

2018 Week 29: The Week Ending Saturday, July
21st

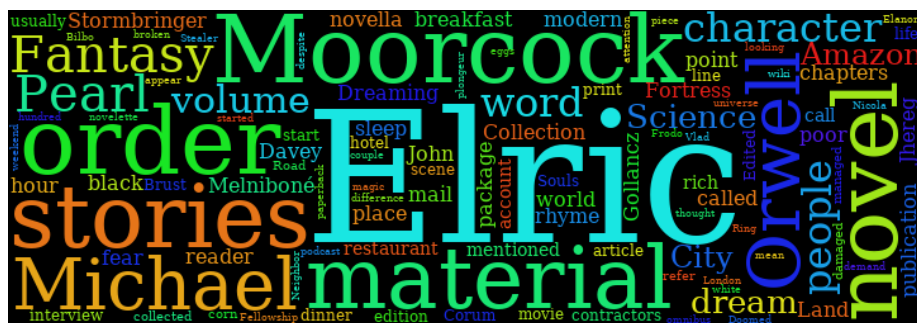


Figure 1: Word Cloud

Sunday

The remaining three Elric books came in the mail yesterday. I mentioned previously that although they were all part of the same order, they arrived in seven separate packages. And I'm not sure exactly how this happened, since the packages didn't indicate which books they contained, but I managed to unpack the books in the same order they were published. The last three are:

- *Elric: The Revenge of the Rose*
- *Elric: Stormbringer!*
- *Elric: The Moonbeam Roads*

Our mail carrier stuffed the three separate packages into the mailbox along with another package for Grace. The mailbox wouldn't close, so she apparently tied it partly-shut with a rubber band. The packages were packed in there so tightly that Veronica had to grunt and use all her strength to pull them out.

The last one, *The Moonbeam Roads*, an omnibus containing 3 novels, is a big book, a doorstop. Unfortunately it also arrived a bit damaged, although not badly damaged enough for me to want to send it back. It's printed on a different kind of paper than the others: bright white paper instead of the rougher slightly grayish paper one usually finds in modern paperback books. Does that mean

it was a print-on-demand book? I don't really know. It doesn't appear to be. I'm not really opposed to the idea of print-on-demand books, although they aren't very conducive to serendipitous browsing, as long as they are readable and well-made. Some of the print-on-demand books I've acquired accidentally in the past have *not* been very well-made and have *not* been as legible as traditionally-printed books.

***Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018 Film)**

Yesterday afternoon I took the kids (all except Elanor) to the 5:05 showing of *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, the documentary about Fred Rogers. It was at the Quality 16 on Jackson Road, out by my office. It wasn't a matinee, but the tickets were cheaper than they usually are at the Ann Arbor 20 + IMAX near us on Carpenter Road. So I'll have to make note of that and consider taking the family there instead of the closer place; when we're taking a whole gang to a movie, a small difference in ticket price adds up quickly.

I was quite impressed and the kids were engaged enough to mostly sit in their seats and watch. Any movie that could hold the attention of our whole range of ages is all right by me. In fact it's a very moving story, and also quite thought-provoking. I'll see it a second time if I can, and write up some notes as I'm able.

We had a pretty simple dinner of leftovers last night and ate sitting out on the back deck, until the mosquitoes started to bite. The kids also burned some more of their leftover sparklers. It was warm but the temperature had come down some, and it wasn't unbearable. It was a nice relief to be able to sit outside, although I do have a couple of mosquito bites today.

***Elric of Melniboné and Other Stories* by Michael Moorcock, Concluded**

This morning before breakfast I finished reading *Elric of Melniboné and Other Stories* (since I just read *Elric of Melniboné* in the form of an old paperback edition, I didn't feel the need to re-read that novel, just the other material). The biggest piece of other material is the graphic novel "script" called *Elric: The Making of a Sorcerer* which I mentioned last week. It's an interesting and complex piece of back-story, and worth reading, but I think it would be more fun to read the comics. So I may do that.

I mentioned last week that the material had been freshly edited. That's true, but I still came across a point where the word "grieves" appears instead of "greaves," when referring to armor. So make of that what you will. I'm reasonably sure that Moorcock, who grew up reading T. H. White and other authors who wrote in detail about medieval armor, would not have made that particular error. It was probably a "correction," perhaps one suggested by spell-checking software. Whoops.

For breakfast I made a big pot of Irish oatmeal and a pot of tea. I had my oatmeal with walnuts and butter and just a little maple syrup. After cleaning up breakfast Grace and I went downstairs to record an interview with our friend Meredith. I'm editing that now. We are going to try to squeeze in a second interview this evening, with a guy named Matthew who works with the Huron Valley DSA. So we are hopefully getting traction on *next* weekend's podcast episode. If we could get into the habit of having one or two shows in reserve it would seriously reduce our stress level on Sundays!

Really it's been a pretty low-key weekend, as our weekends go. And we really needed a low-key weekend, so I'm grateful.

Monday

***The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 2, Chapter 1: "Many Meetings"**

The bedtime story, after some argument with the kids who wanted to watch *Lego Ninjago*, was the rest of "Many Meetings," the first chapter of the second book of Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I had a feeling they'd want to get back to *Fellowship* eventually, and last night Joshua wordlessly picked up up the big omnibus paperback edition and handed it to me. In "Many Meetings" Frodo, after a long chat with Gandalf, and recuperating amazingly quickly, attends a banquet, meets Glóin, is reunited with Bilbo, and listens to Bilbo's long poem. We are introduced to Arwen, although she does not say anything.

Frodo is in the proximity of Gandalf and Elrond, at the "grown-up's" elevated table, up on a dais, while Sam and the rest of the lesser folks are lower down, presumably so the fancy people don't have to watch them chew their food. But his interest is largely with the secondary characters; he chats quite a bit with Glóin, who tells him about how the rebuilding of Dale and the halls of the King Under the Mountain is coming along. It sounds beautiful. Frodo expresses a desire to see it someday; but if you have read Frodo's story to its end, you know that he will not.

