

Reading Notes

Books I have read and
what I have learnt from them

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Preface

There are not many authors for which I made the conscious decision of reading everything they have written, even if somehow I didn't quite succeed. I can count them on my two hands, here are the ones I can remember having read a lot of their oeuvre even though I never had the time or courage to read everything they have written:

French-Canadian: Anne Hébert, Michel Tremblay, Réjean Ducharme.

French: André Gide, Honoré De Balzac, Racine, Molière, Voltaire, Antonin Artaud.

English: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur C. Clarke, Gentry Lee, Stephen Baxter, Agatha Christie, Michael Crichton, Dan Brown, Stephen Hawking,

There are probably more, but I can't think of them right now. It is interesting to see that list, as these authors are so different from each other, one could have trouble identifying what my taste in literature truly is. Perhaps I have no particular taste, perhaps at some point for a reason or another that author caught my eye and somehow I went crazy and read many of their books.

Of all these authors, there are only three I could read their books over and over again, without ever tiring, they are Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee. I suspect I may wish to read Agatha Christie again one day if I ever finish reading all her books, something I am doing right now.

I will need at some point to analyse these authors and their books, especially the ones I read again and again, to find out specifically why I like their books and their style, what I can learn from it in my own enterprise of writing books.

However, for now I have decided to read and comment on other science fiction authors, to test and see if somehow my Anna Maria and my grasp of the English language might be severely handicapped. I had no idea where to start, despite having so many sci-fi e-books from so many authors.

For a long time I have been accumulating a whole library of books that I have never read, I have two full book shelves in my living room and many more bags of them in the cupboard. I have also left most of my books in Canada. The problem has been to identify the books people have said were great, and yet, not a simple story of humans going into space just to meet some other civilisation suddenly declaring war on us. I realised that I do not enjoy all of science fiction, indeed, I am actually really specific in what I like. As there are thousands of books out there, and since I have no time whatsoever to read, I have to choose carefully.

Pulp Sci-Fi or Space Opera, I feel, must be off my list, and yet, it is not easy to know which is which. I have a feeling I won't enjoy Heinlein so much, I will read *The Number of the Beast* though, to give it a chance, it is about parallel universes.

I browsed on Wikipedia to find out who wrote stuff about alternative histories, parallel universes and time travel. I am building a sub-library of these books I will eventually read, and they also need to be somehow a bit philosophical and contain some degree of theoretical physics, hard science fiction. Though it is not essential, as long as the writing is clever. I also do not need to limit myself to sci-fi, I have read two books of Agatha Christie recently, so let's start with that.

Agatha Christie

And Then There Were None Murder on the Orient Express

Last week I played the adventure PC game *And Then There Were None*, based on Agatha Christie's book of the same title. I thoroughly enjoyed it and immediately played *Murder on the Orient Express* afterwards. Both games were a bit boring after a while, because I had to go through all the rooms of the suspects again and again, to find clues, just like in the train compartments. Dialogues and cut scenes is what I prefer, but overall I liked the games.

It piqued my curiosity enough that I investigated further and got the books of Agatha Christie the games were based on. I spent the day reading *And Then There Were None*, and I intend to go see the play in Central London soon. The thing is, I would never have got into Agatha Christie until I could play the adventures on my PC, knowing all the characters helps a great deal, because there are always so many, and no one really cares for any of them or the reason they all got together where they are in the first place.

I guessed immediately that the Judge would be the culprit in *And Then There Were None*, because it was obvious that only he would want to punish those who got away with their murder or carelessness when the law could do little to bring them to justice. In the game though, I was wrong, a woman was the culprit, for unconvincing reasons. I knew the culprit would have been one of the dead ones. I also sort of guessed what was going on on the *Orient Express*, how else would you explain that everybody related to a kidnap/murder in America could have all been on that lost train from nowhere in the first place? They were all on it, they were all guilty. So there is some sort of logic in Agatha Christie, you can still guess what's coming, when it would have been easy to make anyone of them the guilty party, with a minimum of clues. I like that the fact that it still answer to logic and you can deduct yourself from reading the books.

I don't particularly like *Detective Stories*, I will never write one for example, though I should never say never. I only like *Sherlock Holmes*, and more because of the writing style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I can't say the writing style of Agatha Christie is that great, to be honest. On that level my English might not be that bad, when I feel that compared to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, I can only bow in respect to the greatness and genius of the man.

What I admired in Agatha Christie was on another level, how forward she is, and modern, despite writing at the beginning of the century. And I realise that England hasn't changed much in 100 years, except that we now have a phone and a TV and a computer. Overall, nothing else has changed. She was modern indeed, in her philosophy of life. I like that.

Just like in *Sherlock Holmes*, in those days they were obsessed with the colonies, in India, in Africa, and to a certain extent, America. As if in those days, the wars were all they could think of and write about. Something else I noticed, is how politically incorrect they were allowed to be in those days, when today writing the same things would be unthinkable.

For example, *And Then There Were None* was translated into French with the title, till to this day: *Ten Little Negros*. If I were to write a novel today called *Ten Little Negros*, I would not only destroy my entire in-existent writing career, I would most likely lose my job, be charged, and executed publicly.

In the book though, the story is about Ten Little Indians, not what I would call Negroes. So why was the French title Ten Little Negroes? And then, more puzzling, in the Adventure PC Game, aware of the political incorrectness of even mentioning Ten Little Indians all being killed one after the other, they were called Ten Little Sailors, and they were all white, of course.

In the book, one the guest is responsible for 21 Africans being left to die of starvation, and not many in the novel seem to consider it a crime, because they were Black. Even one of the women said that it didn't really matter, they were indigenous people. I have written much less than that, without any intention of hurting anyone, and felt the need to censor myself, and will eventually delete stuff I have written which people could misinterpret, when I never even wrote anything that bad.

So, I have learnt that in the past authors had much more freedom of speech than we will ever have, and I wonder if the trend will continue to the point where only new euphemisms replacing the old ones now a bit too contaminated and subjective will have to be used. Or if maybe one day, most likely after another World War, we will free again to write such books as André Gide has written in French, which are still read worldwide everyday, as he is recognised as one of the best French author there ever was. Many of his books were about pedophilia and how he enjoyed sleeping with little boys. Not that I have any of those inclination, quite the contrary, I always likes men older than me, but I could not imagine today even writing a fictional book about a pedophile.

I wanted to make Anna Maria a Jewish woman, who somehow through history had to hide the fact she was Jewish, but now I will delete that from fears that it could be misinterpreted as me trying to say that being Jewish is unacceptable, and that being a Protestant is preferable. She was also half Catholic, and also had to suppress that fact if she ever wanted to become Queen of England. There would be no problem there, since no one could misread my intention. But today you cannot take any chance as an author, it is best to avoid anything even slightly politically incorrect.

I wanted Arthur to be bad, sexist, anti-gay, racist and all, just like you meet them every day at work, but today it is no longer acceptable, and whenever Harpreet, the Indian lesbian in my book Anna Maria confronts Arthur, he is so nice to her whilst she spit on him, the whole thing as become surreal and unbelievable. And yet I don't know how I could go around this. I certainly have no wish to create discomfort or that reading my book will become unpleasant, this is entertainment. I guess you have to adjust to the times you live in and censor yourself to the max if you wish to go mainstream.

As a matter of fact, Ten Little Negroes was the first ever book I ever tried to read in my entire life. I must have been ten at the time. I had to read a book, I picked up that Agatha Christie book at the school library and started reading. I cannot remember how many pages I read before I decided to drop the book and forget all about it, as it bored me to death. I remember clearly thinking in those days that it was so badly written, and yet, I was 10, and I had never read another book in my entire life. I have no doubt even today that the French translation of that book must have been horrible, the one I tried to read at least. I'm sure there is more than one French translation of Christie's books. That day I decided that Agatha Christie was not for me, and I never looked back for 25 years. Today I picked up the same book, And Then There Were None, in its original version, still not impressed with the writing style, but I enjoyed it, probably only because I have played the computer game before hand and that I now live in England, and love Devon.

At this stage, I have no idea if reading two of her books will get me to read them all, and then I might speak differently about the bitch. I still hate detective stories, and yet, most Hollywood films and television series are about just that, a murder and solving that insignificant mystery that no one cares about. That is a great lesson for me, stay away from these murders and these

solving the crime. There are other mysteries in life that are far more interesting. And that idea though has stuck with me, especially after watching over and over again that Star Trek episode about Captain Picard trying to solve Dixon Hill mysteries, and Data about Sherlock Holmes. Mysteries are important, and the build up to finding out is an important ingredient of suspense. I should never forget it, and I admit that so far it has never truly been on my mind when coming up with an idea and writing it. It is either there from the start, hopefully, and I did it at an unconscious level, when in fact I should have more thoroughly thought about mysteries and build the suspense around them.

I used to think when writing film and television scripts that if it is boring in the book or on paper, then it will most certainly be boring on the screen. If I went on to write a car chase that would last 20 minutes on the screen, can you imagine how boring that would be in the book? Thankfully, I have never read such books that would have 100 pages describing a car chase, I suspect on paper it is three pages, perhaps even three lines, and then the Director of the film or series gets carried away and the film becomes just a long chain of action stuff that, to be honest, can be quite gripping sometime, but sure enough many times I thought: well, that's enough, let's talk about something else, something significant that perhaps can tell me something, even teach me something.

The Murder on the Orient Express has a clear structure. We meet the characters one by one, their false identity, a murder is committed, the detective question everyone, realise most of them were lying, question them again, and then present his conclusion, which cannot fail to impress or be spectacular, because obviously in the book none of it was that clear.

It is obvious that this recipe works well, everyone love a murder mystery, but in the end, perhaps it is a bit boring, and one would need to have a lot more imagination in order to write something wonderful and memorable. I asked someone at work to tell me which Agatha Christie book I should read next, she said, they are the same, just pick one randomly. Can you imagine if after a long career as a writer, and after having written 50 to 100 books, someone was to say the same about my books? It would be like saying that every single book I have written was the same one, that I had in fact written only one book! And the same I suppose could be said of Sherlock Holmes, if you need to start discovering Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, any book will do, they are the same, even though, they are all exceptionally good. So I have to be careful never to find or follow any already made structure, especially one about a detective questioning people until the light is turned on. That is not good enough, I have to be more original.

What is it that I actually liked reading those two books of Agatha Christie? I think it is the places, the Orient Express train, the millionaire's house on an island of the Devon's coast, and the people, the characters. None of them are developed that much, and perhaps that is good since there are so many and I would quickly lose interest, but enough is said about each of them for me to enjoy this cosmopolitan feeling of people from all walks of life and from everywhere in the world.

I also believe most characters in those two Agatha Christie, just like they are in Sherlock Holmes, are a bit of a caricature, they are funny in their most peculiar ways. Even a religious fanatic can be funny, when described by the others. Both authors have many comparisons with animals, most of their characters at some point or another are described as turtles, weasels, ferrets, that kind of comparisons, and it never misses its target, it is always funny. None of them can be taken seriously, there is a lot of humour without it becoming a blatant comedy. I especially liked one of the women's impressions of Hercule Poirot in the Murder on the Orient Express, about the fact she could not believe how someone could have a head so shaped like an egg.

I also noticed that Poirot was using the fact that he was a bit of a spaz with the English language to get other potential culprits to finish his sentences, to test if they have any knowledge of common American expressions, and hence

find out if they lied when stating they never went abroad. I have learnt a valuable lesson as well reading that book, it is acceptable to have people speaking with a strong French, German, Swedish or whatever other accent, and by all means once in a while we need to be reminded that they have an accent, but going about writing a whole book in destroyed English really gets on my nerve. If ever I have people with accents, I will no longer destroy the language in order to make it clear, I will here and there remind them that they have an accent, either through narration or one of the characters saying that this has been said with a strong French accent, but not a whole character constantly destroying the language. I faced that problem before, in my novel Denfert-Rochereau, it was mistake to have some Anglophones speaking in a broken French, I won't do that again.

I love trains, adventures in trains, even the cheap one Last Train to Blue Moon Canyon of Nancy Drew, satisfying enough. Of course, the God of adventure games is Benoit Sokal, and nothing beats his train and the cut scenes from his adventure Syberia. Benoit Sokal with Jane Jensen (Gabriel Knight) and Ragnar Tørnquist (Longest Journey/Dreamfall), are my heroes of the day, for having achieved the best adventure games possible, and without them I'm not sure where I would be right now. That is the kind of impact they had on my life.

Adventure games are like films, but they are interactive. They ask much more from you as an investment, they last for days if not weeks, and they give you much more in return, as they truly immerse you in their universe. I cannot think of anything better that ever came into my life than Adventure Games, and I bet you are laughing right now. But think of it, is that damn TV not the best invention that ever entered your home? Could you imagine your house or flat without a TV? I bet you could easily see your flat without a fridge or a cooker, but not without a TV. And so, perhaps you have not realised it, but a TV is everything to you, or else you would have one, you would spend hours in front of it. And yet TVs are not satisfying like adventure games, they don't grip you as much and bring you into the universes they present to you. A three hour film, for which you would have suspended disbelief for a while, and forgot it was actually a film in the first place, rare occurrence I admit, might give you a glimpse of what adventure games are all about. That is why I have here every single adventure game that ever went into the market, even the ones from 1980s, because even then I was already well immersed into that universe, no matter how primitive it was then, it was as powerful then as it is now, 25 years later. And my God, this is exciting times, as the next generation will surpass everything we have seen so far, it will be the ultimate experience. And if I knew that for one minute I could be part of that revolution and universe, I would drop everything and write and programme for the rest of my life the best adventure games you could ever imagined. More important than TV, films or literature, computer games, adventures, it has to be my destiny as it is my passion. I cannot see that ever changing. We all have our own quirkiness, our own queerness about us, that is mind. Perhaps I should work toward making this come true. If I were to become rich overnight, I would be willing to spend my last penny on this industry, even though making any profit is a hard thing, if not impossible. Who cares, I don't care, I don't care about anything anymore except my own obsessions. I will die soon, I can feel it, unless somehow I can finally do something full time that I actually like doing, or else, I will kill myself, because I can't stand it anymore, I just can't! I will not live another 60 years being bored out of my mind, living the least exciting existence one could hope for. I'm sorry, I wasn't born for that kind of shit, and if I was then I don't care to end it right now.

