

withholding allowances going forward, setting it to the number our H&R Block rep recommended. Because our big tax-relevant expenses are very much up in the air this year, it's largely a stab in the dark.

It also means my take-home pay will go down. But I expect to get some kind of raise shortly, as part of the regular annual review process for my job. Will the raise increase my take-home more than the withholding allowance adjustment decreases it? I dunno. We'll see.

We've had a number of other big bills recently. We were on the energy budget plan at our new house. The budget plan monthly payment that we set up last February was set by DTE Energy Company based on the previous year's expenses. Well, in 2016 the previous owner was, I believe, not actually living in the home for most of the year. During that time the heat was on, but set low, and there wasn't much electricity usage or extra gas used for running the water heater. So I expected that we'd probably exceed the budget plan amount, and we did.

When the "settle-up" bill arrived, we had an option of paying a lump sum of \$558.78 by March 14th, or an option to spread our balance over the next 12 months. The first option would result in changing our budget plan amount from \$182 to \$210.00. The second would raise it to \$256.00.

Looking at the numbers more closely, if we subtract the current budget plan amount, \$182, from the "lump sum" settle up bill amount for March, \$558.78, this suggests that we actually exceeded the total budget plan charges for the last year by \$376.78. The "spread the balance over 12 months" option would avoid a lump sum, but it would result in paying an extra \$552 over the next 12 months ($\$256.00 - \210.00 , or $\$46.00$, times 12 months = $\$552.00$).

DTE Usury

That looks to me like it would involve paying \$175.22 in interest for a loan of \$376.78. That's an effective interest rate of something like 46.5%. (I'm not sure exactly how they account for it.) That's usurious. By all that is right and holy, that kind of APR ought to be forbidden by law. And I just want to make clear: agreeing to this loan is the *default* option, what they will do if you just let them continue to process payments without intervening.

Clearly, if someone is in my shoes and has exceeded their budget plan, and *can* pay the lump sum, said person absolutely *should* pay the lump sum. They don't make it easy, though. There's a little table in the e-mailed "DTE Energy Notice - BudgetWise Billing® Settlement" that shows the two options. Under "option 2" in the table, there's a button that says "pay now." This button just takes you to the regular payment page in your online account. The online billing system does not show any way to pay the lump sum at all; it shows only the \$182.00 bill.

So I had to call them, and wait on hold, but I paid the lump sum. Now we'll

see if they actually set the budget plan amount to \$210.00 with the next billing cycle.

Anyway. (Did I already say “Anyway?”)

The Pottscast

We managed to get the Pottscast out yesterday, and we even had a couple of guests! My son Joshua (age 9) got on the microphone to give a book report, and our friend Julie joined us remotely using Google Hangouts. The audio quality was pretty decent, although it took a while to get her audio working. I could connect using my laptop, and it worked fine, as in our previous testing, but when she was connected, we could not hear her. What finally worked was literally just signing out of the group, reloading the web page, and signing back in again. Then suddenly we could hear her. As a computer guy I joke about how idiotic it is to ask people “have you tried turning it off and back on again?” But this does really work sometimes. It’s unfortunate that if it does work, you generally don’t learn anything about what the problem was or how to avoid it in the future.

We managed to get to Mass nearly on time. And we went out for our weekly meal out at Maiz Mexican Cantina. They were really not on their game last night, though. It took something like 45 minutes before the kid’s meals arrived, and another 15 before I got my tacos. They just weren’t very good this time: soggy and dried out. Also, they did refill our chips while we waited, but apparently they ran out of salsa.

A Mexican restaurant. Ran. Out. Of. Salsa.

***The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 14: “Fire and Water”**

We got home, I went downstairs, and finished up the last half-hour or so of work on the podcast. The kids were supposed to finish cleaning up the kitchen, and get ready for bed. And apparently *they actually did!* So when I came upstairs, there actually was time to read a chapter of *The Hobbit* for a bedtime story. I read them chapter 14, “Fire and Water.” This chapter is a little strange, because it jumps back in time a couple of days, and we leave Bilbo and the party of dwarves entirely to go find out what has happened in Esgaroth (Lake-town). It’s all “telling,” without much “showing.” So it’s really a bit unsatisfying. We don’t get much sense of Bard as a character, or the Master as a character. There’s no real dialogue, just places where characters expound to each other on what is going on:

“Look!” said one. “The lights again! Last night the watchmen saw them start and fade from midnight until dawn. Something is happening up there.”