Bilbo's role in all of this is interesting. We learn that Bilbo has been to see Dale, but a while ago, and since then he's living in a kind of timeless retirement in Rivendell. The aged hobbit is treated with considerable reverence. Elrond is quite deferential to him, and Aragorn seems happy to drop everything and help him work on his poetry. I took a crack at chanting/singing the entire thing, and it's one of the more beautiful poems in the book, with a complex, varying rhyme scheme, with end-of-line rhymes, partial internal rhymes, and alliteration:

*A ship then new they built for him
of mithril and of elven-glass
with shining prow; no shaven oar
nor sail she bore on silver mast:
the Silmaril as lantern light*

*and banner bright with living flame
to gleam thereon by Elbereth
herself was set, who thither came
and wings immortal made for him,
and laid on him undying doom,
to sail the shoreless skies and come
behind the Sun and light of Moon.*

Note the alliteration “ship/shining/shaven,” the rhyme “oar/bore,” the alliterative pair “lantern/light” *combined* with the rhymes with the alliterative pair “banner/bright”, near-rhymes like “flame/gleam,” mid-line rhymes like “made/laid,” and even alliterative word pairs spaced farther apart, like “set/sail.” But my best attempt at performing this poem couldn’t make it not feel much too long, and this part bored the kids (and even bored me a bit).

I enjoyed hearing about Dale and enjoyed the reunion with Bilbo, who is apparently fascinated to hear all the gossip from the Shire (and there must be a lot of it, since he’s been gone for something like seventeen years). Fortunately we as the readers are not subjected to all the gossip. Ultimately not much happens in this chapter, but it does give us a little respite from the action, and get us itching for some bigger news and storytelling, which we will get in the next chapter, “The Council of Elrond.”

***Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)**

I started reading *Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl* last night after the bedtime story, and by the end of breakfast this morning I was fifty pages in. Moorcock’s style in this novel seems a little looser and more fun. It makes sense because while this book fits into the chronology just after *Elric of Melniboné*, it was written quite a bit later, and published in 1989 (the first Elric stories date back to 1961, and the first novel appeared in 1972).

The central MacGuffin seems to play on the “pearl of great price” from the parable in Matthew. The story setup makes it so that our protagonist, Elric, doesn’t actually care in the least about the pearl, but needs to acquire it to save his own life and the life of a young hostage. Elric at this point in the story doesn’t care all that much about his *own* life, but the hostage situation, along with his desire not to hurt his love, Cymoril. Parts are right on the verge of genre parody, but are presented entirely deadpan. I get the feeling that Moorcock loves riding that line, just on the verge of silliness.

I fear I may have accidentally committed myself to reading many, many volumes of Moorcock’s fiction. I don’t believe they all can be good, so I think it’s necessary to do some triage in advance, and look at reviews and recommendations. For example, this blog post contains pretty brutal reviews of the Corum material. One of the basic story problems, when introducing magic, or magical creatures, or magical weapons, into a story is that it can become too easy to solve all the

story problems that arise. In *Elric of Melniboné* there are dragons, but Moorcock knew that introducing a magical version of the B-1 bomber would take a lot of tension out of battle scenes. So the dragons are severely weakened: they have to sleep most of the time — it takes them years to recover from a few hours of activity. At any given time, when dragons might be useful, there's a good chance they're busy recharging. This avoids what, in *The Lord of the Rings*, might be called the “why can't the Eagles just carry Sam and Frodo directly to the Cracks of Doom?” problem.

According to blog post author “Arthur B,” in the Corum stories Moorcock fails to put in-universe restraints on magic powers:

As for the actual plot this time around, it starts out well but runs into trouble when it turns out Moorcock can only think of two ways for any particular crisis to be resolved in the long run: either Corum summons supernatural aid with the Eye of Rhynn, or the Hand of Kwll acts of its own accord to do the thing the reader has been yelling out for Corum to do for several paragraphs. Such interventions are interesting the first time they happen, but of course once the reader learns what the Hand and Eye can do the magic is lost and tension becomes that much more difficult to establish; across this book and the next one, Corum will regularly get in a scrape, I'll yell at him “Use the Hand/Eye, idiot!”, he'll invariably do it and I'll roll my eyes and try to suppress the urge to throw the book across the room.

This, by the way, is also one of the reasons I gradually lost interest in the fun-but-ultimately-tedious Nightside series by Simon R. Green; Green's protagonist always solves the crisis in the same way, activating his nearly limitless magical powers. Supposedly it gives him a headache to do this, but there aren't many real consequences. Meanwhile in the Elric stories, Elric knows very well that solving problems by swinging the “black blade,” Stormbringer, will not necessarily leave him better off. Stormbringer is a malevolent entity that grows in power as it feeds on souls. Each time Elric uses Stormbringer, Stormbringer is also using him, driving him to kill more and more people to feed its blood lust. Elric fears, with good reason, the day that he will not be able to bring Stormbringer, and himself, back under control.

So, perhaps I'll skip the Corum stories, or at least save them to consider later. From various reviews I've read, it also seems like perhaps the in-world chronology is *not* the best order to read the Elric material; maybe the publication order is better?

The Pottscast

Last night Grace and I managed to record an interview with Matthew Haugen, co-chair of Huron Valley Democratic Socialists of America. It was a relatively brief interview as our podcast interviews go, under an hour. It will probably become a podcast episode next Sunday. So we are, surprisingly, ahead of schedule!

Maybe we can get some better work out there if we aren't always scrambling to record on the night the show needs to go up.

Grace is trying a combination of Unisom and Vitamin B6 at bedtime to reduce nausea and help her sleep through the night. It seems to have helped. I only got to exchange a few words with her as I got out the door this morning, but she seems to have slept better than she has been. Once we got the baby and the four-year-old calmed down last night I had a pretty good night's sleep as well.

