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Mid January saw us going to see the one-act play *Five Presidents* written by Rick Cleveland. It was about Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton meeting at the Nixon Library on the occasion of his funeral. In writing this play, Cleveland researched each of the presidents much as he would have if he'd been writing autobiographies. Then he imagined a conversation among them. While the conversations were fine, the actors playing the presidents looked different enough that it was difficult at times to remember who represented whom. I thought the actor portraying Clinton did best. Mike felt that the one doing Bush did best. We both felt the worst portrayal was Reagan. He looked like a caricature of Reagan, and his build didn't seem right. On the whole it was entertaining and shed a lot of light on the changes that had been wrought to the presidency by Nixon.



Recent Reading

Skin Game by Jim Butcher: This was nominated for the Hugo. This book is part of the "Dresden

Files”, which was made into a TV series. I’ve never seen the series, and this is the first book I’ve read by this author. Some of my friends really like his work, and I’ve heard a lot of hyperbole about it. In this book Harry Dresden, professional wizard, emerges from an island in the Great Lakes for a job working for one of his worst enemies. There are a lot of ins and outs, but everything ends okay. While I found the story exciting, I found the book lacking in style. This is good if you’re just looking for entertainment without much depth.

The Dark between the Stars: The Saga of Shadows, Book One by Kevin J. Anderson: This is another Hugo nominee. This book is the first book in a new trilogy in the universe of the “Saga of the Seven Suns”. The series contains seven books, and there is also a prequel in the form of a graphic novel. I have not read any of the other books in the series. If this current work is any guide to the rest of the books, I might just look into them. There are several protagonists in this book. One is an entrepreneur who sometimes cuts corners and ends up paying for it. Another is a woman who works for him. The third is her husband. Another protagonist is obsessed with studying diseases of all kinds and looking for cures for them. However, she doesn’t offer any cures to anyone until her colleague lies dying of a plague that has always killed everyone who contracted it. There are others. There are humans and more than one alien species. A new/old threat surfaces that seems to threaten the entire universe. This book covers events before its appearance and several battles. Whether I read the other books in the series, I intend to read the sequels to this book when they’re available. It’s an interesting story well written with very interesting characters.

Red Rising by Pierce Brown. This is the first book in a trilogy that has been compared to *The Hunger Games*. Although I see the similarity, it seems different to me also. The story takes place in the far future on Mars after it has been terraformed. The society there has been structured in an economically differentiated way. There is a governing caste that has many of the same problems with corruption as our current one percent. The protagonist, Darrow, belongs to the bottom caste, the Reds, who live in virtually slavery working underground. They’re not even aware that the terraforming of Mars has been finished. As a result of circumstances, Darrow has the opportunity to become transformed into a member of the top level, the Golds. Among the Golds there is an exclusive Institute. Admission is limited. Darrow is admitted in order to help the Reds. He learns much more than he ever expected. When I read *The Hunger Games*, I thought there was too much violence for a book for young readers. The violence in this book is another factor of ten worse. On the other hand, it doesn’t seem gratuitous in the way I perceived it in *The Hunger Games*. It’s very well written, and the characterizations are excellent. I hope to read the sequels.



The Three-Body Problem by Cixin Liu, translated by Ken Liu, is another Hugo nominee. Cixin Liu is quite a prolific Chinese sf author. Several other of his books are available in English. I will probably read at least some of them. This current book is the first book of a trilogy. It is sf in the truest sense. The three-body problem of the title is a real problem and has only recently been solved. A three-body system is chaotic, so there is no simple solution. The book begins during the Cultural Revolution, so we learn a

lot about Chinese history. The main characters are mostly scientists and mathematicians. They are brought to life as real people, unlike the stereotype of the scientist in lab coat of the movies. I must trust the translation since I do not know a word of Chinese, but it seems to be excellently written. The author's reputation is a clue that the original is also well written. As the book focuses on modern days, we learn that the Chinese have contacted an alien civilization. The contact starts having an impact on the lives of many scientists and other people. The aliens have stated that they intend to travel to Earth, but it will take over four hundred years. This increases the impact on select people of Earth. This book is an excellent read. The second book is already published in English. I hope to read it soon.

