Book Review: Further Learning From the Patient. The Analytic Space and Process by Patrick Casement

I wrote this review as part of a diploma course in Psychoanalysis a number of years ago. Two other reviews written for that course of 'Understanding the Borderline Mother' and 'John Bowlby & Attachment Theory' have proved incredibly popular. Hence I’m posting this review as it might be of use to some readers, especially therapists interested in countertransference based diagnostic and treatment approaches, often at odds with more interpretative approaches. A review of Casement’s first book is available here.

Review: Further Learning From The Patient.

Casement’s second volume represents an examination of working with transference and
countertransference (CT) as the means to understand a client’s current experience, early
development. The book also deals with the use of countertransference to re-parent the client
through containment and interpretation. Casement fuses this emphasis on CT with a person
centred approach to psychoanalysis.

Casement begins by outlining the development of many of the ideas he discussed in depth in
Learning From The Patient (Casement, 1995); including trial identification, the internal
supervisor, and the mechanics of transference.

Early theological investigations disabused Casement of the idea of a single unitary and
accessible truth. The discomfort of not knowing (cognitive dissonance) blinds us to the
contradictions at play in the world. For Casement, dogmatism suffuses psychoanalytic claims to
understand the mind. Transference occurs because of a mirror between internal or external
reality and past experiences (pp7) – hence it is not always merely the patient’s projection, but
also can reflect aspects of therapists own behaviour and self presentation.

Casement was initially wary of interpretation – intuiting that it could mask the client’s own
experience; and this led him to develop a more client centred form of interpretation. (pp6)

Casement classifies transference as ‘unconscious hope’ (pp7) a signal reaching from the client
indicating their disordered thinking and desire for understanding. But is unconscious
transference a kind of communication? It can certainly be understood as communicative (and
informative as to the client’s prior experience), but given that transference is a part of everyday
life (outside the therapeutic encounter) it is perhaps merely indicative of learned role /
behaviour in response to a perceived aspect of another person or situation – rather than an
effort at communication. Casement distinguishes incidental and intentional communication
(pp110). Hope (the assumption of environmental reliability) arises initially from the meeting of
infant needs during the omnipotent stage of development. In client work, it’s always present
(even if repressed by the client) and may need to be held for the client by the therapist when its
dissonance with felt despair is too great (although the clients negative emotions must also be
felt and tolerated simultaneously) (pp122).

Casement distinguishes between client developmental needs (appropriate containment and
empathy) and libidinal demands (satisfaction of desire – more practical needs) (pp91). He
differentiates client needs (for appropriate therapist response and containment) from their
attested wants – e.g.: for answers, control, power over the analyst (pp114).

I question Casement’s belief that clients seek a firmness
in reaction to their anger (pp115) – rather than an acknowledgement of what is being communicated by it – the intolerability of the internal experience. Although I do find his acknowledgment of the secondary benefits of social deviance / attention seeking / cruelty useful (pp123).

Casement distinguishes internal supervision (as a critical, pre-conscious way of thinking about ones contribution to the session) from an internalised supervisor (the introjected advice, opinions and attitudes of a real world supervisor) (pp9, 15).

Casement argues for the value of maintaining openness ‘not knowing’ alongside expertise. This is an openness to the client’s dynamic reality in the individual session, rather than theory or existing knowledge alone. Interpretation is something to be tentatively, playfully worked towards in collaboration with the client, (pp12) gradually scaffolding their disclosures (pp28), avoiding the appeal of trite, theoretically driven, falsely certain universalities (pp17). A client’s reaction to interpretation is as important as the clues that drive it initially – and in this way mistakes can become beacons to new understanding (pp20). Clients provide clues to their experience in the therapeutic relationship, and their emotional response to interpretation that Casement (citing Lands) describes as ‘unconscious supervision by the patient’. They may employ ‘communication by impact’, acting so as to provoke unacknowledged, or inexpressible feelings through the therapist’s projective identification (pp24). Interestingly, Casement notes that even accurate interpretations can serve as intellectualisations blocking engagement, when provided to the client rather than discovered with them (pp28). However, the example he provides – of a client’s repressed memories of abuse being screened by oedipal phantasy, is not the support for psychoanalytic theory Casement attests. Rather it evidences real abuse: The seduction hypothesis abandoned by Freud (Robinson, 1993), substituted for by the concept of the oedipal complex.

For Casement the role of the therapist is not necessarily a re-parenting one – in the transference clients can need the therapist to take the part of negative presences in their life. This can be an object relation that is bound, and indeed needs to fail – for that primeval failure to be recognised and overcome. However, the therapeutic encounter can become a replication of earlier dynamics, providing an opportunity for reconciliation of inadequate parenting (pp26). The client
Therapist countertransference is both the creation of the client, and involves the contribution of the analyst. Others have proposed a variety of therapist contributions to the countertransference, as well as admixtures of client and therapist material. These include classical CT (the therapists own neurotic material), complementary identification (identifying with the clients disavowed / projected material), concordant identification (identifying consciously or unconsciously with the id, ego or superego of the client), indirect countertransference (introjection from supervision and other third parties), institutional countertransference (introjecting an institutions relation to a client), stylistic countertransference (self presentation effects), and ecological countertransference (aspects of the therapists own life) (Geddes & Pajic, 1990); any of these forms of countertransference could potentially be ego syntonic or dystonic for the client.