No one was up yet this morning when I left. I went to Joe and Rosie Creamery on Jackson Road and tried their peanut butter and banana sandwich with an apple and a small coffee. I wanted a caffeine hit, but not a large one. I'm not sure what all that fruit will do to my blood sugar or my digestion. We'll see.

Tuesday

Last night's drive home was quite strange. It normally takes me about twenty minutes. But last night it took me over an hour and a half. Traffic on I-94 was slowed to a stop/start crawl for miles. There were no signs and no visible accidents or emergency vehicles, no lane closures, and no indication what was going on. I should have gotten off at State Street, but I thought "how bad could it be? It's only a couple of miles to my exit." I left the office about 7:05, and got home about 8:45.

I never did find out what was wrong, but as I got to the exit to 23 for Flint and Toledo (my exit), I found that I-94 was completely closed at the exit, so that all traffic had to get off the freeway.

Looking at the news today, I think it had to do with a truck that rolled over spilling a load of bricks and cinderblocks all over the highway, although I didn't see anything. Grace had no trouble with a section of I-94 further east.

So, despite my best efforts, we ate dinner quite late: roast chicken and salad. Grace had made plans to meet the attic contractors at our old house in Saginaw at 8:00 a.m. We did our best to get her to bed early (about 10:00). After herding the kids through kitchen cleanup, I tried to read them "The Council of Elrond" from *Fellowship*. That didn't work out so well — they were just not paying much attention. So I gave up on that plan and went to bed myself. After getting up three more times to quiet them down, and once to hand Elanor off to Veronica because she seemed to be demanding a bedtime snack, I managed to fall asleep about 12:30. About 3:30, Elanor woke me up (she didn't wake up the kids she was right next to, of course — they all sleep like logs). I had Joshua cuddle with her and she fell back asleep, and fortunately she slept peacefully the rest of the night.

It seems like we may have to feed her an extra little meal — she always seems to want more food before going to sleep. She's not actually speaking words we can understand yet, so it's just a matter of trying different things to figure out what she actually wants. Food seems to be the thing.

So my sleep was pretty broken, but I got more-or-less just enough. Grace managed to get up and out on time to meet the attic contractors, who have blown us off and missed every deadline, failed to finish weeks after the original due date, and left trash all over the place. Apparently when they got there, they found squatters living in the house. They had broken into the house and the garage.

Our nosy neighbors were really good at harassing us and our realtor about the overgrown lawn. While we lived there, they were really good at calling the police and child protective services because of transgressions like me walking around the neighborhood with my infant son in a backpack carrier, or our children playing in our own yard. But actual criminal trespass? Unnoticed, apparently.

Grace is going to get in touch with the police and we'll see what we need to do next. We are at the point where we simply can't keep the property safe from further deterioration and vandalism and trespass. That's got to factor into our next few decisions about getting more work done on the property, somehow, but I'm not yet sure how.

Wednesday

It turns out I was wrong about the squatters. Since Grace described people fleeing through a window in a downstairs bedroom at about 7:55 a.m., I assumed that people had been sleeping there. She didn't find any evidence of that. The lock on the garage was broken and some things were taken. There wasn't anything of much value in there: mostly there were painting and plastering supplies for the work we were doing on the house. There was no indication that they broke the locks on the main house. This leads us to believe that the people leaving may have had some connection to our contractors, as they may have had the lockbox code. Or maybe someone conveniently left a window open. There's nothing of value left in the main house itself either, unless contractors left tools or equipment there. We didn't see any evidence that they were trying to strip wires or pipes.

Grace filed a police report. The police in Saginaw don't even send an officer out for property crimes. You just "fill out" a form over the phone, or online. In a week we're supposed to get a case number.

We could try to put an alarm system on the house but we have contractors scheduled to come and go all week, so I'm not really sure how that would work. It's another reminder that we really have to get out of the business of owning a second home.

On the positive side, Grace found that the plaster and paint work in the front room actually came out looking very nice. So there's that. She has scheduled a guy to refinish the floor in the front room. We'll see if he can get it done this week and how it looks. The attic folks are supposed to come back. They have blown us off repeatedly and delayed for weeks and weeks. If they don't show up

and finish this week, I'm going to talk to my credit card company and/or our attorney.

The broken stone wall in front of the house was stacked up, but not mortared yet. Yes, it's been weeks and weeks. We're not very impressed with that.

Wednesday Night

I got home last night without any major traffic backups, which was nice. I had a pretty productive work day yesterday, fixing another firmware issue. When I got home, I found that my family had saved me a piece of pot pie. The kids are getting gradually better about doing meal cleanup.

I received two books in the mail from Indoo. They are a mixed bag, shipping-wise. Often, they package books in packages that are wide pieces of cardboard with a low-tack glue between them. Those books usually arrive in perfect condition. This time I got two used books, stuffed together in a bubble-wrap mailer. Both arrived with covers slightly crumpled and damaged from the shipping. They're not terribly damaged, but I'm starting to feel like by ordering books like this, I'm complicit in damaging them. So I'm a bit angry at Indoo, for not coming up with safer ways to ship their books, and with myself, for continuing to order books.

I'd swear off ordering books from vendors through Alibris and say I'm only going to order books through Nicola's, but the books I order through Nicola's often arrive damaged, too.

Anyway. I received *The Book of Jhereg*, which is an omnibus volume of the first three Vlad Taltos novels by Steven Brust (the guide to pronouncing his characters' names in the front of the book helpfully tells me that he pronounces his name "Broost.") The book itself is a somewhat ugly reprint edition; the cover graphics look fuzzy, and the text looks like it was scanned. It's not as bad as some print-on-demand books, but I'm getting kind of disgusted by how bad so many modern books *look*.

I also received a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition trade paperback with the cover by Daniel Clowes. More about that one another time. I'm embarrassed to admit that I still haven't read this novel. There's also apparently a similar edition of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and I'll probably need to add that to the library some day; I'm not sure I even have *Dracula* in any edition.

***Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, Continued**

Last night's story was three more chapters from *Down and Out in Paris and London*. We learned more about the life of a *plongeur*. Orwell claims he was working seventeen hours a day at a restaurant during this time. Even if he exaggerated that a bit, it's still an insane work schedule. The sanitation situation is laughable. It's not really meant to be as horrific a book as, say, *The Jungle*

by Upton Sinclair. The description of the kitchen is merely disgusting, not likely to be fatal, or at least not very often. At the end of Chapter 21, Orwell (Eric Blair) has given notice and is heading to London, to take a job as a caregiver. He imagines this will be a more civilized setting and easier work:

I pictured myself loafing in the country lanes, knocking thistle-heads off with my stick, feeding on roast lamb and treacle tart, and sleeping ten hours a night in sheets smelling of lavender.

I honestly can't really remember what happens in the second half of the book, but I'm pretty sure Orwell only describes his hopes here in order to humorously dash them later.

Chapter 22 is sort of a "lessons learned" or "theory" chapter. In it, Orwell makes a short but pretty devastating and spot-on critique of low-wage restaurant labor and the broken relationship between customers, owners, and workers, with its misplaced incentives, and asks us to consider how it could be better:

I think one should start by saying that a *plongeur* is one of the slaves of the modern world. Not that there is any need to whine over him, for he is better off than many manual workers, but still, he is no freer than if he were bought and sold. His work is servile and without art; he is paid just enough to keep him alive; his only holiday is the sack. He is cut off from marriage, or, if he marries, his wife must work too.

While the details of the material conditions of labor have changed somewhat, but only somewhat, none of the fundamentals have truly changed. Then Orwell asks "why is it like this?"

He earns his bread in the sweat of his brow, but it does not follow that he is doing anything useful; he may be only supplying a luxury which, very often, is not a luxury.

Orwell compares the slavery of the *plongeur* to the slavery of a rickshaw puller in India:

In any Far Eastern town there are rickshaw pullers by the hundred, black wretches weighing eight stone, clad in loin-cloths. Some of them are diseased; some of them are fifty years old. For miles on end they trot in the sun or rain, head down, dragging at the shafts, with the sweat dripping from their grey moustaches.

But:

...there is no real need for gharries and rickshaws; they only exist because Orientals consider it vulgar to walk. They are luxuries, and, as anyone who has ridden in them knows, very poor luxuries. They afford a small amount of convenience, which cannot possibly balance the suffering of the men and animals.

Similarly with the *plongeur*. He is a king compared with a rickshaw

puller or a gharry pony, but his case is analogous. He is the slave of a hotel or a restaurant, and his slavery is more or less useless.

Orwell points out something that everyone who works in the service industry eventually learns:

They are supposed to provide luxury, but in reality they provide only a cheap, shoddy imitation of it. Nearly everyone hates hotels. Some restaurants are better than others, but it is impossible to get as good a meal in a restaurant as one can get, for the same expense, in a private house. No doubt hotels and restaurants must exist, but there is no need that they should enslave hundreds of people. What makes the work in them is not the essentials; it is the shams that are supposed to represent luxury. Smartness, as it is called, means, in effect, merely that the staff work more and the customers pay more; no one benefits except the proprietor, who will presently buy himself a striped villa at Deauville. Essentially, a 'smart' hotel is a place where a hundred people toil like devils in order that two hundred may pay through the nose for things they do not really want. If the nonsense were cut out of hotels and restaurants, and the work done with simple efficiency, *plongeurs* might work six or eight hours a day instead of ten or fifteen.

Orwell then tries to pinpoint the "why." He does not have a deep critique of the concepts of *capital* and *ownership* here, but instead talks about the invisible ideology of the owner class. Orwell concludes that

I believe that this instinct to perpetuate useless work is, at bottom, simply fear of the mob. The mob (the thought runs) are such low animals that they would be dangerous if they had leisure; it is safer to keep them too busy to think.

And it's really remarkable how little things have changed for the people "in between," those we might call the middle class:

Very few cultivated people have less than (say) four hundred pounds a year, and naturally they side with the rich, because they imagine that any liberty conceded to the poor is a threat to their own liberty. Foreseeing some dismal Marxian Utopia as the alternative, the educated man prefers to keep things as they are. Possibly he does not like his fellow-rich very much, but he supposes that even the vulgarest of them are less inimical to his pleasures, more his kind of people, than the poor, and that he had better stand by them. It is this fear of a supposedly dangerous mob that makes nearly all intelligent people conservative in their opinions.

But:

Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and

poor, as though they were two different races, like Negroes and white men. But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit.

Ignoring for the moment Orwell's obsolete and unscientific view of race, I want to take special note of this truth-bomb. Orwell continues:

Everyone who has mixed on equal terms with the poor knows this quite well.

And yet in America in 2018 we still revere capital and many of us can scarcely imagine a politics which defends the poor first, or political leaders who don't come from the class of those with inherited wealth, or who aren't so-called "job creators." Orwell writes:

From this ignorance a superstitious fear of the mob results quite naturally. The educated man pictures a horde of submen, wanting only a day's liberty to loot his house, burn his books, and set him to work minding a machine or sweeping out a lavatory. 'Anything,' he thinks, 'any injustice, sooner than let that mob loose.' He does not see that since there is no difference between the mass of rich and poor, there is no question of setting the mob loose. The mob is in fact loose now, and — in the shape of rich men — is using its power to set up enormous treadmills of boredom, such as 'smart' hotels.

Wow. So where's the next step? That's the kind of thing Grace and I like to talk about, in the podcast. What would a service industry not designed to serve as a "treadmill of boredom" look like?

The kids were perhaps not as interested in this chapter as they were in the chapters describing the gross but funny conditions of Orwell's work. But I hope that by understanding the previous chapters, eventually they will get to the larger questions.