The Goblin Emperor by Katherine Addison, is yet another Hugo nominee. I wouldn't call this book great literature, but I found it entertaining and the characters engaging. In this fantasy realm, the disfavoured son, Maia, of an emperor lives as an exile in an isolated place with a cousin who is none too nice to him. One day there is news to the effect that the old emperor has died along with the heir presumptive. Maia is rushed to the capital by his cousin to take his place as the new emperor. Maia has problems, as he was never groomed to be an emperor. He must learn things quickly. Speed is essential. The rest of the book is about his struggles, plots against him, and the investigation into his father's apparent murder. A lot has to do with the interactions between Maia and other people at court. I found the book engaging.

The Quantum Thief by Hannu Rajaniemi, was our book club selection for June. It takes place in a far future post-human universe. People seem to exist only as thought and emotions and apparently can inhabit different bodies. Individuals can control, to some extent, how much of the self can be perceived by others. I found the book confusing. This is the first book in a trilogy, and I'm not very motivated to pursue the rest of it. In this book a thief is liberated from prison to recover something on Mars.

The Gate Thief by Orson Scott Card is the second book in the "Mither Mages" series. Previous to reading this, I've read several volumes of the Ender series of books and one or two of the Alvin Maker books and have enjoyed them all. This one I had a harder time getting into possibly because I haven't read the first book. Perhaps the subject matter doesn't hold my interest as much. The book is based on a lot of different mythologies. In the universe of the book, magic exists and the gods exist. The book flows smoothly and is easy reading, though sometimes the mythological parts get a little complicated. The character development is good. I was invested in the main character before I finished reading it. I wouldn't mind reading the next book, especially since this book ends in a sort of cliffhanger.

Ancillary Sword by Ann Leckie is a Hugo nominee. I didn't care much for the first book, *Ancillary Justice*. Looking back on that, it seems more like an introduction to the series than a standalone book. Or possibly the author has become better. The characters didn't grab me at all in the first book. This time I became at least somewhat invested in the main character. The situation was also more something I could get into. I'm somewhat motivated to reread the first book. For those of you who didn't read the first book, in the universe of the series there are "people" who are AIs embedded in the bodies of actual people. The host bodies are dead. If they aren't dead when the AIs are embedded, they die in the process. These ancillaries are associated with a ship. The ship and its ancillaries are always in communication. The character now known as Breg Mianaai was an ancillary. Her ship and her other cohorts were destroyed. Due to various circumstances, she finds herself in command of a new ship without ancillaries. They fly to a planet where they find rather intolerable conditions. This book deals with how the commander deals with the situation.

Recent Viewing

Jurassic World: Predictable but entertaining. If you've seen any of the *Jurassic Park* movies, you can easily guess how this works. If



not, here's a capsule description of the story. About twenty years ago, we visited Jurassic Park just before it was scheduled to open. A few people were invited to preview the place. It had security measures to insure the safety of visitors. Stuff went wrong when a strong storm knocked out the power. In this movie, Jurassic World has been open for a number of years. It's successful but needs new attractions every few years. A new dinosaur has been genetically created—talk about GMO. In the meantime one of the park workers is being visited by her two nephews, but she leaves the babysitting to an assistant who is not always as observant as she should be. The nephews go off on their own. In another part of the park that is behind the scenes, the new dinosaur appears to have escaped. Stuff happens.

Local Outings

In April we went on an outing with the Nature Conservancy to a couple of local sites nearby. One is an established nature preserve. The other is still in the development stages.



In May we went on an outing to Mount Lemmon with a small group of local people. There are observatories up there at an altitude of about 9000 ft. We were able to tour some of them. One of them is used in the search for Near Earth Objects.

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