



THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #8, AUGUST 2023



I CERTAINLY READ A COUPLE OF good books this time around, but also a few clunkers (mainly SF I had to read for the podcast).

Quick Summaries

Literary

***The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt**

Quite possibly the best book I've read this year. Excellent stuff, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2013. I can't do a quick summary, see my review!

[Review here.](#)

Crime/Thriller

***Spook Street* by Mick Herron**

Another great addition to Herron's "Slough House" series of spy thrillers featuring a team of failed spies.

[Review here.](#)

Science Fiction

The first five of these were read for the Hugo Time Machine segment of our podcast, all nominated for Best Novel in the 1970 Hugos.

***Macroscopic* by Piers Anthony**

Terrible, give it a miss. I couldn't even finish it.

[Review here.](#)

***Up the Line* by Robert Silverberg**

Moderately entertaining time-travel story, in which you'll learn probably more than you wanted to know about 6th Century Byzantium.

[Review here.](#)

***Bug Jack Barron* by Norman Spinrad**

No doubt very trendy in the late 1960s, this has aged badly. Lots of derring-do to do with immortality and a powerful television personality.

[Review here.](#)

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

An important anti-war book framed as a science fiction story with time travel and alien abductions. Still love the opening of the story: “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.”

[Review here.](#)

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin

One of the greatest classics of the genre, about a world where humans have only one gender, not two. And a moving story about a relationship which starts off very badly. And a great adventure story as the protagonists struggle across a frozen landscape. Top notch!

[Review here.](#)

Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber

Clever 1950s fantasy thriller based on the concept that all women have secret knowledge of magic which they use to boost their partner’s fortunes. Not sure what women readers were supposed to make of it!

[Review here.](#)

Children’s Literature

Utterly Dark and the Heart of the Wild by Philip Reeve

Pretty good middle-school level fantasy set in the mid 1800s on one of the forgotten Autumn Isles, west of Britain.

[Review here.](#)

Crime/Thriller

The Russia House by John le Carré

Excellent spy thriller by John le Carré. Really, when is he not excellent? Middle-aged failing book publisher

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The Megaloscope is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published for ANZAPA members and available to anyone else who is interested.

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Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

finds himself entangled in a Cold War plot during the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union, and risks all for love. Good stuff!

[Review here.](#)



Hits and Misses

Best book read since last issue

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt, without question. Really enjoyed it. I'm pretty certain that this will be at the top, or certainly near the top of my Best Books of 2023. I'm keen to read the only one of her three novels I have yet to get to, *The Little Friend*. If only she'd write another one!

Next best books?

Second would be *The Russia House* by John le Carré. Really enjoyed this spy thriller. Le Carré is brilliant at creating compelling, rich characters, and his Barley Scott Blair is a wonderful creation.

Next would be *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin, a great classic of the genre (though see my review for a big criticism I have of it nonetheless).

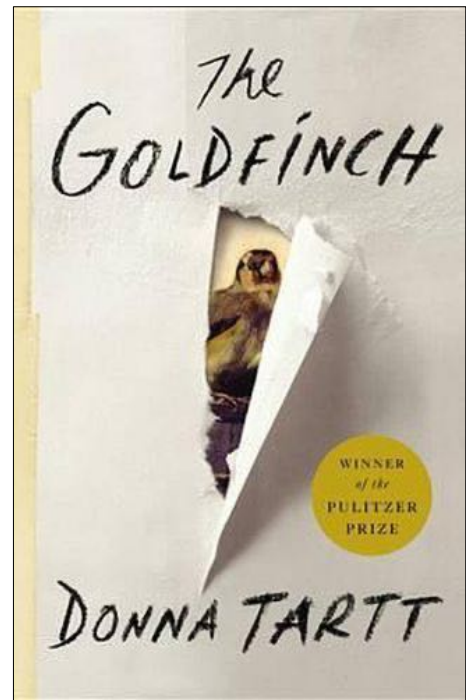
Most disappointing read

I really can't say I was "disappointed" by *Macroscopic* because I hadn't expected very much from it. It was certainly the worst book I read (or to be honest, tried to read) since last issue.

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt

I WENT OUT AND BOUGHT MYSELF A hardcover copy of this book (admittedly a second-hand copy) almost immediately after I finished reading *The Secret History*, Tartt's first novel. I've been trying to find time to read it for quite a while, but boy, was it worth the wait.

The Goldfinch is a very long book—771 pages in the edition I bought—and it took me a while to finish. But my interest in the story and the characters never flagged for a moment. The quality of Tartt's writing is so high that it was a joy to read, even if I did keep stopping to marvel at individual sentences and paragraphs. That may make you think that Tartt's writing is flowery or pretentiously literary. Nothing could be further from the truth. Her prose is made up of mostly very simple, short words, but she has a talent for writing long, sometimes paragraph-long, perfectly structured sentences which just flow like a river in flood, carrying the reader along. I'll quote an example later, because I won't be able to help myself.



But what about the story, I hear you asking? Is *The Goldfinch* some esoteric literary confection full of angst and navel-gazing? Nope. In some ways it's as down-to-earth and gritty as a Raymond Chandler novel. It's a story of terrorism, art theft, drugs and guns. Among many other things, of course.

All right, so what is the story?

Well, we start with a short chapter which acts as a prologue. The whole book is told in the first person. The narrator, Theodore Decker, in his mid 20s, is in Amsterdam at Christmas time, and for some reason he's confined to his hotel room. He's cold and ill. He speaks no Dutch, but is obsessively watching local TV trying to work out what is going on about some sort of crime he's been involved with.

Much of the rest of the novel, of course, is the story of how and why he ended up there.

The real story begins with young Theo at the age of thirteen. He's in bad trouble at school and has been suspended. On what turns out to be the most critical day of his life, he's due to attend a disciplinary meeting at the school with his mother, but that meeting is later in the morning, so they fill in time, and end up in one of New York's major art galleries, where there's an exhibition on of classic Dutch painting. One of the paintings in the exhibition is *The Goldfinch*, painted in 1654 by the artist Carel Fabritius. Theo's mother leaves him for a moment in the room with that painting, but before she returns, something terrible happens. A terrorist organisation sets off an explosion which destroys most of the building.

Without going into too much detail, young Theo survives the explosion. He helps a dying old man, who is partially out of his senses, and who in his crazed state insists that Theo take something from the gallery. It's the painting of *The Goldfinch*, which has been knocked to the floor and its frame broken.. Bewildered, Theo puts it in a bag and carries it with him. He sets off through the ruined build-

ing trying to find his mother, but can't, so he returns to their apartment to wait for her there. A spoiler here, she died, and the novel deals at length with Theo's grief and loss and the feeling, which lasts through his life, that he was responsible for her death because they wouldn't have been in the art gallery if he hadn't been suspended.

The problematic possession of this little masterpiece of a painting is a thread which runs through the whole story. At first, Theo wants to return it, but then realises that he's left it too long. The authorities thought that it was destroyed in the explosion, but then other missing pieces, looted from the gallery, start turning up and they start saying *The Goldfinch* was stolen.

There's so much in this novel it's impossible to summarise without becoming tedious. There's a compelling coming-of-age story, as Theo navigates life without his beloved mother. There's a story of a heart-breaking life-long hopeless love. There's alcohol and drugs and guns and violence and antique furniture... Trust me, the story drags you in and won't let go.

So, about that prose. Let me at least quote this one sentence, this one long sentence. Theo is in New York at Christmas time, feeling miserable. Here's the quote, one sentence:

Hordes of people on the street, lighted Christmas trees sparkling high on penthouse balconies and complacent Christmas music floating out of shops, and weaving in and out of crowds I had a strange feeling of being already dead, of moving in a vaster sidewalk grayness than the street or even the city could encompass, my soul disconnected from my body and drifting among other souls in a mist somewhere between past and present, Walk Don't Walk, individual pedestrians floating up strangely isolated and lonely before my eyes, blank faces plugged into earbuds and staring straight ahead, lips moving silently, and the city noise dampened and deafened, under crushing, granite-colored skies that muffled the noise from the street, garbage and newsprint, concrete and drizzle, a dirty winter grayness weighing like stone.

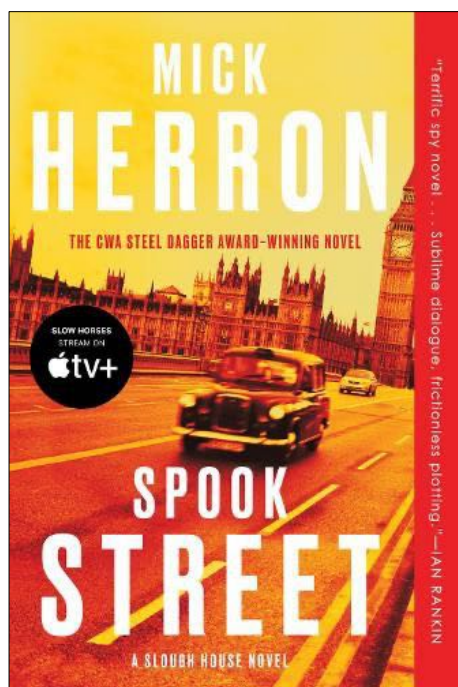
My gosh, she's a good writer. I'd have to put it down as the best book I've read so far this year. I've already ordered a copy of her second novel, *The Little Friend*.

The Goldfinch won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and several other awards, and was on the New York Times bestseller list for over thirty weeks.

It was made into a film in 2019, directed by John Crowley, but the film is certainly not highly regarded, with one reviewer calling it "a botch job for the ages" and saying it "appears to be adapting the Cliff's Notes version of the book instead of the book itself". Ouch!

But the book itself... I loved it.