Interpretation

In Casement’s work with a child client, he initially expresses an admirable reluctance to provide the child with a readymade ‘symbolic language’, seeking to remain more reserved about unconscious assumptions. The parents had already labelled their prepubescent child ‘very sexual’, and compounded this interpretation by framing her behaviour in the context of seduction. At the same time, her mother behaved in a rejecting manner, while her father overindulged her. Casement employed play therapy with this client; despite his avowed reluctance to interpret, his (primarily sexual) analytic hypothesis fly thick and fast. Although he holds back some interpretations, Casement does provide the child with a theoretical frame – through his selective focus on sexual interpretations, and his provision of a narrative of secret collusion (pp39). The issue with this kind of interpretation is that humans cannot help but recognise patterns – even where none exist, and clients (especially children) are likely to provide a narrative that meets the (consciously and unconsciously expressed) expectations of the interpretive encounter. In this client’s disclosure we can see themes of penis envy (pp35, 37, 39), vagina dentata (pp39), camouflage (pp41), masculine violence (pp 39, 40) and so on, but it’s important to remember the selective, interpretative nature of Casements account; and to acknowledge his ‘coaching’ of his client through constant tentative interpretations (of her drawings).
Rather than working with the client’s parents to directly address her exclusion within the family system, Casement is preoccupied with discovering the hidden content of her disclosures. Thus there is a co-production of meaning at work – as seen in the mutual letter game Casement and his client develop (pp46); in which Casement serves not merely to understand, but despite himself, to build a context – through selective reflection, suggestion (e.g: theme of ‘secrets’ which could be revealed in confidence), fixation (e.g.: on genitalia), tentative interpretation etc. Another therapist might have focused on – and hence elaborated, other aspects of the client’s fantasy world – for example the archetypal figures of the threatening ‘great condor / eagle’ (pp54), or the cared for ‘coal baby’ (pp56). Casement by contrast, focuses on eliciting explicitly sexual / gender related themes with the client – even as he gradually comes to accept her need for age appropriate freedom and ‘messy’ regressed escape from control, and simultaneous desire for appropriate boundaries (pp50, 56, 58). Casement finds success when he models behaviour (playing word games), rather than directing it; developing the creative alliance in a way that’s more productive than interpretation (pp46, 48). His fixation on penis envy, and his interpretation regarding his client’s confusion over her own gender / family place, eventually produce the desired response in the child – who begins to respond in the terms and through the metaphors Casement has provided. This does not convince as an archaeology, but rather suggests an identification by the child with Casement’s own projected material (pp61). This creates a desire for the child to please the seductive partner, by producing the reading behaviour that he desires – as demonstrated when she later makes Casement’s baby ‘her baby’ (pp63). Casement disagrees – suggesting that he has gradually come to follow the child’s lead in addressing (explicitly sexual) matters that he was initially uncomfortable with; ultimately allowing the child to explore her own gender, and providing a space for reading ‘after her own more urgent needs had been attended to’ (pp63).

Communication Lines in 1004 Flats – El Anatsui

Countertransference Impact

Casement uses another case to examine client communication by impact, and how to differentiate neurotic from diagnostic transferences (pp65). Such communication cannot be interpreted in isolation, but must triangulate with explicit client communication (pp66). Casement details the treatment of a client horrendously abused by the medical establishment. Casement’s CT feelings concerned boredom at her rote deadened disclosures – and he identified this as a ‘role responsiveness’ re-enactment of the clients relationship with her withdrawn father. Rather than directly disclosing, and further distancing – Casement raises the
issue from the client's perspective – using trial identification. Later Casement identifies an erotic interest in the patient, hypothesising that it is the client's disowned erotic feelings, intruding on the session; he confirms this by asking the client about her sexuality (rather than disclosing his own feelings), unlocking a series of connections between sexuality and punishment (pp73). This case study provides not only a pragmatic examination of how to work from CT impact without disclosing inappropriately; but also a startling illustration of the biomedical treatment (and iatrogenic worsening) of hysteric symptoms.

My grandparents, my parents and me – Frida Kahlo

Traumatic Transference

Discussing trauma, Casement highlights that it can be gradual or one trial learning, and aroused in the here and now of the session through associations with the original event or circumstances (pp 76). Casement's use of the concept of signal anxiety, parallels the idea of the conditioned stimulus on behaviourism (Wyricka, 2000). What differentiates this psychodynamic account is that the anxiety can be provoked through unconscious associations with the original trauma (which can itself result from unconscious associations), rather than simply through direct replication of traumatic circumstances / stimuli (pp79). Casement identifies the differences between trauma and current transference as what make the transference endurable (and catharsis possible) (pp79), and hence inadequate / overly identified transference may block the work (pp81). Rather than attempting to 're-parent', the therapist should maintain both the 'as if' transference illusion, within boundaried containment (pp82). In Casement's previous volume (Casement, 1995), he revealed the extent to which he would risk client psychosis to avoid tempering this illusion (pp87) – which he sees as potentially retraumatising (along with potential similarities between traumatic childhood treatment and the analytic encounter). All this points out the difficulty of working in the transference – the necessity of being sensitive to parallels between inadequate parenting and the therapy, without seeking to reactively correct them.

Casement argues against the 'corrective emotional experience' recommended by Franz Alexander, suggesting that the 'good' object in therapy is not reparative but needs to survive the client originated attempt at destruction described by Winnicott (Winnicott, 1971). It's questionable whether this complete rejection of the concept of corrective emotional experience, and the implied necessity of abreaction / re-living of trauma as always necessary or sufficient to recovery (Lopez, 2011).

Casement discusses the intersubjectivities of therapist and client, both laid down (according to Casement) in early childhood experience (pp126). The therapeutic relationship hence acts as a re-enactment of the clients early disturbed object relations, aspects of the therapist related through in the transference as the previously failing care giver. If supportively contained, accurately trial identified and interpreted and provided sufficient boundaries, the client can find in the analysis the reparative relationship needed to heal early trauma (pp129), passing from antagonism, to dependence and finally independence – transcending the need for the therapist (pp131). Casement's recognition that the therapist's counter-transference can block this process, if unaddressed, is valuable.
Usefulness

By rejecting the ‘corrective emotional experience’, Casement distances his analytic technique from the intervention styles of behaviourist therapies – and their demonstrable efficacy in certain domains of psychopathology (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006). However Casement’s issue seems to be more with the alliance damaging, transference provoking technique advocated by Alexander, than with the corrective utility of new emotional/social experiences themselves (provided they are client directed). Contemporary cognitive therapies frequently work to provide clients with the tools to meet their own needs – and while this can potentially fixate on the presenting problem, it also provides an agency and a willingness to accept client directed growth, lacking in a Casement’s singular focus on transference as a clue to developmental trauma which needs to be reworked. Casement tackles this contradiction directly when he talks about a case where therapist affirmation had helped solve a client’s immediate depression and purposelessness, but failed to tackle her deeper existential dilemma – by providing a ‘false self’ image that was not derived from the client (pp101). However, psychoanalytic interpretation too can provide a frame or self for the client that may not be wholly authentic. Further, as pointed out in my previous review of Casement’s first volume, there is a fallacious essentialism at work here – an assumption that there is a singular ‘true self’ (hypothesised by Winnicott), existing apart from influence and capable of destruction (Foucault, 1984).