“Perhaps the King under the Mountain is forging gold,” said another. “It is long since he went North. It is time the songs began to prove themselves again.”

“Which king?” said another with a grim voice. “As like as not it is the marauding fire of the Dragon, the only king under the Mountain we have ever known.”

“You are always foreboding gloomy things!” said the others. “Anything from floods to poisoned fish. Think of something cheerful!”

We learn that the gloomy guy with the “grim voice” is Bard. In this chapter he almost seems to have more to say to his black arrow than to people. When the dragon falls,

A vast steam leaped up, white in the sudden dark under the moon. There was a hiss, a gushing whirl, and then silence. And that was the end of Smaug and Esgaroth, but not of Bard.

Note that we’re *told* that Bard survived, but we aren’t *shown*. Although a bit later he does announce to the other townspeople that he has survived, in that same formal way:

“Bard is not lost!” he cried. “He dived from Esgaroth, when the enemy was slain. I am Bard, of the line of Girion; I am the slayer of the dragon!”

Much of the rest of this chapter involves politics and diplomacy, and more “expounding.” In my opinion the style of this chapter really takes some of the wind out of the story’s sails, especially when you consider that *The Hobbit* is mostly a children’s book and mostly centers around Bilbo and the dwarves. I had to read my children the Master’s speech:

“I am the last man to undervalue Bard the Bowman,” said the Master warily (for Bard now stood close beside him). “He has tonight earned an eminent place in the roll of the benefactors of our town; and he is worthy of many imperishable songs. But, why O People?” — and here the Master rose to his feet and spoke very loud and clear — “Why do I get all your blame? For what fault am I to be deposed? Who aroused the dragon from his slumber, I might ask? Who obtained of us rich gifts and ample help, and led us to believe that old songs could come true? Who played on our soft hearts and our pleasant fancies? What sort of gold have they sent down the river to reward us? Dragon-fire and ruin! From whom should we claim the recompense of our damage, and aid for our widows and orphans?”

Reading this, one might even start to feel that some of Peter Jackson’s bigger deviations from the text are justifiable. I really don’t like the testicle-eating version of the Master of Laketown that Jackson and Stephen Fry created (I can imagine Fry saying “OK, I’ll do it, but only if I get to eat balls.”) I don’t really like the slimy assistant Jackson invented, Alfrid Lickspittle, when the book only mentions an unnamed counselor. But it just would not have worked to adapt this chapter literally, so at least some of the development of Bard and the

creation of drama around his killing of Smaug was justifiable, even if most of what happens in Laketown is not.

And as you might imagine, the younger children were pretty much out cold by the end of this chapter. But we'll soon be in the middle of The Battle of the Five Armies, and I expect that will make the story more interesting for them.

Tuesday

Dinner was some leftover Costco pork tenderloin baked together with some frozen meatballs from GFS, and sauteed greens.

After dinner, Grace and I had a brief money meeting and talked about some pending bills. She's going to make some calls about a medical bill for Elanor that was only partially covered by insurance, to see if maybe our supplemental insurance can help with it. We plotted out expenses for the next few weeks in our spreadsheet, and determined a budget for the garden project. It's not much. I was hoping to allocate a thousand dollars, so we could buy some trees and get some real work done on raised hügelkultur beds, but what's actually left in the budget is \$164.02. Grace will do something great with that, but I really wish it could be more.

***d'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire**

Last night's story was from *d'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths*. This is the last story in the book before Ragnarök, about the punishment of Loki. This book has a sort of weakness, which is the post-Ragnarök coda called "A New World." In the coda, the Norse gods and myths are laid to rest as an aberration, something that happened before the birth of Christ and before Christianity came and put the world into order. It's a strange cop-out, it seems to me, to write in modern language the ancient stories of Scandinavia, and then undermine them in the same volume. I guess this sort of "contextualization" was *de rigueur* in the days when the D'Aulaires were writing their books, but I find it distressing that preserving and sharing the Norse myths required a dose of Christian apologetics at the end. It's like being fed a delicious and satisfying meal, only to be told afterwards that the meal was actually poisonous, and so you must have an emetic for dessert, lest it do lasting harm.