Spook Street by Mick Herron



THE FOURTH BOOK IN THE “SLOUGH HOUSE” series of spy thrillers, which have the twist that the characters all belong to a department of MI5 where failed spies are sent to do boring, meaningless work in the hope that they’ll resign and save the government having to pay redundancy to them. It’s a great concept, because despite appearances, these failed spies end up becoming involved in a great many live and important cases.

I can’t really outline the story of *Spook Street* without giving away too many spoilers, but suffice it to say that it begins in the middle of the night when the head of Slough House, the obnoxious Jackson Lamb, is called out to identify the body of one of his team, who has been shot dead. The story then has many twists and turns and deals in large part with the danger to the intelligence services of a retired, elderly ex-spy who is now descending into dementia. He knows far too much, but is no longer capable of

keeping his mouth shut.

Great stuff, as usual. I may take a pause before I roll on to the remaining books of the series, however. I think Herron is up to number 9 of the Slough House books so far. I don’t want to read them all in a gulp.

Don’t forget to check out *Through the Biblioscope*, my fortnightly newsletter about my reading, as well as my monthly newsletter featuring my short fiction, *A Flash in the Pan*. Both are published on the Substack platform.

You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

[Through the Biblioscope](#)

[A Flash in the Pan](#)



SCIENCE FICTION

Hugo Awards 1970

A GREAT DEAL OF MY READING SINCE the last issue was for the purposes of our podcast. Every so often we run a segment called “The Hugo Time Machine”, in which we go back and look at the works nominated for the Hugo Award in a particular year. This time it was 1970, and so I’ve been reading the following five books.

Macroscope by Piers Anthony

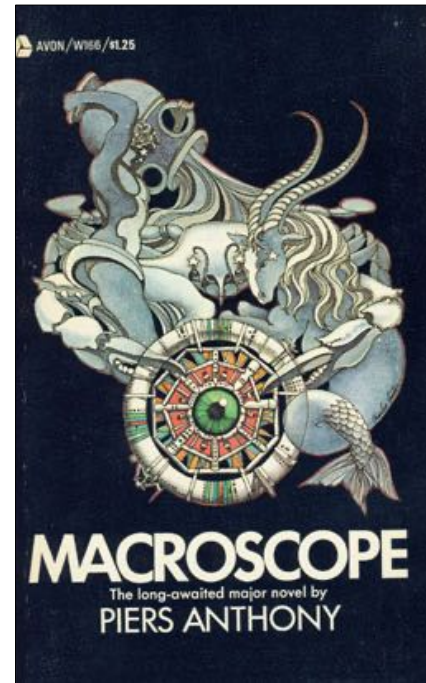
I HAVE TO START WITH A CONFESSION. I didn’t actually read this book, or at least, I didn’t read all of it. I don’t know how many words it is, but it felt like a very long book. About half-way through, maybe a little more, I started flipping pages, flip, flip, flip, trying to get back to what seemed like the main core of the story. Eventually I reached the point where I just gave up and skimmed through, glancing at pages here and there to see if it had improved. It hadn’t. And then I found myself at the end. I read the last page. No joy there, either. So of the five novels nominated for the 1970 Hugo, this one definitely ranked last for me.

But let me at least give you an outline of the story and an indication of why I found it so unreadable.

We start with a young man called Ivo. He’s of mixed race, with darkish skin. As the novel opens, he’s being followed. The setting is of some American town or city, and the time is meant, I guess, to be in the 1980s or 90s, in other words, a few decades in the future from when the book was written. Ivo fears that the beefy White man following him means him harm. It turns out that he’s wrong, but there’s lots of (completely unnecessary) mystery about what’s going on as Ivo is driven to Cape Kennedy and shot off in a rocket to meet up with someone he used to know called Brad who is aboard a space station housing a fantastic instrument called the Macroscope.

I use the word “fantastic” advisedly, because due to some hand-wavy scientific nonsense, the Macroscope can see into the Universe without paying any regard to the inverse-square law, and can thus see in incredible detail (again I use the word “incredible” advisedly) objects hundreds of light-years away. Solid objects don’t block it, either. So if they turn it on the Earth, they can clearly see the print on a book someone is reading inside a library (the Macroscope, apparently can also adjust to match the rotation speed of the Earth while it does this). And—gosh wow!—they even can do the same for civilisations on planets orbiting other stars, and so read alien books!

The scientists operating it have also discovered that there are the equivalent of galactic radio stations broadcasting knowledge using the same technology on which the Macroscope operates. One of these stations, or channels, has become known as the “Destroyer” because if you’re intelligent enough to understand it, it fries your brain. Less smart people are safe, it seems.

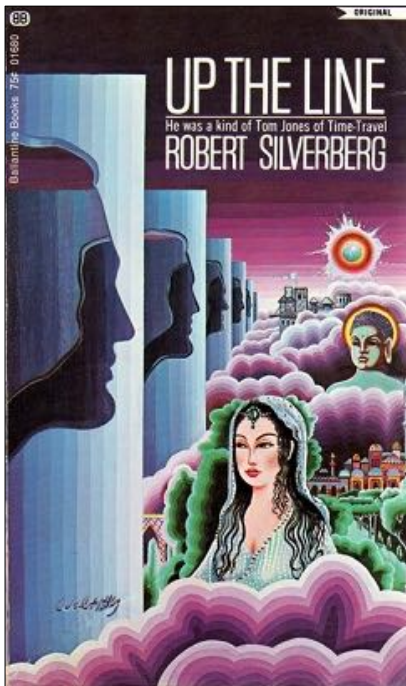


Then there's a lot of political goings-on. Brad and a senator have a macho stand-off and decide to test their mental powers against the Destroyer. Both of them get their brains fried and then Ivo and a bunch of other hijack the Macro-scope and head off for the planet Neptune. There Ivo is able to (safely) tap into the galactic radio channels and they discover amazing technology which lets them leave the solar system entirely and make huge many-light-year jumps through space in an instant, from where they can look back at the Earth, but of course they are now hundreds of light-years, in fact thousands of light-years away from Earth now, and so they're looking back at the earth as it was thousands of years ago, and so there's a long boring segment where Ivo is projected back to live in ancient Tyre and...

That's when I started skipping. And I haven't even mentioned the huge slab of the book which appears to be based on the idea that astrology really works, and it's all tied up with the Destroyer and....

My tip: give this one a solid miss.

Up the Line by Robert Silverberg



I DON'T HAVE A LOT TO SAY about this one (Perry reviewed it on the podcast), but I suppose it's entertaining enough.

The book is told in the first-person by one Jud Elliott, who has recently dropped out of a job as a law clerk and joins up with the Time Service as a tourist guide. Yes, in this period well-heeled people can pay to be taken back in time to visit famous places and events (one problem: the area around the Crucifixion is becoming very crowded with tourists pretending to be locals).

Lots of time-traveling, mostly to or nearby sixth-century Byzantium (about which Silverberg revels in telling you about in great and often boring detail). Lots of bonking of his charges, and of women of the past, by the protagonist, and because of that he gets himself into a complex time paradox which eventually leads to his demise.

Ho hum.

Bug Jack Barron by Norman Spinrad

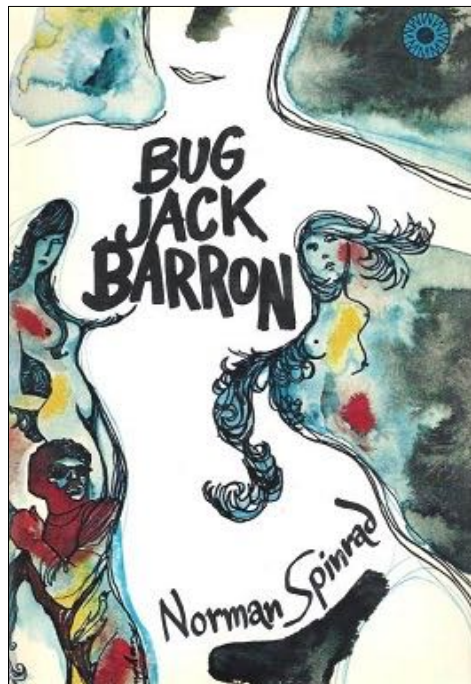
LIKE MACROSCOPE, this one is set a few decades in the future from when the book was written, let's say the start of the twenty-first century.

In this one, Spinrad seems to have felt that writing trendy New Wave science fiction came down to using a lot of swear words, describing sexual intercourse in gross detail, and having lots of long stream-of-consciousness passages. As if James Joyce hadn't done all of that in the 1920s in *Ulysses*.

So much for the writing style, which I found very irritating. Let's get on to the story. The book's titular protagonist is one Jack Barron, the host of a hugely popular weekly television show called *Bug Jack Barron*, the idea being that viewers can call in with some topic they are incensed about and "bug" Jack Barron about it. Barron positions himself as the saviour of the common man or woman, he's on their side, despite, of course, being filthy rich and as cynical as hell. He boasts of the size of his audience—100 million people! The whole thing is

eerily prescient of the kind of television show run by men like Tucker Carlson on Fox News.

Anyway, it seems that Jack Barron wasn't always this kind of character. In the past he was a left-wing progressive, friends with Black leaders like Lukas Greene, who is now the Governor of Mississippi, and deeply in love with his wife Sara, who joined in his progressive dreams. But six years ago he started his TV show and, so far as Lukas and Sara are concerned, sold out to the Man. Sara left him, but it appears that Jack can't let her go, and as a substitute, has lots of sex with a series of women who mean nothing to him, though he frequently annoys them by calling out Sara's name at the moment of climax.



The actual plot of the novel comes from Barron's interactions, on screen and in real life, with a man called Benedict Howards.