Casement advocates waiting until the therapeutic alliance is developed to begin transference interpretations (pp95); therapists need to provide appropriate (emotional and physical) space, without impingement on or role-responsiveness to the client. Further, insight is of limited utility until it is experienced as transference (pp103). This is an
important point, and I feel provides the powerful advantage of impact / transference based object-relations approaches. Emotional experience, rather than intellectual comprehension, is the domain of change and insight. The part I find challenging is the attested efficacy of interpretation during emotional experience (pp104) – isn’t this merely confining emotional reality into a new configuration of the symbolic order? Casement himself questions the power of naming (pp108) and the importance of the content of interpretation vs the communication of having understood the client (pp109), even while arguing for its utility. However research does seem to indicate the efficacy of interpretation, even apart from the other therapeutic aspects of analysis (the real relationship etc) (Høglend et al, 2008).

I found a number of Casement’s incidental ideas to be illuminating. For example, his definition of self-respect, self-esteem etc, as products of ways in which others have related to the self (pp98). This is another way of stating Roger’s utility of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961) – in providing a space for reflection and acceptance of unmanageable communicated emotions often absent in the primary parenting relationship (pp99). Casement’s re-framing of ‘negative therapeutic reaction’ in terms of ‘pain of contrast’ provides a way of understanding why clients might reject new positive experiences (pp106).

In treating narcissistic wounds, Casement recommends attending to the meaningful content of the symptom, rather than attempting to treat its abrasive aspect (out of intolerant defensiveness) – which may re-enact happened in the parental relationship (pp132). Narcissism as a defensive position, may occlude internal self loathing, and be perceived as un-repentant, resulting in projective identification criticism from the therapist – worsening defences / re-wounding the client (pp133).

As with Casement’s previous volume, there were moments when his treatment of clients in his care seemed worrisome. For example in his physical restraint of a misbehaving child client and his exclusive focus on sexual interpretations of the child’s play behaviour. With an adult client Casement recounts the uncovering of ‘repressed’ memories of sexual abuse (pp135) – which is an enormously problematic area, vulnerable to the construction of detailed false memories based on unconscious therapist suggestion (Rubin, 1999).

**Conclusion**

As with Casement’s first volume (Casement, 1995) there is a strong contradiction between his explicitly stated desire to ‘follow’ the client in interpretation, and the leading behaviour demonstrated in his case studies. However, Casement’s explanation of handling countertransference impact is a practical guide to handling the extreme emotional restimulation and regression that can occur in therapy.
This volume clarifies concepts established in Casement’s first book, such as the nature of the internal supervisor, the efficacy of transference work, and the methodology of trial identification.

For me, Casement’s approach is broadly a person centred psychoanalysis. Trial identification mirrors Rogerian empathy, while acceptance is another way of framing unconditional positive regard, and interpretation of the CT impact / the acknowledgement of mistakes in therapy are both example of deepening the therapeutic alliance through congruence. The innate orientation towards growth in humanistic models, is reflected in Casement’s belief that the client continually seeks to meet ‘unmet needs’ (pp105) through ‘unconscious hope’ (pp111). Finally, the client directed nature of person centred therapy, is mirrored in the focus on the client’s own search for ‘therapeutic experience’ through transference (pp107), and the importance of tracking the client’s needs, intercommunicative style and experience of the therapeutic process.

References


A great writer has passed, Julian May 1931 – 2017

Science fiction is undergoing a cinematic renaissance. Over the past few years we’ve had an undeniably great continuation of the Starwars saga, two populist reimaginings of Star Trek, and superhero shows to every taste. Bladerunner just had a remarkably tolerable sequel, albeit one that like the original, bombed in America. The most popular cartoon is a hard SF parody, and the best satire on Netflix is cerebral future shock. For that, there have been surprisingly few recent adaptations of major science fiction novels or series. Fewer still have been artistically or commercially successful. There’s no Rama or Ringworld movie, no Hyperion or Xeelee series. ‘Syfy’ channel efforts to bring life to Riverworld, Dune and Earth Sea have done more harm than good. The reason is undeniably budgetary. Sure, CG has come to the point where digital compositing is routinely used to take the place of location shooting. Yes, movies like Gravity have demonstrated an almost entirely digital set can, with care and expense appear photorealistic. However, the old fast, good, cheap equation still applies. In the case of CG the
That’s one reason I have so much trepidation about the proposed adaptation of Julian May’s classic Saga of Pliocene Exile. Julian May died recently, at eighty six. She was perhaps my favourite writer. The books you stare deeply into as a child become the lens through which you view the world as an adult. As a tween I ate up late Victorian & Edwardian comic fiction, from Just William, to Jeeves and Wooster to Three Men in a Boat. To this day I still have an inappropriate fondness for the aesthetics and chummy noblesse oblige of late British imperium. When early adolescence hit, another perhaps only slightly less fanciful genre became my focus. I ate the greats of science fiction in huge, unchewed swallows – from Asimov and Clarke to Aldis, and Baxter. Later I nibbled weirder stuff, Lem, Dick, Ballard and Delany.

