

Library Update

Paul R. Potts

11 Apr 2023

Hello Dear Readers,

This week I am trying to roll out something a little different as part of my newsletter content. I want to include an update on some recent acquisitions to the St. Ambrose Homeschool Library — our basement library. This is targeted at the Potts kids, particularly the older ones. However, we have always envisioned the library becoming a community resource as well. I don't have any kind of formal arrangement worked out yet, but if there is something that I mention, which would really like to borrow from the library, let me know and I will see if I can make that happen — we could arrange local delivery, or even mail things. I will want them back, though!

But first, some other topics.

Tuesday, April 11: The Chocolate Order

This weekend we ordered a large quantity of chocolate from Guittard: 12 packages of semi-sweet baking bars (64%), 6 packages of bittersweet baking bars (70%) and 12 cans of red cocoa powder. If we pace ourselves, that should be enough chocolate to last our family of nine until the fall. If we don't pace ourselves, well, we'll run out of chocolate and we'll be sad.

We use a lot of their delicious cocoa powder in coffee drinks and a lot more of the cocoa and the bar chocolates in desserts. Grace and I also find the 64% to be quite delicious for eating after dinner. Just a few squares are very satisfying, although the bitterness slows down the younger kids, so they generally won't raid the chocolate stash. We order from Guittard because they are, as far as we can tell, one of a small handful of chocolate producers that insist that their suppliers don't use slave labor. Do they really live up to this? Well, obviously we have to take somebody's word for it, and it depends whose word we take, but Guittard has been consistently listed as one of the best vendors.

I should probably confess that we do eat some other chocolate. For example, we've been getting Sanders brand Dark Chocolate Sea Salt Caramels for our movie nights, along with some other products. None of them promote themselves as sourcing only ethically produced chocolate, so one must assume the worst.

Does this make me a hypocrite? It sure does! But with so few “good” chocolate products available locally, the alternative is removing chocolate from our movie night snacks, which would punish our kids who have had to give up so much since the pandemic began. So we live with a certain amount of hypocrisy.

Long-term, the best plan is probably to *make* our own chocolate-containing snacks for movie night. We could easily make chocolate-dipped pretzels, or chocolate-drizzled popcorn. Chocolate-covered caramel candies, or even turtles, are probably not that difficult, and if we made them ourselves, we’d feel better about the ingredients. Honestly, things are hard even getting the basics ready for movie night — getting the kids to clean up the kitchen and family room, and putting together a quick meal that the kids will eat. So if we try this, we should probably start simple. It has to be something that doesn’t add to everyone’s stress level.

We wanted to order the Guittard chocolate now, because in a few weeks they will stop shipping chocolate except overnight, in insulated packages containing cold packs; that’s much more expensive, so we try to avoid it. I thought we still had a few days before chocolate-melting weather arrived, and apparently so did Guittard, but our chocolate is supposed to be delivered Friday, and the predicted highs for Wednesday and Thursday are 79 and 80. So, we may have waited too long already. Still, even if the bars have melted a bit, and aren’t so appealing to eat by themselves, we will no doubt still use them for baking. It’s a reminder that we should probably have done this in March. We were planning to, but things came up, including...

Expired Plates

Grace and I were out doing a grocery pickup, waiting in the Target parking lot, when a police car pulled up behind us and an officer came to speak to me. Apparently our registration expired in September, not of 2022 but of 2021. We were both quite surprised to learn this. Grace had just done the paperwork for the renewing our other car, and she thought we had renewed the registration for the Element. I thought we had, too.

As far as we can figure out, we must have simply forgotten to renew in the fall of 2021. A lot was going on — I had recently started my job with Argo AI and was working long hours. I probably put the paperwork in a safe place, with other important paperwork, in the basement office. It’s probably still there now. And since we didn’t renew in late 2021, the Secretary of State’s office probably didn’t send us a renewal form in late 2022, assuming that we must have gotten rid of the car. (It would be reasonable to assume this; it’s twenty years old.) I’m working entirely from home now, and we don’t use the car all that often, mostly to pick up groceries.

What’s more baffling is that Grace was just involved in a minor fender-bender a month ago, and an officer examined her paperwork. That officer didn’t notice that the registration was expired by over a year, or if he did notice, he didn’t

bother to mention it to Grace, telling her that everything was fine.