Howards operates a hugely profitable outfit called the Foundation for Human Immortality, which for a hefty fee is freezing human bodies in perpetuity, with the hope that one day science will have advanced enough to thaw them out and fix whatever was wrong with them—a common SF trope of the time. They are also working on actual immortality treatments which will stop human aging forever, but claim to have made no progress as yet.

Barron infuriates Howards by running segments critical of the Foundation on his show, and doubling-down when Howards objects. This prompts Howards to develop a cunning plan: bribe Barron with enough goodies that he'll join Howards' cause and help him get a law passed through Congress which will give the Foundation an effective monopoly.

But what would be enough of a bribe to do this? Barron is, after all, rich. Well, there's a free Freezer contract, for a start. And Howards engineers it that Sara, Barron's estranged wife, comes back to him on condition that she get him to agree to do Howards' bidding. Her bribe to do this? Another free Freezer contract. The fear of death is described over and over again as a motivating factor controlling the behaviour of all of the major characters, in Howards' case to an obsessive degree.

Then we go one step further, because it seems that behind the scenes the Foundation has developed an effective immortality treatment, but that fact, and how it works, is a deep secret. Offering true immortality to Jack and Sara is, it seems, the ultimate bribe, and one they both eventually agree to take.

However, there's an ugly secret behind how the treatment works (but you can see it coming a mile away), so ugly that the knowledge will enough, Howards is certain, to force Jack and Sara into doing his bidding after they have first unknowingly had the treatment. He doesn't really know Jack Barron, though, does he?

Look, this was all readable enough, but it's a book very much set in the thinking and culture of the late 1960s and it hasn't aged well.

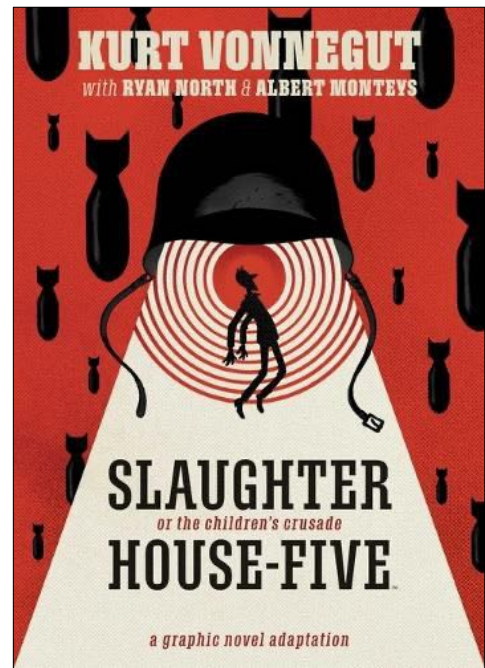
Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut

AGAIN, I don't have a lot to say, because Perry covered it well in the podcast.

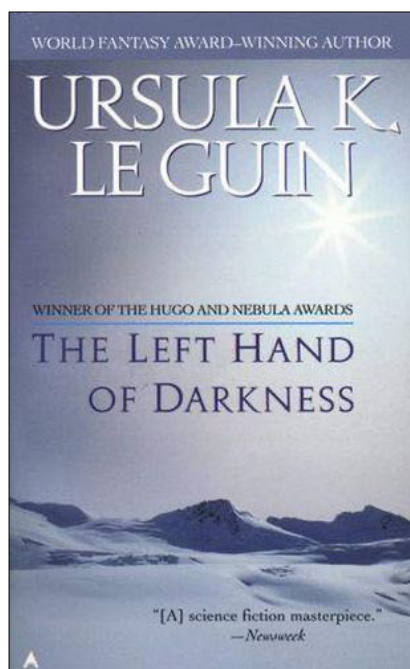
The book is subtitled "The Children's Crusade". Nominated for both the Hugo and the Nebula Award in 1970, it is nevertheless only barely science fiction, though it certainly has plenty of SF elements to it. Really, it's a very powerful anti-war novel, detailing in fictional form Vonnegut's own experience as a prisoner of war who survived the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden, an event now considered as a war crime (rightly, in my view). There were no military targets in Dresden, but the Allies nevertheless burned it to the ground, and some 135,000 people died in one night.

There's a very dark thread of humour throughout the book; and perhaps it's trying to show now only the tragedy but the essential absurdity of war.

A great American classic, however you want to categorise it.



The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin



THIS BOOK STANDS OUT HEAD AND SHOULDERS above the other novels nominated for the Hugo Award in 1970. It's deservedly a classic of the genre and will I think always remain so. But as you'll hear later, I do have one issue with it.

Le Guin excelled at world-building, if we understand that to mean not merely the physical characteristics of a setting, but also the social structures and culture of a world. Here she does a magnificent job of doing all of that.

The planetary environment she depicts is fascinating in itself: the world of Gethen, colloquially called "Winter" by the investigators who discovered it. On the edge of an ice age, with its seasons created not by the axial tilt of the planet but by the eccentricity of its orbit around its sun, which means if you think about it, that everywhere on the planet is cold at the same time, there's no division, as on Earth, between northern and southern hemispheres (I wonder if that's a metaphor,

hmmm). In deep winter, cities are almost buried in snow and travel is almost impossible.

There are several different nations on Gethen, and the author describes two of these in some detail, the monarchy of Karhide, run by a half-crazy king; and the Soviet-style Orgoreyn, complete with its secret police.

The story is told from the first-person point of view of two characters, the Envoy, Genly Ai, and the Karhide politician Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, and the core plot is about their changing relationship. Genly Ai is a representative of

the Ekumen, which is a star-spanning community of humans. The human form, it seems, was spread eons ago to a large number of stellar systems by some society now long-gone. Gethen is one of those systems, but like many others, has now no idea that other civilisations, or the Ekumen, exist. Genly Ai is a lone human, an Envoy, sent to the planet to carefully re-establish contact. Firstly, of course, he has to be believed and his message accepted. This doesn't prove to be easy. Estraven, who has been speaking to the king on his behalf, abruptly tells Genly that he can no longer help him. Genly has been distrustful of him from the start, and now he feels betrayed.

Now, before we go any further, we have to talk about sex. There's one huge difference between Gethen and the societies of humans on other worlds. On Gethen, there is only a single gender, not two. Humans for most of the time are asexual, but periodically, every five or six weeks or so, enter a state of estrus or sexual activity and fertility. The Gethenians call this state that of "kemmer". An individual, while in this state and with a partner similarly in estrus, can express male or female genitalia. Which gender they take on is at random, so any individual can either impregnate or be impregnated. A person can have children "of the flesh", so be what we would call the "mother", or else their sexual partner can bear the child, and so the first person would be what we call the "father".

Le Guin deals well with this fascinating idea, and its ramifications for society. She introduces the concept very carefully, introducing us to the idea in a slow, subtle way: we get little hints, we get legends and myths, it's really quite an education as to how she does it, no great expository lumps, until once we are properly prepared, when we do get such a lump, in the form of a report from an earlier Ekumen investigator (before the Envoy is sent, these investigators operated in secret from the locals).

This genderless society is of course, a key characteristic of the book, and one which is why it has deservedly attracted so much interest and attention. But in re-reading the book, probably for at least the fourth time, I was struck by one issue affecting the plot of the book, which is as a whole is a well-depicted adventure story. Genly Ai's mission in Karhide initially fails, Estraven falls out of favour with the king and is sent into exile, Genly Ai gets into even more trouble in the neighbouring state of Orgoreyn and ends up in a prison camp, from which Estraven is able to free him. A long, long section of the book, carefully researched and beautifully written, is the journey which Genly Ai and Estraven make across a frozen section of the world in mid-winter, trying to escape Orgoreyn and return to Karhide. And of course it's also about the changing relationship between these two people, forced closely together, a relationship which on Genly Ai's side is badly misguided.

Now I'm going to do what some may consider to be blasphemy, and criticise this classic work.

Le Guin wants to say that the dual-gender nature of Estraven has prompted Ai's misunderstanding and initial hostility to him, but I'm not sure that I buy it. Here's the key passage, from Ai's point of view. They are stuck in a tent on the ice, and Estraven has gone into kemmer:

I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted. For he was the

only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty: and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man.

I don't think this works, quite honestly. And the key reason is Genly Ai himself. I thought this the previous time I read the book. As I say, I think I've read it at least four times in total, and truly, I love it. But in a book which focuses so heavily on issues of gender, the problem is that Genly Ai *himself* seems to be so genderless, so asexual.

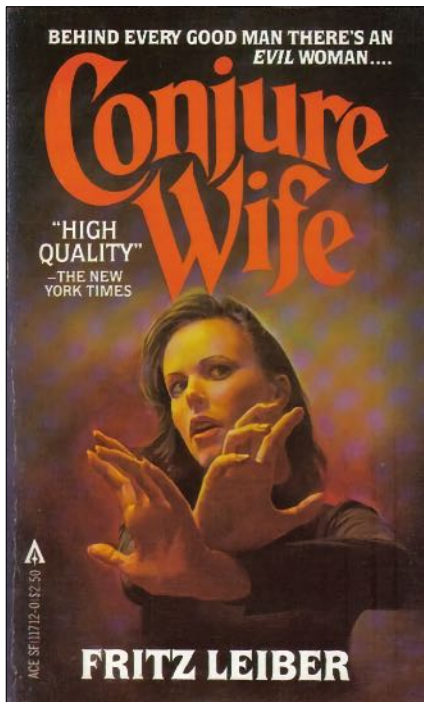
Consider: this is a young man (we're told so several times), presumably with normal sexual appetites. Now he's been isolated for nearly two years from his own kind, from women and men, but nowhere in the book, ever, do we get any sense of him experiencing any form of sexual frustration or tension, any sense that he is attracted by any Gethenian, though many of them are described as being good-looking. And here at the most crucial moment of the book, when Estraven goes into kemmer and appears to Genly Ai's eyes as a woman, we get no feeling that he is aroused or tempted by this, not in the least. But if Genly Ai is a completely asexual human, then why is he afraid of seeing Estraven as a woman? Is he afraid of being sexually attracted to someone he's been thinking of as a man? OK, but then why aren't we, even at this critical moment, *shown* that attraction? Even if you think that perhaps Genly Ai is gay, it makes even less sense, because why the fear? I just don't think it works.