Science fiction was for me, as for so many others, an escape from a miserable adolescence. It spoke to the possibility of a future filled with wonder. Alien life and artificial intelligence offered the possibility that we, and I, were not alone. The endless vistas of space were a joyous vacation from the confines of early 90s Ireland. With its apologia of technological magic, science fiction offered a believable, and by inference hopeful future. One light years from Catholic Ireland, original sin, and the mundane suburbs of The Pale.

From my wooden, inkwell holed desk in St Joe’sh Christian Brothers school in Drogheda, I could run the endless strips of Trantor. Wet arsed on the grey ceilinged beaches of Laytown, I could walk without rhythm across the sand dunes of Arakis. Each mind bending short story by Niven or Heinlein or Bester, offered the possibility of a word vivid and different, a world of hope and change, in a place and time that seemed devoid of both.

For an unhappy child in an unwholesome place, the believability of escapism was paramount. And no one justified her fantasies like Julian May. Her magic was the ability to craft from hokey tropes like telekinesis, spiritual possession and alien visitations, a world at once mundane and utopian. My exposure came through the journalist dad of a school friend. He was occasionally sent books with covers and premises to garish to review, and kind enough to pass on a few to me. That’s how I came across The Galactic Milieu series, and through those May’s best known work The Saga of the Exiles.

Julian May spent decades writing copious non fiction. Including “7,000 encyclopedia articles on science and technology, [and] over 200 juvenile nonfiction books on science, sports, and biography”. That experience gave her with a literally encyclopaedic general knowledge. Her narratives are bedded in a profound mythological erudition, rivalling that of that CS Lewis.
Her narratives are bedded in a profound mythological erudition, rivalling that of CS Lewis and JRR Tolkin. The Saga of the Exiles is saturated with Scandinavian and Celtic mythology (one fabulous conceit of the books is that they explain the origin of the myths that inspired them). Not to mention fanatical attention to the detail of geology, mountaineering, materials science, cordon bleu cookery and a hundred other disciplines. Her characterisation is rooted not in Joseph Campbell, but in Jung’s primordial archetypes – as filtered through mythology and classical literature.

The books are littered with wordplay connecting characters and ancient alien races to Irish mythology. For example the Firvulag (a race in the Saga of the Exiles) take their name from the Fir Bolg, one of the first peoples of Ireland mentioned in the legendary volume of Irish pre-history Lebor Gabála Érenn. The Firvulag’s ancient rivals the Tanu, take their name from the Tuatha Dé Danann an ancient race of Irish gods. Their leader was Nuada Airgetlám, who becomes Nodonn Battlemaster, a powerful alien psychic in May’s universe. Game of Thrones might be the apex of contemporary fantasy world building, but for depth of mythological reference, complex psychologically diverse characters, and the fusion of the conceptual depth of SF with the magical conceits of fantasy, The Saga of the Exiles has it beat.

May blended science fiction and fantasy in a way only giants like Frank Herbert and Anne McCaffrey had previously attempted. Both in terms of content (fantastical beasts, Arthurian aristocracies, hyperspace travel) and mythic resonance. Her work took the tropes of fantasy seriously in a way that authors whose popularity transcended the genre (with notable exceptions like Ursula K. LeGuin and Susan Cooper) rarely did. Her taxonomy of ‘metaphysic’ mental abilities, developed out of a fascination with parapsychology. She reenergised the ‘next stage of human evolution’ trope by imagining super human abilities emerging gradually and inconsistently throughout human history; accounting for everything from ghostly apparitions to faith healers. As with the x-men franchise, the mistreatment and eventual acceptance of her psychic operants can be read as an allegory for the civil rights and the emerging American gay rights movement.

Over two interconnected series, May constructed a grand and intricate narrative. A genre defying tale of warring political dynasties, organised crime, time travel, serial killers, psychic abilities, mountain survivalism, ancient reptiles and near future space colonisation. Her books are undeniably science fiction, just as they are undeniably fantasy, noir, political thriller and philosophical treatise. Her characters are human, in a way that is all too rare even today in genre fiction. As likely to argue Quebecois history or the theories of Catholic philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as they are to battle on flying beasts over the skies of Pliocene Europe.

This unrivalled ambition was not always successful. Her work can at times become bogged down in sheer detail, and the meta-narrative that connects her two best series can seem initially impenetrable. The final
Two Galactic Milieu books inexplicably run out of steam, just as they arrive at a conflict that should bring the arcs of all her central characters to a satisfying conclusion. Perhaps these factors explain why her work is not as well remembered as it should be. Just as likely, the books are simply too difficult to categorise to be truly marketable. Like the high fantasy-SF of real life spy Cordwainer Smith; May’s fiction remains too human and quirky for genre fans, yet too fantastical and narratively focused for literary fiction.

Julian May died two weeks ago. Perhaps the rumoured TV adaptation of her Saga of the Exiles will give the books a second life, but I doubt it. The scope, ambition and sheer scale of her major series would require a visual treatment dwarfing Game of Thrones. They’ll likely remain second hand book store favourites, passed from fan to fan. I cannot recommend them highly enough.

“A professional writer for my entire adult life. Married to the same man for thirty years. Mother of three grownup children. I have three cats that keep the house messed up and a big Japanese Akita guard dog that goes backpacking with me. I grow cute little miniature roses. I play pop songs on a mighty theatre organ and love to go to the opera. I drive a bronco four-wheeler. I sew on a 1928-vintage electric sewing machine. I’m a practical, hard-headed pro. I write for money and make no bones about it. Starving for the sake of art has never appealed to me. I like to write and I’m good at it – but it’s my profession, not my pastime. “

Julian May, 1981

Two Businesses That Don’t Exist, But Should

I attended the Phoenix Convention last weekend. The con is a literary Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy gathering, which this year included some fascinating panels on micropublishing and ebooks, both easily worth the price of admission alone. I will hopefully do a more detailed post on the con as a whole in the near future, but for now, here are a couple of business ideas that struck me during the panels.

A Federated Media For Podcasting

John Battelle’s Federated Media is a medium sized company which aggregates the eyeballs of several of the worlds most popular blogs (including the highly influential and chaotic Boing Boing), and
sells them to advertisers.