Wednesday Morning

I got Veronica's e-mail account working again (I had set her mail account quota, so that I would get e-mail messages reminding me to clean out more of her old mail; apparently if an account is over-quota, you can't log in, but the error you get just looks the same as the message for an incorrect password. Not helpful at all; how are you supposed to know, if you aren't the administrator? And how are you supposed to clean out the mail, if you can't log in? I can understand mail bouncing, when an account is over-quota, but not refusing Webmail logins.)

***Jheræg* by Steven Brust**

This morning I read the first four chapters of *Jheræg*. So I'm taking a break from Moorcock to read Brust and I'm taking a break from a pile of political books to read Moorcock, or something like that... honestly, I'm generally happiest when I'm reading at least half a dozen books at once, jumping between them. I'm sure that doesn't work for everyone, but it works for me.

How is *Jheræg*? This novel goes all the way back to 1983, and it isn't really "urban fantasy." It doesn't seem quite like "high fantasy." It's fantasy more-or-less in the mold of a writer like Roger Zelazny, where there is magic but also science-fictional elements.

The prose style is serviceable but perhaps slightly bland. It moves along pretty well. The dialogue is snappy and enjoyable for the most part, although occasionally a conversation will be a bit of an info-dump. The protagonist is an assassin, which I suppose makes him an anti-hero, and it makes the *milieu* a criminal underworld. I'm not sure what to think of that yet. In this fictional world, people who are dead can often be brought back to life, so maybe at least some of our protagonist's murders didn't really "stick." I'm reminded just a bit of *Altered Carbon*. We haven't gotten a lot of detail about the world yet (and actually I think that's a strength, as I prefer to discover the world-building in the context of an unfolding story, rather than getting a big bolus of explanation). Some scenes are quite nice. The scene where Vlad acquires his familiar is well-done. So I've found several things to interest me, and nothing (yet) to tempt me to stop reading. That's about as strong an endorsement as I'm willing to give after only four chapters.

Because I was up and out fairly early, I had breakfast at Zingerman's Roadhouse. I used to go there a couple of times a week when I was commuting from Saginaw. Now it's been a few months. Breakfast was a special that involved pierogies, scrambled eggs, and bacon. The combination wasn't terrific but it wasn't bad. I still appreciate the quality of their coffee, and I always get a fruit plate, so I guess you could call that a balanced breakfast. I probably won't be hungry again until three or four.

I got gas (for my car, not from breakfast).

I got a call from Nicola's books. Joshua's zombie book is in. I'll pick that up today.

It rained a bit last night and it has cooled down a bit, so this part of summer is actually pretty pleasant, just now. You know what would make it incredibly pleasant? If the contractors finished up their work on the old house this week, and all did a good job!

Thursday

I got home at a reasonable hour and gave Joshua his book. The kids have been playing with their Legos in the garage — Grace has forbidden Legos in the house because they won't keep them picked up, and baby Elanor is likely to eat them. Grace had two pans of cornbread in the oven and a pot of black-eyed peas on the stove. I opened up a bottle of sangria and we had a very nice dinner. She didn't have a ham hock to cook with the black-eyed peas, but just threw in the rest of the package of bacon from Saturday, and it tasted great. I think we're going to try to keep black-eyed peas in regular rotation.

Grace's combo of antihistamine sleep aid and vitamin B6 has been helping quite a bit with her nausea, although she has been having weird dreams. She told me this morning that she had a dream about being lost in her old college library, losing all her books, and stumbling into new sections of the library she didn't know existed.

We didn't have a story last night. We were all feeling pretty tired. I read a couple more chapters of *Therag*. There's an evocative scene in which Vlad does magic. We get a little more back-story as Vlad goes to Castle Black. The storytelling and writing are competent and I've really got no reason to complain. I'm still reading it with relative satisfaction. But it doesn't really *soar*. I feel like Brust was still making his bones in this volume. I'm hoping that the later books in the series soar.

***Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl* by Michael Moorcock, Continued**

This morning I read a few more chapters in *Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl*. Moorcock's writing in this book is a bit more poetic and fun, although as I mentioned, it *constantly* edges on self-parody. Elric enters a dream world, and a character shows up, called Jaspar Colinadous, with his black and white winged cat, Whiskers, who, it turns out, is far more powerful than a real cat has any right to be.

This character might be a version of Jhary-a-Conel, which might be a version of Jerry Cornelius, but I'm really not sure, nor do I care very much. This aspect of Moorcock's work doesn't really impress or interest me that much, especially when he uses one of these characters as a *deus ex machina*. In this story, he just appears, defeats some baddies that conveniently arrive, then disappears, not having really contributed anything to the plot at all. I think this kind of thing was more fun for Moorcock than it is for the reader.

An annoying bird woke us up, pecking at our bedroom window. I did not manage to get to work early, though. In fact I didn't really have time for breakfast, so at work drank tea and ate some jerky that was in the refrigerator for just such an contingency.

Friday

The damned bird was back, pecking at our window at the same time: 6:00. I climbed up to see it but it did not come back.

Last night was kind of a bust. I'm not sure if it's the time of year, or maybe I've just been eating too many carbs. I was just plain sluggish. All i wanted to do was lie around and read. But my concentration wasn't the best, because part of me also wanted to doze off. I read a few more chapters of *Jherag*, then eventually made myself vertical again and we had dinner. Grace made a pot of rice and a meat sauce with ground turkey and anchovies and put some hard-boiled duck eggs in it, making a pseudo-Indian dish.

It was pretty but something bothers me about duck eggs. I don't mind them as an ingredient. The texture is just different enough from chicken eggs that they bother me. So, I ate rice with cashews and sriracha, and drank some more of the bottle of sangria in the refrigerator. I think this is the end of the sangria for the year. It was gone, or nearly gone, from the shelves at Costco.

I did eat a little bit of the sauce without the eggs, and a bit of leftover greens.