A.B.C. Murders

I just read *Evil Under the Sun*, but I not enough to say to even mention the fact that I have read it. I read it because it is what the next adventure PC game will be based on. I recognised all the familiar elements of the previous books, a hotel on an island in Devon, a murder, questioning and solution. It was entertaining, and that is it.

I am finishing *ABC Murders*, which apparently was highly praised amongst all the other books. The beginning of the reason may be because it is unlike the other murder stories I have read so far and came to anticipate from Christie, I suppose the idea came at a time when scholars were discussing the possibility that a mad man may commit murder without a motive, as a completely gratuitous fact, like André Gide talked in length in *The Caves of the Vatican*. Yawn!

What I find quite interesting is that there are not one but many mentions of Sherlock Holmes, which proves to me that Christie was aware of Doyle and must certainly have drawn some inspiration. I would think that at the time Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes must have been the two most recognisable private detectives fiction has ever known, and probably still is to this day. There was even a critic there of Sherlock Holmes, how by looking at a crime scene for a few minutes he can tell you so much about the man who committed the crime, when quite the contrary Poirot is most of the time completely in the dark and is not afraid of stating so. I suppose it is a way for Agatha Christie to say that in crimes, nothing is that clear cut, there are never that many clues left behind that within seconds you can find your man. She is saying that her stories are based on reality, and that Sherlock Holmes exhibits feats that could be called supernatural and totally unrealistic. What a bitch! It was the first time I read anything slightly negative about Sherlock Holmes.

Once again there is something so modern about this book written I believe in 1934, you could easily forget that this story is not happening in the year 2000, except of course that the words "forensic analysis" do not appear anywhere, and checking fingerprints is about the extent of what the police will do. It makes for much simpler stories, I can just imagine today the crime novel filled with techno babble about the forensic bullshit that no one could actually care about. It is well pointed that after mentioning fingerprints and DNA, it might be better for me to not venture any further in all the work related to forensic evidence, or else the plot will become secondary.

I noted also that Poirot has now a friend called Captain Hastings writing his adventures, just like Doctor Watson in Sherlock Holmes, and they're both from the British Army. And that sometimes it seems that Agatha Christie regrets her choice to have a narrator who is part of the story, as this is the big problem of such novels, is that you cannot talk about anything or be anywhere where the narrator has not been, unless he reports what he has been told. I faced the same problem in *Anna Maria*, my main character tells the story, and then nothing can be said unless he was there or someone told him. Christie solved that problem by having chapters where she states that this is not from Hastings reports, and then we can see the murderer in action, and she wrote something artificial at the beginning stating that he is the one who wrote it from other police reports or facts that has been told to him after the case was over. She might as well have gone for a third person narrator and forget the Doyle's style of having a Doctor Watson there. I think it may have been a mistake on my part for *Anna Maria* to have my Duke of Connaught to be the narrator, I don't know. At least I will never do the artificial trick like Christie to suddenly have chapters at the third person, bad idea. And yet, I'm glad I saw that, one day I may just have to use a similar trick, who knows, especially if *Anna Maria* becomes the series I hope it will become.

I've been wondering about where the idea of Hercule Poirot came from, and especially that he is from Belgium, which is such a weird choice, why not East Berlin or China at that point? Also that Arthur Conan Doyle also has Sherlock

Holmes mother being French, and there are a lot of French expressions in Sherlock Holmes. Both authors must have been inspired a lot indeed by the early French detective novels like Monsieur Lecoq of Émile Gaboriau. And then, just to mark the difference, instead of being French Poirot is from Belgium, and still speaks French. At the beginning his French accent annoyed me, but now I love it.

I am now reading *A Murder is Announced*, not much will I have to say about that one, except that yesterday the film was on TV and I quite enjoyed it. Went to bed at 5 in the morning and suddenly my partner asked me horrified: do you intend to start writing murder mysteries in Agatha Christie's style? My answer was of course not, but I wondered where this comment came from. After all, Christie sold two billion copies of her books worldwide, oversold by only one author, namely Shakespeare, and oversold by only one other book, the Bible. What harm could there be in writing pastiche of Agatha Christie, just like I always wanted to write pastiche of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes? My partner that there was a golden age for that writing style, that subgenre. And that even though these authors are still highly popular today, this is built on a century of success, something you would never be able to achieve is somehow you were to hear today for the first time stories about Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple and Sherlock Holmes. It is quite possible that if these books had been published today only, no one on the planet except perhaps a few hundreds, would have ever heard of them. Interesting fact, that not only you need to write in a great literary style, but the genre of what you write needs to go hand in hand with what is actually published at the time, or you need to be so fantastic an author that you can, all alone, start a new style and subgenre of literature. So in essence you need talent, luck and great timing. If one fails, you're fucked and might never go anywhere, even if you had created and written dozens of novels about some obscured private detectives like Poirot or Holmes.

I am reading right now all the books of Agatha Christie, helped by the fact that most of them are quite short, between 700 and 900 small pages on my Pocket PC. I call that a novella, whilst 1500 pages is a book, and 2000 and more pages is a proper book. I always had books containing many pages, to the point that my publishers had to find ways to reduce the size of the fonts so they could save on paper and shipping costs. I always thought a book was not a book unless it had 300 to 400 pages. In light of Agatha Christie, I may need to rethink that. It is nice to know that you will finish reading the book soon, that it is coming to its conclusion eventually. But I have to take into consideration that a Christie is unlike a proper book from another author you would read. If the book is good, you don't want it to end, and sometimes I see 2500 pages and I wonder, I wish it was 5000. So does this tell me about Agatha Christie's books? Are they so boring that if they were any longer I would give up reading them? Or is it just that this works perfectly for what it is, an easy and quick read, just perfect in the context, also since there are so many similar ones within a series, which ultimately altogether form that huge collection, like a few big novels. I thought that four Christie's books are about the size of a proper book, and so, after all she has not written so many books in her lifetime. And yet, let's not forget that she has sold two billions of them. A strong argument indicating that she knew what she was doing. As to if that would be appropriate nowadays, I'm not sure. I can't imagine a potential publisher being impressed with a book of about 120 pages, as I assume this would be the result despite most of her books right now on the market having over 300 pages, which I can only explain by having first a long preface, and then the largest font size possible. After double checking, I have to admit that her books are 99 pages long in MS Word, most of them, and this is over 200 pages of a normal book. Sorry, I guess the books are not that short, maybe it is just that you can read them really fast. Anyway, it might be worth for me to consider writing books of that same size, I could write many more that way.

A few more titles I read from 4.50 to C

I have decided that I required some extraordinary escapism from this reality at the moment, because my life is either boring, or unbearable both at work and at home. I feel so lucky in a way that I never read Agatha Christie until I was 35 years old, because once you have read one, that is it, reading it again does not have the same impact at all. And now I have all those books I can read for the very first time and enjoy them all one by one.

I have taken upon myself to escape this reality by reading all her books in alphabetical order. I have jumped a few for which the titles seemed less interesting, but in the case of Agatha Christie, the title does not make much difference and every other book is excellent. Perhaps even the content of the books, the events and the places and the people populating the books are also somehow less relevant. At times, it does become a bit tedious, a murder, and then a police inspector questioning everyone. And then another murder, and question time again. I can see how so many detective stories authors could fail miserably if they tried to duplicate what Agatha Christie has achieved. Because her secret, I have found, is in her style. Writing style, the quirkiness of how she thinks, the way she perceives human nature and the British society of the time, and how, with irony and it seems some detachment, she can laugh at them all, at us all, by showing clearly exactly how and why we do everything we do or say.

Agatha Christie, in my opinion, is far more intelligent than I gave her credit for. And if her writing style is not as great as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which she has called the "Maitre" or "Master" in one recent book I read, her writing style has grown on me and I do find this kind of old English way of speaking which I love so much in Sherlock Holmes.

Indeed, a lot of intelligence and an extraordinary sense of observation of society, and also a great capacity to put that back in a book here in there, all the time, is what has made Agatha Christie the most celebrated author in the world after Shakespeare. It is no accident, and her success would have happened even if all her books had been about a bunch of marine biologists or botanists and that no murder ever took place. And of course, just throw a murder in their midst, and there you are, you have the premise to an Agatha Christie's novel.

That is what I sort of figured out so far reading in quick succession: 4.50 from Paddington, A murder is announced, After the funeral, Appointment with death, At Bertram's hotel, Body in the library, Cards on the table, Cat amongst the pigeons and The Clocks. I also read Evil under the Sun, can't remember if I mentioned it before. I may repeat myself, but I prefer not to re-read what I have already written before talking more, because I may come up with something I missed.

Of course, I cannot deny that beyond her writing style and modern way of thinking for the times, which might be impossible to emulate and so to speak, to duplicate what she does as a writer, there is also the construction of the novel, the content per se, the story. Yeah, it is obviously well thought out and that alone are equally great ideas which grip the reader. I wouldn't want to resume Agatha Christie to a writing style. One should never get into writing a novel without a few great ideas to explore first and interesting situations. It could quickly become boring. Christie avoids that. She can turn a simple murder story in a hotel or a school into something really worth reading, which would include just about everything the people working there or attending these places would actually think and say in those situations. She certainly has a great imagination in order to portray what one might think whilst running a school or hoping to be the one who will replace the head mistress/owner (in Cat amongst the pigeons). I suppose though, that when you throw yourself into writing such a book, you do naturally get to understand and predict what these people might think, say and do. So these books become more than just another murder and the police

questioning everyone many times until we get to the truth, hopefully in a climax and unsuspected truth. The novel becomes the background stories and histories of all these people.

Of the three recent PC games made of three Agatha Christie's novel, we can witness this more clearly. An adventure game cannot spend that much time just having characters speaking, it is really telegraphic style and a minimum is said by all the characters. Most of the adventures have more to do with investigating, finding clues, joining objects together in order to accomplish some tasks. For example, in *Evil under the Sun*, there was this big deal about a bird soaked in oil, and having to clean it in the bath, after finding a book about how to do such a thing, and finding the brush, another kind of oil and soap, whatever. And a lot of the game, like in the other two, is very much the same. A location, a big house, a hotel, a train, around ten suspects who all have their own room or compartment, and you go through these a few times to find bits of papers, letters and other clues. The games are well done, and they provide some sort of escape from reality by bringing you there, but it is not as satisfying as reading the novels.

About the television series, that is also an interesting parallel. I had started to record them and watch them, but I realised after watching *A Caribbean mystery* and *A murder is announced*, that I could not read the books anymore. I forced myself to finish reading *A murder is announced*, but I will keep *A Caribbean mystery* for the very last. So I stopped watching the TV episodes until at the very least I have read all the books.

I have to admit that I much prefer the books with Hercule Poirot than the ones with Miss Marple. The way Ms Marple is presented to us and described by Christie does not help, she seems to despise the woman, and yet she is the hero of her novels. That old Spinster, that Old Pussy, as she calls her, and the lack of respect for her from others who encounter her, is an example of Christie's style, that without being too judgmental, she can still pass judgment and express opinions about anything and everything, as a narrator, without being too obvious.

She also talks about detective stories in her novels, and how it is achieved, and other authors. She brings in characters who are themselves authors of detective stories, giving her the chance to justify herself, and to sort of self-analyse what it is that she does herself. At the beginning this was kind of annoying me, because it reminded me that this was a murder story and that someone had written it. That kind of talk did not belong in the novel itself, but perhaps more in some sort of autobiography from the author to be written at a later time.

I have not investigated Christie enough to know if she has written such a book which would talk about her life work. I was under the impression that she did not and her murder stories are all we have from her. If this is the case, I understand how important these bits and pieces might become interesting to the analysts and students doing their PhDs on Christie. In cards on the table, there is such a character who writes murder stories, it is obvious that this is Agatha herself, laughing at herself. Mrs Oliver (I think) has this character from Finland as a Private Consultant/Private Detective, and moans that this was a big mistake because she knows nothing of Finland. Just like her Hercule Poirot and even Sherlock Holmes of Doyle, the first one being from Belgium, the other with French ancestry. And yet, what do we get to hear about Belgium or France? Nothing. They might as well both have been British. The difference with Hercule Poirot is that he speaks French here and there, and has a clear accent which is portrayed by simply eliminating a few words here and there in what would be called normal standard English. All Christie's foreigners in her books speak the same, a normal English with a few words taken out, and their past tense wrong, usually those past tense are brought back to the present tense. I'd say this is a great idea, and I will certainly copy it myself eventually. Though I prefer to write perfect English and pretend the accent is in the voice only. I made the mistake once in one of my

published novels to have a character who spoke in broken French for far too long, because she became a main character. And in the end, if this novel is ever published again, I may bring her back to someone who can actually speak French very well, with only a few quirks here and there, and very rarely, just to remind us that she is not French.

Another main point that seems to worry Agatha, to the point of mentioning it many times in her novels, is how so many readers will just write to her to pinpoint all the little mistakes and errors she might have made whilst writing her novels. She feels, rightly so, that this is fiction, and so, none of these little details matter that much. I don't know, perhaps like what it is that the police actually does when they go about an investigation after a murder, or if that hotel in Istanbul is really on the right or on the left of the train station. That kind of thing.