Result – blog authors can finance their writing and the growth of their sites, while advertisers get a single point of content to help them target and run campaigns. There’s an instant firewall around editorial decisions – as advertisers have no direct input into blog content; and sites can choose to accept only advertising that accords with their perspective (and *puke* branding). Advertisers get an instant audience (Boing Boing alone gets 3 million uniques a month), cheap.

Why does this not yet exist for podcasting?

While individual podcasts garner listeners at most in the hundreds of thousands (although there are perhaps a few that crest a million uniques) together they represent an growing, economically solvent and highly educated audience. An audience, in the US alone, of over 18 million listeners!

There are organisations like Adam Curry’s ‘Mevio’ (formerly Podshow Network). These guys throw automated adds into hundreds of small – medium casts, and provide a revenue stream; claiming exclusive rights to content for contract duration in return.

What I’m suggesting here by contrast, is a limited service that would work with top 20 or 100 (independent) podcasts only- dealing with advertisers directly in geographically specific markets (this is how itunes distinguishes its podcast rankings, which largely dictate downloads); and allowing podcast hosts to craft their own discursive in-show adverts, in their own voice – as Leo Laporte does in his enormously popular This Week in Tech podcast. This way, advertisers get known quantity shows with large, established audiences and (internally) consistent content and presentation. While at the same time growing indies can fund production costs and the development of their creative enterprise- via a personal relationship with a single company, who are ‘on their side’. The reality of ‘new media’ is that (especially in audio production, but increasingly in video) a small group working with a tiny budget can create compelling, high production quality content. What they cannot do, is replicate the services of a sales force. Nor should they try, as direct advertiser / editor contact, almost inevitably results in watered down, less appealing creative work (or ‘content’, for you marketdoids).

Marketing on Demand for Authors

Small publishers and independently published authors are increasingly switching to Print On Demand (POD) services for short run (in the low thousands), academic and older titles (slow but steady sellers). Companies like Lightening Source provide a dirt-cheap ‘just in time’ printing facility, with constant improvements in the quality of the finished book. Additionally such POD services facilitate ISBN numbers (which allow bookstores to order and stock a title) and work closely with Amazon to ensure books are available to purchase (and more importantly deliver quickly) online.

These companies also remove the distribution headache, delivering directly to the public and retail, without the necessity of publishers direct involvement. Such services are not perfect. The finished product may not always rival a traditionally printed book (and of course the design is still reliant on the talent of the publisher / author side artist). More importantly POD cannot replace the direct relationships between publisher and retail chain / indie bookshop, which dictate placement of the book at retail, how long a title is stocked, and whether it is for sale at brick and mortar stores at all. Accepting that, they can be an important tool for small publishers who wish to take a risk on a book they could not otherwise have published, or authors who have a pre-existing audience they can sell to directly. I’m thinking of the Wil Wheatons and Amanda...
a pre-existing audience they can sell to directly. I'm thinking of the Wil Wheatons and Amanda Palmers of this world- actors, musicians, and fine artists who maintain a direct relationship with their fan communities, either through blogging, podcasting, convention appearances or what have you. Personalities who may obtain much greater targeted sales dealing with their audiences directly. Here's an interesting quote from the Wheaton interview linked in the last sentence, on his experiences with his book 'Dancing Barefoot'..

The publisher insisted on marketing it in a way that did nothing to expand the audience I was already able to reach on my own, and basically blew me off when I repeatedly begged them to change course. I hired a PR firm at great expense, and they did pretty much the same thing. I vowed that I would never again go the “traditional” route with my future books.

So POD is great, but what's this business that's missing?

What's missing is a marketing firm specially tailored to the needs of micropublishers. A company that knows the net, understands how to build an audience, AND can work with traditional media outlets to arrange interviews, reading tours, store promotions and television, radio and new media advertising. This is the one facet of traditional publishing that has not been replicated as a paid service.

With the suicide of the music industry, musicians are abandoning record labels to deal directly with, and sell directly to, their audiences. Probably the two best known examples are Radiohead's In Rainbows release, and the Nine Inch Nails record Ghosts, which were both released directly online using donation, and freemium models respectively. Both records sold extremely well (in Radiohead's case, better than their previous three albums).

What's less well known outside the industry, is that artists are turning to next generation promotion companies like Live Nation, to handle the other important aspects of getting music out there- promotion and touring. These are services that an artist (beyond a certain popularity) cannot themselves handle without a label or label replacement. More importantly, as the perceived value of music recordings drops to zero (as will inevitably happen with books, Kindle or no Kindle), such tours provide the revenue stream that musicians need to keep creating.

Where is the equivalent in publishing? Where are the television and radio adverts for books? Where is the radio talk channel devoted to the enormously popular audio book genre? Who is organising paid and highly publicised public readings? Who is organising and promoting book tours for a set fee or a percentage of profits? Answer- no one. This is a service that could work at a variety of levels, from festival main stage readings by Chuck Palahniuk, to book promotions of unknown but compelling new fiction and non-fiction authors.

Two businesses that should exist, but don't. Yet.

Leave a comment 5 Minutes
Arthur C. Clark once called science fiction “The only genuinely mind expanding drug”, proof positive that he hadn’t tried any of the others. And yet, there’s something to this flippant quote. SF is the literary genre, next to the romantic novel, most often demeaned; despite this, it is perhaps the genre which has most influenced our recent history – inspiring technological and social change as varied as mass transit systems, space travel, and urban promiscuity.

Science Fiction is a kind of architecture of the mind, laying out possibilities sometimes loosely and grandly, sometimes explicitly and with the greatest conservatism – for technology to engineer. There’s another quote I like about the genre, this one by Frederik Pohl—“A good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam.” This cuts to the experimental nature of writing about the future, and the knack great authors have had of deriving subtly correct predictions about complex chaotic systems.

