

Castles Burning

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05 Jan 2020

Don't let it bring you down
It's only castles burning,
Just find someone who's turning
And you will come around.

Neil Young, "Don't Let It Bring You Down"

Feedback

Last week I wrote:

I think my great-grandfather, my mother's father's father, may have been Jewish, but I have almost no documentation on him.

That relative was Dennis Armstrong. One of my relatives, who knows a bit more about that side of the family than I do, told me that Dennis Armstrong's father, James Armstrong, who died in 1834, was a Methodist minister. So it sounds like that rules out my theory.

I have mountains of photos, many of them scanned, and family trees in progress, but there is more to learn. I dove in headfirst in 2008 when I bought a scanner, and started scanning some of the boxes and boxes of photos and documents that I inherited, but things sort of got away from me, especially after we moved to Saginaw. And so even though I scanned hundreds of gigabytes of stuff, and turned it into a blog for a while, that family history project isn't really complete. Maybe as things start to settle down and the kids get a bit older, I can get back to it.

This Week

It's been a hell of a first week for any year. America has launched an assault on Iran, committing the war crime of international aggression. The so-called Democratic "resistance" hasn't been resisting much of importance, it seems. I marched against the Gulf War in 1990-1991. I marched against the invasion of Iraq in 1993, and I didn't just march — I also studied, and wrote and wrote

and wrote some more, and prayed. And now we are, it seems attacking a *third* country that wasn't responsible for 9/11, a country we really should not be antagonizing, or working to destabilize. And everything the administration, or the major newspapers, tell us about this situation should be considered a lie until proven otherwise. I feel like I should be out in the street protesting, again, and writing, again, but I've also got a house full of sick, crying babies, and so mostly I just feel worn down.

Somehow, shortly after Christmas, we all got sick with some kind of upper respiratory infection. I don't know what it is, but it has lasted a lot longer than this sort of things usually lasts. It was severe enough that we took our two smallest ones, Elanor and Malachi, to the doctor, to look for ear infections, strep, and pneumonia.

Malachi just has a bad cold, and is extremely cranky, but there were no serious concerns. But our little girl Elanor had some crackling in one lung, so her doctor ordered a chest x-ray. By the end of the day, we had confirmation that she had pneumonia on one side, so we started her on antibiotics and albuterol. We had a difficult night with her, lying awake listening to her shallow, rapid breathing, and wondering whether we needed to run her to the children's emergency room at the University of Michigan hospital, but in the morning she was up and running around, although still very cranky. So she seems to be on the mend.

I'm still coughing after a week, although I seem to be getting very slowly better. I don't think I have pneumonia. I don't know what it is. It could be a flu virus, not a cold, although I got the flu vaccine a month or two ago. It isn't always effective.

I think that I needed to get some extra rest when I first felt the symptoms, but a house full of sick kids had other ideas. Instead of relaxing on New Year's Day, I had to put about six hours of work into kitchen cleanup, since the kids had not been keeping up with chores. We've also had a houseguest we weren't quite planning. I say "quite" because we were planning to have her here, but we lost track of exactly *when* she was showing up. We thought she was going to arrive next Monday, not this Wednesday. With Grace chained to sick babies, I had to put in a big push to get the upstairs ready for a guest, when I really should have been drinking broth and resting, trying to get over this virus.

I spent a few days between Christmas and New Year's Day doing intermittent fasting, having only coffee and liquids until dinner, and I lost a noticeable amount of weight immediately. But I think that also may have been slowing down my recovery from the virus, so I started eating more calories again. I'll try another round of fasting when I have finished getting over this virus.

With everything going on, I really haven't done much worth writing about this week. I haven't made progress on any of the books I'm reading. I didn't get any time at all into the writing project I was hoping to work on. I didn't get any of the needed repair work done on either car. I haven't gotten any more organizing done in the basement. I haven't even gone through the stack of old

medical bills to try to figure out what we need to pay. But we've all survived, and today, Saturday, we even got out to the Bomber diner for brunch.

Tomorrow I'll take three of the kids to go see the premiere of the new season of *Doctor Who*. The show has been on hiatus for a long while. I'm hoping they used that extra year to work on writing a better season.

I brought up the 43-inch monitor from the basement and set it up in the family room, so we could watch our annual *Lord of the Rings* movie marathon on a bigger screen. I left it up for a few days. So we've gotten to see a few movies on the bigger screen.

***Godzilla* (2014 film)**

I picked up a discounted copy of this DVD after Christmas. I'm very glad that I didn't pay more than a few dollars for it. This *Godzilla* movie is by far the duller and least interesting that I've seen, even compared to some of the more ridiculous kid-friendly *Godzilla* films from the sixties and seventies.

The story is dull as mud, featuring several concurrent "lost children" narratives, and a lot of military hardware. It seems more like a military recruiting film along the lines of *Top Gun* than an original story. The viewer has to watch for almost an hour before getting a glimpse of a live monster, and it isn't *Godzilla*. We don't see *Godzilla* himself for another long while, and then when we do, we barely see him do anything. It's far too long a wait for the payoff. If the back-story was more compelling, maybe it would make the wait worth it, but in this case, it really doesn't.

Veronica told me that the much more entertaining *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (2019) was actually a sequel to this one. At first I didn't believe her, because while *King of the Monsters* is a big dumb spectacle, it is *far* more entertaining than this earlier film. But Veronica was right.

In any case, I recommend the 2019 film if you want to watch a big dumb monster movie, and I recommend leaving the 2014 film in the discount rack where it belongs. We actually wound up ejecting the disc 15 minutes before it ended, but no one complained, because no one thought there was any chance the ending would make up for the previous hour and forty-five minutes of boredom.