The kids did most of the cleanup, which was a relief because I just didn't have much energy. It was late and we didn't even really consider reading a story.

***Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl* by Michael Moorcock, Continued**

For breakfast I had a breakfast BLT sandwich at Harvest Moon Café, with coffee, and finished part 2 of *The Fortress of the Pearl*. This story is competently written, but it just isn't as interesting as I'd hoped. The sequences in the dream world are evocative but, big surprise, when nothing is necessarily real, or what it seems, and likely has no consequences, then the storytelling impact is lessened.

The way that Elric is portrayed in this sequence is also strange to me. Elric, at least the Elric in the stories I've read so far, is not a very admirable or even sympathetic character, but one of his more consistent aspects is that he has an iron will — an obsessive will, in fact — which enables him to stick to his goals through terrible trials. But in the dream worlds he is constantly distracted from his goals by the prospect of ease and comfort. It seems very out-of-character. The dreamthief Oone has to constantly work to remind him of their goal.

Despite his constant failings and displays of weakness and distractibility, Oone apparently becomes attracted to him, which seems unconvincing, as he is not admirable in this sequence. Elric's "dream self" is then unfaithful to Cymoril, but we're not sure *why*. We're told this is of no consequence at all in the real world. That just seems like a cop-out so that Moorcock could write some sex scenes, but even so, they are hardly very salacious, and so I'm not sure what the point was.

Per the Tor re-read,

Together they must pass through the seven dream-lands: Sadanor, the Land of Dreams-in-Common; Marador, the Land of Old Desires; Paranor, the Land of Lost Beliefs; Celador, the Land of Forgotten Love; Imador, the Land of New Ambition; Falador, the Land of Madness — and the seventh, which has no name “save any name the inhabitants shall give it. But there, if anywhere, you will find the Fortress of the Pearl.”

This sounds interesting, but our heroes spend so little time in each dream-land that they are not really well-differentiated. Some of the dream-lands seem to last barely a page or two. A lot of confusing things come and go, and seem never to get the slightest explanation. Some of it is probably “multiverse crap.” Oone even mentions London at one point, but the word means nothing to Elric.

I’ll finish it, but it’s pretty clear at this point that this is *not* the best that the Elric stories have to offer. So I’m not sure I will even keep this volume. It also suggests that reading the Elric stories in the in-universe chronology really isn’t the best way. Maybe I should read them in the publication order, as they are collected in the Del Rey series called *Chronicles of the Last Emperor or Melniboné*.

I could probably use the set I’ve got, and pick through it to find the stories in publication order. Maybe that’s what I should do, after finishing *The Fortress of the Pearl*. But — looking at reviews of the volumes that collect the material in *publication* order, I see Moorcock fans complaining that it is confusing to read the stories in *that* order. Sigh.

Either way, I feel compelled to press on until I discover the Elric material that really lives up to its reputation, or discover the hard way that *none of it* is really all that and a bag of chips, and it just doesn’t hold up that well, even if it felt revolutionary to fresh-faced readers discovering it in a very different time and place.

It also makes me curious to track down some of Moorcock’s standalone novels, and see if they work better for me. He’s written so much — is it *seventy* novels? — that it seems like *some* of it must certainly ring my cherries! Or maybe I’m just too old and picky and cynical.

Saturday

Last night after work I went to Costco as usual and I bought a smaller-than-usual load of food: fruit, pancake mix, biscuit mix, lunch meat, a big box of cut-up rotisserie chicken, one container of salmon, some canned olives, English muffins, sliced cheese, whole wheat bread, maple syrup, sweet corn, a ready-to-bake cheese pizza, and a few other things to re-stock our kitchen. For dinner we had the salmon, the cheese pizza, and the sweet corn. The house was quite trashed, so there was a significant delay while we waited for the kids to clean up some of their messes. The corn was not local, and we really should be buying

local corn, but it was still tasty and we only ate half of it. I also discovered a delicious combination that never occurred to me before: sweet corn is delicious with Indian mint chutney. I'm thinking that needs to become some kind of salad. Maybe a sweet corn salad with toasted pistachios and a mint chutney dressing?

After dinner and a bit of cleanup, the kids really wanted to watch the Miyazaki animated film *Castle in the Sky*. It was actually Benjamin, the four-year-old, who asked to see it. It was relatively late, but since it was a Friday night and they had been, ultimately, fairly agreeable about doing chores, I let them down into the basement, found the DVD in one of our still-packed boxes, and started watching with them. I came upstairs about halfway through the movie to let them finish it themselves.

Castle in the Sky is one of the better animated Studio Ghibli movies, and has some of the best outdoor scenes and some of the best music. It's immersive and slow, however, and so really benefits from a big screen. I was a little surprised that Benjamin wanted to watch this one, since I didn't think his attention span was really up for it. And shortly after I came upstairs, Grace and I started hearing the sounds of screaming bickering and fights of some kind downstairs. It looks like the movie couldn't hold his attention after all. So that was the end of the movie, and we sent them to bed.

I kept waiting for the big thunderstorm we've been promised would come along and help end the near-drought conditions here. It didn't really materialize. We only got sprinklings, and a lot of oppressive humidity. It rained at least a bit during the night, but we really didn't get the long, gentle, soaking rain that we need. And yesterday's prediction of an 80% chance of rain with an estimated three-quarters of an inch for today has been downgraded to a 40% chance with less than a quarter of an inch predicted. We might have thunderstorms early this evening but I'm not optimistic.

The End of an Error: Closing my Amazon Account

Yesterday I managed to close my Amazon account. It's been about 20 years. It took some effort, including a live chat with a rep. I first saved my order history, because I found it interesting. I ordered my very first item from Amazon in 1998. Back then I don't think I really thought of them as the oncoming storm that would destroy most brick-and-mortar bookstores and, eventually, many other kinds of store.