Well, this is the ransom of success, when your books are reaching out so much, that they would get that kind of feedback. Which in itself is simply amazing, and no author who ever struggled in life to get anything published could ever criticise this from their readers. Do you know how difficult it is for anyone to pick up a pen and paper, and nowadays to just send an email to an author, to express any kind of opinion whatsoever about what they just read? That when they do, dear me, you really had an impact. And when they do in such numbers, well, you have become a classic author.

Funny, I received such an email this week, not a critic per se though, this time around (I did receive many highly negative critics, I can tell you), but this reader simply wrote to tell me how much he had appreciated reading my book Anna Maria, and how it had provided a few days of entertainment. The power of that email alone, the opinion of one person, made me re-open that novel two days ago, and suddenly I will finish the last short story that remained unfinished for a whole year, and I am hard at work thinking about the second instalment of my Anna Maria series.

This is actually a topic I need to address. The idea of series. Series of novels and series of short stories. When I started to write Anna Maria, this is exactly what I had in mind. After becoming obsessed with Sherlock Holmes, I had to create my own eternal and extraordinary hero. This is what empowered Agatha Christie as well, she has fallen for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the very same way I did, from what I can gather from her bits and pieces here in there in her novels. She fully intended to do the exact same thing with Hercule Poirot, and then with Miss Marple once she got tired of her hero, which she has mentioned that she could no longer suffer him later on in her life (and dear me, I wonder how she was then able to suffer Miss Marple).

I went about it the exact same way as Doyle. Short stories, told by one of the main characters, which makes it difficult when the narrator is actually one of the characters. It limits everything in such a way, that you spend a long time just stating what people said, instead of living it as it is for example in an Agatha Christie's novel. So she did not make that mistake, she has not gone for a Dr. Watson telling us the story. Though in many of her characters, like Hastings, she has her Dr. Watson, and she did compare Hastings and others to Watson in her own novels.

There is something she has not done, it is to avoid the short stories, and go for full novels. True, the novels are quite short, more like half a normal book, and certainly half the length of any book I have ever written myself. Now that is interesting, because I am still only at the beginning with my Anna Maria, and I can still operate a massive change. Only one novel has been written, and it has not been published yet (because it is still not finished and I did not send it to any agents or proper publishers yet). And contrary to what most people may think, to change the whole narration of a novel of over 300 pages, from one character speaking to an unknown narrator, or making other extensive changes, could take one night, two days at most. I have done it many times. Try that one, I turned a

diary book where most characters were homosexuals, into a novel where the characters were all heterosexuals, in one night. And the result has been published in Paris a few years ago. So no one should be afraid of massive changes in a book after it has been written and that you feel you could not possibly change one more comma without first taking a gun and shooting yourself in the head. Once you just had a baby, I can understand you would not wish to have another right away. And that what came out after such a long time and such painful processes, is what it is and nothing else, and it will have to do.

I made the mistake of having a Dr. Watson telling the story, and as a result, there is a lot of talk about what happened, instead of a lot of action about what happened just about everywhere. I could not initially think this was a mistake, because this is exactly what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has done, and he is the master. A lot of his stories, are that, people telling Sherlock their stories. Yes, there is then a bit of action afterwards, for the investigation, but truly, mostly, the idea is that Sherlock can solve it all whilst sitting in his chair at 221B Baker Street whist smoking his pipe and shooting himself with heroine. Sending a telegram to confirm whatever he has deduced already, sending a letter wherever else to confirm another hunch.

And anyway, Agatha Christie comes close to this too, most of her novels are just inspectors questioning people after a murder, and those people are simply telling us more stories that happened elsewhere in the past. However, I feel both Doyle and Christie, even though are playing dangerously on the edge of just having people talk, talk and talk, are still providing enough of actions that we do not feel it is just chit-chat about stuff that happened in past lives. And I feel I have done just the same, and I too, I have not fallen in the trap of that. However, I am no master yet, and the only feedback I got so far pointed in that direction, that I had fallen into that trap. Perhaps this is a mistake an author can afford once he has already made his name, but it is a mistake no new author can make, otherwise they will not be published.

The other main point I need to consider with my Anna Maria, is the short stories or the short novels. I don't understand why Agatha did not start with short stories. I know she has written short stories, but I am only here talking about the detective novels, whether it should have been novels or short stories. I will explain why.

First, many new authors start with short stories, and then move on to full novels. The reason is easy to understand. Writing a whole book is a daunting thought, and if you never did it before, you wonder if we will ever see the end of such an enterprise. It's like someone asking you to build a whole house in your backyard, and you know it will take a minimum of a year to build, perhaps and most likely two, and yet you have to do it somehow, no matter if you already have a full time job somewhere else that you need to attend to, and still provide enough time to your family in order not to alienate them completely. Ever wondered why most authors always thanked their wife or husband at the beginning of their books? It is because they spent so much time in front of their computer writing away so many nights over months and years, you just know the nightmare it must have been for their loved ones, who incidentally, unfortunately, somehow always require so much attention and presence, and will always get to the point of wishing a separation or a divorce instead of being with a computer freak writing all the time, who might then might as well not exist in this reality anymore.

Well, anyway, most authors start with short stories, because they can see the end of it, whilst a whole novel, only God can see the end of it and if it will ever come to be. Once an author has written enough short stories, he or she has built in some confidence that they can actually write a whole book. But Agatha seems to have jumped right in writing novels. Short ones, I agree, but still. It is weird.

The second reason it puzzles me, is because Agatha, sitting in front of all the Sherlock Holmes short stories (46 of them I believe), and the four Sherlock Holmes novels, could not have missed, like I did not miss it, that the short stories were a much better medium for what it was. Short, to the point, quick beginning, middle and end, no time wasted on anything which you should not waste your time on, instant effect and surprise at the end. Short stories are perfect for Holmes. The four novels, dear, dear, dear. Except the first one, they are long, boring, they go nowhere, Sherlock Holmes barely appears in them, you just know Sherlock Holmes would never have been a success if Doyle had spent his time writing novels instead of short stories. And his short stories are long enough that they have been translated to television in series of 45 minutes each episode, just like any Christie's novels have been. Which means, it made no difference how long the story was. And if you intend to create such classics as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, well, you might as well insure that it can translate into a television series.

Writing as many novels as Agatha did, I don't know how she managed it. It is a safe bet that you will never achieve that. It is not so much that she has written that many books, I have written myself perhaps as many books as she has, when we consider the length of my 30+ books and her 80 detective novels. It is more a case of: how can anyone in their right mind write 80 times the same book over and over again, with the exact same formula and ingredients, and sustain that for so long?

You would get so bored! And if you reached any kind of success, you would be so rich you would not want to write another one. And if you do not reach success, it is doubtful you would write a third or a fourth instalment. Somehow for Agatha, it must have been that despite her success, it did not make her rich, and she had to write another one in order to survive. She mentioned it in *Cards on the table*.

Now, though Doyle could not be trusted to write a novel without getting lost and losing the plot, and that the restrictions of the short stories, to fit in the magazine they were published in (*The Strand*), obliged him to get to the point and wrap his stories perfectly well, for Agatha it is another story.

I don't think her writing style would have worked for short stories. Perhaps this is where she was going initially, but as soon as her police inspector started to question 12 suspects, and then question them all again, it would not have fitted in a short story. This is the major difference between Doyle and Christie. So in fact, what those two authors were doing, is quite different. Doyle had a few great ideas and events and that was the story. Christie had one murder and then we get to learn about the little stories and lies of many suspects, many times over.

And now I understand why I went for short stories with Anna Maria. I have no desire to do as Agatha Christie did, I will not have an inspector question everyone over and over again, every single one of them, simply because I could not trust myself that it would all be exciting and fascinating the whole way to the end. I would bore myself to death, I would bore my readers to death. It needs a special skill Agatha had, which is part of her writing style, which I might have, but I'm not ready to test it yet. Oh well, I did test that, I'm sure I could do it too, I have done it, but I fear it might get boring anyway over time, if this is to be a series.

I don't want to spend pages and pages hearing insipid stories of unknown people. I know it is a mystery, and this is the way by which we get to elucidate the mystery, and though it is rare we can guess the truth, if ever, we still get enchanted by it. One trick is that the guilty one has an alibi, and so of course you eliminate him or her from your list of suspects, but then, it turns out that an alibi can never be trusted. Well, it is not for me to replicate that as an author. I need something more piquant, to the point, a lot happening in one go, that in a few pages we go around the world three times. Just like most movies we watch nowadays on TV or in the cinema.

I have watched recently a television series called Universe, where they are, episode per episode, explaining to us all the different hard to grasp concepts of theoretical physics. And it moved so fast, no image remained on the screen for more than a few seconds. I thought, wow, we really pushed this telegraphic style to the limits, to the point of losing the content, unless somehow our brains have adapted and we can grasp everything now at the speed of light, which I doubt. So I guess no extreme is advisable.

However, though I now understand a bit more about how Agatha Christie went about writing her books, and that I have identified that I will not do that, I have lately been considering writing short novels like her for my Anna Maria, instead of short stories like Doyle. I have been thinking about why I should do it, and how to go about it. The advantages, the disadvantages, you see the gist of it.

Perhaps the decision should come as a need. At the beginning of Anna Maria, in the first short story, I went quickly over how my two main characters got together in the first place. In less than a few pages, I can't remember now, it might have been no more than two pages out of thirty (per short story), I described what could only be a whole short novel. And my Duke of Connaught is quick to point out that he will not here and now tell that story, but he promises that he will one day. And now that I sit down considering the second book, I feel it needs to start with that story. Bringing the genesis of what Anna Maria and the Duke of Connaught are all about. Exactly in the same way as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has done with his first Sherlock Holmes novel A Study in Scarlet, perhaps my favourite story of all the Sherlock Holmes stories taken together.

A very short novel though. So short, if I were to write such a short novel, I wonder if a publisher would not get back to me and say: well, throw in another murder, will you? I have to admit that so far my publishers have asked me if somehow we could take some off, so printing the books would not cost so much. I told them to print in smaller prints, they did, problem solved.

But the thing is, I could easily write many short novels, just as I can write many short stories. And perhaps it would not take me that much more time, and perhaps it would also be beneficial, because then I would not do as Doyle does, skip just about everything and get to the point. No more so many things happening within one small paragraph. But then, what would I talk about? Just develop further on everything I have just said? Yeah, could do. Hard decision.

And what if I run out of things to say? Not every single short story is worth developing into a full fledged book, and so perhaps I would think twice before getting into such a story, that I would have to insure that it is truly worth it. Every single short story of the first Anna Maria is, I feel, worth it. I could take them all one by one and turn each of them into a small novel, 10 short novels. But then, I would have to input many more stuff and events and things to talk about, and so the essence of those stories would be lost.

I wonder how long it would take me to do that, and if I should? I wonder if I have the patience to spend so much time on these particular stories, when I could instead write a second book of short stories.

Maybe I should not be sidetracked by Agatha Christie, and maybe I should stick to my initial thoughts after reading Sherlock Holmes. And perhaps the second book should be a novel, like A Study in Scarlet, and then, I would really have to come up with many great ideas to turn that story into something interesting, because at the moment, the few lines or pages I have written to explain the whole coming together of Anna Maria and the Duke of Connaught, left me unconvinced that this is an interesting short story to write. Which is precisely why I have not written it yet and that I have waited until the second book. It requires a lot more thinking.

Gosh, I am starting to wonder what is the point of writing a whole book like this present one, just to figure out how to write another, instead of just writing it. Gosh, I am starting to wonder what is the point of writing a whole book like this present one, just to figure out how to write a book I have already

written! Gosh, perhaps I should not think so much, not analyse so much, and just get on with it!

It is a known fact that literary teachers are horrible writers. And that rarely, after doing a PhD, a literary student would then go on to write a masterpiece. The truth is, it is perhaps not the role of an author to think too much about these things. Their job is to simply write, and let others deal with the consequences.

Even then, I can see that Agatha Christie, perhaps only later on though, was worried about that, how to position herself in the genre of detective stories, that she went to read them all and even draw inspiration from them, and admitting it freely within her own novels.

But I wonder what would have been the result if she had started with that, analysing everything and then go on to write her novels. Perhaps then she would not have been able to write anything. And reading and analysing much later was not a problem, because then it was just small adjustments in the continuation of her body of work.

Yeah, I'll just get on with it and stop thinking too much. It is not good for an author to do so. It will become what it will become and what will be will be. You can only do and achieve what you can do and achieve, you cannot plan so carefully and follow such recipes to success. I think this is more or less what most great and successful authors say anyway, is it not? I have heard many of them stating so.

And therefore success follows more because somehow that author was born with such abilities to somehow make it all happened naturally, instead of planning so carefully artificially. I'm sure both methods work just fine, look at most films from Los Angeles, it is all the same, and if the scriptwriter comes up with something slightly different, it is quickly given to another scriptwriter, and another one, and another one, until the final result is identical to the identified rules of success for a major Hollywood production.

God, I always wished I could have a whole team of people helping me writing a book, I often wondered what ten thinking minds working on one of my books could achieve. Just like on those films where no less than 500 to 1000 people working together and bouncing ideas will make a script and a film come true. But I am very much alone doing all the work, thinking everything, writing a book for over a year and more, and if somehow I take the wrong path at some point, it can all disintegrate just like that, and this book will then never go anywhere. All that time wasted. So I guess some planning, a little bit of thinking, cannot go amiss.