Anyway, after a \$175 ticket and a special trip to the Secretary of State's office to pay the \$100 renewal, we're up-to-date until this fall. I had to go into the office in person. I've been avoiding any such errands for months, only going into, say, a post office, if I have no other option. If I do have another option, such as weighing a package on a postal scale I bought just for this purpose, purchasing postage online, printing it out, and requesting a pickup, I will do so. But the Secretary of State's Office insisted that I come in, in person. I actually tried to go to an office near us — the map indicated there was a Secretary of State's Office location inside Kroger on Whittaker Road, not too far from us. When I got there, though, I found it was actually just an un-staffed ATM-like kiosk, which can do basic renewals. It also would not let me renew without going into an office in person. So I did.

Fortunately it was not crowded and I was in and out in under fifteen minutes. But if I come down with COVID-19 yet again, despite being masked with an N95 respirator, the Secretary of State's office — a small, not very well-ventilated office in which almost no one but me was masked, is my only likely source of infection.

I'm not looking forward to having to renew my driver license this fall — they may want me to come in, in person, for new photos and a basic vision test. The fact that there's no safe accommodation for immuno-compromised people whatsoever, after over three years into the pandemic, is a perfect summation of the way the state at every level has embraced state abandonment and social murder.

Tuesday, April 18: Appliance Update

We have received a payment from our insurance company to cover some of the expense of repairing or replacing damaged appliances. Unfortunately I don't have an exact accounting of just how they came up with this dollar figure. It is less than I hoped and more than I feared they would send, if that makes sense. I'm lacking the accounting because our adjuster e-mailed me a PDF file that was zero bytes in length. I have asked him to please re-send me that file but haven't heard a response yet except a generic "we're all very busy, so please be patient" message.

I called a local HP service center about repairing the printer. After I told him the model number of the printer, the repair technician's response was, essentially, "don't bother." He told me that with the hourly rate and the cost of replacement parts it would not be any cheaper than buying a new printer — even though a new LaserJet 406dn costs about \$529. He also said that when a printer has been damaged by a power spike like this, they usually can't be repaired.

So, the next step was to find a new printer. Unfortunately it seems like the 406dn is sold out everywhere. I had the same problem when I ordered it — it

took months to arrive. So I decided to take a chance and order an “open box” printer from an eBay seller that specializes in refurbished electronics. The seller claims it was opened but never used and is still on the original box. The price was about \$50 lower than a new printer, and they offered free shipping and free returns, so it seemed like it was worth a shot. I ordered it, and we’ll see how long it takes to get here.

I want to make it a high priority to put in a whole-house surge suppressor. It doesn’t really work well to put laser printers onto surge suppressors or UPSes. HP, as well as other vendors, specifically recommend against it, as do the UPS vendors. This is in part because they contain motors that draw a fair amount of current, but especially because they have a very high initial current draw while heating up the fuser to begin a print run.

Users like to see the pages start coming out fast, but that initial surge can be enough to dim any lights that are on the same circuit, and also trip surge suppressors, and cause UPSes to detect a voltage drop and jump on to battery backup, and then try to supply that huge current draw from the battery. This can be enough to either quickly or slowly damage the UPS. So they pretty much have to be connected to the unregulated current from the electrical panel. That means that a whole house surge suppressor might be the only thing standing between the printer and another power spike or brownout that could fry it. That will be one of our next priorities.

It seems insane to throw away a 25-pound laser printer, but I’m sure what else to do. At least I should be able to reuse the toner cartridge. I may try taking it apart and see if I can find a fuse to replace, but I suspect that even if there is a fuse I can replace, that won’t be enough to bring it back to life.

I still want to look into getting the stereo receiver repaired, so I will get in touch with the nearest authorized service center and describe the situation, and hope they don’t give me the same advice.

We’ll start planning having someone out to look at the dishwasher and original refrigerator and see whether either can be repaired. The ceiling fans are certainly not worth repairing, so I’ll be looking for replacements and trying to find someone to install them. If I can get the same model, we’ll just get the same model; just like the printer, I put a lot of thought into choosing exactly what we wanted, so unless it isn’t available, we probably want that same thing.

Chocolate Update

The Guittard chocolate showed up, and it was not melted! I think this is because it was still in the cooler Western states for most of the week and by the time it hit Michigan, Michigan had cooled down a little bit.

We’ve had quite strange shifts in the weather. It’s Tuesday April 18th as I write this. On Saturday it was over 80. We had just gotten the air conditioning running on Friday, since we have no working ceiling fans anymore, and on Sunday

Joshua helped me replace the filter and clean the air return vent. But then Monday by midday I had to run around and change all the thermostats to turn the heat back on, as it had dropped to below freezing Sunday night and it was very uncomfortable to work in my office — my fingers ached like crazy from the cold. It was snowing lightly on Monday afternoon. The forecast says it will be down to nearly freezing again tonight, and below freezing Wednesday night, but then back up to 80 on Thursday afternoon.

