

## WHAT I AM READING THIS WEEK

**Stephen Harrod Buhner**

*Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.*

Neil Gaiman

I am from the past (which pretty much everybody knows by now) – it might be the Depends, I don't know. Or, it might be my insistence on still believing in social liberalism (as opposed to classical liberalism), the fact that I am a Social Democrat, or that to me John Lennon has not always been dead. These things date me one way or another. But when people visit my home and see the thousands of books in my library (and find out that I have actually read all of them) they are pretty sure I am from a past where people loved books and the smell of old bookstores and actually took the time to sit and read in front of the fire on a cold day, a time when ebooks were only a fantasy in an I-live-in-my-mother's-basement geek's brain.

Because I began my intensive reading of books in 1968, the books that have shaped me are very different than the ones later generations have been shaped by. Many of the books that have companioned me for decades are now didn't yet exist when began reading. I remember the excitement of standing in line to buy some of them. It's not so surprising then that few people under 45 have read them. Still, as I slowly get rid of my very large library (an incredibly painful process) I find myself unable to say goodbye without at least skimming through them one more

time. A few of them catch hold of me again and so I put by the bed to read one final time before they are gone. I thought I would mention some of them here.

All of the books that I particularly love are written by authors who genuinely care about their readers – not all authors do. There is a warmth in those books that others lack. Something of their deep humanness comes through and by the end of the story I feel more myself, more companioned, more able to deal with life's difficulties. There is also, always, some depth of insight that occurs that enables me to see more deeply into myself and others, to better understand the human condition. Thus, I have a particular dislike for overly mental fiction of whatever sort, literary (which often tends toward snobbishness) or mystery or science fiction. I don't find Kim Stanley Robinson all that warm (or knowledgeable about Earth ecology when it comes right down to it). With most of the science fiction writers now there seems to be this belief that because they know science (which is often inaccurate to reality anyway) they have some sort of control over the exterior world. The more science they do, the less warm they are.

I don't like overly masculine, unemotional, somewhat cold, I-am-really-tough-so-fuck-you mysteries, which means I don't like Michael Connelly and a number of the other "bestseller" mystery writers. To many people's dismay, however, I do like Lee Child's Jack Reacher series. Why? Knight errant, a theme I have always responded very well to. Round Table? King Arthur? Three Musketeers? Those kinds of stories ruined me long ago – or so the literary world would have it.

Anyway, I don't have much to do with those kinds of writers. And while I have read very

widely the past 50 years, I limit myself now to the authors and books I find to be agreeable companions, the ones who are enjoyable to spend a few hours with over a cup of tea. The writers that, when I put the book down and they have left the room, I feel better for the visit, better about my own humanity, more thoughtful, more kind, and most of all companioned.

Here are a few books that I am re-reading now and a few short stories as well.

### **Some Novels:**

One of the great dystopian novels in English literature is *Day of the Triffids* (published 1951). Most people only know the book from that terrible 1962 movie and most know the word *triffids*, but few have read the novel. That's a shame as it is a truly great literary work with one of the best opening lines in all of literature: "*When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.*"

The book was written by John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris, better known as John Wyndham. He wrote a number of very good books (I have read them all, many times) but this is the one I consider his masterpiece. It gives the reader one of the more realistic looks at civilizational collapse and how people are likely to respond to it. Unlike many other writers, he understands just how tenuous human civilization is; I suspect this is because, like many men in Europe then, he had fought in WWII. And it changed him as it did so many others. The book is a bit dated in parts, as all old novels tend to be, but it is a fascinating read especially if you want to see more clearly what climate collapse is going to be like. The book is deeply humane and very moving and I find myself weeping at the same scenes every time.

One of the better writers of the New Wave movement in science fiction and fantasy was Roger Zelazny. Regrettably, as often happens, when he hit middle age he did not adapt well to this profoundly different psychological state. Rather than stepping back and re-orienting himself, he kept on writing the same kinds of things he had been writing for most of his life. But at this point they were caricatures, not fresh stories but a mimicry. The same thing happened to Samuel Delaney, though he developed an irritating arrogance to go along with it, something Zelazny did not choose to do. (*Babel-17* is however a classic and deservedly so; it was written when he was still young). This sort of thing is a problem in every field. Once the youthful enthusiasm begins to abate some living force begins to be lost from the work. Afterwards, the writers mimic telling a story but they do not tell a story; their heads are too much in the way. They are no longer writing from the heart.