From C to Murder

I have now read many more books of Agatha Christie, it has been months now and this is all I do, read her as soon as I have a minute. I no longer watch TV or play adventure games. I read the whole book Murder is easy in one evening, after a full day's work. I went to bed at 3 am, but I finished it. I am now a specialist of fast reading. Pretty good, not one of her best.

I also read Crooked House, which I loved tremendously, I wished at the time it had been twice longer. I really got into it, I could not explain why exactly. Is it the characters? Is it the love story and the fact that the whole family of the girl was bunker? Is it the young girl's characters playing at being a sleuth? Or was it the fact that the book was written at the first person? I noticed so far that every time Poirot or Marple are not in the story, the story is usually better. But none of these factors could explain why one book is better than the other. I think it was the way the investigator, the narrator, went about doing his investigation, meeting people here and there, and talking some more. All the characters had something charming and fascinating about them, even though they were all

caricatures and stereotypes, in the extreme in fact. Perhaps it is part of the ingredients. The neurotic young daughter, the spastic kid, the nervous teacher in love with the wife of the murdered man, the young and beautiful wife who married the rich man for his money, the sane girlfriend in love with the son of an important man at Scotland Yard, the son who takes over the business of the father, but ultimately bankrupted it badly, being a useless moron, and his wife the scientist who has a brain and a desire to escape it all. Who else? Oh, the other son who is jealous of the other brother and who inherits nothing, like all the others since only the sane girl gets it all, and his wife the mad failed actress who no longer has any bearing on this reality and acts all the time, does not even hide it. Fascinating stuff.

It reminds me one class of French I had in college, the teacher made us write a brainstorm, and we had to list a whole bunch of crazy characters and choose a few out of 40 of them. Of course, you always go for the crazy ones, the ones out of this world, mostly all stereotypes and caricatures. These people never exist in real life, just like Hercule Poirot. One wonders where they found the actor in the films, and how like Poirot he really is in real life. I shall read his biography on Wikipedia once I have a minute.

Now that I have read many more books, including one of short stories (Murder in the Mews), I realise that I made a few mistakes and assumptions about Agatha Christie. I wanted to put the record straight. She has written many short stories just like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with Sherlock Holmes, she also truly replicated Doctor Watson with Captain Hastings. It is just that I had not read those books yet, even though I would have thought I would have a good idea, after reading so many. And when they portrayed her books to TV, they are not 45 minutes episodes, they are all full length films! Big difference than Sherlock Holmes television series.

So, Agatha Christie certainly only became a novelist writing detective stories because of Sherlock Holmes. Her story is the same as mine. She fell in love with the short stories, must have read them over and over again just like I did, and decided one day that she would be capable to do the same, and she did. She did not think twice, she thought I will replicate it. However I can see that somehow it has proven impossible and eventually she found her own true style, different and yet, as fascinating.

I only read four short stories so far, Murder in the Mews, and really it does not work, even though the stories are much longer than a normal Sherlock Holmes one. It is impossible to get interested, because first she has too many characters involved, you truly need a whole book just to describe them all and have a few conversations with them, since one run around everyone takes about a quarter of a book, sometimes half of it with the development of the story. Then the second round is another quarter to a third of the book, and finally you get the last part of the book which I have come to call show time. The detective presents his or her solutions to everyone or a few chosen people, eliminating one by one all the irrelevant surrounding little mysteries which made us believe that everyone was guilty, and the grand final to tell us who is the murderer and how the feat was achieved. Of course, always totally unexpected, we could never have guessed it. Or more like, yes, at some point we did guess it, but then, we guessed it for all the suspects. In the end you can always say: I knew it, because of course, you went to think at some point or another, it must be him or her, because whatever. And often I found myself thinking, it must be this person, because nothing truly points to that person and she is so unlikely to be the killer.

Short stories does not fit Christie's style, everything went way too fast, and suddenly Poirot announce his big solution almost instantly. WE never had the time to wonder what happened, or to feel, ah, finally, let's find out the resolution of the whole story I spent so many evenings reading. In a short story, you never get the time to care about anyone, and you don't really mind at all who is the murderer.

Which brings an interesting question. Why is it then that for Sherlock Holmes I feel there could not have been any other way to write them but as short stories? Was it just that it suited Sir Arthur Conan Doyle better, for his style? For example, you never see Sherlock Holmes interrogate a series of people one after the other, everything is almost pure logic and thinking, and extraordinary impossible chain of events to guess, and yet, he saw through it all without having to do much investigation or interrogation. The difference is truly about how the authors go about figuring out the story itself, and how their detective go about investigating their cases. And so, in deciding what you should do, yourself, as a novelist, you really simply have to try it all and let the result guide you for the future. I look forward reading one her Christie's books containing 12 stories, and see if what I assume is true, even more so with shorter ones.

One of the most boring books of Agatha was Five Little Pigs. I really had to force myself to finish it, and at some point, when we once again went through questioning everyone and it was boring because it was the same events over and over again, I skipped a few lines in many pages. Stay away from that one, no matter if it was supposed to prove that Poirot could solve a whole crime simply by using his @##@\$*#! grey cells.

Oh, I think there was one worse than that yet, but I can't remember. Would you believe that I am trying to remember what these books were, that I just read in the last few days and weeks, look at the title, and I have absolutely no idea what they are about! Completely forgotten. And then, today, I was wondering, is there a point reading them, if I am to forget all about it the very next day? And then I thought, well, it is only for the pleasure of reading them in the present time, which is why I am reading them, to escape this reality.

Another important problem I noticed, when you read so many in one go, is that I already have quite a French accent, and I just love the way Christie makes Hercule Poirot speak. I have found myself many times recently writing and speaking just like him, without even realising that this is really bad English. I have to be careful.

And now, let me speak about the best Agatha Christie I have read so far. Destination Unknown. Ah, fascinating from the beginning to the end, I was really there, I really felt something, I was afraid for the main character when she was impersonating another woman for the Secret Service. I was afraid for her when she arrived at the utopia supposed to be salvation and freedom, when in fact it was prison in the middle of nowhere. All the situations in the book were fascinating, simply because the main character was pretending to be someone else, and at any minute she could be found out. She had no idea where she was going, and the way the disappearance of those people was organised, was brilliant. There is also this whole subtext to the novel about western world ideals compared with communism and fascism, and you really get to understand that Agatha Christie was not only knowledgeable but also highly intelligent to be able to put it all in this book like that, as if it was just in the background, barely passing judgement, and yet, very powerful message in the end. Truly stunned me that book.

Seven Dials Mystery was a book I really thought I would like, because, well, I have a fascination with Seven Dials in Central London, especially the monument Seven Dials in the middle of the round about where seven streets meet. I have many times about Seven Dials, even in many of my books. I was however really disappointed with the novel, I almost abandon reading it in the middle of it. Certainly at the beginning, as it was slow to start, and nothing that interesting happened. Conversations between characters went nowhere, and I could not care about them. This is actually the book that I hated even more than Five Little Pigs. I did finish it though, but really I don't know what happened there when Agatha decided to write that one. And it really made me think. Because you see I immediately went on Wikipedia, and read that the critics for that book truly hated it. And I wondered how Agatha took it, and how it affected her subsequent

book. I felt that it must have been a great lesson for the author, that you cannot, at any cost, write a bad novel. It has to be great and on the spot every single time. And so you really have to think your brain out, and figure a way so that every single conversation at any time between the characters, is simply fascinating to read. How this is to be achieved, be my guest. It is not easy. But usually with quirky funny characters, usually modern women, a bit childish as well and confrontational, you get something interesting.

There were a bunch of those in Hickory Dickory Dock, mostly students. And I have laughed so hard about the Black student from Africa, when he belched in front of the Inspector of Police, you would not believe. I thought, wow, Agatha must have been drunk or must have had a high fever when she wrote that whole passage, because the whole thing was so surreal! And yet I really embarked, and followed the flows of her words. There were remarkable passages throughout this novel, this is one I would read again. Clever ideas all along.

Murder at the Vicarage was the first time Ms Marple came about in an Agatha Christie novel, and I can see why she wrote it. She had a bunch of great ideas from the start. It was really gripping this book, though in retrospect I find it hard to explain why. Was it the unexpected twist at the end? No, the end was a bit disappointing, the way Marple told her solution and that she figured it all out. It was more like an anticlimax. No pomposity and show time like Poirot, when everyone believes he is but a ridiculous little ignorant fool, and then he goes on to prove that he is a master detective. Maybe it was the situation between having a vicar with a modern young wife, outspoken and fascinating as well. Being Catholic myself, living mostly in the North of Québec, it took me many years to find out that priests outside of Catholicism could actually marry and have kids. Once I found out, I thought, what a great idea! And I was really puzzled as to why catholic priests had not followed suit. Never mind. What was also wonderful was that no one particularly seemed to like our hero, Miss Marple, because she was that old curious spinster who seemed to always managed to spy on everyone and see everything that is going on, and no one can put a fast one on her. I am also deeply fascinated by everything she says at any time, because she seems to have such high morals, and be so judgmental about the new free generation, and yet, seems to understand them so much better than this young generation can understand themselves. She always says interesting things, like when she speaks to the vicar and tells him straight that he is unworldly. I am not sure what she meant really by that, but it certainly had a great effect on the vicar, and suddenly everyone other old spinster in the village were telling the vicar that he was so unworldly. There is also a lot of humour in this book, like in many of the books with Marple in it.

Dead's Man Folly was an okay book, Death in the Clouds was all right but a bit boring, Mrs McGinty's Dead was not that boring, but certainly bordering on it. Man in the Brown Suit was already much more interesting, I really did like that story of the young girl with the father interested in archaeology, and once he dies she discovers she has a taste for adventure, and suddenly witness an accident, and from there the adventure begins and she boards a boat for god knows where, and everything that happens is highly interesting. A bit like Death on the Nile, I thought one of her best novels. Also on a boat, with stops here and there to visit some touristic attractions. You really feel like you are travelling with these people, even if those touristic attractions are barely mentioned. You have in your mind this whole background of exoticism as the story evolves, and it involves crazy Americans and rich people with their usual quirkiness, things that are so alien to us all in this day and age.

Lord Edgware Dies was an excellent one, the intrigue and mystery and craziness of all the characters really reached a peak in this novel. It had me gripped, though when I think back, I cannot remember anything that outstanding which would explain why I was so gripped at the time. Must have been the conversations, and the cleverness of the intrigue. Just like what I remember of

The Clocks, another novel I really thought was good. It left a great imprint on me long after I finished reading it, even though nothing that interesting happened, really.

Just like the one I just finished, Murder of Roger Ackroyd. Nice to read, though a bit far out as to the solution of the crime. Of course, we would have needed to know that the old man did buy a damn Dictaphone, and he was already dead when just about every suspect heard him talk to someone in his office all night long. We have been told he did not buy one! I knew that when the young Flora went to see her uncle, he was already dead but she pretended he was not. I will not be fooled by this trick again, but as a mark of genius, and in order to avoid repetitions in her novels, I have found that Christie goes out of her way not to repeat the same tricks over and over again. So Flora never actually entered the Study, so she did not see her uncle dead, she just pretended she had seen him alive. The interesting thing in this novel was the narrator, Doctor Sheppard, and a few interesting characters like his sister Caroline. I cannot tell you here what was so interesting about the narrator, you will find out at the end, and I think you will understand then what I wanted to say here.

The problem is, once it has been done once, you cannot do it again. For example, I could not use that trick now in one of my novels. In fact, I could not use any of Agatha Christie or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ideas in any of my novels. The reason is simple, I cringe and I am afraid every time I read an Agatha Christie book, that eventually I will witness a simple borrowing or blatant theft of a Sherlock Holmes story. So far she has avoided that, I wonder if she did, especially in the short stories. I look forward to finding out.

You truly need a great imagination when you write novels, to do and think and write events and intrigues and solutions no one ever thought of before. And not only that, you also need to be knowledgeable of everything, of anything else that might have been written already. Ideas seem infinite sometimes, but when you do not have such a great imagination, you will find that most stories you will think of, someone else did it before, and quite often, you are not even aware of it. It is a big killer once you find a great idea, and suddenly, out of the blue, almost immediately, you find out that a book or a film is about that very same subject or idea. And then it is all gone and these ideas need to be abandoned on the spot. And then you also sometimes realise that these ideas might not have been so great, because that book or that film sucks big time after all and was a huge failure. Then you can smile to yourself, and go on to think better ideas to write about.

That leaves one other book I read which I have not mentioned yet. I can really talk much about it, though I can already say that the title did not inspire me at all at the beginning: By the pricking of my thumbs. Since I knew that, with such a title, I would read this book last, I emailed it to myself at work (I read all these books on my pocket PC, I could not read them on paper). I read five minutes of that novel every other day, usually when, at the end of the day I have nothing left to do but to wait for my manager to get the cash out of the safe. She always forgets or suddenly goes into an interminable meeting, and I am always there waiting for her to bring the cash out. So I read a bit of it, as a very slow pace. Which might explain why I thought that not only the title was bad, the book is as well. I am not sure yet if I care or not at all for those heroes Tommy and Tuppence, I can't stand their name for a start, it seems to me this is for children. And both characters seem brainless, and very much childlike. And this long moral about who modern society just put old people in mental asylum to get rid of them, few!, I thought I would never finish reading it. It went forever, and not only that, I was stuck reading this long passage for weeks, at five minutes only every other day. So far I want to read The Secret Adversary, to get better acquainted with who are Tommy and Tuppence, younger, supposedly spies pretending to be nobodies. That book might be more interesting. Still, once we got out of the old pensioners asylum, and moved to the countryside in that lovely

house she had seen from the window of a train, I felt better, I started to breath a bit more, I wish to escape to that countryside, especially when stuck at work when reading it. Also, that single idea so far, that mystery, of the little child dead in the chimney, told by that old woman who simply disappeared, fascinates me so far, I want to find out more about that single little idea. So I won't pass judgement yet, but if you read it, skip a lot of the bollocks about old people at the beginning. Yes, we get rid of old people nowadays, so what? Who cares? I remember clearly that those same old people were very quick to kick their children out of the house as soon as the age of majority came on, and never did anything to help those kids get anywhere in life. So I guess they get what they deserve, don't need any moral about it. I am being sarcastic, just in case you miss it. But it proves an important point, you can never start being moral and teach people lessons in a novel, so directly and blatantly. It is a real turn off. And I thought Agatha had done so well in Destination Unknown, because she does pass judgment there, and yet, it is not so obvious, it is intelligently written and presented. One has to be clever about all this, not to alienate the reader.