The long-term forecast is highly speculative but it is showing another sixty-degree drop between Thursday afternoon and the following Monday night.

I don't love hot weather, and I don't really mind cold weather, but I *really* don't like these huge shifts! Somehow, they are very hard on my system.

We ordered something a little less perishable: 25 pounds of short-grain brown rice from Lundberg farm. This is the rice we used to get from Costco and it is my favorite brown rice. It's become surprisingly difficult to get decent brown rice these days. GFS doesn't have anything good, just a really bland and processed rice. We've been buying small bags of organic brown rice from Target, and it is pretty good, but this isn't cost-effective for our family, and they're out of stock most of the time.

We bought some big commercial-size food storage buckets, which ought to be entirely mouseproof, for the larger quantities of rice.

A New Networking Option

A while back I ordered a NETGEAR LM1200 modem. This is a device that connects to the cellular network and allows connected devices to access the Internet through it. I already have a T-Mobile 5G Internet appliance to fall back on when the cable modem connection fails, but I wanted to try this as another option. I don't really like using the T-Mobile appliance since it creates its own WiFi network, right next to the existing WiFi network, and also because we are sort of renting it, the way people used to pay every month, indefinitely, for a cable modem that is much less expensive in the long run to simply buy outright.

To make this work I needed to contact T-Mobile and request a SIM card. That process was a bit strange. The person I spoke to via an online support chat kept getting my name wrong and making all kinds of typos — they work on several calls at once. But he did actually arrange for T-Mobile to send me a SIM card. They did not charge me anything for it, which I also found strange, and they shipped it overnight. It arrived the next day in a little pouch with no paperwork or invoice or packing list whatsoever — just the SIM card.

I put it into the modem and the modem seemed to power up OK and get onto the network — the lights turned green. But I was not able to communicate with it when I plugged it into my existing router. So, I had to order a USB C to Ethernet adapter for my laptop, so that I could easily talk to it from my laptop. I found a cheap used Belkin adapter on eBay then had to wait for that to arrive.

With the adapter I was able to log into the modem using an Ethernet cable, connecting to the modem's built-in web server. Most modern devices like this have a web server built in. The modem reported that it was connected to the Internet, and I was able to configure it and check for software updates. After reading some notes on a T-Mobile forum post, I changed a "keepalive" setting so the modem would keep the network connection active. But when I set it to work in bridge mode and turned off my laptop's Wi-Fi, I could not get online. So something still wasn't working.

A T-Mobile support forum post suggested that I had to get T-Mobile to activate the SIM. It would have been nice if the guy I spoke to originally had mentioned this, but he didn't. So today I called T-Mobile tech support. It took about half an hour for the support person to figure out what had to be done and get it working. I had to pay an activation fee, and they are going to add a recurring charge for, essentially, another line.

They don't have a predefined way to bill me for this modem, but she told me it would look on my bill like I had added a tablet to the line, with a discount applied since I have multiple lines. She was able to get it working while I was still on the line, and suddenly I had Internet access from my laptop, through the modem. It is disappointingly slow, though, compared to the existing T-Mobile device. Apparently that speed is, at least in part, the difference between a device with a 4G connection and a device with a 5G connection.

The technical support specialist said that if I want to remove the 5G device, I'll have to go into a store. I'm going to leave it on for a while in case I determine that this modem is not really a good replacement. If I really do want to remove it, I will call them and see if I can convince them to let me ship them the 5G device instead of dropping it off at a store.

Reading forum posts, I found that some people like these modems because they can use them remotely. One person reported that he uses it to access the security cameras on his boat, while it is docked. Then he can access the cameras from home. It seems like a good use case for this device might be a road trip. I'd have to figure out how to power it. It uses a simple charger with a USB A socket on the cable and a USB C socket on the device, and came with a (much too short) USB A to C cable. On a road trip, I might be able to use it with one of the Ryobi battery packs and chargers that we use to charge our phones during power outages. It might also work to plug it into a car battery adapter that I've already got. It depends on just how much current it draws.

Even if this works, I'm not sure it would really be valuable, since it is already possible to supply a Wi-Fi connection my laptop by using my phone as a Wi-Fi hotspot, and I think the connection through my phone is probably faster than it would be through this modem.

Still, I'll keep it for a while until I decide what to do with it. I know that it can be useful to have a backup Internet connection on hand. If it really just doesn't

look like it is going to be useful, it'll go into the giveaway pile, minus the SIM card.