Almost all the things I bought from Amazon over the years were books. A lot of them were technical books, on mathematics and programming, that I would have needed to order in some way, since local bookstores post-Borders almost never stocked them. There was also some science fiction and fantasy and literary criticism. Here are a few typical examples:

Typical examples:

- *Programming in Prolog: Using the ISO Standard* by W. F. Clocksin and C. S. Mellis
- *Attending Daedalus: Gene Wolfe, Artifice and the Reader* by Peter Wright
- *C++ Templates: The Complete Guide* by David Vandevoorde and Nicolai M. Josuttis
- *Chaucer: The General Prologue and Physician's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer (Naxos Unabridged Audiobook on CD, in Middle English and Modern English, read by Richard Bebb, Philip Madoc, and Stephen Tompkinson)
- *Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days* (Gollancz British ed.) by Alastair Reynolds

I placed:

- 5 orders in 1998
- 7 orders in 1999
- 5 orders in 2000
- 2 orders in 2001

I must have then had an “Amazon is bad, or at least unnecessary” phase in 2002 and 2003, since I ordered nothing from them. In 2004 I broke my “Amazon fast” and placed one order, which consisted of Miyazaki DVDs and homeschool math textbooks.

Then apparently the floodgates were open, since I placed:

- 17 orders in 2005
- 18 orders in 2006
- 12 orders in 2007

and so forth, ramping up to a high-water mark of 32 orders in 2011.

I must have felt the pangs of conscience again and known by that point that supporting Amazon was problematic, since I placed no orders in 2012. But then, while I was unemployed in 2013, I felt that I needed to quickly acquire books on iOS programming, JavaScript, Python, Scala, and other technologies to try to prepare myself for job interviews, so I ordered a number of programming books. But that was the last year I ordered anything from Amazon.

These days when I want to browse, I go to Nicola's Books. If I am looking for a specific book in print, like *Mistaken Identity* by Asad Haider, I order it from Nicola's. If I'm looking for something older and out of print, I will often order it from Alibris. Sometimes I will order from Powell's.

There are still some good used bookstores in Ann Arbor itself although because I no longer live in the city itself, and the parking situation is often pretty obnoxious, I rarely visit them. I've heard good things about Literati bookstore but I just don't usually get downtown.

I recommend that you also delete your Amazon account, if you have one, and never order from them again.

I'll give you a pass if you have something you absolutely need from Amazon

that isn't available elsewhere, or it is so much cheaper from Amazon that it may as well not be available elsewhere, and the cost is really an issue for you. But mostly, I don't think anyone needs Amazon, and the world would be a far better place if it didn't exist. So I urge you to boycott them completely, if you can, in all forms, especially Prime, and their streaming content, and their spy machines.

Elric Revisited and Spoiled

While I was half-watching the first half of *Castle in the Sky*, I re-read the article "Elric: A New Reader's Guide" by editor John Davey, which closes the book *Elric: Stormbringer!* After getting most of the way through *Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl*, I decided that I'm just not that excited about it. I'll probably finish it, but I was itching to read some of the older Elric material. I think I'm pretty well convinced now that reading the Elric material in the in-universe chronological order is *not* the best way to enjoy it.

I took out a drawing pad and pencil and tried to make sense of the Elric stories and their publication history, and how they have been adapted, retrofitted, and retconned into various volumes over the years. This quickly became an ungainly diagram covered with arrows and dotted lines, but I think the relevant gist of it runs as follows.

The Publication History of the Elric Stories

The original Elric stories, the ones that are the most famous, appeared in pulp magazines in the years 1961-1964. I did not count the words of the first one, "The Dreaming City," but I guesstimate that it is about 15,000 words long, so I'd call it a long story rather than a novel or novella, although it does have some structural aspects one usually finds in a novel rather than a story, including digressions. I present story names in quotation marks rather than italicizing their titles as I do book titles.

I'm doing this not as a value judgment of a work's importance, but simply to differentiate the length, and also to indicate that it would more likely be found in magazine or collection of stories than as a standalone volume. One shouldn't overlook the fact that the pulp magazines paid by the word. Moorcock may have weighed that factor against artistic concerns about the number of words that would tell the story most effectively, and decided that he needed to ramble on a bit in order to eat and pay the rent. I mention this especially because in *Elric of Melniboné* published as a standalone volume in 1972 rather than in a pulp magazine, Moorcock's prose often seems beautifully spare and lean.

Novels, Novellas, Novelettes, and Stories

The series editor John Davey's article calls the early Elric stories "novellas," although I think that's an incorrect usage; the term novella usually refers to stories that are, per the definition used by the Writers of America, 17,500 to 40,000 words. Some famous books fall into this category, such as *Animal Farm*,

A Christmas Carol, and *Of Mice and Men*. Wikipedia refers to the first six Elric stories as “novelettes,” and the next four as “novellas” (it does this inconsistently, though; this page refers to “The Dreaming City” as a novella, but in this list of Elric stories, it’s a “novelette.”

I’m going to avoid the word “novelette” and refer to the first six of these as simply “stories,” but I will continue to refer to the last four, which are longer, as “novellas.” But whatever you call them, here is a list of those early works:

- “The Dreaming City” (*Science Fantasy* 47, June 1961)
- “While the Gods Laugh” (*Science Fantasy* 49, October 1961)
- “The Stealer of Souls” (*Science Fantasy* 51, February 1962)
- “Kings in Darkness” (*Science Fantasy* 54, August 1962)
- “The Flame Bringers” (*Science Fantasy* 55, October 1962) (titled “The Caravan of Forgotten Dreams” in some publications)
- “To Rescue Tanelorn...” (*Science Fantasy* 56, December 1962)
- “Dead God’s Homecoming” (*Science Fantasy* 59, June 1963)
- “Black Sword’s Brothers” (*Science Fantasy* 61, October 1963)
- “Sad Giant’s Shield” (*Science Fantasy* 63, February 1964)
- “Doomed Lord’s Passing” (*Science Fantasy* 64, April 1964)

The first five stories were collected in *The Stealer of Souls*. That collection excluded “To Rescue Tanelorn...” which is not, strictly speaking, an Elric story, because Elric does not appear, although it is set in the same storyline. The four later novellas are collected in *Stormbringer*.