I wound up accidentally leaving my phone at work last night, which somehow led to me sleeping better and waking up earlier (go figure). Grace helped me get out this morning by frying me some eggs and greens and making coffee so I could get some caffeine down my neck. It was snowing lightly this morning. As usual traffic on I-94 was briefly slowed to near-immobilization, but also as usual, once past State Street and once past about 9:05 a.m., it opened up again and I clocked in at 9:22. I just have not been able to figure out a reliable strategy for getting in by 9:00 that doesn't involve sitting in traffic for 45 to 50 minutes instead of 20 to 25.

Wednesday

Well, I tried to arrange to take Veronica to a movie about teenagers using social media. It was at Skyline high school and started at 6:30 p.m. I e-mailed Grace early in the day, just a link to the event page with the subject “possible movie for Veronica?” and she wrote back “sure.” But we didn’t actually put a plan together for how we were going to get her there. Later in the afternoon I tried to call home a couple of times, and no one answered. So I left work, early, about 5:30. Unfortunately at 5:30 p.m., traffic was such that it took me 40 minutes to get home, and I didn’t get home until 6:10.

On the way I called Grace, and it turned out she was in Saline with Joshua at choir practice. So it did not seem feasible to take Veronica and leave the rest of them without adult supervision. Even in the best case scenario, we would have been quite late to the movie. And there was another complication coming on — it was beginning to snow heavily, alternating with rain, and there was a winter weather advisory. So I had to give up that plan.

Our new location, south of downtown Ypsilanti in Pittsfield township, is very frustrating in some ways. It’s twenty minutes from my office, and twenty minutes back home, in theory. In practice if I’m trying to travel between the hours of about 7:30 to 9:00 a.m. or 5:00 to 7:30 p.m., it’s a 40 to 60 minute drive. So I’m always trying to figure out optimal times to travel, to avoid spending so much time crawling along in heavy traffic. Travel around the Ann Arbor area is looking more and more like how I remember travel around the Los Angeles area back in 1988. This was not what I wanted and hoped to move for.

When Grace got back with Joshua he was having a meltdown and saying that he wanted to quit choir. We had the Costco chicken pot pie for dinner and listened to Pippin and Benjamin argue about eating it. So it was an evening with an awful lot of loud complaining.

The Web of Fear (1968 Doctor Who Serial Fan Edit)

After dinner we watched the fan edit of the *Doctor Who* serial *The Web of Fear*. This serial is one of the stories that was almost entirely missing until recently. Only the first of the six episodes was in the BBC archives. But in 2013 the BBC recovered most of the missing episodes, so now only the third is missing. *The Web of Fear* is set in 1975, about 40 years after the events of *The Abominable Snowmen*, another mostly-missing serial (only the second of its six episodes is held in the BBC archives).

In most cases you don’t have to watch *Doctor Who* serials in order, since the story arcs between serials and seasons aren’t usually very important. But in this case, *The Web of Fear* might make a little more sense if you know what happened in *The Abominable Snowmen*. Not much more sense, mind you, but a little more.

Unfortunately there’s not much you can watch, except for one episode and

some short clips released on the *Doctor Who: Lost in Time — The Patrick Troughton Years 1966-1969* set). There's no animated reconstruction, or even a reconstruction with stills. There is an audio-only release, and an audio-only fan edit, and I'll probably listen to that soon to try to get a sense of the story.

Anyway, even cut into shape by the fan editor, *The Web of Fear* is a bit of a sluggish mess.

There's a principle, often cited, called Occam's razor. It can be formulated in different ways, but one way is "don't create more things than are needed to solve the problem."

The Web of Fear creates *far* more things than are needed to tell this story, and the story suffers for it.

We have a set of monsters, the abominable snowmen, which are actually robots. Then there is some kind of malignant fungus, which seems to be infecting the London Underground. The snowmen/robots also create webs, like spiderwebs, using guns that spray the webs. Is the fungus the same thing as the webs? It's not really clear.