Recently Viewed Films

I'm behind on reporting on the movies we've been watching on our Saturday movie nights, and some other nights when we manage to watch a movie. So, let me try to catch up. One reason I'm writing these down is so that *I* can remember what we've seen in a few years. Also, if the kids ask me about some movie we watched, and they can't remember the title, I can refer them to the newsletter and see if they can figure out which one it was.

Mission: Impossible (1996 Film) I was pleasantly surprised by this film, as the reviews are not great. It was directed by Brian de Palma, and I've long admired de Palma's use of dramatic camera angles and theatrical lighting.

The critical reviews complain that the plot is convoluted and hard to follow. It does require a little more concentration than the average action film, but spy thriller plots *should* leave you wondering who to trust. In the best scenes, Ethan (played by Tom Cruise) has good reason to be suspicious of the people he's speaking to, but has to hide this fact. Viewers have to constantly ask themselves "is the enemy of his enemy his friend?"

I have issues with Tom Cruise but there's no denying that his acting in this film is impressive, and his co-stars (including Vanessa Redgrave!) are terrific as well. The dramatic final chase sequence, involving a high-speed train, a helicopter, and the Chunnel, remains thrilling. There's violence, but it's PG-13 violence, so we did not regret showing it to the kids. And clocking in at only 110 minutes, it didn't tax any of our attention spans too much.

When we watched this a few weeks ago, all the *Mission: Impossible* films were available on the Paramount Plus streaming service, for no additional charge. But this week I was looking to see if we could still watch the second film, and it turns out the second, third, and fourth films are all locked down now, and are marked as "SHO." If I click on one of them, it sends me to a site offering to upgrade me to Showtime at \$119.99 a year, before I can watch it. If I try use the browser's "back" button, it takes me to a different page offering me the same thing at \$11.99 a month... which is actually more expensive. This is a typical "dark pattern," and they're everywhere in web design. I'm already paying Paramount Plus \$120 a year, and the site is full of movies that I can't watch without making it \$240 a year.

This is just one more reason that I am likely to cancel Paramount Plus. There just isn't a lot of content we actually want to watch. It is loaded with really mediocre old films and TV shows. And when we do find something we want to watch, it either disappears or is locked down before we get to it. So, at some point we might be back to having the Criterion Channel as our only streaming service. Films come and go monthly, on that service, but they send out a list

a month in advance telling you what films will be arriving and what will be departing the service. It's great, actually.

If I don't renew Paramount Plus, I'll just do more of what we're already doing, which is, mostly, to order used Blu-ray discs from eBay.

Kubo and the Two Strings (2016 Animated Film) I did not initially realize that it was made using stop-motion animation, because it combines stop-motion animation with CGI, and it became only the second stop-motion film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects; the first of course was *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The animation is absolutely gorgeous! The animation studio that made it, called LAIKA, also made *Coraline* (the 2009 animated film).

Although the location is a fantasy version of feudal Japan, the only Asian voice actors are George Takei and Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, and they have only very small parts. I guess we should be grateful that at least the white American cast members don't attempt Japanese accents. I didn't find this to be a deal-breaker, but I would still rather hear Asian actors voicing Asian characters.

Puss in Boots (2011 Animated Film) This is a rather silly kids' film with the title character voiced by Antonio Banderas. All the voice actors do a great job, but I was just too tired to stay up for the whole thing. I wound up going to bed while the kids finished it. They reported that it was fun. I have ordered the sequel with a Best Buy gift card.

That reminds me — I think I forgot to mention that after the stupid situation in March when I was unable to pick up the UPSes I had paid for, I posted the story on Twitter and tagged Best Buy. Best Buy got in touch via Twitter direct messages and sent me a \$25 gift card to apologize. It took a strangely long time to arrive — I think it was at least three weeks — but it did show up eventually. So I applied it to the cost of the newly released 4K Blu-ray of the *Puss in Boots* sequel, called *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish*. That should arrive soon. I am not planning to do any more business with Best Buy in the future.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022 Film) I was really hoping this film, the sequel to the 2018 *Black Panther* film, would be better, as I enjoyed *Black Panther* quite a bit. In November 2020 I wrote:

Black Panther does take itself pretty seriously, and this makes it less good than it could be... I'll still recommend *Black Panther*, because it is ground-breaking in many ways: not just for its cast, but for the depth of its screenwriting; the script takes some big risks and makes interesting choices, including an amazing fake-out with a character we think is the villain, but who turns out to only be a warm-up villain.

