it's not a full-cast drama, but he differentiates the voices of the characters just enough. I especially like his portrayal of the blacksmith Joe.

Here I have to admit to not having read as much Dickens as I should have. I read *A Tale of Two Cities* at one point in high school, and got through it, but I can't say that I enjoyed it that much.

A few years ago I started to read *Bleak House*, and got a few hundred pages in; I laughed out loud at the characters and dialogue, but ultimately I was distracted by shinier objects and faster-moving stories.

Dickens was a prolific and incredibly gifted writer, especially as a caricaturist, and while I deeply admire his style and ability with characters and dialogue, his writing can be off-putting to a contemporary reader, because is not really modern in a few important senses.

First, his stories are often quite sentimental or "corny," although so far in *Great Expectations* I feel that he's so far admirably avoiding the quicksand of sentimentality (but skirting it).

Second, he published his works episodically, and so his works are long and wordy; he was paid by the word, and he expected the reader to take breaks (*Great Expectations* was published in 35 weekly installments, over the course of just over eight months, from December 1st, 1860 to August 3rd, 1861; *Bleak House* was published in 19 monthly installments, and so would have taken the contemporary reader over a year and a half to complete).

Ideally, then, his works would be best read as they were read by his contemporary audiences — episodically, with a week or a month between episodes. The chapters as published in modern editions do not match the original divisions into episodes, but one could break the story when one chose. The audiobook format allows me to experience a chunk of the story over the course of a two-hour drive, and then

set it aside until the next drive (unless I can't wait). I'll see how that goes.

Onward to December!

## Scorecard

Completed since last time:

- *Revelation Space* by Alastair Reynolds
- *A Hat Full of Sky* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime story reading)
- *Exodus from the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (in print form)
- *Out of the Silent Planet* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)
- *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)

In progress:

- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)
- *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)
- *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle (bedtime story reading)
- *The Wintersmith* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime story reading)
- *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments* by Ali Almosawi and Alejandro Giraldo (bedtime story reading)

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