Somehow behind the snowmen is a Big Bad, the Great Intelligence. The webs seem to kill people who touch them. The fungus seems to be spreading rapidly and killing people, and sometimes glowing. The snowmen are stomping around slowly and killing people, and the Great Intelligence is somehow connected to all of this, but it's never really clear what is happening and why.

There are an excess number of *devices*, too. The snowmen are apparently controlled by "control spheres." The control spheres can apparently be themselves controlled by little rectangular boxes. The snowmen are also somehow lured or attracted by a number of small yeti figurines, which for some reason are in the pockets of several characters. Then there's a glass pyramid, which looks like it came right out of the "pyramid power" craze of the 1970s, which somehow acts as a focal point for the Great Intelligence. And a helmet, for hooking The Doctor's brain up to the Great Intelligence, because that makes sense.

Anyway, there are all these things; too many things. And the Doctor has to mess with all of these things. They're like cigarettes, though; mostly they just seem to be there to give him something to do with his hands while he's talking. The capabilities of each are unclear. In an opening sequence, the control spheres are shown to float through the air and smash through a window. But later the best they can do is roll around on the floor in response to voice commands. That provides a little amusement, but not much clarity.

There are also too many characters. This is the first serial with Nicholas Courtney as *Colonel* (not yet *Brigadier General*) Lethbridge-Stewart, and he's very charismatic and fun to watch. But there are a bunch of other soldiers, including one that seems to have gotten lost from a different unit, and a reporter, who wanders in and out of the show without much to do. And the companions don't have all that much to do, either, except for a few moments when Frazier

Hines as Jamie gets to interact with the yeti. Deborah Watling as Victoria seems to be there mostly to scream and look frightened; early in the story The Doctor and the two companions are captured because Victoria can't help screaming when she walks into a cobweb.

The Doctor, the companions, the soldiers, and the snowmen spend most of the serial tromping around in subway tunnels. They do so much of this that it's relief when there's an aboveground battle sequence. Apparently the snowmen have taken over London, but we don't get a lot of details. The soldiers keep trying to blow up the snowmen in the tunnels, but the snowmen spray the explosives with their web shooters, and this apparently contains the explosions so that they can do no damage.

Even the edited serial becomes a little tedious to watch. There are some cool visuals now and then, including some shots of what appears to be stop-motion animation, when the fungus is taking over rooms or coming down the corridor. But these sequences look a bit like they belong in a different story, a horror movie like *The Blob*.

The snowmen, aboveground, are a bit creepy, especially the way they move in groups. But not much interesting happens until we get close to the end of the serial, and then there's a somewhat abrupt and anti-climactic encounter with the Great Intelligence, who is not destroyed. The Great Intelligence then reappears, eight regenerations of The Doctor and 44 real-world years later, in the Eleventh Doctor (Matt Smith) episode *The Snowmen*, when he confronts The Doctor in the London of 1892.

If you'd like to read a detailed plot summary, and I can't really recommend that you do so, you can find one on the TARDIS data core page here.

This serial has a few interesting moments, but they are few and far between. Remember that there is no footage from episode 3, and that footage might have explained a few things. Apparently episode 3 contained the scenes where Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart is actually introduced, and without that footage we just see him start appearing in scenes, and I don't think we ever learn his name. The missing episode was not reconstructed for DVD release using animation; the DVD release uses stills. So the fan editor, wisely in my opinion, did not want to use any of the audio with stills.

Even lacking footage, and even accelerated by the fan editor, this serial still feels pretty slow. You can find the fan editor's commentary along with the fan edit here. He refers to the Big Bad in this serial as the "Great Lack of Intelligence," and I certainly can't disagree with him there. He also claims:

This was the first real time the show had made the threat of an alien menace seem real by having it take place somewhere that the bulk of the audience were familiar with and probably used every day, unlike flying which they would probably have done once a year, if at all. By setting the story in the London Underground, *Doctor Who* made

its first foray into making the familiar scary. Things aren't what they seem. That's a simple yet brilliant idea with which to scare children, the thing that they think is nice and looks nice is actually something horrible in disguise... That's why *The Web of Fear* was so well remembered and the reason why it was so well remembered is that this is where *Doctor Who* as we know it really started.