The *Black Panther* franchise was faced with the unfortunate reality that Chadwick Boseman, the incredibly charismatic star of the first film, died of cancer in 2020 at the age of 43. Marvel chose not to re-cast the character of King T'Challa. Given just how perfectly Boseman owned and inhabited that character, I think this is a wise decision. But it left the screenwriters trying to figure out how to explain and move on from the death of the main character.

In the sequel, this is handled rather strangely; King T'Challa is portrayed as dying of an unnamed disease off-screen. I can't write "shown," because we never see him, not even as a shadow behind a screen, or a dimly-lit figure under a sheet. We see his sister Shuri, played by Letitia Wright, in her lab, trying to re-create the heart-shaped herb, which was destroyed in the previous film. T'Challa dies off-screen, as the computer reports that her experiments fail. This is actually congruent with the way the real Boseman died; apparently very few people knew about his illness. But it does make for *quite* an unsatisfying death scene.

The film doesn't improve much from there; it just becomes more complicated. The producers decided to make the whole film an elegy, and it follows Shuri's arc as she spends her first year grieving the loss of her brother. But of course, Marvel was not actually willing to make a quieter, sadder film set within the confines of Wakanda, showing internal strife following the death of the monarch. They have to go bigger than that. Each film has to be a blockbuster, and each film has to set up all the others, including many that were already in the pipeline, as part of the next "phase." So the film introduces Namor, a slightly obscure Marvel character, who

is the king of Talokan, whose people refer to him as the feathered serpent god K'uk'ulkan.

The bulk of the film's conflict then centers around a dispute between two persecuted indigenous peoples. The whole storyline becomes overcomplicated, and instead of telling a tight 90-minute or even two-hour story about Wakanda grieving the loss of its king, it tells a bloated, nearly three hour long story about many characters and many people, including an antagonist who flutters around with ridiculous tiny wings on his ankles.

Because, of course it does — Marvel is not a machine for making good films, but a machine for making money, and if they have to waste an entire blockbuster just to set up future blockbusters, they won't hesitate. Really, the respect they showed Boseman by not re-casting him is overshadowed by the fact that the sequel to his very good film is so very, very tedious to watch.

The home video release has another strike against it. The 4K Blu-ray is almost unwatchable, at least on our 43" 4K monitor, because the majority of the scenes are simply too dark. This was true even with the lights out in our family room. I'd like to give the regular Blu-ray a try, since several reviews I've seen suggest that it is brighter. But even if we can see it better, I don't think that's going to improve this film a whole lot. Some things are better left in the dark.

***The Marvelous Misadventures of the Stone Lady* (2019 French Short Film)** One movie night, we just weren't succeeding at getting the cleanup done and dinner ready on time, so we wound up starting the movies very late — I think it was after 10:00. So as not to keep everyone up until 3:00 in the morning, after watching an episode of *Picard*, we watched two shorts from the Criterion Channel. They have lists called “5 Minutes or Less,” “15 Minutes or Less,” “30 Minutes or Less,” and “60 Minutes or Less.” So we chose two shorts that were under 30 minutes, and got to bed at a reasonable time.

The Marvelous Misadventures is a simple story set in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The protagonist is a relatively undistinguished ornamental statue of a young woman, referred to as an “ornamental” statue. One night the Winged Victory of Samothrace comes flapping into her gallery and she comes to life. *Winged Victory* tells her that she can have fun exploring the museum during the night, but she must follow the rules — she can't be seen by humans. She has a defiant spirit, and has been listening to a young anarchist tour guide ramble on about inequality and revolution. And so, naturally, she winds up at protest, being teargassed and beaten by the police, and riding off on a stolen bicycle, taking some damage along the way.

The special effects are very impressive, but it's also a lovely short story about innocence, curiosity, and what it means to be an “ordinary” person.

***Sierra* (2022 Estonian Animated Film)** This is a short animated film from Estonia. A young boy's father is really, really into racing cars, and so the boy winds up strapped into the passenger seat while his father apparently crashes a road race and, after dizzying, ridiculously silly, extremely fun animation, winds up winning. Even inexplicably stuck inside a tire, his enthusiasm remains undampened. The kids loved this one.

***The Truman Show* (1998 Film)** It had been many years since I last saw this film, and I thought that it was time to give it a re-watch, and show it to the kids. The older kids found it fascinating. The younger kids mostly didn't pay attention, as it was too slow-paced and talky to hold their interest. *The Truman Show* is, per Wikipedia, a:

1998 American satirical science fiction psychological comedy-drama film

I'm not going to recap the whole plot, but briefly: Truman Burbank, a young man of about thirty, lives and works in a small community, Seahaven Island. It's an idyllic existence, although he seems a bit bored with his life there. One day a theater light comes crashing down onto the sidewalk near him, apparently falling out of a clear blue sky. The light is labeled “Sirius (9 Canis Major).” Truman begins to think that his life is not quite what it seems.