In any event, I have been reading my way through Roger Zelazny's work again and found his novel *This Immortal* to be the one I enjoy the most. Zelazny focused in his early works on creating stories out of the powerful myths from a number of cultures, using them as templates for stories set on other worlds or in the future or in alternate time lines. Most of them had a powerful impact on me during my younger years. And in some ways, they still do. While I have read all of his books, most of them many times, *Isle of the Dead*, *Lord of Light*, *the Amber Chronicles* [first series only], *This Immortal*, and his novelette "The Last Defender of Camelot" are the ones I tend to go back to the most often.

*Kim* by Rudyard Kipling is, I think, the best book Kipling ever wrote. The wokerati bash Kipling these days for a great many woke reasons but I don't care. (In fact I am rather tired of

people without much life experience applying moral standards from today to the behavior of people in the past.) I know Kipling's limitations and disagree (as he himself did by the end) with some of his earlier life decisions and positions but I also know a great work of art when I read it. *Kim* is filled with heart and soul and kindness and so much more. It has kept me company on many a difficult night.

### **Some short stories:**

Short stories that end without some sort of Twilight Zone or horror or existential twist are not easy to write; it is why most short stories have some weird twist at the end. Personally, I've never enjoyed that sort of thing. If I want to feel depressed or schizophrenic I can read the news or listen to certain forms of non-melodic jazz or even talk to some of my relatives. But it is not an experience I go to literature for; I consider the technique to be cheap, the sort of thing writers of limited talent tend to do. From personal experience I know how hard it is to write the kind of story I am talking about here. I have only managed to do it once (Alice) or twice (not gonna tell you). The rest continually fall short of meeting my criteria so they end up in the trash or unfinished. They are so hard to do that I suspect that is the reason I have come across so very few of them the past 50 years.

Here is a list of those I have returned to many times over the years.

- 1) Theodore Sturgeon, Uncle Fremmis (in, *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*)
- 2) Theodore Sturgeon, Slow Sculpture (same)

- 3) Theodore Sturgeon, Scars (in *Sturgeon's West*)
- 4) Frank Herbert, A Matter of Traces (in *Eye*)
- 5) Barry Lopez, The Mappist (in *Light action in the Caribbean* as are the next two)
- 6) Barry Lopez, The Construction of the Rachel
- 7) Barry Lopez, In the Great Bend of the Souris River
- 8) John Dunning, The Bookscout, separate booklet editions available from Old Algonquin Books for \$15. For some reason, never anthologized except once in an expensive limited edition entitled *Ten Tales*.
- 9) Jack Finney, Where the Cluetts Are (in *About time*, as is the next one)
- 10) Jack Finney, Second Chance
- 11) Roger Zelazny, The Last Defender of Camelot (in the book of the same name)
- 12) Edward Abbey, Disorder and Early Sorrow (in, *The Journey Home*)
- 13) Bruce McAllister, Poison (in *The Village Sang to the Sea*)

I was quite taken by Theodore Sturgeon's work when I was younger, I still like these three short stories quite a bit but I can't really read the rest of his work anymore. One of the problems with admiring writers when young and deciding to become a writer, too, is that once I truly learned the craft I became a better writer than a number of them. Going back I was astonished to find that some of the Sturgeon stories I loved most (Pruzy's Pot, for instance) were not all that well written, some were very poor indeed . . . though to be fair, the stories themselves were often wonderful (Pruzy's Pot being one). I have always been very fond of Uncle Fremmis and Scars and there are parts of *Slow Sculpture* that are just delicious. By all accounts Sturgeon was well-loved in his lifetime, a very kind and amusing man.