That sounds good, but for a dissenting opinion on the importance of this serial, consider the AV Club review here. Christopher Bahn writes:

The Enemy Of The World, which I wrote about last time, is Second Doctor-era *Doctor Who* at its least formulaic, with a terrific dual performance by Patrick Troughton... *The Web Of Fear*, on the other hand, is totally representative of its age. Which means that while there's a lot of memorable scares and thrills, it's also a more superficial, straightforward sci-fi/horror thriller where the Doctor fights monsters alongside a group of people trapped with him in a base under siege. In fact, given the fizzle of the ending, it may even offer less than it appears to on the surface.

I agree with that, except for the part where he claims that the serial offers "a lot of memorable scares and thrills." But I certainly enjoyed reading Bahn's description of the snowmen:

They're mechanical Bigfoots in the service of an evil cloud of fog, armed with hot glue guns and hanging around in train stations, and they look like very angry Cookie Monsters.

True. Whether you find watching angry Cookie Monsters entertaining, or just stupid, probably determines whether you will find watching *The Web of Fear* bearable, or not. Personally, I thought it was not very good compared to some of the other fan edits I've watched and written about recently, especially *The Power of the Daleks* and *The Enemy of the World*.

It's funny, but the parts that are memorable to me are the parts that look like they are firmly part of an earlier school of filmmaking: the *noir* lighting in certain scenes, and the stop-motion animation, that looks almost like something out of a horror movie from the silent era, such as *Nosferatu* (from 1922). *The Web of Fear* is only fifty years old, but the elements of the serial that seem timeless and *good* feel much older, while the newer elements feel dated.

UPDATE: I hypothesized above that maybe listening to the old *The Abominable Snowmen* serial would help clarify some of the details of *The Web of Fear*. I listened to it. We've got the concept of the pyramid, and the control spheres, and the robotic yetis that need to have a control sphere stuck in their chest cavities to operate. Somehow the pyramid (channeling the Great Intelligence) controls the control spheres. The pyramid also can glow and spew out some kind of goo, which seems to be the fungus or web that we see in *The Web of Fear*, and that somehow is the way the Great Intelligence is invading. With goo. In

other words, there's not actually much more clarity to be found.

Thursday

It was snowing heavily again last night when I drove home. I stopped off at Nicola's Books and ordered a Zombie-themed kid's book Joshua. I was not feeling very energetic last night. I might have been fighting a virus. My hands and feet were freezing cold. I took a brief nap when I got home. Grace was planning to make a more elaborate meal, but I asked her to just make some soup, so she threw together some broth and leftovers and pasta to make a chicken soup. We didn't watch a movie, and I didn't read the kids a bedtime story. In fact, I didn't do much more of anything but ate some bowls of soup and go to bed early. I was feeling a little bit better this morning, although my joints are a little bit stiff and sore.

Since installing open-source firmware on our Netgear router, the WiFi connection to our devices keeps going down. Last night my iPad was not able to get online. I fixed this by turning the router off and back on again. It sounds like I might need to put the factory firmware back onto the router, which is frustrating because the factory firmware doesn't allow me to filter traffic using MAC addresses. So I might have to come up with a different approach.

My hands and feet are freezing cold again today. I just put on a fleece jacket. I honestly can't quite tell if it is cold because the heating system at work isn't keeping up with the temperature changes outside, or because I'm sick. No one else is complaining of the cold in here so it might be me.

David Feldman: "Food, sex, exercise, I want to do my comedy, I want to write, I want my books, I want my friends. And I want peace and quiet."

Friday

I wasn't feeling great again last night. I stayed late at work because there's a crunch going on to get prototypes finished for a trade show. I got home and had some soup, and then didn't really want anything to eat but soup, so ate some more soup, and then pretty much did nothing except lie in bed and wait for everyone else to go to bed. I'm a little more energetic today so maybe this evening will be better.

At work today I spent the day working with my co-worker Patrick to try to get a new prototype finished. There are, it turned out, multiple hardware issues, which made our initial optimism a little premature.

I got paid, but since I adjusted my state tax withholding, my paycheck is a bit lower. So that's no fun. Our budget will be tight this week and I'm going to try to make my run to Costco this evening a minimalist one.

My co-workers are still working on the prototype unit, and if they get the hardware going, I might need to come in tomorrow to install firmware, or debug

firmware, or customize firmware. So we'll see how that goes.