More to come soon.

Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee

Rama Series

Rendezvous with Rama
Rama II (Rama Revisited)
The Garden of Rama
Rama Revealed

I came across Arthur C. Clarke quite late in my life, despite having a father and 15 of his brothers and sisters all quite addicted to science fiction books. The only names I heard and read then, when I was a teenager, were Isaac Asimov and A. E. van Vogt. It is amazing that Arthur C. Clarke could have remained hidden from me for that long, though of course I have seen and was aware of the films 2001 and 2010 for a long time.

I discovered Arthur C. Clarke after I bought a Sierra Entertainment Adventure Game called Rama. This was the beginning of a new era for adventure games on PC in 1995-1996, and Sierra was right in the middle of that revolution. I must have bought the game around 1996, but it could have been a year or two later. They shipped the game with the book Rama II, and one day where I was bored, I read the book, and I remain astonish to this day.

The Rama series is my favourite series of all time, and Rama II my favourite book ever. Anyway, the main question is, why is it that I feel Rama is the best thing ever written on this planet? What is it that really caught all my attention, to the point that I do not feel anyone else could ever come up with something better?

To be continued...

Orson Scott Card

Pastwatch,

The Redemption of Christopher Columbus

It is weird that the first sci-fi book I read, after struggling for so long to attack my collection of books, was Pastwatch, The Redemption of Christopher Columbus, as I had clearly identified that Orson Scott Card was not only a Mormon and religious freak (which would not stop me per say), but he is openly and publicly quite anti-gay. Such a man, if I were to meet him one day, I thought, I would hit him in the face.

But then I thought that I was myself quite anti-religion, and it would be sad if it stopped anyone from reading my books, which are not anti-religious at all (well, sometimes here and there, maybe). Also, that my understanding of the Mormons has changed slightly after I visited their Disney Land in Salt Lake City two years ago. I still don't like the idea of religion, but let's say that visiting their centre and talking for hours with some of them, I developed some sort of understanding and interest in their history.

If I had to write about a religious character, I thought, he may be a Mormon, as I find it less offensive than any other religion, or threatening, since there are only a few millions of them worldwide, and most of their philosophy has already been destroyed in so many scandals, I cannot see them going around that strong in years to come. It is also still Christianity, so it would give me a chance to criticise the main thing whether he was a Mormon or a Catholic. Anyway, it was just an idea I had, nothing concrete yet. Let's just say that I developed more tolerance for the Mormons than for any other religions, and probably only because I was in Utah for a few days, and to be honest, I loved it. I also read so much about it when I was in Salt Lake City, I was still reading about that one month later when I was in my hotel room for another conference in Philadelphia. There would be a lot to discuss, debunk, and speak against, when it comes to the Mormons. I don't to do that, I have done it a lot with Catholicism, and only because I felt no one would want to kill me for doing such a thing, no one cares for Catholics anymore, or Protestants for that matter, and no one will declare a Jihad on me for speaking against it. I have learnt to speak globally against religions from now on, never one specifically. And let's face it, they are all the same in the end, what you wish to criticise about one, can equally be said about the other. Some are more extreme than others, and some are more freak than others.

As to Card being anti-gay, and stating stuff which is highly threatening to my being, I guess I will just have to be tolerant of his shortcomings, just like he must feel he needs to be tolerant of my own. And then, none of that nonsense should prevent any of us from being read and recognised for our talents.

So I enjoyed that book, it was well written, filled with great ideas, it was my kind of book. Easy going, not pretentious, a bit fast food, but not as bad as Agatha Christie, which, let's face it, is really fast food, even if it is well crafted fast food. Card didn't go into too many details, there was no big drama, he was able to interest me in stuff I would normally never be interested in, like Christopher Columbus.

I was ultimately a bit worried about this obsession to convert the whole world to Christianity, as the only way perhaps to build the perfect utopia on Earth, but then, the obsession was so clear, I thought it would equally serve well to show how stupid this obsession was, when clearly Card must have thought how it would solve all the problems of humanity. Of course, such arguments could be said for Muslims, that if we were all into Allah, then perhaps there would be no wars in this world and we would all live peacefully and content. Then, obviously, the argument is that if there were no religion at all, or if we could all tolerate each other and forget that detail in our arguments for going to war, then we would live peacefully and content. At the end of the day, we are at war right now, and no one can actually tell if that war against the Muslims is a question of

religion or oil and other natural resources. Probably both. And to be honest, who truly cares now in Europe about Christianity, to the point that we would need to go to war to preserve it? Not many politicians, that is certain. When the Republicans are in power in the U.S. however, this changes, and certainly Christianity is back at the top of the agenda. But usually is to used as an excuse hiding the real reasons we must do the things that no one feel should be done.

Oh poor Jesus-Christ, how many deaths will you be responsible for in the end? That your message of love has been twisted to become the biggest argument for war? Perhaps you should never have been born, and the planet right now would have 15 billion souls and be at the breaking point. We can't win in the end, we need to get off this planet one way or another, and it would be better if we were to leave religions behind.

So, what have I learnt from reading Pastwatch? I'm not sure if I have learnt anything significant, enough to guide me further. I just enjoyed the book, to be honest. So why have I enjoyed reading the book? Well, of course I like stories about alternate histories, this one was well done, credible, came up with new ideas we might not have considered, like if South America had been left alone for 50 more years, they could easily have become a worldwide threat to this world, so I guess the Spanish went there at the right time to enslave them all and before they enslave us all and sacrifice us all to their deities.

I was reading the book, giving a chance, enjoying it but so so, until that woman in the past was able to find out that people in the future could see her right now, and that somehow observing the past using Pastwatch was able to change the past, and in so speaking, change the future as well. There were other great moments like that, for example when Christopher Columbus had his vision from God, and immediately the people of Pastwatch realised that this must have been people from the future sending a message into the past in order to change history. That would explain many of those illuminations and visions of God and the Virgin Mary, perhaps they are people from the future manipulating you into doing whatever they want from you.

Card didn't go with the idea of a multiverse. At any given time there was only one universe even though it could be changed, but at the cost of erasing the future. I liked the little moral dilemma of the question, and the clever way Card came up with for humanity to accept such a thought that they need to be wiped out in order to give the past and humanity to survive.

I also enjoyed most conversations between the characters, it was very strong and well done, it was interesting. When Diko met Columbus, and when Columbus met the young Haitian interpreter, and all the conversations around that was good. So that is something I have learnt in Card, always have interesting discussions between your characters, and because of that, I feel many of his other books would be worth reading, whatever the topic, and I look forward reading more of him. But of course, interesting or intelligent conversations is always something I had on my mind whenever I have written something, and yet, one needs to keep it in mind, so many films and series on TV present us with boring soap conversations that would not change anyone life anytime soon.

So in all I thought it was a great book, I don't regret having read it.

Philip K. Dick

The Man in the High Castle

The second book I am reading now is Philip K. Dick, The Man in the High Castle. It was described on a website as being great literature, of a higher

standard. It is true, I almost gave up reading the book after the first 100 small pages of the e-book (it has about 1200 pages on my mobile phone). Detailed, dramatic, depressing, not going anywhere fast, might as well pick up a gun and shoot myself right now, as this alternate reality dominated by Japanese and Germans, I feel, could have been more readily eatable if I had written it myself.

But I continued to read, it is getting better, who knows. And this thing about the I Ching, or Book of Changes, prompt me to read about it on the Internet, find a software, and now I am asking questions to the oracle, the old Chinese wisdom. Will I ever be successful? Everything points to a great yes, I hope I can believe that old great Chinese wisdom. I could easily become addicted to I Ching, to the point that like his characters in the book, I could become totally useless at making a decision until I read the answers in the Book of Changes. How does it work anyway? How can it work? To be honest it seems to work very fine with me, it was negative when I thought it would be, it was positive when I thought it would be. And yet, how is this possible? What sort of laws of physics could be underlying the I Ching? That alone would have been a great discussion in the book, but Dick didn't go for it.

In fact, now that I have finished reading the book, Dick basically wrote a drama that would not have been sci-fi if the Germans and the Japanese had actually won the war, there was nothing sci-fi in the book. And yet, he feels the need to justify himself, his characters are talking about a book describing an alternate reality (our reality), and that this can be classified as sci-fi, alternate reality subgenre. It was cute from Dick to remind us what it is that he was writing about or trying to achieve, I may have been guilty of the same thing myself in the past, but I won't anymore, people could easily criticise this.

He however had a good reason to discuss it, because the novel finally was about this book some character had written, which was about an alternate history which was ours, that idea was mind boggling, highly enjoyable, and I kept thinking that at some point it will be revealed that the author was in fact from our reality, but his final was even greater, the Book of Changes, the I Ching had dictated the book, as if somehow this was the reality that should have been, but somehow was not, with Germans and Japanese everywhere reducing white American people to slaves or at least second class citizens. I truly enjoyed it, more so than any other book I read recently, including Arthur C. Clarke and Baxter.

It is true it could be described as literature, not a style I personally usually enjoy, nevertheless in this case it works well. His characters and the locations in San Francisco and in the Mountains remained with me for a few days afterwards. So what was painful to read at the beginning, these long descriptions of what these characters were about, is perhaps the secret to building strong and believable characters. But what I have learnt from reading this book, is that you need to strike a great balance. Too much bullshit and people will give up, too little and your characters become caricatures like in Agatha Christie, the right balance should solve that problem, perhaps just a bit more than what Orson Scott Card has done in Pastwatch.

I also think that Dick has mastered the art of having Japanese, Germans and others speak clear English, and yet, we were still aware by the suppression of a few words here and there, that they were foreign. It may have been a bit more artificial, but at least it was readable and not annoying.

There is a narrator to the story, but his characters are doing a lot of thinking, and sometimes the narrator and the thoughts of the characters mingles together, to the point that even the narrator sometimes seems to have an accent, and many pages of the book at some point towards the end where a cascading and more direct kind of English, without all the words, more to the point. I got annoyed after a while, even though I appreciated the effect of moving faster, getting somewhere.

I loved the history I have learnt about the world wars, which went into details that I have missed completely by recently reading everything I could find about both World Wars on Wikipedia. Thank God though that Dick didn't go into too much detail about all this, because I would have become bored quickly to hear too much about the Germans and everything they did and how they structured everything. I liked the palpable difference we could see between the Japanese, the American and the Aryans (a sub section of Germans who were blond with blue eyes (and by the way, Hitler was far from reflecting that ideal he wanted so badly for his new race)). To convince us how Americans could be foreseen as a second class citizen, the Japanese were perfect, because they are so anal anyway in the first place, anyone else in front of a Japanese would look like a pig. It worked for the novel. With the formalism and all. The Mickey Mouse watch, the stupidities the Japanese love about American culture, and how that gift went haywire when it was given instead to a German.

For a while I really wondered where this Jewish guy making Jewellery was all about and if it carried the story forward, but I guess he was necessary in the story, about how Jews would have been treated if Germany had won the war (basically they all get exterminated). It was a nice twist at the end when the Japanese official appreciated the jewellery without knowing who did it, the Jewish guy, and in a fit of anger with the German official, decided to say no to his extradition to Germany so he could go and get burnt to death.

It was like many little stories within the novel, like the one about the wife of the Jewish guy, lost in the mountains, going out with that young Italian who turned out to be a German, and I wonder for a while when it would all come together, when they would all meet at some point to drive the story forward. This is a classic structure for a book, start with many characters in many different places, and eventually they all meet and the story ends. But they never met! In the end they were only link with either the jewellery pieces and the art dealer, or by the fact that they all had a copy of the book about our alternate history and were all discussing it between each other, as if this was the greatest event of all that happened in their lives. Which is irony, since that very book is representing the book we are of course reading right now. That is intelligent and nice, it gives you something to think about and will give journalists and teachers something to say when talking about the book. It has however been done to death, and one needs to be more original these days than go about talking about a book which is about the book people are reading, or a play about a play being produced within the play which is about the play itself. I know all these things have names, and I have learnt them, but I forgot all about it right now, and so I don't care. Dick did it well, to his credit, it was not annoying, like *Waiting for Godot* of Samuel Beckett for example, a play that I cannot stand and which is boring to death, and yet everyone is raving about it because they learnt about it in class as an example of this "mise en abime". There, I remembered the French term, at least.

Overall, I think *The Man in the High Castle* was a great book, and I feel it would be a great film too. I wish now to read more of Philip K. Dick, though I wonder if his style would be equally interesting to me if for example the topic was not sci-fi or the idea behind the story was not in itself a strong motivation for me to read the book. I will have to find out.

John Birmingham

**Axis of Time 1
Weapons of Choice**

When I was doing my degree at the University of Ottawa, I had a theatre teacher, a memorable one, who stated that before you can write anything, you need to be aware of everything else that has been written before you, so as to avoid unconscious or unknown plagiarism or making a fool out of yourself. Because what would be the point of writing something similar to what a great classic author already did ten times better you could ever achieve yourself?