Frank Herbert wrote two great novels and one great short story. Few writers can make such a claim. I consider *Dune* to be (as Herbert once said) a single volume consisting of *Dune*, *Dune Messiah*, and *Children of Dune*. Most people don't. In any event, *Dune* is a masterpiece, as is *Dosadi Experiment*, and the short story "A Matter of Traces." "A Matter of Traces" is one of the two very funny stories in this list (the other is Ed Abbey's "Disorder and Early Sorrow"). I consider a number of the stories in this list to be as close to perfect as a story can get: "A Matter of Traces," "The Bookscout," and "Poison." Herbert was a strange writer in that he could do something like *Dune* or "A Matter of Traces" and then write so many other mediocre works. By all accounts though, he was a very kind man and well loved by most who met him. I laugh deeply every time I read this story and find myself always saying, "How did he do that?" when it comes to the crafting of the story.

Despite the fact that I respect him deeply, I have always had mixed feelings about Barry Lopez. I met him several times during his life and found him to be incredibly kind and responsive to his fans but, as with a number of people I have known over the years, it was a moral decision to be so, an intellectual choice. The warmth did not burst out of him as it did with writers like Gene Wolfe for instance. There was an underlying coldness (or maybe distance is a better term) to him and his writing that, in my opinion, came from him not wanting to expose his heart to the outside world without a guardian at the gates keeping watch – though he actively tried to keep it as inoffensive as he could. This is something I have noticed in many literary writers; to be genuinely open-hearted exposes them to accusations of being naïve or unsophisticated or incapable of acute analysis of literary texts. They behave kindly because it is a strongly held

moral principle (Tom Hanks is a perfect example of this in his later years) but it is a covering over who they are underneath. (Sometimes I think that as they became famous, they tried to remain just a regular person but of course they were not. Robert Bly was quite famous, perhaps the most important poet America has produced since Frost but he remained approachable, genuinely so.) Anyway, with people who institute a top down behavior due to a strongly held principle, I find myself a bit hesitant in my own emotional responses. I am not quite sure how they really feel about anything. (Over time it does become easier to read between the lines of their behavior, nevertheless, I prefer people who just are how they are.) That being said, the stories in *Light Action in the Caribbean* are masterful. It is just that after reading them 15 or 20 times the underlying coldness begins to overcome the story. I have thought for many years about this and finally came to the realization that with this book Lopez over-edited them. That is, he worked the stories for so long, polishing and smoothing and making them perfect that without a bit of roughage they began to take on a coldness or a sort of lifelessness. I do want to *emphasize* here that most people will never notice this and it doesn't begin to become apparent until the stories have been read a great many times. I still highly recommend these stories for many reasons, one being that they are remarkable. "The Mappist" is in fact one of the better science fiction stories I have read. "The Construction of the Rachel" is one of the better fantasy stories ever written. Both should have been nominated for either a Nebula or Hugo award but of course they were not. Holding the book in your hands as you read either of those stories (and as well, In the Great Bend of the Souris River) is like holding a fine jewel in the hand and being allowed to turn it this way and that while the light of the sun is caught in its facets, throwing sparks of



immense color outward into the world. Most writers could do worse than study these stories as pure examples of the art.

John Dunning, the mystery writer, only wrote three short stories in his life. In my opinion this is the only good one. For whatever reason the cosmic tumblers all clicked into place the day he sat down to write it; it is a truly great story. It is a joy to read, every time. John was by every measure a kind and considerate man and I was lucky enough to be friends with him for many years. Later in life, he developed what they called a benign brain tumor (this only meant it was not cancer, by all other standards it was not benign) and at that point his writing began to decline. Education-wise, John had a GED and never went to college. This always bothered him. He felt less-than – but he really shouldn't have. He was, as so many were then, a working class writer (as am I). Despite his lack of an MFA (which few had in those days), he became one of the Denver Post's best investigative reporters as well as a speech writer for some prominent Democratic politicians in the 1970s. He had a long dry spell as a writer (ten years) before he wrote his breakthrough novel *Booked To Die*. And for a brief time he had what he had always wanted: acclaim for his prowess, financial abundance from his royalties, and recognition as the great writer he truly was. Like many of his friends I was glad to see it. Unfortunately, John did not fit into the literary world very well. He usually took 2-3 years to write a book but after he became a bestseller his agent (grrrrr) and his editor (double-grrrrr) both pressured him to begin doing a book a year and to do so as part of a series of mysteries set around Cliff Janeway, cop turned bookman. (John never did want to write an ongoing series but the time when mystery writers could make a living with one off, non-series books, is long gone now.) He agreed to do what they