Nevertheless, despite all that, this remains a great novel, and as I've said it definitely deserved to be the winner of the Hugo and Nebula in 1970 and to have become the great classic of the genre that it is.

(End of the Hugo Time Machine titles).



Conjure Wife by Fritz Leiber



THIS WAS LEIBER'S FIRST NOVEL, published in *Unknown Magazine* in 1943, so well before the Hugo Awards started up in the 1950s.

I suppose that you would call it an “urban fantasy”, in that it deals with the everyday world with fantasy elements blended in. Some people have described it as a horror novel, but it's fairly tame horror if so.

In the book, Leiber plays off the deep fear of the hidden powers of women that men have had, going back to prehistoric times. Women, after all, have the power to create new life from their own bodies. And they have knowledge—secret “women's business”—concealed from men.

In *Conjure Wife* Leiber spins this deep-seated ancient fear into the concept that even in the modern day all women (or at least, the vast majority of women) have secret knowledge of witchcraft, concealed from men but acknowledged among themselves. And they use this magic, not at all in the gently humorous way of

the TV series *Bewitched*, but much more seriously to defend themselves and their male partners from the evil influences of other women.

The novel is told in the third person, almost entirely from the point of view of Norman Sayler, a sociology professor in his 30s, specialising in ethnology, currently employed at Hempnell College, a university in a small town in the United States. His academic researches have concentrated on the use of ritual magic in primitive societies, and he has spent a lot of time travelling the world to document these practices, accompanied by his wife Tansy.

Though he's still young, and an outsider, he's succeeded remarkably well at the College, and he can't help thinking to himself how lucky he has been, and how well Tansy has navigated the rather close-minded community of college wives.

He's at home one day while his wife is out, and is idly mooching about the house when he decides on a whim to have a look in her dressing room. In one of her drawers he discovers some strange things: jars of what appears to be dirt, some dried up herbs. As he looks at these things he realises that these materials are very similar to those he's recorded from primitive society. He looks closer and finds that the jars of dirt are labelled with the names of local cemeteries—graveyard dirt.

Tansy arrives home unexpectedly and finds him standing at her dresser. There's a confrontation, and he accuses her of having been overly influenced by his researches and the field trips they have gone on. In other words he thinks she's become obsessed and has become mentally unbalanced. Their emotional discussion goes late into the night, but he finally forces her to promise to give up trying to do magic. As a scientist he doesn't doubt for a moment that magic is all nonsense.

Tansy, having reluctantly agreed, then goes about the house finding various charms she has secreted about the place, and Norman burns them all in the fireplace. Tansy seems to enter a state of relief and release, as through free from an intolerable burden.

You can see where the story is going. That very evening, things start to go wrong for Norman, and his luck takes a turn very much for the worse. Three of

the college wives in particular seem to have it in for Norman as they boost the careers of their own husbands. No surprise that here we have three witches. Norman tries to hold on to his rational, scientific ideas even as the coincidences and malevolent events start to mount up. Finally, with Norman's life in danger, Tansy tricks him into passing on to *her* the curses he has had laid on him by the other wives. Shortly thereafter she leaves home without his knowledge, leaving him only a cryptic note, broken off before she was able to complete it.

This is the best part of the book, as Norman, still fighting with his disbelief of magic and assuming that Tansy has had a mental breakdown, sets off to follow her. Along the way, Tansy is able to drop other notes: it seems as though she is (or as Norman would say, *thinks she is*) in the grip of a powerful, malevolent creature whose attention very rarely is distracted. It is taking her to a bayside town to commit suicide by drowning herself.

The notes Tansy drops add up to the instructions for how to put together a spell which will free her. Despite his scepticism, in his fear for Tansy, Norman tries to assemble the spell, but as a midnight deadline approaches, the simple objects required seem to conspire against him to make it terribly difficult. Leiber does a great job building up the tension here. Norman finally completes the spell. But not quite quickly enough.

I won't give away what happens after that, but the tension continues and there are a number of clever twists in the story before evil is defeated. I was a bit let down by the ending of the book, however, which implies that despite all that has happened, Norman still tries to hold on to his rationalist point of view. His continued stubbornness in this regard is probably the weakest and most annoying part of the story.

Look, I enjoyed this a lot. It's a clever idea and it's worked out very well in the story. I do wonder, however, what *women* readers were meant to make of the book. Perhaps back in the 1940s Leiber didn't expect there to be any women readers of magazines like *Unknown*?

Utterly Dark and the Heart of the Wild by Philip Reeve

THIS BOOK, which was published last year, is aimed, I imagine, at “middle-school” readers, kids from about 12 years old upwards. It’s a sequel to *Utterly Dark and the Face of the Deep*, the first in this series, published about two years ago. I talked about *The Face of the Deep* in Episode 67, and at that time I didn’t expect there to be a sequel. Neither, apparently, did Philip Reeve, according to what he said to me on Twitter (should I be calling it “X” now?). Anyway, here we are, and I see that there’s yet another *Utterly Dark* novel in the works.

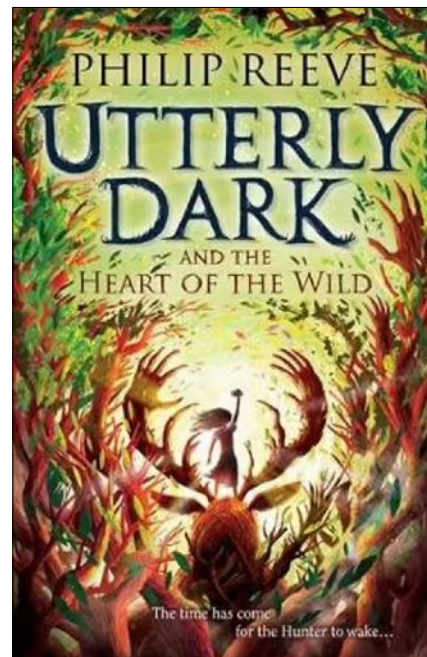
Reeve, by the way, is probably best known for his quirky *Mortal Engines* series, from which a movie was made a few years ago.

The setting of both the first *Utterly Dark* book and this new one is the fictional “Autumn Isles” which are supposedly located to the West of Britain. The time is the early to mid 1800s. In the first book, we discover that young Utterly was found abandoned in a wicker basket washed up on the shore of the island of Wildsea, and adopted by Andrew Dark, who was the Watcher of Wildsea, tasked with keeping watch for the return of the “Hidden Lands” far to the West, the domain of a powerful entity called The Gorm. He raises Utterly as his niece, but we eventually discover that his relationship to Utterly, and for that matter, with the Gorm, is stronger and stranger than it at first appears.

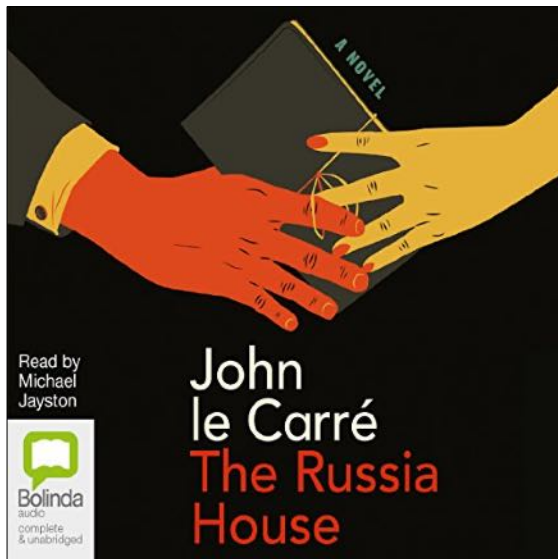
Andrew’s brother, Will Dark, returned to Wildsea part-way through the first book. At the start of this one, he is getting married to a woman called Aish, who rescued him from a shipwreck in the first book. She’s a strange, powerful woman, close to the land and the wilderness. A month or so after the wedding, Will is invited to help examine some standing stones on another island, Summertide. Aish tells him she can’t leave Wildsea, so Will invites Utterly to go with him.

On Summertide, dirty deeds are slowly uncovered, and Will and Utterly eventually find themselves trapped in the “Underwoods”, an endless forest dominated by the malevolent and powerful Hunter, a primitive demiurge. With the help of their friends and ultimately that of Aish, they do escape from the Hunter, but he follows them into our world and they have to struggle again to put an end to his power. Doing so forces young Utterly to make a solemn promise to The Gorm in order to recruit her help, a promise which we will have to wait for the next book in the series in order to see how it plays out.

All of this makes a compelling story for young and old readers alike. I enjoyed it a lot, and I will be looking out to buy the next book, *Utterly Dark and the Tides of Time* as soon as it comes out.



The Russia House by John le Carré



I ACTUALLY LISTENED TO THIS AS AN audiobook, rather than read it. With audiobooks one of the tricks is to make sure that you can cope with the narrator's voice. There was no problem here, however, as Michael Jayston does an excellent job of it.

Set during the final years of the Soviet Union, it centres on the book industry and in particular on a middle-aged, unsuccessful publisher, Bartholemew ("Barley") Scott Blair, who is the book's main character. And what an intriguing, compelling character he turns out to be.