I proposed to Grace that maybe we could take the kids to see *A Wrinkle in Time*, but perhaps on Sunday after Mass, when we would normally go out for our weekly dinner out. This would reinforce the idea that we can't do both a dinner out and a movie for everyone. The movie for everyone will actually cost more than dinner out for everyone at Maiz Mexican Cantina. I'm also happy to give Maiz another week to get their food up to snuff after last week, when it was really not great or even good.

Saturday

Last night after I left work it was Costco and then home. I managed to go somewhat lighter on the budget than usual, even though we needed a big box of baby wipes.

I also threw in a boxed set of books, *The Wrinkle in Time Boxed Set* from Scholastic. This includes five books, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, *Many Waters*, and *An Acceptable Time*. There's also a little paperback journal. This set at Costco was only \$15, which seemed like a pretty good deal, given that the list price is \$34.95. Of these books, I'm certain that I've read the first three. Of course I've read *A Wrinkle in Time* more than once. A few years back, I read it to the kids, but it's time to read it to them again, since some of the younger ones don't remember it. I know I've read *A Wind in the Door* and *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, and possibly more than once. I'm not sure about *Many Waters*.

I had an old copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a cheap Scholastic paperback which I probably bought via the Scholastic book club through school about 40 years ago. It had my name printed in it in my old grade-school printing. I had given it to Veronica. At some point, we had a fight about something — I don't even remember what. It may have been about the way she left her books lying upside-down on the floor. I wound up tearing the book in half in front of her. That was a shameful little tantrum on my part. Apparently she actually loved having a book that her dad had read back at her age, even though she didn't take care of it. So I owe her an inscribed copy. This boxed set will be for any of the kids to read, but I will pick up a fresh copy of the new graphic novel for her and inscribe it. I will take at least some of them to see the new movie, probably tomorrow.

The Queen of Air and Darkness by T. H. White

This morning I finished reading *The Queen of Air and Darkness*. I'm counting it as a separate book even though it is part of *The Once and Future King* (it was originally published as a separate novel called *The Witch in the Wood*). That book had a different version of the text, and I'd love to read it, but it is long out of print and scarce. It's sort of a separate book in the same way that *The Lord of the Rings* is one novel made up of six books in three volumes, and are

sometimes published as one volume, or as six volumes. *The Queen of Air and Darkness* is not really much of a stand-alone novel, but more of a set of episodes from the over-arching story of Arthur and, just barely introduced in the end of this book as a child, Lancelot.

The Queen of Air and Darkness mixes comic episodes with grim battle sequences and it doesn't have a proper arc in and of itself. The story of Sir Palomides and Sir Grummore dressing up in a Questing Beast costume is hilarious and, to an adult reader, pretty funny given what has been suggested about the author's homosexuality and penchant for sadomasochism.

"That was a splendid burst, Palomides," exclaimed the Knight of the Forest Sauvage.

"A noble gallop."

"Did you notice how I was bayin' all the time?"

"I could not fail to notice it, Sir Grummore."

"Well, well, I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much."

They panted with triumph, standing amid their monster.

"I say, Palomides, look at me swishin' my tail!"

"Charming, Sir Grummore. Look at me winking one of my eyes."

"No, no, Palomides. You look at my tail. You ought not to miss it, really."

"Well, if I look at you swishing, you ought to look at me winking. That is only fair."

"But I can't see anythin' from inside."

"As for that, Sir Grummore, yours truly can't see so far round as the anal appendage."

"Now, then, we will have one last go. I shall swish my tail round and round all the time, and bay like mad. It will be a frightful spectacle."

"And yours truly will continuously wink one optic or the other."

"Could we put a bit of a bound into the gallop, Palomides, every now and then, do you think? You know, a kind of prance?"

"The prance could more naturally be effected by the back end, solo."

"You mean I could do it alone?"

"Effectually."

"Well, I must say that is uncommonly decent of you, Palomides, to let me do the prancin'."

"Yours truly trusts that a modicum of caution will be exercised in the prance, to prevent delivery of uncomfortable blows to the posterior of the forequarters?"

"Just as you say, Palomides."

"Boot and saddle, Sir Grummore."

"Tally-ho, Sir Palomides."