asked and it was a very bad decision. John had been dyslexic all his life and as well would have been diagnosed as ADHD had that label been around when he was in school. Unfortunately, he went into the medical system for high cholesterol and within a year or two was on a handful of medications daily, including some for ADHD (essentially meth and a few other things). This did allow him to write faster but the work began to decline in depth and richness. (I have always felt that it was the massive amount of pharmaceuticals that somehow stimulated the brain tumor to show up within such a short time after he began using them.) The thing that did him in I think was his book *Two O'Clock Eastern War Time*. He was attempting to write the Great American Novel in mystery form (something that many genre writers aspire to do, always an error). He regrettably believed far too many of the writing techniques suggested by literary writers and unfortunately used some of them in the construction of the book – at the very end. And so, around 4/5 of the way through the novel he betrayed the plot, his characters, the readers, and the craft. Up until that time, he had indeed been writing the Great American Novel. I so want to take that book and re-write that last one fifth. It would have accomplished everything he ever wanted had he had better advice at that point in time. I find myself incredibly angry still at his agent and his editor for not confronting him about what he had done. Sigh. The book did not sell the way he had hoped and he went into a depression. And so he went back to doing a series he really had no interest in doing. No one knew at the time that he had a tumor growing in his brain. The doctors did find it eventually and they operated but he lost sight in one eye and slowly began to lose the ability to write, then to speak, then to understand what was said to him. Aphasia. The worst thing that can happen to a writer. Truly a tragedy. But . . . this one short story; it is perfect and beautiful

and a joy to read in the evening in front of the fireplace when the nights are cold and the heart feels bereft. In it you can get a sense of the kind of man John truly was in the depths of himself.

Jack Finney was a remarkable writer and most of his novels were made into films except for his magnum opus *Time and Again*. Both of these stories are a bit dated, written as they were in the 1950s. But they are wonderful. And were they not dated they would be on my perfect list. They are fine, fine examples of the storytellers art.

Roger Zelazny. What can I say The Last Defender of Camelot is a great story; I read it every year at least once.

Edward Abbey's story "Disorder and Early Sorrow" is one of the funniest stories I have ever read. It is all the more funny because Abbey is making fun of himself as well as everything else his mind alights on. I don't particularly like the last line in the story but the rest, it is so very funny and my stomach hurt so badly from laughing that I had to stop reading a number of times just to recover enough to go on.

Bruce McAllister is best known because of a dispute with his teacher in high school. It was 1963 and the teacher was telling the students how to identify symbols in story and as part of this, he indicated that authors put symbols in stories on purpose. McAllister, sixteen years old, became angry at the teacher's assertions about it (something I understand very well and besides, it's not true anyway) and rather than argue with him, he wrote 150 of the most prominent writers in the world (mostly US) asking them to fill out a four page mimeographed questionnaire about it. Seventy-five of them responded and the story of his exploit entered literary lore. Over the

years a few of the responses were lost, some were stolen, but many remained and were published in the *Paris Review* years later. McAllister did become a writer, a very fine writer indeed, during what I consider the New Wave era. He suffered the same problem that Theodore Sturgeon did, he wrote slowly, he wrote short stories, and he just could not do novels. This is guaranteed to keep a writer poor and unknown. McAllister's last book (as far as I know) is *The Village Sang to the Sea*. It is a series of interlinked stories rather than a more conventional novel. All of the stories in the book are very fine but "Poison" is something else again. It is a perfect story. A jewel, one of the finest I have ever read. I find myself continually asking: "How did he do that?" The language is beautiful, the story is beautiful, engrossing, and life-changing in many respects. It should have been nominated for a Nebula Award but of course it was not. That really pisses me off. The science fiction and fantasy world, since Ursula LeGuin's passing anyway, seems to prefer mediocre, rather clunky writing. If it is too elegant, they send the writer to the literary world (who often send them back again because it is fantasy or science fiction). In any event, I wish everyone would read this story just to see what a great story is like. It still resonates inside me. Reading it, every time, is a remarkable experience.

Good Reading to you in the days to come.

Stephen