The novel opens in Moscow, at a trade fair for books, where there are stands for Western publishing companies to sell their wares and

to perhaps take on new titles from Russian writers. At the close of the day, one of the stand holders, Nicky Landau, is approached by a beautiful young Russian woman, Katya, who has been desperately looking for Scott Blair. But Blair hasn't turned up to the fair. She tells Landau that Blair has promised to publish a book, a novel, by a friend of hers. It's vitally important that he does so, she says, and she presses three hand-written notebooks on Landau, which he is very reluctant to accept.

There's some lovely characterisation in here of Landau, despite him taking only a minor role in the book as a whole. He's an expatriate Pole, more British than the British, with a soft heart towards good-looking women.

Here's how Nicky thinks of himself, a lovely bit of writing, I thought:

He was a card. That's what he liked to be. A pushy, short-arsed Polish card and proud of it. He was old Nick, the cheeky chappy of the eastward-facing reps, capable, he liked to boast, of selling filthy pictures to a Georgian convent, or hair tonic to a Romanian billiard ball. He was Landau, the undersized bedroom athlete, who wore raised heels to give his Slav body the English scale he admired, and ritzy suits that whistled, "Here I am." When old Nick set up his stand, his travelling colleagues assured our unattributable inquirers, you could hear the tinkle of the handbell on his Polish vendor's barrow. And little Landau shared the joke with them. He played their game. "Boys, I'm the Pole you wouldn't touch with a barge," he would declare proudly, as he ordered up another round.

Nicky takes pity on Katya and agrees to get the notebooks to Scott Blair, whom he knows. He cleverly smuggles the notebooks back out of Russia and back in England tries to locate Scott Blair, to no avail and to his increasing annoyance. He looks at the notebooks and finds them full, not of a novel but of mathematics and diagrams, covering some sort of military issue. Suspecting that Blair is a secret agent, Landau doggedly keeps trying until he forces the British intelligence services to take him seriously and accept possession of the notebooks. At which point alarms start going off. This is hot stuff, apparently to do with Russia's nuclear readiness. The material is eventually passed to "The Russia House", the

department which concentrates on that country. The agents here, and their interactions between each other, and then with the agents of the CIA, become a major focus of the novel.

But Landau is wrong. Barley Scott Blair isn't a secret agent, not at all.

Le Carré is a master of so many aspects of storytelling. He's brilliant at characterisation, and I find it interesting that he is often able to have us understand a character not by a direct description of that person, but through looking at their actions and movements. Think, for example, of how Jim Prideaux is introduced at the start of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* through a description of how he arrives at the boarding school where he is going to teach in his old Alvis pulling a battered caravan, bouncing over the rough ground. Here is someone bold, experienced in life but down on his luck. Or similarly how Maria Ostrakova, a Russian emigre living in Paris, is introduced at the start of *Smiley's People* by a description of her trudging along the pavement with her shopping bags, wearing a black dress and cracked shoes. Someone who has suffered grief and is now living in poverty but nevertheless she endures.

We don't quite have the same thing here, but we do get a really good view of Barley Scott Blair's character well before we meet him, through what Landau says of him, and through the investigations carried out into his background by the security services. Blair runs his publishing business, largely owned by his aunts, in a lackadaisical fashion. Indeed, that's how he treats his life. He has two children from a failed marriage, now in their 20s. He drinks too much, and plays the jazz saxophone in bars, very well, when the urge takes him. He travels all over, apparently at a whim.

The British security forces eventually track Barley down in Lisbon, Portugal and persuade him to talk to them. Does he know this woman, Katya? No. Did he promise to publish a book for her? No. For a while he is as baffled as the British agents, but then he recalls how on a previous trip he met a Russian man, introduced to him as a poet and given the joking name "Goethe" by his friends. During a long boozy evening when they all got very drunk, Barley spouted off his ideas about world peace and disarmament, not particularly seriously. But Goethe took him with deadly seriousness. And Goethe, it seems, is not just an amateur poet, but an idealistic Russian scientist involved in their nuclear program. It's Goethe's book which Barley, in his drunken state, has promised to publish, without any real understanding of what it would contain. Goethe thinks that publishing it will cause radical change and save the world.

The material is of such interest and importance to the security of both Britain and the United States that the authorities convince Barley to return to Russia to try to make contact again with Goethe to try to verify the source and possibly to obtain more valuable intelligence. Barley, needless to say, is no one's idea of a good secret agent, but it appears that Goethe will talk to no-one else.

The first thing to do is for Barley to return to Moscow and talk to the young woman Katya, who it turns out works for a Russian publishing company. She is the only connection they have with Goethe, whose real name they don't even know.

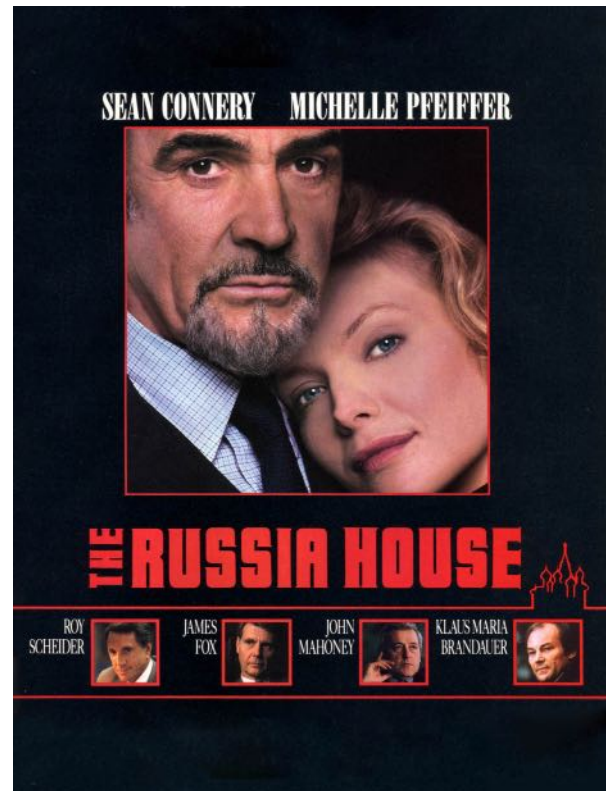
To quickly summarise most of the rest of the book: Barley soon falls deeply in love with Katya, who is a divorced mother of two children, and who was once Goethe's lover. The CIA get involved, and treat the British intelligence service as their junior partner. Though this important lead came from a British source, the CIA (or "Langley" as it's referred to throughout) quickly take control and want to direct Barley as their own agent.

Barley, however, is his own man and has ideas of his own. He soon has serious fears for the welfare of Katya and her young children, unwittingly caught up in the midst of Cold War paranoia and subterfuge.

Interestingly, although the book focuses on Barley Scott Blair as the main character, and for much of the start of the novel appears to be written in the omniscient third person, we discover that in fact it is being narrated from the first-person point of view of Harold de Palfrey (“Old Palfrey”), a legal adviser working for the Russia House, with his own personal concerns. This disconnect bothered me for a bit—how does Palfrey know exactly what Lauder and then Blair were thinking at various points? That is eventually explained, how convincingly I’m not sure. But that’s the smallest of nit-picks.

Le Carré certainly knows how to create a tense, compelling drama, that’s for sure, and here he ends by showing us the absurdity of the hall-of-mirrors of espionage and nuclear strategy. Though this novel is set in the era of Mikail Gorbachev, *perestroika* and *glasnost*, these elements are unchanged and still make for a highly readable story.

I can’t close without mentioning that **The Russia House** was turned into a movie in 1990, directed by Australian director Fred Schepisi. It starred Sean Connery as Barley Blair and Michelle Pfeiffer as Katya, with a script by Tom Stoppard. It seems to have been generally well-received with the two lead actors given credit for excellent performances, but it went nowhere in the awards, and only gets a 70% rating on Rotten Tomatoes.





THIS IS YET ANOTHER TRANSCRIPT FROM our podcast, a discussion between Perry Middlemiss and myself about the movie *Interstellar*, which we recorded way back at the start of 2020. But the subject of this movie came up in ANZAPA recently and I thought it went well with some of the other transcripts I've published.

PERRY:

Right, from time to time on this podcast, we like to go back and have a look at something in the genre, a book or a film, which one of us really likes and the other one's not so happy with.

In this case, we decided to have a look at a film, *Interstellar*, released in 2014, directed by Christopher Nolan.

David and I discussed this. He absolutely and utterly hated it, as he recalled. I thought it was okay. I didn't think it was absolutely terribly spectacular, but I thought it was okay.

And so we thought we'd go back and have a look at it again, come up with our current views of it and see where they lie.

So David, have you changed your view about this particular film?

DAVID:

Well, it's interesting, actually. The answer is no. I still don't like it, with all sorts of reasons.

In fact, to be perfectly honest, my wife and I sat down to watch this about a year ago, and we got about 20 minutes in and we both turned to each other and said, "Nah, we're not going to keep watching this."

So when Perry suggested that we talk about it, I thought, "Well, I can take it. I'll make myself watch the whole thing."

PERRY:

And have you David?

DAVID:

I'll explain the bit where we gave it up, too, because it's probably important.

But I'll recap the basic story, if someone hasn't seen it, very, very briefly. The Earth has had an environmental crisis. There's some sort of plant blight which has been killing off all the cereal crops and so on, a bit like the *Death of Grass*, there's a film or a book called *The Death of Grass*, isn't there?

PERRY:

In the film, with the blight that is hitting all the crops, it's odd that they mentioned wheat and corn. They don't mention rice at all. And I would be of the view that probably rice is more of a cereal crop than any other in the world.

DAVID:

That's right.

PERRY:

Maybe I'm wrong, but I think that's probably right. Even though this is set in the US, they just don't grow it.