“The Dreaming City” by Michael Moorcock, in *Elric: The Sailor on the Seas of Fate* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)

Last night I read “The Dreaming City” and I’m here to tell you that yes, the old Elric material is *better*.

Elric, while having a few specific characteristics, really is, as Moorcock refers to him in one of his introductions, a “generic” character. He’s a manifestation of what Moorcock called the Eternal Champion — in this case, a particularly doomed one.

This genericity means that he doesn’t actually lend himself all that well, it seems to me, to featuring in full-length novels. There just isn’t enough *him* there to really achieve anything like the character development and depth of characterization that has come to define the successful modern novel. But in the shorter stories, he really can fully be that Eternal Champion, that archetype if you will, and the stories can do what they do best, which is to very energetically and beautifully tell the dark tales of the doomed, star-crossed adventurer. In the “novelette” length, a story with a main character who really isn’t a fully realized, modern character *isn’t missing anything*, in the same way that *Beowulf* isn’t missing anything despite the fact that it isn’t a modern novel and the main

character doesn't have a rich inner life and we don't learn about the minutiae of his daily grind.

In my view, it isn't really *important* to read the stories in their in-universe chronological order. Moorcock pretty clearly didn't have a full story arc for Elric worked out. He didn't have all his multiverse nonsense worked out either. And here I'm going to spoil it for you. "The Dreaming City" starts *in media res* — in the middle of things. In fact, it actually starts *near the end of things*, or at least the end of some things. It's midnight in the history of the Dreaming City, Imrryr. Elric shows up with a mercenary army and destroys the city. In the course of attempting to rescue his love, Cymoril, *Cymoril is killed*. That's pretty dark, and pretty weird for the *opening* story in a series of stories. But that's the order that readers at the time would have experienced the stories, and it's *okay* to experience them in that original publication order.

The original series of long stories or whatever you want to call them actually *ends* Elric's story, as he dies in the one called "Doomed Lord's Passing" (go figure).

In my opinion, everything Moorcock later wrote in the Elric universe, or retconned together, or revised into the larger story cycles, is thus *gratuitous*, in that it was a gift unasked-for, and, perhaps, unneeded. I'm not saying all the later material is not worth reading. I haven't read it all. But I am saying that it really does seem like it is "second-tier" Elric. Maybe some of it is really great, but I'm not ready to vouch for it as a whole, and I'm inclined to agree with the reviewers at the Ferret Brain blog who would suggest that you read the ten stories, then *maybe* the prequel novel *Elric of Melniboné*, then *stop*. Or, at least, consider stopping, because in my opinion the later material just isn't going to give you the Melnibóner that the early work does (LOL, sorry/not sorry).

So anyway, last night I read "The Dreaming City." It is a quick read — it's under forty pages long, and you can probably finish it in under an hour. And it was terrific. The prose is alliterative and energetic. I'm not going to apologize for the sexism or the violence; it is what it is. It's still great despite the fact that the only female character is asleep for most of the story, and then killed (I suppose a "trigger warning" is in order).

Then this afternoon I read "While the Gods Laugh." Like much of the Elric material that story runs right up to the line of genre self-parody, but as I've mentioned, because it treats the material in such a deadpan way, it doesn't cross the line. It's also got a female character that by modern standards is a bit appalling, but it's hard to hate it because it moves fast, there's a lot of action, and the writing is vivid and poetic, with lots of alliteration and rhythm.

If, like me, you have the Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection volumes, reading the earlier stories in publication order becomes a bit complicated. You have to jump around between the third, fifth, and sixth volumes in the seven-volume series. This shows the extent to which Moorcock "infilled" the chronology, fleshing out the relatively brief original story arc. So:

- “The Dreaming City” and “While the Gods Laugh” are collected in *Elric: The Sailor on the Seas of Fate*
- “The Stealer of Souls,” “Kings in Darkness,” “The Caravan of Forgotten Dreams” (aka “The Flame Bringers”), and “To Rescue Tanelorn...” are collected in *Elric: The Revenge of the Rose*
- “Dead God’s Homecoming,” “Black Sword’s Brothers,” “Sad Giant’s Shield,” and “Doomed Lord’s Passing” are collected in *Elric: Stormbringer!* as the four “books” of the novel called *Stormbringer*.

If you are starting from scratch, it really seems to me that the 2008 Del Rey collection *Elric: The Stealer of Souls* is a good place to start, despite the bad, lurid cover art, and may in fact also be a good place to finish. It contains the contents of both *The Stealer of Souls* and *Stormbringer* collections. If you get through that, then consider reading the prequel novel *Elric of Melniboné*. If you’re still enjoying the material, then consider reading the more modern Elric material in any order you like. But that one volume might be plenty, or even more than enough.

Please not that I reserve the right to change my opinion in this matter without written notice. Although I probably will write about it, if I do.

And also please note that I’m not yet ready to suggest much at all about Moorcock’s *other* work. I’m quite sure that there’s other good, or even great, stuff in his *oeuvre*. I’m not prepared yet to vouch for just what the good stuff is, though, at least not the stuff that really appeals to yours truly.

Media Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* (2018 film)
- *Elric of Melniboné and Other Stories* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)
- *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 2, Chapter 1: “Many Meetings”
- *Elric: The Fortress of the Pearl* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)
- *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell
- *Jhereg* by Steven Brust, in *The Book of Jhereg* by Steven Brust (omnibus containing the Vlad Taltos novels *Jhereg*, *Yendi*, and *Teckla*)
- “The Dreaming City” by Michael Moorcock, in *Elric: The Sailor on the Seas of Fate* by Michael Moorcock, Edited by John Davey (Gollancz Michael Moorcock Collection)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, July 21st, 2018

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