In fact Truman has been the star of a long-running reality TV show. The first baby ever legally adopted by a corporation, every aspect of his life has been

controlled by the show’s director, simply called “Christof.” In fact, as we watch the introductory credits of the film itself, we see Christof listed as the director of the film we are watching. As the details unfold and Truman begins to see beyond the fourth wall, he finds himself locked in a battle with Christof, who he has never met, to keep him behind the fourth wall he desperately wants to break.

The film has held up really well as a still-plausible near-future (or alternate-present) science fiction story, but even more so as a meditation on the way we spend our time observing other people’s lives, while somehow also believing that we are in charge of our own. Truman — the “true man” in the film, the only person in Truman’s whole small world who is telling the truth about who he is — isn’t a paid actor or extra, and is the only person acting on his own volition. And he discovers that he *is*, in fact, the star of his own reality show, and extremely important to millions of people, while most of us just *think* that we are.

If you’d like to read a longer review of *The Truman Show*, there’s a good review in *Rolling Stone* magazine [here](#).

***Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* (2022 Animated Film)** This is a technically impressive followup to the first *Puss in Boots* animated film, which itself is set in the *Shrek* universe. I did not like it. I’ve been struggling to understand just *why* I don’t like *Shrek* or these related film. It’s not the frenetic, style-shifting animation *per se* — I really love animation, and I loved *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, which is *constantly* shifting in style, as befits a movie about multiple universes colliding.

Somehow, I think I just don’t love films that take bits and pieces of fairy tales and reassemble them as shortcuts, instead of actually building original characters or worlds. I also don’t love taking elements from, say, Grimm’s fairy tales, and mixing them with fart jokes and poop jokes. I have too much respect for the importance of folk and fairy tales to appreciate that. The originals will, of course, withstand this mistreatment and still be told when this film franchise is long forgotten, but I’m saddened to think that many kids will grow up watching these “remixed” versions and may never be exposed to anything close to the original fairy tales.

Other Movies We’ve watched a few more movies recently on non-movie nights, including the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968 Film), *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970 Film), and *Tim Burton’s Corpse Bride* (2005 Film).

It’s been decades since I’ve watched the original *Planet of the Apes*. It’s held up really well — it’s still a very entertaining, interesting film. I especially like the wild soundtrack, which

is known for its avant-garde compositional techniques, as well as the use of unusual percussion instruments and extended performance techniques, as well as his 12-tone music (the violin part using all

12 chromatic notes) to give an eerie, unsettled feel to the planet, mirroring the sense of placelessness.

The first sequel... is not good, although I had fun doing a running Mystery Science 3000-style commentary and posting jokes on Twitter.

(In one scene in *Beneath*, a telepathic priest is impaled on a wall of spiked bars, and falls to the ground, his back covered with stab wounds. I couldn't resist blurting out "Hey Taylor! He's holier than thou!")

At the end of the first film, they actually blow up the planet, leaving one to wonder: how could there *possibly* be sequels? Two words: time travel!

Corpse Bride is a lovely film, although it raised some interesting questions for us about the way it took a traditional Jewish folktale, "The Finger," and stripped it of all historical context:

While pogroms ravaged Jewish communities throughout their diasporic history in Russia, the early 20th Century saw a particularly gruesome wave of attacks, with would-be brides often being murdered and tossed into shallow graves, still in their wedding gowns.

Our solution was not to avoid the film, but to talk about the history.

Wednesday, April 19: Library Update

As I've described, the library's stereo receiver is still broken. We've received some money from our insurance company to help cover repairing or replacing the receiver, but the deposit hasn't cleared yet. The refrigerator, ceiling fans, and dishwasher need to take priority, so it might be a while longer before we have a working stereo receiver. Meanwhile, the Bluetooth speaker and iPods should provide some options for listening to music from the music server, and every single CD is on the server.

Meanwhile, here are some recent acquisitions that I want to highlight!

The Ware Tetralogy by Rudy Rucker

This is filed with science fiction novels under Rucker, since it is an omnibus edition of four of his novels from the years 1982 to 2000: *Software* (1982), *Wareware* (1988), *Freeware* (1997), and *Realware* (2000). I also may have some mass-market paperback copies of the early books, which will be shelved when we get the last few boxes of books out of storage. I read the first three back in the day, but I'm not sure I've ever read *Realware*.