DAVID:

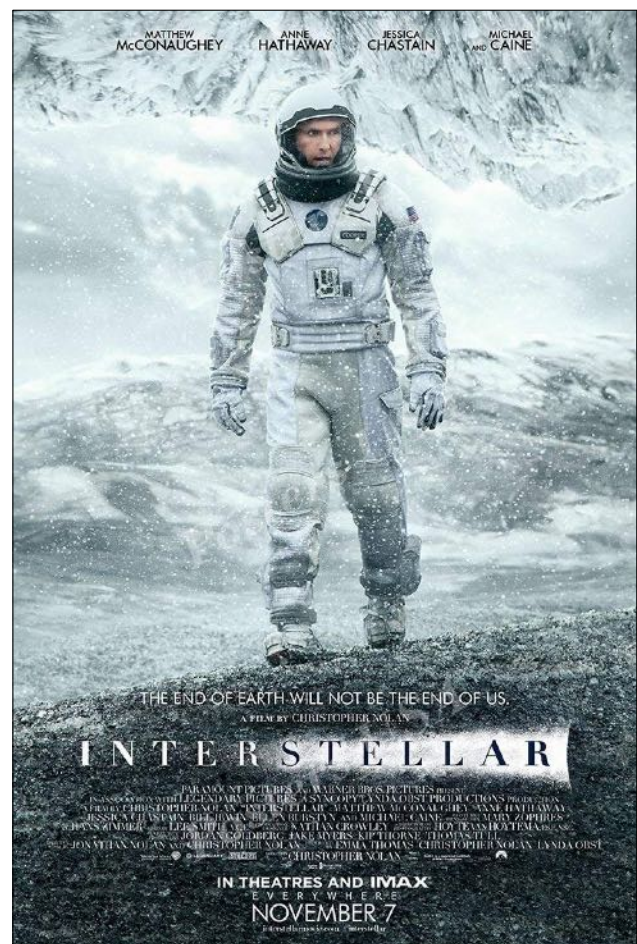
That's it. So there's that part of it. So the big problem, therefore, is everyone's likely to starve. The only crop that seems to be surviving at the moment is corn. And so everyone's got these huge, huge fields of maize.

So Matthew McConaughey, who's this farmer, living in this little farmhouse, this sort of little rural type farmhouse, and nevertheless has acres and acres and acres of corn growing. And he used to be an astronaut. As the movie starts, we find he's having a nightmare of something that happened to him when he was an astronaut or a trainee to be an astronaut.

But now, all that's gone in the past, we don't want to go into space anymore. The school books are now teaching kids that the moon landing was a hoax. And the focus on everybody is, you've got to be a farmer. You've got to go out there and grow more crops.

But weird things happen. And the main character, Cooper, or Coop, has a daughter, a young daughter, and she finds really odd things happening in her room. And signals are being sent to her somehow. There's some sort of message being transmitted by what she calls a ghost in her room.

So eventually, eventually, eventually, we get to the bottom of this. And there's some sort of message which turns out to be the coordinates of some particular location, which is spelled out in binary in streaks of dust on the floor. Now, that's just about the point where I gave up. But no, no, I kept going.





Anyway, he gets in his truck and he goes off to find what's at these coordinates, and his daughter sort of stows away on the truck to go to the same place.

The daughter is about 10 or 11, I think. And they discover that this is the last remaining outpost of NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of America. And they're building this rocket ship that's going to go into space. There's already some sort of space station up there. But they're building this rocket to go up there again.

And it turns out that Matthew McConaughey, the Coop, is the best possible pilot they could possibly have, and somehow, mysteriously, he's been recruited by forces unknown to come and take off. So I'm being very cynical about this.

Anyway, then there's been some sort of wormhole which has been placed in the solar system. And that connects to another galaxy, apparently. So there's something like 12 possible habitable worlds. And so they go there.

So he goes up in the spaceship with a couple of other people like Anne Hathaway. They visit these various worlds, only three of which are real candidates. And various things happen to them.

They're trying to find a suitable candidate for humanity to get to the stars and survive from Earth, because not only is the blight happening, but apparently this blight that is killing off all the crops is also absorbing all the oxygen, which is one thing, which is the other point at which I think I just decided to give it away.

Anyway, it's full of things which break your ability to believe, your suspension of disbelief. I kept hitting these roadblocks of, "I just can't believe that. I can't suspend my disbelief. This is terrible."

And so it keeps on going, keeps on going, and that keeps on going.

And then right at the end, it becomes incredibly sentimental and icky and sort of really over the top in terms of the amount of sentimentality in it. So I didn't like that either.

Then there's the fact that these habitable worlds, three of these habitable worlds that they're visiting are not in orbit around a star, but around a black hole.

Now it gives the director the chance to have this really nice looking simulation of a black hole or visualization of a black hole. But black holes are not good places to be around. They emit gamma rays. They don't emit light that would be enough to grow crops in or anything like that.

So that's the other thing which just about got me. Well, the other thing about that is that one of the planets, the planet they visit first, is apparently very close to the event horizon. In fact, they say, someone asks, "And Miller's planet is on the horizon?", and the reply is: "As a basketball around a hoop."

So this is supposed to be on the very event horizon, just outside the very event horizon of this black hole, at which point you wouldn't be able to see the black hole. You'd be able to see it is black and you'd be surrounded by all the falling matter.

So that was really annoying.

Then there's the other bit where, you know, the very start where he discovers NASA, they got this Saturn V equivalent, you would agree? It looks like a Saturn V and the whole spaceship takes off just like the Apollo astronauts took off and so on to get off the Earth.

Now they go visit this planet next to the black hole and when they land on this planet, the surface gravity is about 1.5 that of the Earth. So it's got *stronger* surface gravity than the Earth. And yet they're able to get back into orbit *in this little flyer*. They don't need the Saturn V rocket anymore. They've got this little flying craft that's like a little space shuttle of its own, without any boosters, it just flies up into space.

So it's full of these things which really just got up my nose about the plausibility of this thing.

And so I don't know, it was a mess, I thought. It was just a mess.

So what did you think, Perry?

PERRY:

Well, long ago, when I first watched this, long ago, like four or five years ago, I probably watched it when it first came out. I thought, "Oh, yeah, that was all right. It wasn't overly flash, I thought it was okay."

And since I've gone back and had a look at it again, I've also gone to have a look at its reception in various web-based critical websites. IMDB, the Internet Movie Database, gives it 8.6 out of 10.

DAVID:

There you go. See, I'm obviously in the minority here.

PERRY:

Rotten Tomatoes gives it 7.06 out of 10. And Metacritic, which is a combination of a whole lot of either web-based or print-based reviews of a particular piece of work, gave it 74 out of 100. So they're all around that 74 to 80.

I wouldn't give it any more than 5 out of 10.

DAVID:

No, no.

PERRY:

The first hour is just terrible. Bloody Matthew McConaughey, all he ever does is he talks in this whisper, where he's trying to be really serious all the time. There is absolutely no emotion in his voice and he does not act. Michael Cain, he just plays Michael Cain.

And all the way through, all the way through, when I got to the end, I thought, you know, the only good actors in this whole film are the women, either the young girl or the women. Anne Hathaway is not great, but the other women in this are pretty good. The men are bloody..

DAVID:

The young girl is great.

PERRY:

The men are woeful. There's just nothing there. It's like, oh, God, I've got to walk through and I've got to read all this crap. And yeah, it's almost like they didn't want to be there. They really did not want to be there.

So I started off with this idea that I was going to be arguing with you about how good this film was. And I can't.

It's two hours and 49 minutes long. It's almost three hours.

Now, there's some nice touches in this here and there.

DAVID:

Yeah, I can mention a couple of things.

PERRY:

Yeah, there are a few things in it. And you know, you really would have thought that somebody like Christopher Nolan would have done something pretty good out of all this material.

DAVID:

Yeah, he's a good director.

PERRY:

I mean, he's the director of things like *Memento*, *The Dark Knight* Batman trilogy, *Inception*, *Dunkirk*.

And he also directed films like *Prestige* with Robin Williams and Al Pacino, which is a fantastic thriller. I know it was a remake of something from Scandinavia, it was still a fantastic thriller.

DAVID:

Sorry, what was the film?

PERRY:

Oh, that was *Insomnia*. But he also did *The Prestige*, which is based on the Christopher Priest book.

DAVID:

Yeah, which is great.



PERRY:

So he's got a good pedigree. But I sat thinking about this after I watched it. And I reckon this is his homage to 2001.

There's a lot of things in this that if you take it as chunks, you take the first bit as a chunk where it's just basically trying to work out a reason to get these guys off the planet, really. That's what he wanted to do.

So all of this, all of the stuff is, as you say, is pretty sort of ridiculous and mindless. And so he just happens to be in the right place at the right time. They didn't know he was there, but he turns up, oh, you're here. Good. You're just the guy we're looking for. We can put you on a rocket and send you off.

And you think, are you bloody kidding me?

DAVID:

"You're the One!"

PERRY:

So he basically, it seems like a week after he's turned up at this place, he's suddenly on the spaceship. Guys take *two years* to bloody train themselves to basically get onto these things to know what to do?

And he's there, flicking switches all over the place like he knows what's going on. And off he goes.

All right, OK, get over that part. But just shut up, Perry, just don't argue the toss about that. My son will go, well, *just stop it*.

And then I just carried on. And I thought, OK. Then they go to this first planet, the one that's really [right] on the event horizon. They're sitting there and they're looking at this and they land on the planet. And there's like half a meter of water on this planet. And they see something on the horizon, which they think are mountains. And then they realize, oh, it's a wave.

And the first thing I thought of, have you never read "Neutron Star" by Larry Niven? Because that's the whole thing about that, about he gets really close to a neutron star and he realizes that the thing that's pulling all of the vessels apart and breaking everything up on the inside is the tidal forces that are stretching him from one side to the other.