We laughed at that, because how in the world could you ever come to know everything that has been written under the sun? Also that from the Bible we have learnt that there was nothing new under the sun. I thought it was crazy. However, as years have passed, I totally agree with her. If you are to write a story about alternate history, you better know at least generally what has been done before, you might learn for example that most alternate history books are about the American Civil Wars and the World Wars with the Germans and the Jewish right in the middle. And so, if you embark on such a story, it better be good, it better become the classic of all the other ones that came before you and that will come after you. Of course, this is probably impossible to achieve, but your ideas at least, before you even start, should warrant that it will be a worthy enterprise.

John Birmingham with the Axis of Time trilogy might have made that mistake, I don't know yet because I have only read 400 pages of the 2485 on my Pocket PC. I wonder if we needed yet another book about that very subject of time travel to the time of the Second World War, with huge American ships appearing exactly where other older American ships are already fighting the battle.

I am myself guilty of having mentioned something similar in Anna Maria, I did propose that we had lost the Second World War and only through time machines were we able to modify that past so we won in the end. I however did not insist upon the point and now I understand that I will not be developing this line of thought any further, as it lacks originality. Another thing I am guilty of is that I have mentioned a Time War where some baddies went back in time to even before there were humans on the planet in order to make sure that none of humanity will ever exist. I had planned a second short story in the next Anna Maria book where I would explain all that, but now I understand that with a quick overview of most sci-fi, that idea is so old, I would be crazy to go for it.

Weapons of Choice has been described as a Military novel, so I knew what to expect. I don't doubt many military people, and most especially Marines, will enjoy this book filled with techno babble for the first 400 pages of the e-book, but I wonder. Because this is so much techno babble, you could easily say it was just that and nothing else. I still don't understand what is going on, we have gone from one ship to another going through the same stuff, GPS and satellites out, other ships disappeared, some other are non responsive, we are under attack, let's get the computer running and establish links so we can fight back those stupid Americans from the past incapable of recognising American ships from the future when they see them.

I gave it a chance, I wanted to give up a long time ago, and I will continue just a little bit further, but I despair that ever will they get to understand what is going on and will stop fighting and then the story might get somewhere. I have learnt from this book not to flood the reader with military techno babble, not to have 400 small pages about one single event that lingers forever, and make sure I establish my characters a bit more and make them human beings before just describing some incomprehensible attack following some technicalities and traveling in time.

And yet, I wonder, if this was to be turned into a film, and many films are similar to that, maybe it would be better, maybe it would translate well to the screen, even though on paper it is boring. It is action, and just action, and so as I was saying in my previous lecture note, maybe it isn't that great in a book but

might be what is required on the screen, or else you end up with just conversations, and then you need to be a master for those to be highly gripping. It's just too long, this action scene, it just does not end, and then I realised that perhaps the whole book was about those ships arriving into the past and fighting those allies, when I kept thinking that the initial premise should bring us much more interesting discussions and events later on. I'm sure it is coming, and so perhaps I should bypass many pages and get to the thick of it. I wouldn't want to pre-judge the trilogy, but I may have to give up, as perhaps it is not my taste after all, those military novels.

I read a bit more, didn't see anything I found interesting, I gave up.

Eric Flint

1632

It has always been my opinion that a three line résumé of any book or film must be interesting enough in the first place to get you to jump on that book or that film. I am guilty that perhaps that three line résumé of my novel Anna Maria will not get people to rush to read it, but I think I succeeded in the short stories themselves, that a short outline should get people interested in reading them.

I think 1632 of Eric Flint is such a great three liner teaser, that this today's town of West Virginia could be shipped to 1632 Germany is an exciting idea, and I jumped at the chance to read it. I have now read 502 pages out of 2588 and I am hooked. It is well written, clever and intelligent, he thoughts of everything.

It may seem weird to you what I am going to say next, but I always felt the need to understand everything around me. From every single natural phenomenon to any old and new technology we use every day. It is not enough for me to have a car and a computer, I need to know how they work, and if necessary, I need to learn enough about it that if somehow I was transported into the past, I could immediately start rebuilding.

I admit that I never had that much time to comprehend how a car work, or how I would go about constructing a computer from scratch. More importantly, what about power plants, electricity, petrol, manufacturing, etc. I cannot say I have learn enough, but I know enough that perhaps I could jump start these industries helping a bunch of people figuring it all out.

The idea has always been there in my mind, from a very early age. I wanted to know how I could produce electricity to get my walkman working if I were to be shipped to the past, because in those days I couldn't picture myself being separated from my walkman. Today I may feel the same about my portable computer. Though I am wiser now, it wouldn't matter so much if I had none of those, I would be quite happy to it all for the sheer experience of travelling in time. Of course, if that fails from ever happening, a Third World War or a series of Civil Wars could easily kick us all out to the Stone Age again, and then, I would be glad if I am able to produce electricity somehow.

The book 1632 addresses all these issues. How these few thousand Americans from West Virginia have to re-create their great American Empire, ironically in Germany in medieval times. It is perfect that this is not happening yet during the First or Second World Wars, that would be cliché and perhaps even boring. However Flint chose Germany, why? I believe it will become clearer as I continue reading the book, and read the follow up books 1633 and 1634.

I have to admit that this bit of history is actually interesting, the different kings of Germany from before the year 1900 is fascinating, and I had not realised that, already in 1632, Germany was rich in history, within the Roman Empire. I

thought that the Roman Empire had died by then, did it not die around 500? Perhaps they are not only in the past, they are in an alternate history as well? That would be cute. I understand now that even though the Roman Empire had died long ago, they seemed to still be using the term in 1632, so no double bubble of not only going into the past, but also to a parallel universe. However I am glad I thought of it, it would be interesting if ever I write such a story, it would also give me a larger margin to manoeuvre, because then anything would be possible, and all the mistakes you are bound to make writing such historical stories are no longer mistakes if you are in a parallel universe as well.

The thing is, to write such a book, a lot of research is necessary, you need to read not only about history, but also about technology through the ages up until now, and how you could actually go about creating for example vaccines on a massive scale if actually you would need stainless steel first. It has to be convincing, and Flint so far has done extremely well in my opinion. Of course, any serious author of alternate history has to do research in order to paint a convincing picture, it is pretty much a given and hence would definitely take you over a year to write such a book. I used to do a lot of research when writing my novels, you wouldn't believe all the research and interviews I did for a play I have written about a historical ghost town in Québec, and also my novel Denfert-Rochereau. I however did little research for Anna Maria, though I admit I read a lot of Wikipedia along the way, such a great tool for any writer, we do have it easy nowadays with the Internet. Instant access to knowledge for free in the comfort of your home, no going to obscure libraries to read old archives, I don't think I would bother with that anymore unless I was a full time writer, which I don't think I'll ever be.

The only negative point I would say so far, is the way he has chosen to ship that West Virginia town to 1632 Germany, it was art from a now extinct alien race. Come on! This is ridiculous. However, now that I come to think of it, it may well be that it was a stroke of genius on Flint's part. The reader no longer waits to figure out how this happened, how could it anyway? What sort of technology or even theoretical physics idea would fit the bill in this case? It might have been even worse to hear Flint try to convince us that somehow Quantum Mechanics is to blame for this weird phenomenon. In the end, it would sound as ridiculous and improbable that an alien race now extinct being the culprit. I would not have gone for it, but I have learnt there that it may be better to state that it is a mystery than trying to explain the phenomenon by any impossible means possible.

1632 is heavy on nationalistic pride, how great being an American is, how great our governmental and constitutional structures are, the whole shebang. You finish reading the book and your head is spinning, you want to be an American, it is so much better than everything else in the world, and not only because we are in 1632, since just like 1984 (I just realised that Flint's title is actually very close to George Orwell's book title), just like 1984, all of this could be the same if we were in fact in 2007. Yes, there are still many barbarian countries out there with monarchies or tyrannies, with citizens who could be better called slaves and servants, etc.

It is just that after George Bush as president for what seems a decade now, I find it hard to read anything which could bring me to any sort of American Pride. Bush has done much to destroy just about everything America really stood for, to the point that today I wonder if anyone can be shouting so loud about how proud he or she can be to be American. We'll just have to hope that this President will disappear soon and will be quickly forgotten, and eventually quickly remembered as the worst American President ever to head such what may still be a great country. And perhaps then I would have enjoyed reading 1632 a bit more, even I am guilty of falling for it, as we always do when reading these books and watching these films, isn't it great to be American which such grand ideals and freedom?

If anything, 1633, the follow up book, shows us that even in the Netherlands and England, they already were there, as they are today, except that at that point in time the King was still very much in control, the shift towards a true democratic society however was already almost there. Even in Sweden the King is already at the mercy of his people, Vasa. And the French Revolution bringing a republic was not far off by then, 1712 in fact, and that is pretty much what the great American Empire has based its own political system, it comes from Montesquieu. So what else has those great Americans from the future truly brought to the past of 1632 which was so amazing and revolutionary? It can only be on a technological point of view, to be honest, and then, the story could have been the same if you were to send to 1632 Germany a few thousand Chinese people. That should have been interesting.

I however understand the need to write an interesting book, at the end of the day this is entertainment, and it provides a lot to think about and discuss, no wonder that series of books has spawn a few monsters, with an active forum and a huge fan based, many of them writing spin off novellas and novels, which perhaps I will read as well if I can buy somewhere electronic versions of these books. Finch has done very well, even if somehow at some point the reader can cringe a bit, like this moment in Independence Day film where the Americans get out of their alien spaceship in the desert after destroying the mother ship, and the American President with his wife are coming towards them with the big symphony on the background, cringe, cringe, cringe, please someone shoot me!

This nationalistic pride type of novels is truly American in nature, you would never read a book about how great it is to be Canadian, especially in the army, after you have killed something like half a million people, and such ideals we may have can be turned into something that perhaps does not really exist. I have never read something like that either about how proud anyone could be to be British. It couldn't be done, people would laugh. And yet, we all have democracies, we all have what they Americans have, sometimes it seems we have less, and sometimes we have more, and yet, no one is that proud about it, and perhaps we should be proud and write that kind of novels about our own countries. Many of these sort of books must have been written, I imagine, by the Irish. And the first ever French Book found, The Song of Roland, is all about that, being proud of being in the French army and be killed heroically by the Spanish in the year 800. I wonder how successful would be a book about alternate history considering Québec and the rest of Canada, heavy nationalistic pride in the context of creating a new country out of Québec, and all that crap. Interesting, if ever I decide to write a book in French-Canadian specifically about Québec's history.

One thing I hate in books is suddenly it could become just a series of battles, and reading about them becomes quickly really boring. I enjoyed the first film Lord of the Rings, but not the others, as it was just that, battles after battles that made no sense to me and I could care about any of it. Maybe if I had read the books beforehand, but now there is no way I will, Lord of the Rings simply does not work for me. Reading 1632, and 1633, I thought, here we are, it prepares us for a series of battles and wars, and we will have to go through them one by one. It would have been intolerable to read these battles in the context of a historical novel without the twist of alternate reality and the people from the future. Perfect example how the simple idea of science fiction can turn anything boring into something worth reading, and I am glad I am learning a lot of history that way. Flint is also quite clever, that none of his battles are boring, it is this clash between the past and the future, the reaction of the enemies as they see things they have never seen before, the pride once again of being an American who is unbeatable and take it all so casually in such situation that anyone would find unbearable, and the lot. Also that most conversations between his characters are interesting as well, what those kings and other leaders think, plan, react to the new reality, it is all fascinating.

Reading Flint made me realise something that I already knew, but re-enforced the idea, that it does not matter if the three lines describing your book is quickly just: a man and a woman fall in love together. There is nothing attractive in such an outline, and yet, you could turn it into Anna Karenina if you were Tolstoy or Madame Bovary if you were Gustave Flaubert. It is not enough to have three great lines for an outline which will attract someone to read the book, the book in itself needs to be great in style and a multitude of small ideas and fascinating conversations between many interesting people. And the big test of any author, of course, would be that without a story per say, but just a man and a woman fall in love together, is enough for you to go on and build a masterpiece of literature.

Flint could easily have gone astray after finding such a great idea, but he does not, it is highly interesting all the way through, and the key ingredient I'm afraid has nothing to do with how great the initial idea was, which was ultimately just a starting point, a necessity of a successful book, the key ingredient is his writing style which flows perfectly and make you forget there is a narrator there speaking. And yet, all that would be useless without the most important ingredient which he has mastered: the background situation (the context), the actual events being described (plot lines), intelligent conversations between well developed characters. And there are so many of the latter, and yet, most are interesting to read. Whenever a man and a woman fall in love in Flint's books, you bet you will want to read it. There are means by which he achieves this, we get a lot of the internal thoughts of the characters, very detailed in fact, and it adds a psychological dimension to just a simple event with people talking to each other. On the screen this translates into faces the characters do, their behaviour, how they stand, what they do, whilst they talk. It is perhaps the only way to show what goes on in their mind, which is equally important than just events.

I have learnt that with Flint, however it is difficult for me to transpose this to the Anna Maria for example, because my narrator is the main character, he doesn't know what other people think, he can only guess, and yet, I should add more psychology to it, to every scene, every conversation. In 1632, when Richelieu in France receives any news and makes any decision, we are there to witness it and we will get to see the consequences later on. In Anna Maria, my hero could not have been in France with Richelieu to get all that, private thoughts and scheming in the shadow, we could only see the consequences and speculate about what the bastard had done or wanted to achieve. A narrator at the third person is much better, however I don't regret not using the third person in Anna Maria. If anything, you need greater skills in order to achieve the same effect. But you need to keep it in mind, think about it, develop ways by which the story will not remain static, that you can still be in many places to know what is happening and not simply witness some sort of after effect, you need to think hard to describe the psychology and emotions of other characters, all viewed from one single point of view, your narrator, hero of the book.