Today, the pace of change has outstripped the possibility, and perhaps even the desirability, of accurately predicting the future. The death of positivism, the dissolution of main stream culture in favour of a neutered commercialisation of the counter-culture, a near universal alienation from the corrupt pragmatism of politics; these things don’t lend themselves to the problem solving, manifest destiny of John W. Campbell’s lauded ‘Golden Age’. Science fiction has had to change – bifurcating into the utopianism of the post singularity genre, worlds in which all of our insurmountable problems disappear in the radical compression of technological advancement enabled by post human intelligences; and the experiential literary speculative fictions of Philip K. Dick’s paranoid simulcrum, JG Ballard’s reconstructions of a reality erased by virtualities, and Bruce Sterling’s subjective political dystopias.

Science Fiction rests at an interesting cross roads. It’s deep unfashionability is contradicted and intertwined with the its cultural influence. This Summer every major ‘tent pole’ release is a Sci-Fi movie: although few of these films have much in common with the intellectually freewheeling, ‘sensawonda’ produced by written SF, the thought provoking kick that Clark eluded to. High fashion, dulled to irrelevance by hipster ‘makers’ and neoludite artists, seems poised to adopt Steam Punk whole sale. The art world, for decades addicted to the shocking and shallowly theoretical delights of conceptualism, has been shaken awake by Low Brow / Pop Surrealism – figurative painting and sculpture born of the weirdo SF aesthetic of underground comix and the Ballarddeque machine love of the Hot Rod subculture.

Back in literary science fiction land, the magazines – paying authors tiny, near worthless fractions of their former story rates [in the introduction to Kurt Vonnegut’s short story collection ‘Bagombo Snuff Box’ – that’s the one where he laid out his infamous 8 Rules of writing – the author notes that after WW2, he earned more selling his first three stories than in a year working at GE] – have devolved into endless repetitions of succouring libertarian space opera (Asimovs), or abandoned SF wholesale in favour of fusions of low Fantasy and Horror (New Weird, Bizarro).

There are stirrings of hope for the commercial life of the genre. Podcasts have become paying
markets and built new audiences for short form SF (Steve Eley's Escape pod being the most prominent). Blogs which collate the flash fiction of young authors, provide the exposure and the experience once obtainable via the magazines. As for the direction of the genre, and the possibility of original work being done, only the future can tell.

For the longest of times, I've been promising my girlfriend a recommended reading list to bone up on Science Fictiony goodness. I grew up reading SF almost exclusively, and though my palate has now tempered, and I'm far from an expert in the genre, I remain smugly opinionated about matters Science Fictional.

What self respective geek can TIVo the Battle Star finale, without first having first explored the genres literary routes? What Watchmench can argue the finer details of squid replacement, without a thorough steeping in the pulps? I kid, a little. In any case, the wee lady was keen that I make her a list, and being far too bumptious an individual to construct such a bibliography without sharing it with the world, I present 'The Great Big SF Reading List', being an incomplete and arbitrary list of titles considered to be of exceptional worth or peculiar interest.

The list does not purport to provide a canon, but rather one perspective. The collated preferences of a life well wasted. Heinlein, Silverberg or Scott Card are notable by their absence. There’s little enough representation from the 90’s and beyond- no Ted Chiang, Vernor Vinge, Charlie Stross, Rudy Rucker nor Bruce Sterling; more recent authors, some of whose short story work I've greatly enjoyed.

It is an introductory list, deliberately incomplete, heterogeneous. A list that tries to distil a taste of the golden age, new wave, cyberpunk and post singularity genres. It leans toward softer 'social science' SF, but doesn't negate the hardest of scientific speculation. This is a list of slivers. Slivers of that diverse, obtuse and gloriously indefinable thing called Science Fiction. A list that hopelessly fails, and is delicious just the same.

The Books


*Dune* (first of a series, but fine on it's own) – Frank Herbert

*Rama, Rendezvous with Rama* (Rama 2) – Arthur C. Clark

*Man in the High Castle, A Scanner Darkly, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, Dr. Bloodmoney* – Philip K. Dick

Foundation Series (*Foundation, Foundation and Empire, Second Foundation, Foundations Edge, Foundation and Earth, Prelude to Foundation + Friends of Foundation*) – Isaac Asimov

The Xeelee Sequence (*Raft, Timelike infinity, Flux, Ring*) – Stephen Baxter

*Dangerous Visions* (ed Harlan Ellison)


*Forty Thousand in Gehenna, Downbelow Station* – CJ Cherryh (tomes, wonderful tomes but tomes)

*The Earth Book of Stormgate* – Poul Anderson

*Neuromancer* – William Gibson

*More than Human* – Theodore Sturgeon

*Space Chantey* – RA Lafferty
The Future of E-Books

An article by Mike Elgan in Computer World Magazine, laying the boot into e-books, has sparked a surprisingly intelligent discussion on Digg. According to Elgan, e-books are bound to fail because:

1. They aren’t cheaper – both the hardware and content are more expensive
2. Content is available on other platforms (e.g.: PC)
People love paper books

Throughout his article Elgan conflates the e-book format and electronic book devices, in a way that confuses the issue of uptake. Perhaps the reason he fails to differentiate between medium and its media, is that there are so many kinds of things that can be described as a e-book. Wikipedia for example, lists twenty five e-book formats, including both document types and readers.

Elgan’s article might have been written twenty ago, about digital music.

‘Companies like Sony, Panasonic, Hitachi and Fujitsu have devoted millions of dollars over the past couple of decades developing what they hope will be a device that replaces the..’ [Record player]
‘The hardware costs hundreds of dollars’ [CD Player]
‘everyone already has alternatives’ [Vinyl, Tape, 8 Track]
‘do people want to “curl up” with a battery-operated..’ [iPod]

For a new format or device to succeed, what matters is not how much people like an existing product, but how much they would enjoy an alternative with greater function. Currently e-book readers (like all digital display technologies), are in their infancy. We know this because their development is occurring so rapidly. The best digital display available in 1987 was a 16 inch VGA CRT, boasting 256 colors at a 320×200 pixel resolution. Twenty years later, digital images can be displayed on a variety of output media from 63 inch flat screen HDTV’s at 1920 × 1080 pixel resolution, in 281 trillion colors; to high contrast, monochromatic 800*600 e-ink ‘powerless displays’.