And the same thing, this gigantic wave is a big tidal wave, not a tsunami, but it's a tidal wave because it's being pulled by the event horizon around the planet. Then I thought about that and I thought, hang on, it would take them about, it'd

take that planet about two weeks to get to the point where it was showing only one face to the event horizon anyway, and then you just have a big bulge. Where's the bloody wave coming from?

So I'm sitting there and I'm scratching my head and I'm thinking, they're trying to get it, the music's going really loud and they're trying to make it really sort of action-packed.

And of course—[the movie's] five years old so I can tell what happens, somebody dies on the planet because somebody's stupid and they don't do the right thing.

The woman goes off to try and get something instead of the robot. The robot runs out and gets her. *Why didn't the robot go and get it?*

DAVID:

Yes, in the first place?

PERRY:

I thought, again, I was the same as you. Every time something happens, I thought, hang on, *why did they do that?* The suspension of disbelief was just, no, it just wasn't there. And I thought it was really, it's very sad in this instance because they spent 165 million bucks on this film.

DAVID:

It could have been so much better.

PERRY:

Much, much better. They could have had a better reason for getting off the planet and not spent an hour doing it.

David: Yeah, I mean, there *are* some good bits. There are some good bits in it.

I mean, the thing which I did like about it was this whole concept of time running at a different rate when you're in the gravity well. And so when they go to the first planet, they're deep in the gravity well of this black hole.

So time is actually running very much more slowly for them. Well, sorry, it's running fast outside of them and they're running slowly. So they spend like an hour or something, a couple of hours or something, and 23 years pass on the spaceship and on the Earth.

And so they go back to the spaceship and there's this poor guy that's been like—he's obviously a red shirt guy by the way—he's the one who you know is going to get zapped at some point. He's been left on board the spaceship.

PERRY:

Hang on a minute. He's in the spaceship orbiting this planet. They are *on* the planet. And the time dilation is caused by the black hole. Why is it not affecting him as well?

DAVID:

Well, that's a good point. But anyway, the concept of time running at different rates is interesting. And because Coop has kids on Earth, that's an interesting dynamic of the fact that they leave messages for him over this 23 year period.

And they're getting older and older.



PERRY:

Probably the best part of the whole of the film, I think, was the indication that time is relative and when you're going to come back, you're going to find out that you may will be younger than your children.

DAVID:

Which is how it turns out.

PERRY:

How it turns out in the end. I just thought this was a golden opportunity for something to be done really well. And he basically messed it up.

I don't know. The script is not very good. I gather they've been working on this for six or seven years. After the two or three years, he should have realized he was on a hiding to nothing and chucked it out. And then got somebody else to write something for him.

The thing about Kubrick is he at least had somebody with a sense of scientific and storytelling ability in Arthur C. Clarke to be able to help him along. Although 2001 is an obvious Kubrick film, you know, just those long sequences. But they were fine. But I see a lot of, I see a lot of echoes of 2001 in this film.

What he goes through, he goes towards the event horizon. Going through the wormhole. And so there's a whole lot of that sort of stuff that goes on. Look, it's a very interesting film. It's worthwhile seeing. I don't think I'll ever watch it again.

I can't see a single reason why I would watch that again.

DAVID:

No, I agree. I've got a million notes here, I'm not going to go through them all. There's so many things which get up my nose.

PERRY:

There's just so many things that were really annoying. Very few things that were really good. The good things were good, but the annoying things were really bloody annoying. And it just dragged me out of the whole movie going experi-

ence.

So I'm sitting there and I think, and I just, I struggled to finish it the second time round. I really did.

DAVID:

Yeah. Well, as I said, my wife and I stopped after the first 20 minutes or so. So I think we stopped, we certainly stopped before they got into orbit the first time. And I think one of the trigger points was those bloody ridiculous, filing-cabinet robots.

What did you think of them?

PERRY:

Oh, I actually didn't mind them. One thing I didn't mind the robots themselves because I like the way they were able to adapt, fit into different parts to take over, to slot into a slot where they could act as the main AI in the space shuttle.

What I didn't understand was, why has it got a small little bloody screen on the front of the robot?

DAVID:

Exactly!

PERRY:

With all the text coming through. I dunno about you, David? When I sit on my laptop and I'm sitting there, I don't see a little screen in the corner with all the text running through for all the code being run.

DAVID:

No, no, no.

PERRY:

Why do they keep doing this? I mean, do they think we're idiots?

DAVID:

I mean, the robot in *Moon* was equally non-anthropomorphic, but it was a lot more fun. You remember the little smiley screen on, it had a little screen with a smiley face that changed emotions on? It was very clever.

PERRY:

That was fine. That was perfect. I can deal with that because that's quirky and funny. But putting this stuff here, I mean, I actually was listening for a while



One of Interstellar's robots

because I wanted to hear sort of like the teletype text going, “Gee, gee, gee, gee, gee,” as the lines went across the screen because I thought that’s the only thing that’s missing.

DAVID:

Yeah, anyway, so we’ve trashed it enough, I think, don’t you?

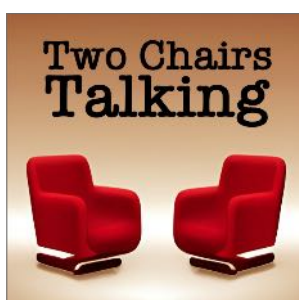
PERRY:

I think we have. Let’s not go back to that one again. Good to see it, but no.

DAVID:

Yeah, so next time around, we’ll have to find a film which we actually disagree about, one of us likes it, the other dislikes it, so we’ll have a think about what that will be.

Transcript by Whisper.cpp, with some editing by David.



If you’ve enjoyed this interview transcript, you might like to listen regularly to Perry Middlemiss and myself discuss books, movies and TV on our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*. It comes out every three weeks or so.

[Visit our website for more information.](#)



A SORT OF LETTER COLUMN. But this time I have a real, honest-to-goodness *paper* letter, a real LoC. I was impressed.

John Hertz (letter, 19 June 2023)

Commenting on Megaloscope 7

Now and then I get to an Internet-access machine. I've just seen *Megaloscope 7*.

Good cover, thanks.

I was the DUFF delegate to Aussiecon IV but, alas, haven't recalled whether you and I met in person.

David:

I think not, unfortunately. I never attended Aussiecon 4, as that was during my decades-long period of deep gafiation.

John:

My Japan trip report is in *On My Sleeve*, which you being electronic can read [[here](#)].

I can't find my DUFF notes but haven't despaired of writing my report. I did manage [[this](#)].

Recently I wrote to Asimov's:

Ray Nayler's guest editorial in the May-June *Asimov's*, arguing that SF is in the business not of predicting but of predicating, at least gives occasion for *What a difference an A makes* (S. Adams, "What a Difference Day Makes", 1934).

He rightly quotes Mary Shelley's preface to *Frankenstein* (1818),

The event on which the interest of the story depends... [his ellipsis] was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops; and, however impossible as a physical fact, *affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield* [his italics],

passing over "however impossible as a physical fact", conceptually the distinction between science fiction and fantasy. But he does not seem to have climbed entirely free of the swamp.

He evidently still has to say SF is “productive”, or a “lens we can focus on our present moment, our past, and – often incidentally the places we might be headed”; indeed he says the *Frankenstein* preface is “one of the best justifications for the value of science fiction around.”

Why does SF, or any artform, need a justification?

That was before I'd read *The Mountain in the Sea*. He needs my comment even more than I thought.

I wonder if he'll see my letter.

I can't agree with your review (*Mega* pp. 4, 6-8). I respectfully suggest *Mountain* is not “very well written”.

(Incidentally, the motto of my local club the LASS (Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society; rhymes with Spanglish “más fuss”) is *De profundis ad astra*, which you and P. Middlemiss make the title of Two Chairs Episode 90 where you discuss *Mountain*).

David:

Well no, the quote I was actually re-purposing was *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine* (“From out of the depths we call to Thee, Lord”).

John:

Conceptually the octopus adventure deserves praise and has my applause. But the book is deeply flawed.

It's stuffed with sermons. Certainly SF can be social criticism. But then an author must do two things, preach a sermon and tell a story. *Mountain's* sermons do not grow out of the story. They are lumps stuck in.

Also their theme, *what horrid monsters we are*, is very faddish in SF now. Not that it has no truth, alas.

David:

So if it has some truth, why not write about it, faddish or not?

John:

I don't object to speculating about consciousness. Nayler is a writer, he can write about anything. But here too he sermonizes instead of showing. And here too he goes on and on.

Your Two Chairs talk says *Mountain* has a strong environmental message. It has a vehement environmental message. It might have been strong if it were organic with *Mountain's* fiction. You call it relentless. That is certainly true.

The popularity of *Mountain* may be readers' liking the message.

Nabokov said (and I recommend his posthumously published *Lectures on Literature*) “Minor readers like to recognize their own ideas in a pleasing disguise”.

David:

Ouch! But isn't his sneer simply loaded language along the lines of “All intelligent people will agree with me that...”?

John:

At the end of Two Chairs you say *Mountain* shows why capitalism must be destroyed. No. It keeps preaching that capitalism must be destroyed. Similarly it fulminates its theories of consciousness. Perhaps I want a different word.

“Fulminate” means “as if with lightning” Mountain is more heat than light.

David:

John, your attack on the book would greatly benefit from some specific *examples* demonstrating where you say Nayler is sermonising and being vehement. Without such, all of this is simply your opinion, with which I can't agree. When I think of authors sermonising at great length, Robert Heinlein is the name which immediately leaps to mind. Some of his books are nothing but long and generally boring statements of his political views. You could also say that Kim Stanley Robinson is heavily into sermonising at the expense of characterisation in his novel *The Ministry for the Future*. By contrast, Nayler seems far more subtle to me.