Eric Flint and David Weber

1633

There isn't much more I could say about 1633, as I covered most of it in 1632. There are however a few things that I would like to think about concerning 1633, which perhaps are more about the format and the way it came to be in the first place.

1633 was a collaboration between Flint and Weber, and I would not have thought more upon the subject, except that at the end there is a foreword in which Eric Flint feels the need to tell us all about collaborations when writing books (mostly sci-fi) in order to justify and kill a few prejudice people might have about collaborations. Interesting point, I have to say. Flint is not only a great author, he is also some sort of militant if you want about breaking old ideas about the literary world. I for example admire him for his comments concerning having his own books available online for free on a website, and finally proving to the world that it is the best publicity possible for any book, and instead of limiting the sales, on the contrary it seems to have turned them into bigger successes. More people talked about the books, just like I am doing now, and hence, more people bought the books as a result through words of mouth.

When it comes to collaborations, I have to admit that I too had some ideas about it. In the Star Trek universe, many books have been written by many authors, and often it seems to me that the result was probably better for it. With two minds thinking, you are less likely to go a wild goose chase about something really boring that could last for pages and pages. With two minds you are also much more likely to bounce ideas and find a string of them which altogether will make for a better story you could have come with on your own. Any idea will be discussed for a start and rejected if less interesting, added to if it is a good one.

Not only that, collaboration is a motivation, without it, you have to motivate yourself, and I tell you, after a day or a week in your normal daily job, getting enthusiastic about writing a novel which you know will take a year to finish, you need a lot of motivation, better be an enthusiastic friend than a bottle of whisky or anger from past events during your week at work. I found that looking for an escape of your horrible job is strong argument to finish a novel, since whenever you write a book, you always think that it will be the one turning you into a rich bastard, which always fail to materialise somehow and mark you final emancipation and total freedom from the famous 9 to 5 jobs.

This said, my only experience working on a collaboration is actually taking place right now and is turning into a disaster. I found a good friend I could work on a book with whilst I was in Los Angeles, and we did a lot whilst I was there, but now I am in London and the book is in standby. The main problem of collaboration is when one of the authors is a great one with a great writing style, and the other has a totally different style and approach. My friend write in a high stylish kind of literary style, which I could not match because not only English is a second language for me, but more importantly I do not wish to write in that kind of style. So even though we developed together all the main ideas, the plot lines, every scene and all, and discussed and decided at length everything that will happen in the book, only he can write the book, and as it is a first book for him, he is struggling to finish it and to be honest might never finish it unless we get together again one day. Second, not only half the book is already written, it is unlikely anyone will ever have a look at it even when and if it will ever be finished, because my friend is worried someone might steal our ideas, and to even have a look at it you will need to sign a contract and the book will need to be properly copyrighted and registered with various organisations. Which is contrary to my own philosophy, everything I write, as I write it, goes online immediately, even if I never had the chance yet to edit it, re-read it, in order to clear most mistakes. I have six books published, they are all integrally online, something I successfully negotiated with my publishers, and I hope I will be able to continue to do so in the future.

So, don't get me wrong, collaborations have a lot of positive, and I hope my own experience will end up being a success as we struggle to finish the book, but you have to choose your writing partner very well and make sure you will in the end finish the job. In the case of Eric Flint, it seems to work very well, considering all the collaborations he has developed successfully in time. And I

suspect it might be the reason we have enjoyed so many more books in that series, so it is plus.

The most interesting collaborations I have always wondered about are of course the ones of Arthur C. Clarke. Clarke is a giant of sci-fi, and never mind what people say that he might come second to Heinlein, for me there is only one person at the top, Clarke. This said, I found myself enjoying much more all the books which turned out to be a collaboration with author sci-fi authors, making me discover in the process great authors it might have taken me years to get to without these collaborations. There are specifically two collaborations I will assess here, Stephen Baxter and Gentry Lee.

I think Stephen Baxter is a great sci-fi author, but I think his best work came about through his collaboration with Arthur C. Clarke. I don't know how their collaboration worked out to be, just like I am not certain what happened behind the books Gentry Lee has written with Clarke. Somehow I had in my mind that Clarke is still as sharp as ever with coming up with great ideas, plot lines and funny and great situations and conversations to develop, but perhaps his age makes it more and more difficult for him to write a whole book on his own, and so the collaborator writes a lot of it, the bulk of it, supervised, edited and added on to by Clarke. I could be wrong there and perhaps Clarke wrote as much as the others in those books, perhaps more, who knows, it is hard to tell. Something is clear though about the Rama Series. The first one was Clarke pure and simple, no character development, no emotions or deep feelings of any sort, no embarrassing situations or awkward moments per say between characters, just pure sci-fi story telling with a lot of amusing and funny situations. This is not to say that it is his normal style, I am only talking about the first Rama book. As soon as Gentry Lee came on board, the Rama series took another dimension and was quite the opposite of what I just described the first book was about. It was the work of genius, from the second book to the fourth. However, as soon as Gentry Lee took over the series on his own afterwards, critics have been highly negative and the books didn't do so well. It seems the series had lost its sparks without Clarke. I don't know if this is actually true, but I just bought all three books of Gentry Lee he has written after his collaboration ended, two are set in the Rama universe, and I will let you know then. At least it means Clarke was quite instrumental in all his collaborations, and all of them are masterpieces, including the last series with Baxter called Time Odyssey, I look forward buying the last book of the trilogy.

To return to Flint and Weber in 1633, sometimes the style was not like the first book, it was obvious when Weber was writing at the beginning, though as you continue to read the book, it becomes impossible to know who wrote what. It was clear to me that the whole discussion about the planes in the air was not Flint, and even then, I jumped a few pages because personally I was not that interested in finding out all this techno babble about flying planes, unless the book were all about that like in the case of Richard Bach, which I enjoyed all his books. It means to me that conversations between characters are far more interesting than describing the process of building power plants or building planes from scratch, or having a long description of battles in the 17th Century or political situations. All of which are necessary and important and would be missed greatly if they were missing, and yet, you need to strike the right balance and not delve too much into the finer details. We watch so much TV, in which within five minutes you could have gone to three different countries, met over 30 characters and have some talk between them, seen two battles, 100 thousand deaths, one specific and emotional death, and a baby being born on top of it, all in five minutes. And I'm afraid, book authors need to adapt and adjust to this kind of pace and rhythm, the Tolstoy style of having a long cup of tea every three pages is long gone, I'm afraid. Got me addicted to tea, I made myself a cup every time they had one, but that's all the effect it had.

Enough now about collaborations, the next book I will read is Ring of Fire, the sequel to 1933, and that is a book of collaborations without Flint being an author on each of them, it will be interesting to see the result, as I would like to see the same eventually to my Anna Maria series, and that should be the test. If I feel altogether these authors have done worse to the series, then I might not consider having anyone else writing in the Anna Maria universe. If it comes out well, then it is certainly worth considering.

My only other experience with that kind of collaboration, are all these Sherlock Holmes pastiches, many from actual great crime writers. I have not found one single novella worthy of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Sherlock Holmes yet, not one which I could say, yeah, that is fantastic, it could have been written by Doyle. However I have many more to read and perhaps I will eventually find an author who succeeded where everyone else failed. The secret of course is mostly in the writing style, the vocabulary, the intelligence of the story, and nothing need be out of character for Holmes or Watson, at any time.

I would not expect of course that kind of rigidity for the 1632 series or anyone who would write in the Anna Maria universe. There could be as many clashing styles as possible, new directions, things out of character, anything may be welcome. The exercise here is not to copycat another author, it is contributing to a great universe. And now I will read the Ring of Fire.

Eric Flint and Several Authors

Ring of Fire

Well, I have almost finished reading Ring of Fire, and I find that I have many things to say about it, whilst for quite a while I thought I would have little to say about it.

One main thing this book proves, is how great a writer Eric Flint is. I have to admit, when I saw his name added to so many books downloadable for free on Baen Publisher's website, I wondered: what is going on here? Now I understand, if you are a sci-fi author, and you have Eric Flint willing to help co-write a book with you, then you must be mad to say no. I also believe the man must be quite prolific. Anyway.

Ring of Fire is a collection of short stories written by many people, established sci-fi authors and amateurs. The book could only be appreciated if you had first read 1632 and 1633 and were by now addicted enough to wish to read the Grantville Gazette available on the Internet. I have not felt the need yet to read that fictitious newspaper from that West Virginia town from today shipped to 1632 Germany, but I suspect I will be by the time I finish reading 1634.

Grantville seems like a beautiful place to live, and considering how miserable I am in 2007 London, I would certainly be willing to be shipped to 1632 Germany in that town full of Americans from today. I have not felt anything like it since I wanted to be on the USS Enterprise NCC-1701-D and part of her crew. Charming story indeed that Eric Flint brought us.

I skipped a few pages of that book, though many short stories from certain authors really interested me, since I was already addicted to Grantville. However, although all these authors are all very good, and you could not fault them on what they have written, often there is clearly something missing. And you only realise this once you get to Eric Flint's story at the end. Because then, you can truly see an artist at work. I would not have realised this if I had not

read *Ring of Fire*, that even the slightest and stupidest little interaction between any two characters, is fascinating to read when Eric Flint writes it.

And yet, his writing style is indefinable. This is no Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with an upper society British English. It is not Shakespeare with an incomprehensible English. What is it then? The wits, the cracks, the fast pace, the casual style? What is Eric Flint's style? I don't think I could copy it, do a pastiche of it, and yet, surely enough, I've got to learn something out of it, I've got to identify why his style is so good that even history about the Jewish people in Prague in 1634 sounds highly interesting. I do care for religious stories or stories about garbage men as long as they are told by great authors.

And that is what I learnt reading *Ring of Fire*. That if you could write something gripping and fascinating while simply talking about the most common story of literature, a man and a woman falling in love with each other for example, then we can call you an author. Almost made me wish to write a book called: *This Book is About Nothing*, and then see if I can turn that nothing into something worth reading.

And it makes me wonder, do I have that magic touch? Am I such an author that would be interesting even writing the worst crap there is? I feel you can only be born with it, you cannot develop it in time, no matter how many writing courses you could take, though I'm sure writing courses would definitely help you avoid the biggest mistakes when writing a book, something that perhaps comes after much experience and wits.

This is a frightening thought, as I have no objectivity whatsoever about my own writing style, and I get so little feedback even if by now two million people visit my websites every year, that I am worried. I wonder, if I was asked or if I decided to submit a short story for that book, assuming I had come across it at the right time, how well would have I rated? Would my short story even have been selected for publication in that book? I have a great imagination, I can come up with great stories, but what about my style of writing, especially when English is but a second language to me?

I suppose I could still do the exercise, write my own short story based in the world of Grantville, and see if it is any good when compared with everything else everyone else has written so far, but then I fear the exercise would be useless, since I have no objectivity when comes the times to compare myself to others. There is but one criterion by which I go by, if I like it myself, if I am proud of it, that is all that is required. At that point I care nothing for whatever else whoever else might think or say. That is my only measuring tool, I'm afraid, at this time anyway.

So, where does this leaves me then? The secret of Eric Flint's writing style and how I could integrate this somehow in my own style. Is it possible? I can't even put my finger on what it is that makes his style interesting. Of course, I might be able to if I were to write a PhD on him, but I barely have the time to write, let alone read, so this is not an option.

Perhaps I have already learnt enough by understanding that everything resides not only on an initial great idea, and then a multitude of other smaller great ideas, but also in one's own writing style, something that you either have or you do not. And most worrying yet, is it possible to change it, to move from boring writing style to highly addictive? Or are you born with that talent, and finding out if you have it or not depends very much on whatever feedback you receive from other readers, when these are hard to come by?

You would think, that after writing for over 25 years like me, you would have some sort of idea of your writing style, if it is any good or not. To be honest, I am not sure. If my books were that great, surely there would have been articles by now in big newspapers like *Le Monde* in Paris and *La Presse* in Québec. However I have always been a black sheep in the world of literature, an anarchist, sort of, and so I cannot expect the mainstream to embrace me at any rate. And science fiction for me has only been in English, started quite recently,

where I have started from scratch as a newbie, in a second language no less. And I still do not have much to show, I had almost nothing before I wrote Anna Maria.

Oh dear, someone could go crazy wondering about that stuff. I guess as an author there is only one thing you can do, it is to do what you love best, to the best of your abilities, and forget the rest, especially, do not be discouraged by the rest. Just keep going, learn as you write and read, book after book, and see where ultimately this will bring you, if anywhere.

And in my case, it does not matter much if it brings me anywhere or not, I was born to write, a deep need I cannot ignore, and so, why should I care for any critic or comment about what I do? It is not like I have a big publisher out there pressuring me to write the next best-seller on the New York Times Best-Sellers List. I have all the freedom in the world to do what I want, what I feel like doing, and I hope it will remain that way, though sometimes I may think otherwise.

I enjoyed reading Ring of Fire even if I jumped many pages, and definitely whatever Eric Flint has written in that book is worth buying the book for. I may have learnt many other things reading it, so overall it was far from being wasted. However I look forward reading 1634, and somehow I feel that book will be great from the first page to the last, just like 1632 and 1633 were. And perhaps I will be in a better position then to identify exactly what Eric Flint's writing style is all about, and see whatever I can learn from it, and even get inspired by it.