We each carry a variety of devices capable of displaying digital books; from laptops, to MP3 players, to mobile phones. Digital displays are becoming ever more versatile, ubiquitous and cheap, with increasing contrast, fidelity and resolution. Fujitsu have recently announced the first prosumer colour e-ink display. So why haven’t e-books already taken off?

Existing efforts are crippled by Digital Restrictions Malware, and available in a bewildering variety of incompatible proprietary formats, from Adobe, Sony, Microsoft, Mobipocket, eReader and others. Publishers fear they will experience the same growth in copyright infringement that the record industry claims has negatively effected sales. It may already be too late. In the absence of reasonably priced, DRM free alternatives, consumers are turning to unlicensed downloads, just as happened with music and film. A quick search of isoHunt, a top bittorrent index, for the term ‘DVD’ returns over 26,000 active downloads. A similar search for ‘Book’, returns over 4,000.

A great majority of these files are posted without their authors consent, but some publishers and authors are embracing digital distribution. Blogger and award winning science fiction author Cory Doctorow, has distributed all his novels online for free; releasing digital versions simultaneously with their paper equivalents. A few publishers, like Baen Books, have adapted to the new marketplace, making available older content for free, and selling reasonably priced, DRM free, multi-format e-books, with subscription options. Initiatives like Project Gutenberg, seek to make digital copies of public domain books universally available. Whether publishers eventually embrace consumer friendly formats, or continue to ignore them, digital e-book content will continue to grow in availability.

With e-book readers, the costs of adoption are still high, as dedicated devices or high resolution
PDA's still cost hundreds of euro. Similarly, while common devices like iPod's can technically display e-books, such uses often require a degree of technical knowledge, and force users to struggle with unfriendly user interfaces. This should soon change, as devices like Apple's iPhone usher in a new generation of high resolution, high contrast digital display devices. While Apple seems likely to restrict the iPhone's use, their competitors will be more than happy to capitalise on more open platforms, whilst learning from Apple's user interface innovations.

Digital books provide a variety of predictable advantages, as well as many which will not emerge until they become more evolved. Right now groups like The Institute for the future of the book, are hard at work 'inventing new forms of discourse for the network age', and their efforts provide an insight into just some of the potential benefits of e-books.

1. Collaborative writing / revision / comment / annotation
2. Effectively free wireless distribution
3. Smaller form factor – potentially infinite books in one networked device
4. Environmentally friendly
5. Text search
6. Updateable
7. Rapid universal publication
8. Dynamic user interfaces
9. Flexibility of format
10. Interactivity

Whether e-book's are ultimately consumed on laptops, dedicated palmtop devices with flexible screens, enhanced newsprint, heads up displays, or by all these and other means, is impossible to predict. Right now paper books are far more durable, resilient, and user friendly than any of their alternatives; but as an analogue medium, their development is slow and expensive. E-book's by contrast, benefit fully from the brakeneck pace of accelerating technological change, and offer so many potential advantages in cost, portability and capability that their adoption is all but inevitable. Witness the publication and consumption of scientific articles, which though nominally tied to peer reviewed magazines, increasingly occurs initially online – increasing the speed, penetration, and availability of research.

Digital consumption will affect the format of books, as it has already affected the format of articles published on the web. There will always be a market for traditional 'dead tree' editions; but 'the book' will likely morph and splinter into a variety of forms, and the nature of authorship will change with it. This is as an evolution of discourse as significant the creation of written language, or the invention of the printing press. It's an exciting time to be a reader, and an even more exciting time to be a writer.

Leave a comment

Disappearing Future

After re-listening to many of the excellent podcasts from 2005's Accelerating Change conference, available from IT conversations; I got a hankering to read Charlie Stross's highly
recommended, and Hugo award nominated, post singularity novel Accelerando. The book is available to download under a Creative Commons license. Or rather, the book was available for download. Accelerando.org is down, and although the site itself can be accessed for now via Google's cache, the PDF of Stross's novel is unavailable. So too is the site which originally seeded the novels torrent, and the torrent itself. Cue whaling and gnashing of teeth re: the unsustainability of torrents.

Bittorrent, a protocol which provides an excellent method of appropriating the latest episode of Lost, sans advertisements direct from the USA, is rather unsuited to maintaining the availability of media on the long tail. A naive, non programmer’s explanation of why this is the case follows... For a file to be available to download via Bittorrent, at least one seeder must maintain availability of a complete copy, dynamically providing portions of the file to a potential downloading 'swarm'. Additionally, for a file to be practically quick to download, pieces of it must be available from a wide range of sources (so that individual clients can trade them directly, greatly accelerating the process), and must additionally be listed on a Bittorrent tracker server, which brokers communications between clients, and between clients and seeder.

Dispersed hosting is a weakness and a strength of Bittorrent as a distribution medium. Say what you will about the printing press, it takes far longer for paper based novels to disappear completely than for their digital equivalents to become network isolated, or become unreadable due to the march of incompatibility.

There's a lot of buzz right now about building Bittorrent (or torrent like) functionality into consumer devices, set top boxes and the like; and little awareness of the bandwidth costs that such distribution transfers to the end user.

There have been a variety of attempts to establish an open directory of Creative Commons works, but as of right now no exhaustive list exists, and existing search methodologies are ineffectual. This is not a criticism of CC per say, which I find both useful and commendable, both as a creator (almost without exception, everything on this site is made available under a creative commons license), and an ethical (sic) user, but rather of the assumption that the internet automagically provides publishing methodologies equivalent or superior to those of traditional media.