***Until the End of the World* (2019 Criterion edition)**

I've had a chance to watch the first half of this epic 287-minute cut. Joshua and the kids watched bits and pieces of it with me. There is a lot of self-deprecating humor in the film. For example, there's a scene in which William Hurt says "I'm not a sad man," in the saddest voice you've ever heard. There are many points where it lovingly mocks the conventions of the various genre films it plays at being, and lots of references to other classic films. I haven't seen most of the films it references, but I can definitely recognize when the cinematographer is

paying homage to classic *noir* films; a few years back, when Netflix was a DVD rental service, I borrowed just about every *noir* film I could, and Grace and I had a weeks-long *noir* film festival.

In the first half of this film, we get a crazed tour of Venice, Paris, Berlin, Lisbon, Moscow, the Trans-Siberian Railway, Beijing, and an inn in Japan. I say “crazed,” but the speed varies wildly. Sometimes we’re literally running through Lisbon, and sometimes we’re rampaging through a coffin hotel in Tokyo, but sometimes we’re sitting calmly in a garden, or serenely watching the scenery from a train window. This cut, and the transfer to Blu-ray, looks absolutely gorgeous. The only thing better would be to watch this cut on a big screen. I hope to have that opportunity sometime soon. 2021 will be the 30th anniversary of the film’s release, and I would happily attend a screening. It would be great to get a chance to watch the whole thing in the dark, without noisy kids distracting me. Of course, this film would require at least two bathroom breaks, which is why one of the previous versions, the “trilogy release,” was broken into three parts.

As I mentioned before, the somewhat absurdist plot — part caper, part heist, part love triangle, and part chase — is presented largely as an excuse to keep the cameras moving. There are guns waved in a few scenes, but we never feel much of a sense of menace, since there aren’t really any bad guys, and no one seems to really like using guns. Most of the people chasing Claire and Sam seem to start out with one motivation, such as retrieving stolen money, but quickly find themselves continuing the chase for its own sake.

As I watch this cut, I’m impressed by Solveig Dommartin’s subtle performance as a woman who seems to be able to inspire everyone around her, except herself. It’s so naturalistic that it takes a long while to realize that she actually is acting, and that her character does have an arc, albeit a very slowly developing one.

She’s a beautiful actress, but her character in this film is fundamentally friendly, open, curious, and approachable. This makes her the opposite of a typical *femme fatale* — she’s more of a girl next door. Except she’s also wearing a ridiculously fancy dress and hat. But then, she’s hung over, and looks like she has morning breath. And she’s also about to catch a night flight to *somewhere* halfway around the planet to do *something* of dubious legality. All these contradictory elements come together to make an interesting character. She seems to be a lost soul, who feels empty and bereft, and is trying to find something that will give her life meaning. The threat of armageddon brought on by an out-of-control nuclear satellite serves to accentuate the undirected nature of most of the characters’ lives (all of them, that is, except Sam, who is a man on a mission), forcing them to ask themselves what their lives so far have *meant*.

It seems like an appropriate thing to consider while Australia is burning up and America is again hell-bent on war.

I’m going to try to watch the second half tomorrow, if I can. The movie takes a brief detour to San Francisco before heading to Australia, where it stays for most of the second half.

***Frank Herbert's Dune* (Sci-Fi Channel Miniseries)**

We've also watched the first two parts of the three-part Sci-Fi Channel miniseries adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, from 2000. It's been a long time since I've watched this, so naturally I have some thoughts. It's a fairly low-budget production, with weak CGI in parts, and a lot of unconvincing matte paintings for the outdoor shots. But the interiors and costumes are quite gorgeous. It looks more like a stage play than a movie, with a lot of theatrical lighting effects, and reminds me a lot of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Story-wise, it's certainly less of a mess than David Lynch's 1984 *Dune* film, which remains a gorgeous train wreck. Since I've read the book several times, it's hard for me to judge what the *Dune* adaptations must be like for someone who hasn't read the book. I suspect that despite the info-dumps and voiceovers, they are still fairly incomprehensible, because an awful lot of the plot devices, like the "water of life," still aren't very well-explained.

There is a follow-up miniseries that covers the events of *Dune, Messiah!* and *Children of Dune*. I think I've seen at least a bit of that, although I can't recall if I saw the whole thing. Maybe I'll see if I can track down a cheap used copy on eBay.

Supposedly, later this year there will be a new *Dune* film, the first part of a two-parter. However, given the epic nature of the story, I would not be at all surprised to see the release date pushed back into 2021, assuming it isn't canceled altogether, and I also wouldn't be surprised to see the film broken into three parts instead of two. Denis Villeneuve directed *Arrival*, a fantastic science fiction film, and *Blade Runner 2049*, a beautifully atmospheric, if disturbing, film, and so I think there are reasons to be optimistic about this adaptation, thirty-six years after David Lynch's fascinating failure.

A Break from Screens

After this week, we're going to take a break from screens, so I'm going to take the big screen back downstairs, and also the smaller monitor that is our usual screen for watching movies. The kids aren't going to like this "screen fast" one bit, but I think we will all benefit.

On Monday morning, assuming my health continues to improve, I'll head back to work, and my two weeks of vacation will be over. It has been a real mixed bag, and this week especially has been strange and difficult. But I have managed to get my mind off work for a while. So hopefully when I return, I'll be able to bring some fresh perspective to my many projects in progress.

It's Saturday night. I usually get these newsletters wound up on Sunday night, but I'm expecting the rest of tonight and tomorrow to be very busy, so I'm going to get ahead and get this one finished and sent out. I hope you enjoy your week!

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