"Tantivvy, tantivvy, tantivvy, a-questing we will go!"

Panting, baying, prancing, winking, swishing, and delivering uncomfortable blows to the posterior. OK, then!

But in parts, the story is much darker. Morgause's sons kill the unicorn:

Agravaine came to the unicorn, and began jabbing his spear into its quarters, into its slim belly, into its ribs. He squealed as he jabbed, and the unicorn looked to Meg in anguish. It leaped and moved suddenly, still looking at her reproachfully, and Meg took its horn in one hand. She seemed entranced, unable to help it. The unicorn did not seem able to move from the soft grip of her hand on its horn. The blood, caused by Agravaine's spear, spurted out upon the blue-white coat of hair. Gareth began running, with Gawaine close after him. Gaheris came last, stupid and not knowing what to do.

White does not shy away from revealing that the process of killing a beautiful animal is not glamorous:

At the gralloch, the three remaining huntsmen were in trouble. They had begun to slit at the skin of the belly, but they did not know how to do it properly and so they had perforated the intestines. Everything had begun to be horrible, and the once beautiful animal was spoiled and repulsive. All three of them loved the unicorn in their various ways, Agravaine in the most twisted one, and, in proportion as they became responsible for spoiling its beauty, so they began to hate it for their guilt. Gawaine particularly began to hate the body. He hated it for being dead, for having been beautiful, for making him feel a beast. He had loved it and helped to trap it, so now there was nothing to be done except to vent his shame and hatred of himself upon the corpse. He hacked and cut and felt like crying too.

The Once and Future King is beloved, still. There is truth in this fantasy; far more than I find in most non-fiction.

***The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 15: "The Gathering of the Clouds"**

Last night our chapter from *The Hobbit* was chapter 15, "The Gathering of the Clouds." This chapter tells of the dwarves returning to the halls of the Lonely Mountain, and fortifying them. The films portray this portion of the story in a way that is fairly close to the book, although they omit the talking raven. I have to admit, I had forgotten about Roäc. This gives me an opportunity to use a fun character voice. This bit of the fantastic doesn't bother me as much as making the secret door into the mountain magical.

What we discussed last night is that Bard's demands to Thorin really are quite reasonable; he has a historic claim on part of the wealth under the mountain, as it was looted from the city of Dale. And the men of Lake-town really are in dire need, and did offer the part of dwarves (and one hobbit) hospitality

and aid. Their request for aid, especially given that their town on the lake has been destroyed and winter is coming, does not seem unreasonable. They are asking for a traditional form of justice, what we might call today “restorative justice.” Thorin is not open to this, though, and we are told in no uncertain terms that the dragon-sickness is on him. In the movies we are shown this as a literal madness, complete with hallucinations that he is drowning in gold. The book does not explicitly mention the Elvenking’s demands for the “white jewels” which were mentioned in an earlier chapter at this stage; he does not have a speech.

In the Tor re-read of this chapter, by Kate Nepveu, she comments that:

Bard’s statements to Thorin, by the way, are kind of a marvel for how such reasonable content can be phrased so as to immediately remove all hope of reasonable discussion.

And after quoting Bard’s speech, writes:

He starts off comparing Thorin to a robber, rather than assuming he has good reason for his actions. He starts with a very broad-sounding claim to the hoard before moving to the narrower ones. And he uses negative phrasing (“Is that not a matter that concerns you?”, “Is not that a matter of which we may speak?”, “whether you have no thought for the sorrow and misery”) which conveys, intentionally or not, an attempt to shame Thorin into acting—which, speaking as someone with an unfortunate surfeit of pride that she sometimes struggles to keep from dictating her actions, is guaran-fucking-teed to put up all the hackles on a proud person’s back. In short: his opening speech was never going to be a success, but this rhetoric really did not help.

It’s a good point. Nepveu also mentions that she “...[doesn’t] personally agree that the Elves have a just claim to the treasure...” and I tend to agree with her, except she may be overlooking some clues in the book:

In ancient days they had had wars with some of the dwarves, whom they accused of stealing their treasure. It is only fair to say that the dwarves gave a different account, and said that they only took what was their due, for the elf-king had bargained with them to shape his raw gold and silver, and had afterwards refused to give them their pay.