The books cover the rise of artificial intelligence, in the form of self-replicating robots called "boppers." Boppers have intelligence and free will. Rucker is not writing "hard" science fiction in these books; they can be thought of as "soft" science fiction or even science fantasy. How well have these books held up, and how well do their stories match what has played out in the history of technology

so far? I don't remember them all that well, so I'm not sure, but Rucker is always entertaining, so I'd recommend giving them a try!

***The Apocalypse Files* and *The Jennifer Morgue* by Charles Stross**

Most of the Laundry Files novels have been on the shelves downstairs for some time, but I only recently added copies of the first two. The whole series is quite good, a mash-up of science fiction and urban fantasy, with many of the novels told in the style of specific spy novels. *The Jennifer Morgue* is a pastiche of Ian Fleming's James Bond stories, and is one of the very best in the series. The ghost of H. P. Lovecraft and the threat of his weird alien entities looms over everything, and unlike a lot of series of novels, the over-arching story actually goes somewhere, as the characters deepen and change over time.

***Virtual Light* by William Gibson**

Virtual Light is the first novel in Gibson's Bridge trilogy, the followup to his Sprawl trilogy. Gibson's novels stand well by themselves, but they also do some world-building, and share characters, across the trilogies. *Virtual Light* takes place in the year 2006, and introduces a stolen pair of glasses containing an immensely powerful virtual reality technology. Google's actual augmented-reality product called Glass was no doubt heavily influenced by the technology described in the novel, published in 1993.

We have two copies of this book: one in the science fiction novels section, a trade paperback I ordered from the U.K., and also a small mass market paperback, shelved with the mass market paperbacks.

The Life of Cuthbert and *Ancrene Wisse*

In the literature section, we have books from two collections curated by the London Review of Books: *Among the Ancients* and *Medieval Beginnings*. The accompanying podcasts are available on the server. The two most recently covered books, from the *Medieval Beginnings* series, are *The Age of Bede* and *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*. I recommend listening to the podcast episodes to help understand more about the world these books come from.

Ancrene Wisse was a guidebook written in the early 13th century, by an anonymous author, for three anchoresses. It consists of a spiritual and practical guide for these women who chose to enclose themselves inside small cells, permanently, to live out the rest of their lives in prayer and contemplation. The way these women voluntarily chose to live in near-solitary confinement seems quite shocking to a modern reader, but understanding why and how they did so is critical to understanding the role of the Church and the lives of women in the Middle Ages.

Bede's Life of Cuthbert, originally titled *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, is a hagiography from early medieval Northumbria, an account of the life and miracles of

St. Cuthbert. I also highly recommend listening to the podcast episode as an introduction to this text.

***Music is Our Friend: Live in Washington and Albany* by King Crimson**

This album is the most recent live album from King Crimson, recorded in 2021 during a very limited tour of the United States, during the pandemic. It will likely be the band's last concert album in its most recent configuration, as I think it is an open question whether Robert Fripp will ever tour again. Fortunately it is quite an amazing album, featuring songs from the project's entire history, including a wonderful, moving performance of "Islands." The recording is quite good as well, with only a few minor flaws.

We now have a number of live albums by King Crimson, in addition to their thirteen original studio albums. I won't list any more today but feel free to explore any of them! It's always worthwhile to read Robert Fripp's notes in the accompanying booklets.

***Anniversaries Volumes 1 and 2* by Uwe Johnson (New York Review Books Classics)**

Translated from German, *Anniversaries* is a massive novel, almost two thousand pages long, and split into two volumes. The novel is set in 1967, but encompassing an incredible amount of detail about the rise of Hitler, the Vietnam war, and the Civil Rights movement.

***Castle Gripsholm* by Kurt Tucholsky (New York Review Books Classics)**

By comparison, this is a short novel about children on a summer holiday.

I chose these two recent acquisitions to highlight the wide range of books in our New York Review Books Classics section. There are many other amazing books in this series!

***The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro**

There aren't many novels that I would call perfect, or nearly so, but this modest story is one of them. It's a simple but deeply moving story about a butler, and the way in which his dedication to the great house he has spent his life serving has built walls around his soul. This book was adapted into a film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson, and it's an unusually good adaptation. Grace and I have seen it before, but I have ordered a copy for an upcoming movie night.

***Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise* (1987 Animated Film)**

This is one of the first Japanese animated films that I ever saw; I saw it a free showing of the anime club at the University of Michigan, back in 1990 or so. It takes place on an alternate world, in a nation that is developing its space program. It's quite a fascinating film. Unfortunately, the DVD transfer isn't very good, but it's better than nothing; I am hoping one day there will be a nicely restored edition available. This was the first film produced by the studio, Gainax, that later produced *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

Wikipedia has an unusually long article on this film, with almost 500 footnotes, a quite astounding effort by volunteers. That's suggestive of just how significant this film is to hardcore fans.