Right now, as far as I can tell, it is essentially impossible to find a (PDF) copy of Accelerando online, as far the the internet is concerned, the novel no longer exists. Similarly, the archive of episodes of Technototics will effectively disappear forever in the ether, if I ever fail to pay a hosting bill (already rather overdue I'm afraid).

Update: After some further searching, I did manage to find a lone floating copy – download here – of Accelerando, which neatly solved my immediate problem. Astute readers will note that this doesn't invalidate my original point. To ensure the novels continuing availability (I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume Accelerando.org's servers have been consumed by some sort of singularity), I'm hosting the file myself. Download link, and copyright notice, after the break.


This work is Copyright © Charles Stross, 2005.

This text of this novel is made available, with the kind consent of the publishers, under the terms of the Creative Commons deed, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5: You are free: to copy,
I’m suffer from chronic insomnia, it’s pretty bad at the moment as I fail to complete two essays due today. Sometimes it’s manically productive however. Last night I watched a documentary on the modern novel, and got to thinking about the books that have influenced me.

They’re not my favourite books, though many would make that list too. Nor are they representative of what I’ve read – I spent most of my childhood immersed in science fiction; and most of what I read these days is digital; much too, of the writing I consider influential, is in the form of song lyrics. But each book changed how I saw the world.

It’s a list as significant for what it leaves out as for what it includes; there’s no Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, no Salinger or Mailer, no D.H Lawrence or Virginia Wolfe, and there’s (god forbid) no Ernest bleedin’ Hemmingway. It’s an embarrassingly cliched list, and incomplete, both due to faulty memory and the huge degree of ephemeral journal articles, reports, blog posts and news print excluded by definition. Here it is anyway..

Read the List on 43 Things.

On the Road – Jack Kerouac
The Social Contract – Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Blank Slate – Stephen Pinker
1984 – George Orwell
Hot House – Brian Aldiss
Dracula Unbound – Brian Aldiss
Fahrenheit 451 – Ray Bradbury
Lanark – Alasdair Grey
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas – Hunter S. Thompson
No Logo – Naomi Klein
Hegemony or Survival – Noam Chomsky
Times Fool – Glyn Maxwell
The Canterbury Tales – Geoffrey Chaucer
The World According to Garp – John Irving
Catch 22 – Joseph Heller
American Psycho – Brett Easton Ellis
The Rules of Attraction – Brett Easton Ellis
Money – Martin Amis
Bright Lights Big City – Jay McInerney
Dune – Frank Herbert
Sociology – Anthony Giddens
Raft – Steven Baxter
Ring – Steven Baxter
Lolita – Vladimir Nabokov
Dangerous Visions – Harlan Ellison (ed)
Transmetropolitan – Warren Ellis
The Liar – Stephen Fry
The Picture of Dorian Grey – Oscar Wilde
The Star Rover – Jack London
Illusions : The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah – Richard Bach
Collected Poems – Wilfred Owen
Collected Stories – Anton Chekov
A Coney island of the mind – Lawrence Ferlinghetti
Waiting for Godot – Samuel Beckett
Forty Thousand in Gehenna – CJ Cherryh
The Earth Book of Stormgate – Poul Anderson
Rendezvous with Rama – Arthur C. Clarke
Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis – Sigmund Freud
The magicians nephew – CS Lewis
The last battle – CS Lewis

What’s on your list?
Popular Articles

Radio & Video Production
Sound as a way of Telling Stories (2015)
Sound and Vision Scheme Part 1, Part 2
Sound and Vision Application Examples
Thoughts On Location Recording (2013)
Cheap Video Equipment for Short Films & Sketches (2015)
Why is Videography so expensive? (2018)

Technology
The Next Bebo (2006)
The Impact of the Net (2017)
Emerging Uses for Twitter (2007)

Mental Health
Meaning and Society in Mental Illness (2013)
Porn Does a Body Good (2013)
Low Cost Psychotherapy in Ireland (2013)

Culture
What is a hipster anyway? (2009)
Someone Just Created the Blair Witch of Podcasting (2017)
Free Schools or No Schools (2014)
Where to Write in Dublin (2013)
A Great Writer Passes - Julian May (2017)
Brief History of Exchange Dublin (2015)

Follow Blog via Email

Enter your email address to follow this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

Join 180 other followers

Enter your email address

Follow
As far as I can remember, neither the physicians nor the orthopaedic surgeons ever enquired as to why suicide had been attempted – that was simply never considered their job. It was the task of the psychiatrists to distinguish those who had attempted suicide on impulse because of some temporary crisis, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs, from those who had serious, ongoing intent to self-harm. As a medical student I would sit in on these consultations. Once a man was brought in who had jumped from the Forth Road Bridge. He had fallen 150ft, shattered his ankles and three of his vertebrae; "A fall on water from a height like that is like falling on concrete," one of the nurses told me. He had crewcut hair, a scar across his lip and lay as if pinioned to the bed, eyes wide with fear. Patients appear to suffer more from the lack of control over hallucinations than from their existence alone (Romme & Esher, 1989). Intervention does not always help all of these students. Further, students with hearing difficulties that are subtle and those who seem to be coping with learning problems might not have been found during the earlier years. Teachers whose training has made them sensitive to these possibilities might prevent these from being discovered so late. Read more. Patient education is the process by which health professionals and others impart information to patients and their caregivers that will alter their health behaviors or improve their health status. Education may be provided by any healthcare professional who has undertaken appropriate training education, education on patient communication and education is usually included in the healthcare professional's training. Patience is a virtue. Lacking it damages your health, career and relationships. Identify impatience triggers, control the symptoms, and reap the benefits. Doing this will slow your heart rate, relax your body, and distance you emotionally from the situation. Sometimes you might need a longer count, or to repeat the process several times. Impatience can cause you to tense your muscles involuntarily. So, consciously focus on relaxing your body. Again, take slow, deep breaths. Relax your muscles, from your toes up to the top of your head. Force yourself to slow down. Make yourself speak and move more slowly. It will appear to others as if you're calm – and acting patient often makes you feel more patient. Emotional Symptoms.