The book also mentions “white gems” as motivating the elves:

If the elf-king had a weakness it was for treasure, especially for silver and white gems; and though his hoard was rich, he was ever eager for more, since he had not yet as great a treasure as other elf-lords of old.

This does not fit well into the later continuity of *The Lord of the Rings*, but seems

to be an out-take from *The Silmarillion*. In the extended version of the movie there are the “white gems of Lasgalen,” a necklace commissioned by Thrainduil for his now-dead wife, an invention that seems to be designed to differentiate these relatively recent and modest gems from the Silmarils, while still honoring the idea that there was a commission, and a dispute about payment. See this discussion.

Anyway. The different interested parties are clearly not getting along, and Bard’s speech, and Thorin’s response, don’t lead to negotiations. And so we have the start of a siege.

It’s a bit odd that the dwarves are portrayed throughout most of the book as elderly and weak, with long beards, except for the youngest ones, who still have beards. But now we’re expected to believe that, even given what they’ve been through recently, including a lot of belt-tightening, they have the strength to build barricades and re-route a river.

I commented to Grace that the polite mentions of how the halls and the treasure still “stink of dragon” suggest that the dragon actually spent decades pissing on the treasure. So take a moment with me to imagine that. It’s like the world’s biggest cat-box in the halls of the King Under the Mountain.

By the way, how *does* a dragon loot a city and carry all the extremely heavy gold and bejeweled objects back to his lair? In his jaws? With his claws? I’m just asking.

In the Office

I am back in the office today (Saturday afternoon). There were some difficulties getting one of the new devices working, so I’m in today to build a version of the firmware that will allow it to be demonstrated, even with functionality missing. So I’m not sure what we’re going to be able to get done today — whether we can record something for the podcast, or not. As usual I’m doing what I can.

***A Wrinkle In Time* (2018 Film)**

I wound up working until about 6:00 p.m. The demo firmware is working, on test hardware, and should be ready to put on the new hardware on Monday, assuming the production staff can get it reassembled and working well enough to program. I’m not going to be left with much time to test and debug on the actual hardware it needs to run on, but there’s a good chance it will work without issues.

I took four of the kids to see *A Wrinkle in Time*. They had fun. The movie is an... *interesting*... adaption. It’s a bit of a mess. In fact it is really pretty puzzling as to how all these very different things managed to go wrong with it, all in the same movie.

It has the feel of too many script doctors and too much punch-up. It’s got that

Disney thing going on where to empower the kids they have to demean and weaken the parents. Oprah changes outfits for every scene she's in, and at some point that becomes distracting.

The visual tone is all over the place, it seems like they must have had a dozen different art directors, and the level of realism is all over the place, too. Sometimes it seems like the movie is doing an artsy thing with sort of a black-box theater effect, where Meg is traveling through space and she's flying through blown strips of cloth, glitter, and confetti, like you might see in a high school theater production. But then in other scenes they're animating planets and galaxies. I'm left scratching my head wondering if the extreme inconsistency was supposed to mean something, or they ran out of budget. Disney has literally all the money in the world so "ran out of budget" seems unlikely, so mostly I'm just scratching my head.

They also seemed to know they had a mess on their hands, so the movie actually opens with the director introducing herself and showing some "making of" footage with group shots of all the production crew, as if to say "hey, these are all nice folks and they worked really hard for you, so go easy on them, okay?"

I'm definitely not the target audience for this film, but I feel like I could have been, since I love the original novel, along with lots of people. The movie isn't a complete failure, and it has some decent emotional moments. The cast is mostly pretty good. But it has a very uneven approach to the source material; sometimes it adapts the big emotional moments unchanged, and sometimes it just throws in random shit that is nowhere to be found in the book, and has no explanation.

If you're going to go see the movie, set your expectations low, and I'd be curious to hear your thoughts about it.

Media Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chapter 14: "Fire and Water" and Chapter 15: "The Gathering of the Clouds"
- *d'Aulaire's Book of Norse Myths* by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire
- *The Web of Fear* (1968 *Doctor Who* serial fan edit)
- *The Queen of Air and Darkness* (book 2 of *The Once and Future King*) by T. H. White
- *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018 film)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, March 10th, 2018

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