***Electronic Meditations, Alpha Centauri, Zeit, and Atem* by Tangerine Dream**

I've gradually been collecting up used copies of Tangerine Dream's best albums. These four are significant because they were published on the Ohr label. They are also significant because they illustrate the radical change in instrumentation that German "Krautrock" bands adopted over the course of just a few years; Kraftwerk went through a similar transition.

The first one, *Electronic Meditations*, really was not all that electronic; it was recorded with guitar, organ, drums, and cello, as well as *ad hoc* found instrumentation such as glass, paper, and shakers — the kind of instrumentation I've used myself, when I recorded a percussion track that features the sound of tearing paper and light bulbs clinking against each other. There are some electronic sounds, but they are created by custom-made circuits, not ready-made instruments that one could buy in a music store. Inspiration and effort can turn all kinds of things into music!

Starting with *Alpha Centauri*, the band made use of the VCS3, an early synthesizer that was much more portable than the early Moog synthesizers used by bands such as Emerson, Lake, and Palmer.

The last album of this series, *Atem*, makes heavy use of the newly available mellotron, a keyboard instrument that is not a modern electronic synthesizer but which uses tape loops triggered by each key. King Crimson made heavy use of mellotron on their first few albums, and toured with mellotrons as well, despite the fact that they were extremely heavy, and required constant maintenance. Modern keyboards that play *samples* of vintage instruments are now popular with touring musicians, for good reason!

***No Pussyfooting* by Robert Fripp and Brian Eno**

This is a wild album of "Frippertronics" — looping guitar tones — combined with Eno's synthesizer sounds. When this first piece on the album was first broadcast on the BBC, apparently the tape reel was accidentally wound in

reverse — something that was easy to do with reel-to-reel tapes, as I recall from my college radio days — so the whole composition was actually played backwards. Because it's an instrumental, with long, sustained synthesizer-like tones, it wasn't immediately obvious that anything was wrong. Allegedly, Fripp called up the BBC to complain that the music was being played backwards, and was told “that's what they all say!”

And so this album contains two instrumental pieces, “The Heavenly Music Corporation” and “Swastika Girls,” followed by alternate versions: “The Heavenly Music Corporation” played backwards, “The Heavenly Music Corporation” played at half-speed (another easy mistake to make when playing back a reel-to-reel tape), and “Swastika Girls” played backwards. It is beautiful ambient music at any speed and direction!

Sunday, April 23: I Get Mail

My friend Ken wrote to me with some kind words about my last two newsletters. He was appreciative of my “retrocomputing,” because I included a

program, that mimics another program, that was written in a now defunct language, for a defunct computer system, that was probably obsolete within a couple of years of you originally getting the TRS-80. It is kind of wonderful. It is a form of nostalgia that I think is far more interesting than, say, the rebirth of vinyl records.

I wrote back:

This has me thinking about the stuff I did as a kid. Is it weird that 10-year-old me still startles and impresses 55-year-old me?

This little Animal program was one of the earliest I worked on in BASIC. I later wrote a program to generate and store Dungeons and Dragons characters. I even wrote something in AppleSoft BASIC for the computers at my high school that implemented a simple database manager — not a database, but a tool that let you create your own databases, define fields, add records, etc. That was quite a thing. I also was learning Z-80 assembly language. I'm impressed that young me was able to type in these huge listings from magazines and books, in tiny print, and debug them. Obviously my eyes were a lot better. I must have been incredibly motivated to work on this for years. BASIC obviously seems like a very ugly language now but only by comparison. Back then I didn't have a lot to compare it to except for later a difficult to use and very limited Pascal environment for the TRS-80 that came on cassettes, and other languages I was reading about in BYTE magazine.

My actual programs are all long gone since they existed on cassette and Commodore 64 diskettes. People say it's “for the best” when

their childhood journals, etc. are lost, because they seem childish when they look back on them. The older stuff I have from my childhood doesn't exactly seem childish to me, though. I do cringe at my old writing because I didn't know how to use apostrophes correctly, and when writing about relationships my social skills were... well... not well-developed. But they're still not that well-developed! And it's interesting to see how "fully formed" I was. Basically, I have most of the same interests now as I did then.

That seems like as good a place to stop as any. Have a great week!

About This Newsletter

This content is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you'd like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!