Perhaps that does make me a “minor reader”, probably it does. So be it.

I asked a friend, W. H. Chong, who also liked *The Mountain in the Sea*, what he thought of your comments. This is what he had to say:

W.H.Chong (email 13 July 2023)

For someone who is so annoyed by Nayler's alleged raillery, his alleged vehemence and preaching and fulminating, [John Hertz] proves himself pretty fine with rant and harangue...not to mention he has placed you two (and me) into the basket of “minor readers” pace the lecturing Nabokov (whose own books are not my idea of pleasure either).

I dare say there is no single way or one mode of novel writing, anymore than there is a consensus about infodumps. As an example of non-standard approaches, I think of *The Three Body Problem*, which starts with an unexpected prologue in pure realist mode, which moved me greatly, before shifting into hard SF.

Personally I found *Mountain in the Sea* stimulating in its intellectual adventure, thrilling in its central premise, and disturbing in its side plots. I certainly didn't feel Nayler was a tiresomely hectoring writer. If “minor readers” like their own ideas reflected in pleasing disguise, then that notion doesn't apply in the instance of my reading of Nayler, as he provided me with a shipload of new ideas and narratives.

Mark Nelson, (email 18 July 2023)

Commenting on Megaloscope 7

Did you think that I was pulling your leg about sending you a letter of comment in the post?

When I first started attending conferences, everyone used overheads. Then there was a period of time over which computer presentations slowly increased in number. Eventually, overheads became obsolete, and all presenters used presentations in the form of PDFs. At sufficiently large meetings there is not even a need for you to install your presentation on the machine in the room where you will give the presentation - you install it at central IT headquarters, and they make it available on the machine in the room you are presenting in.

I used to kid my friends that I wanted to go down in ANZIAM history as the last person to give a presentation using overheads. But that didn't happen as I switched to using a PDF before overheads were done away with. (ANZIAM, the main professional body for applied mathematicians in Australia and New Zealand).

However, at the university I was in the cohort of staff still using overheads for lectures when the university decommissioned over-head projectors and we all had to move to computer presentations. I fantasised about rescuing an overhead projector and keeping it in my office as a keepsake. Unfortunately, they are a bulky and I already have too much stuff in my office.

Why was I so keen on using overheads? Here's one reason. Lectures have changed since when I was an undergraduate. In those days a mathematics lecture consisted of the lecturer writing on a black board or on an overhead and students copying their written words. When I started lecturing, I was informed that lectures are supposed to be interactive. If you have an overhead it's easy to invite a student to come down and have a go at a calculation, explaining what they are doing and why they are doing it to the class. (Students often learn more from hearing other students tackle a problem than hearing the lecturer explain how they think about it).

That's a round-about way of saying that when, in thirty or forty years time, someone writes a history of Australian SF fandom I would like my name to be attached to a footnote that says that on (insert date) 'Mark Nelson wrote the last loc that was sent through the post'. That might need to be a footnote to that footnote explaining the word 'post'. Whilst I am girding my loins to go to the post office and post you a loc, I'd appreciate it if you'd cast your mind back to identify the last person who sent you a letter of comment through the good offices of the postal service.

David:

That's easy, it was John Hertz. See the preceding LoC.

Mark:

I suppose that if the letter is too long you will rightfully (?) ask me to email you a copy so you don't need to spend any time rewriting it. But, for old time's sake, wouldn't like to have to retype a loc?

As I mentioned in the last issue of *Mathom*, *Life after Life* was one of the two most appealing books reviewed in ANZAPA 332. Your discussion in "Talking Books & Television" has only increased my interest in it. Though this increased interest was tempered by the big reveal that it leads up to Ursula killing Hitler. That just seems a bit quotidian. (I would have been more satisfied if the final cycle through the time loop was Ursula dying of old age.)

David:

It's not a "big reveal" in the book, nor is it a spoiler to mention it, as that event occurs in the very first couple of pages! And in one of her loops through her life she does indeed die of old age.

Mark:

In *Groundhog Day* the looping finishes when the Bill Murray character has become a sufficiently good person that he can get the girl into bed and not do anything with her until the next day. So, *Groundhog Day* has an ending of the loop through the actions of the main character. But why does it have a beginning? We can only assume that it's through the action of an omnipresent Deity. I'm curious as to why Perry puts a premium on why the loop ends rather than why it starts.

Perry puts forward the argument that *Life after Life* isn't a science fiction novel because there's no mechanism to end the looping. (At least, that's what I

think he says). Based upon your account of both the book and the TV series I agree that it's not science fiction, but not for the reason that Perry gives. For example, I wouldn't have a problem with a looping device that ends naturally—like a clockwork toy slowly coming to a stop.

Seeing the photograph of your copy of the book and Perry's comments about the problems of reading this book as an e-book confirms my opinion only to read books in the form that the omnipresent Deity determined that they should be published in. I'm joking, I don't read books on stone tablets—I only read them as physical books that I can hold in my hands.

Incidentally, I see that in 2019 *Life After Life* was ranked by the Guardian as the 20th best book since 2000.

Returning to the podcast [transcript]. That was great reading. But it would have been improved if at the start you found yourselves experiencing a slight hint of *deja vu* that you had already covered *Life After Life*. Alternatively, when you checked the size of the file it was multiple times larger than what you expected it to be.

Having taken more of an interest in SF on the TV rather than the written word I'll put forward three, only three, TV episodes that include time looping. The first is the *ST: TNG* episode 'Cause and Effect'. In this episode the crew are caught in a time loop which ends with the destruction of the *Enterprise*. As the loop repeats and repeats the crew begin to feel a sense of *deja vu* and eventually realise that they are in a time loop. Of some note is that the episode features Kelsey Grammer as a captain of a Federation ship that has missing for 90 years.

My second offering is the penultimate episode of the ninth season of the reboot of *Dr Who: Heaven Sent*. In this episode, the Doctor is trapped in a castle by the Time Lords. In order to escape, the Doctor has to pummel through a wall made of a substance stronger than diamond. After being trapped for something like four and a half billion years he finally manages to escape. This is a highly regarded episode, both critically and by the fans. But sometimes I wonder why the Time Lords created an escape mechanism within the 'confession dial'. It was also not clear to me why his death did not lead him to regenerate, though I suppose that some techno-babble explanation about the Time Lords mastery of time could be provided to 'explain' that.

My final offering is the first of the 2022 specials of *Dr Who: Eve of the Daleks*. In this special, the Doctor accidentally sets up an accelerating time loop. Unfortunately, the Daleks enter the time loop and kill the Doctor at the end of each iteration. The time loop is shortening by one minute with each iteration. Can the Doctor work out a way to survive the final iteration of the time loop? No suspense there, of course she can.

Regarding the word *palimpsest*, a word that is so unusual that you footnoted it. I remember when I learnt this word. In 2011, there was an article in the Guardian about the 'Archimedes Palimpsest'. This is a thirteenth-century Byzantine manuscript, which was assembled using pages from several earlier manuscripts. One of these was a 10th century manuscript from Constantinople containing, amongst other things, several treatises by Archimedes. Although the importance of this palimpsest was established in 1906 the book went missing until it was auctioned at Christie's in New York in 1998. Luckily, it was bought by an American collector who deposited it Baltimore's Walters Art Museum where it could be analysed by appropriate experts.

In 1906, it was difficult to read the original 10th century text - as it been partially scrapped away in the 13th century to make room for the prayers.

Using modern imaging techniques it was determined that the palimpsest contained parts of seven treatises by Archimedes, including the only surviving copy of one of them. (The 10th century text also revealed other, non-mathematical, discoveries from the Ancient World).

Why was this in the press in 2011 if the palimpsest was rediscovered in 1998? Cambridge University Press were shortly to publish a two-volume treatise of the Archimedes palimpsest, containing, amongst many other things, both the images of the 10th century manuscript and their translations. I imagine that the starting point for the Guardian's article (dated 26th October, from which I cribbed most of my account) was a CUP press release. (The palimpsest was also covered in the mathematics literature at this time, but it was easier for me to track down the Guardian article).

I am a big fan of Haruki Murakami, at least his short stories—I haven't read his novels as I'm working my way through the short stories. Perry talked about the length of the TV series of *Life After Life* compared to the length of the book. I wonder how he feels about watching a three hour movie of a short story that you can read in much less time?

David:

If you're thinking of starting on Murakami's novels, I would recommend that you start with *Norwegian Wood* or *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* rather than the more science-fictional *19Q4*, which is huge—about 1,000 pages in the print version, though nevertheless well worth reading.

Mark:

I'm not sure if I've read *Daniel Deronda*, so I'll put it down on possible books to read. In addition to *Middlemarch* when I was a graduate student I read *Romola*, another long George Elliot book that I don't remember the title of (it might have been *Daniel Deronda*), and *Silas Marner*.

David:

I don't think I knew about *Romola*, which appears to be historical fiction. I must hunt down a copy (and maybe produce it for Standard Ebooks).

Roman Orszanski (email, 2 August 2023)

Commenting on Megaloscope 5

In the introduction to your piece on Ridley Scott's Alien movies, you note "This piece was written at the request of Roman Orszanski for his blog Wild Goose (wildgoose.net) in 2018. I thought it might deserve another airing with a couple of minor edits."

I note that Wild Goose is an online fanzine, rather than a blog.

Not only can readers view issues online (eg the first issue is at <https://www.wild-goose.net/issue/issue1>, which displays the cover, clicking on the image presents the contents page), but we also distributed the first issue as a separate file on USB, viewable off-line using a modern web browser.

PS: the site is wild-goose.net, not wildgoose.net.

David:

My apologies, I stand corrected!

THE MEGALOSCOPE

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

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