Eric Flint and Andrew Dennis

1634 – The Galileo Affair

I read 400 pages so far out of 2700, and I am already hooked. In Rome and Venice, talking about Catholics, which for some reason I find fascinating, because they were so scheming and devious, it is nice to see them struggle to adapt to 300 years of future history which now will never happen. Also that the Catholic priest Mazzare with his long time Calvinist priest friend (Protestant), are great characters. I had to read twice the passage of Mike Stearns announcing to Mazzare that he was now an ambassador leaving for Venice, it was that good.

I think Flint goes to the point immediately, he does not waste time with boring dialogues or insignificant events. We jump very rapidly to many new scenes, and most of them are mainly human interactions, often people of different backgrounds, time, religion, values, etc., and yet, they all get to discover and appreciate how great the American way is. May sound cheesy when stated like this, however in Flint's style it is highly effective, especially when a woman goes on to save the life of an important official from the past, or like in past books, a woman goes on with her rifle to kill 300 people in record time.

This is all war stuff, but somehow they are all bubble gum wars and nothing horrible never truly happens, even though, of course, a lot of people die, but never a hero. This could have so easily been over dramatised, with good people dying and suffering horribly, but I don't think this series would have been better for it. As it stands it is entertaining and easy to read. In fact, one of the secrets of Flint is that the way he writes, it can be read very fast. I'm not sure how an author would go about developing a style which could permit a faster read without blocking here and then like with most other authors. Interesting point, perhaps it has come naturally to the writer.

As for the contribution of Andrew Dennis, I cannot speak of it since I cannot make the distinction between what he wrote and what Flint wrote, though sometimes, when I have to slow down my reading, I can suspect it is Dennis

writing, and not Flint. At any rate, all the collaborations of Flint with other authors I have read so far, the writing styles of the different authors blend very well.

Some time has passed since I started writing this, I have read many more books of the series, almost made me sick because it took me forever. The series is quite good, and I must have learnt a few things, but I find I have nothing else to say about it all.

R.J. Rummel

Never Again 1 - War & Democide

I stumbled on the series never again by R.J. Rummel by accident, his books are downloadable for free on his website, just like the 1632/Ring of Fire series early books were for Eric Flint.

There were a few hurdles to jump over before I could get on with reading Rummel. First he is obviously a big fan of George W. Bush and fully supports what he firmly believes is America bringing democracy to the world by force. For a man who studied and has written most of his life against genocides and mass killings, he seems to have no problem sending American troops to the Middle-East to virtually annihilate what may remain if this part of the world, and that the death toll is now reaching astronomical numbers. So for a while I thought, and from his photo, that the man was "un idiot savant", a knowledgeable idiot, of the most annoying kind.

However, I have already established that I cannot and will not prejudge anyone's work on such futile basis as religion, political views, homophobia, antecedents, and whatever else you could think of. I am also glad that I read the first two books of the series so far, because I was not expecting them to be that good, and actually more interesting than many other books I read recently.

I have to say, people at work looked at me weirdly when I explained that I was tired because I went to bed late reading books about genocides. It was like admitting some sort of suspicious and kinky desire for mass killings (like if I had said that I fully supported whatever we are doing in Iraq right now, would have got me the same suspicious look).

And the beginning of War & Democide was a bit harsh, we went through a few personal stories of many characters about how it was like surviving a democide, a term coined by Rummel himself to describe a genocide by governments. I thought, oh no, he is trying to illustrate how horrible genocides are, convinced that whenever most of us read in a newspaper that 500,000 were killed in Rwanda, we have no concept and no idea about what it really means, and we could as well think they meant 500, or 5. So he went for the lot, the horrible, the crude, telling us the nightmare of one person within a few genocides, hoping to make us understand that moved us, imagine multiplying that one nightmare by so many thousand and million, how it could really feel like.

In the end it did not work for me, I was not moved, and I skipped a few of these stories in the end hoping the novel would start. Thankfully it did start, leaving those personal experiences behind, and it was pretty good. I'm not sure why exactly, and that is what I need to assess here.

Never Again 1 is the classic basic story of a man and a woman in love, going through a series of obstacles and challenges, ending in a triumphant success. So nothing original there, and I suppose that what happens to them,

what they do, and their personal conversations must be therefore what is interesting?

Well, time travel, changing the future, and how to go about it is of interest to me for a start. Their conversations are okay, but I guess they are not that extraordinary. There is a fascinating aspect of Joy Phim being a cold blooded killer, who cannot stop killing people to the alarmed boyfriend John Banks. You never know what Joy will do next, she is totally out of control, with no fear, and filled with secrets. That may have contributed to make this book highly readable.

I wouldn't say Rummel writing style is special, but it flows easily, probably because he has written so many books and articles on political science in his lifetime, he is now a retired political science teacher. There are many descriptions, less of what the locations look like than the inner neurosis of his characters as events happen to them, the kind of descriptions I would myself bypass whilst writing my own novels. Maybe this is an important point, we do feel the inner struggle of the characters, we are with them in their thoughts.

There are action scenes that seem superfluous, fights with gangsters and bandits, even a classic western style hold up of a train in the second book that frankly was too much. And many some intimate and sex scenes that certainly did not bring about a hard on for me (silly me, it must be because I'm gay). This kind of stuff, action and sex, is something Rummel himself mentions the books contain, as to attract us to his books which are far off his non fiction. He came to fiction with the intention of teaching us about genocides, understanding that perhaps this was the best way. So he seemed to have studied what great books and movies need, action, guns, sensuality, sex, heroes' moments, how great it feels to be American and conquer the world to bring it all, such perfection, to the rest of the world by force if necessary, etc.

The problem with action and sex, to resume all the above to that, is that if it is missing from your novel, it feels like something is missing and the book seems incomplete. I thought I had added such things in my novel Anna Maria, and the only serious comment I got from a magazine/publisher (for a limited distribution to get a first feedback), was that it needs more action and plot. So it is a necessary evil, at the same time I feel it cannot be gratuitous and should never last forever. Short and sweet. Some scenes got boring in Rummel's first two books, but overall I think he got it right most of the time.

I was wondering however if I would myself ever consider having one of my characters knowing all about kung fu, karate and judo, armed to the teeth with so many different models of guns and carbines spanning a century, and have endless fights and shootings. No, I will never do that, whatever a publisher tells me.

I guess this is the challenge, have more action, more plot, more crisis, without resorting to the easy way out: oh I know, let's have a shooting or a kung fu scene where our hero will win over the worst odds, and manage to kill 16 opponents without a scratch or even consequences, with the police saying: thank you for what you did, you have done what none of us could do despite our armies!

Michel de Nostredame - Nostradamus

Les Prophéties - Centuries

It seems that if you spend a lot of time reading on the Internet and searching for things, you almost invariably encounter Nostradamus here and there, and once again you pay attention to him and soon forget him again. After the attacks on 9/11 in New York, what was the number one searched word on every single search engine, was the word Nostradamus. Every single book in the best sellers lists were from or about Nostradamus. How can this be? How a French author from 500 years ago can today have so much power? All because a bunch of cryptic writings which can be interpreted in any way we want, except when there are clearer indications as to what this might be about, like this Mabus guy which can become Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush in the context of the quatrain, and Hister clearly a reference to Hitler when in the same quatrain you find the words the great leader of Germany, or something close to this. I am sorry, I don't care people say about this Hister being the Danube or another river in France, this is exactly that it means to write in codes and hiding meanings. Using words close to what they truly are, inputting similar words meaning certain things, which, after the event, will be made clear they meant something else. I think it is safe to say that Hister is Hitler, you would have to be mad to say otherwise in the context of the text, especially when Nostradamus himself said he was hiding most of the meanings of his predictions. Well, this is hiding it, and not very well at that. He gave us his name, Hitler! To disastrous consequences as well once Hitler himself found out and used it to his advantage in his war propaganda (I will talk about this later in more details).

Is there really something to Nostradamus? Was he able to see future events just like on a television set in a bowl of water or a crystal ball? Of course, his enduring success is mostly due to how we can interpret his writings in any way we want, and so, he might as well have predicted everything and nothing all at the same time.

There are few reasons why Nostradamus could not be clearer than he has been. Using anagrams, words referring to other things, but in light of events, suddenly it takes another meaning, and so on. The perfect example is that Hitler's propaganda machine took over a few quatrains of Nostradamus to legitimate his ascension to the top. Not only that, might very well influenced the course of history, because those few quatrains foretold the exact places Hitler and Nazi Germany was going to attack. And so the prophecy suddenly influenced history, made it happen somehow. This is certainly a strong argument as to why these predictions should not be understood before the events actually take place, but written in such a way that after these events, suddenly it becomes clear.

The problem with this line of thought, is then, why write predictions or prophecies at all? What purpose can it serve? You cannot use them to prevent catastrophes or wars or evil people to ascend to power, and you cannot even have an idea of what is to come. Only a vague notion of where the world is going as a whole. That is already something, I suppose.

And one could wonder, what use can we make of finding out afterwards that Nostradamus predicted it? Those millions of people searching for Nostradamus after 9/11, what is it they were searching for exactly? Alright, Nostradamus predicted this, perhaps, and now, what else has he predicted, we need to know the future, so we can prepare for it. But by definition, in the true art of occultism and esoteric mystical philosophies, of which Nostradamus was an avid reader, everything must be concealed and make sense only to people who have the keys to its understanding.

Those keys must exist, and perhaps there are books out there claiming they have found such keys opening up the complete meaning of Nostradamus. Yet, no big hoo-ha has been made about a new understanding of Nostradamus in recent years, and so this code must still be hidden. No one could have studied occultism and not fully decided to include codes and keys and hidden meanings, especially at a time of Spanish Inquisition and where witches were burnt at the stake.

Incidentally, our generation has an extraordinary advantage over the previous ones. We have the Internet to find out instantly translation of the Latin and Greek words Nostradamus used, we also have sophisticated software capable of deciphering codes within books like the Bible. And yet, this code must have been accessible to students of occultism and mysticism 500 years ago, and so it could not have been that complicated, even if computers today could help identify what kind of codes and hidden meaning might lay in Nostradamus texts.

Apparently, also, some quatrains appeared to be modifications of other quatrains written by other authors of the time. This led some people to believe that this was plagiarism and hence, Nostradamus was not writing his own predictions. However, these books might have been known at the time, and such clear references to them could actually tell people that reading those other books in light of his prophecies, a new meaning could be attained. This could also be a line of investigation.

I speak French, it is my first language, and so I thought, well, perhaps I could read it all and see what I can come up with, even though this is old French and many words today have a different meaning. Unless you are using the translation of a French scholars who knows the old French, Latin and Greek, and the history of France and Europe, I wouldn't trust that translation.

The problem is also that the codes might very well be deciphered through the study of astrology and astronomy, different cycles of planets and constellations, limited to a knowledge of these topics from a 500 years old's perspective.

Anyone who studied poetry will understand that quatrains that rhyme, are careful constructions of small paragraphs and lines, careful calculations of syllables and words and their locations within the quatrains. A lot of meaning can already be understood just by juxtapositions, places of words and syllables in different quatrains, every single figure of style and other tool available to poetry could in fact help and be at the basis of a code within Nostradamus. These laws of poetry have been known for a long time in France, this is another avenue to investigate.

There are perhaps meaning to be found via the study of geographical locations of important monuments in Provence in France, as a mean to decipher some coding. In fact, the study of codes and hidden meanings of texts as practice within most secret societies of France in the last two millennia would be beneficial. Most secret societies in France, like the Freemasons, were born because from the point of view of the Church, the knowledge they needed to construct their elaborate architecture, required the study of illegal knowledge like mathematics and physics, which even today are classified as heretical by many religions.

So, before someone like me could study Nostradamus in any kind of useful way, I would need to read a lot of books and material not even related to Nostradamus, but certainly related to what he might have been reading at the time, 500 years ago, assuming these books and this knowledge still exists today. I will have to put this project on the back burner, and wait until I retire or no longer have a 9 to 5 job in parallel to the books I write. I could not possibly get into this at this time. It would have to be almost someone life's work to find these codes and keys within Nostradamus' work. And even then, Nostradamus would not have wished for us to so easily find these codes and keys, for him, I'm sure, only a few people should have had access to this hidden knowledge, because if the whole future was known to everyone and we could predict the future so well, we would change this world so fast, it would render any other predictions of Nostradamus completely off mark, as we would in effect change the future he foresaw. Since the most remarkable predictions that appear to have come true are still highly accurate today, after 500 years, it is safe to assume that if anyone has the key to understanding Nostradamus, that knowledge has not been used widely. And again, by remaining vague in his prophecies, Nostradamus has

insured that for as long as humanity lives, his body of work cannot be instantly dismissed by too many predictions which have not or will not come true. And so, if we can truly change the future, his quatrains will still signify something to us via our many interpretations of any event in light of his writings.

Nostradamus gave us just enough clear predictions for us to know that he is the real deal, but not enough for us to start knowing the future for certain and start changing it at will. You have to admire such a work of genius, capable of striking the right balance, and this is reflected by his extraordinary popularity today. To the point that he may seem more meaningful and of actuality now than he ever did 500 years ago. What an achievement!

As to his legitimacy, even the hardest sceptic would have trouble explaining this very clear prediction about the Great Fire of London of 1666:

C2:Q51

Le sang du iuste à Londres fera faute,
Bruslez par foudres de vingt trois les six:
La dame antique cherra de place haute,
De mesme secte plusieurs seront occis.

The blood of the just will commit a fault at London,
Burnt through lightning of twenty threes the six:
The ancient lady will fall from her high place,
Several of the same sect will be killed.

The blood of the just shall be wanting in London,
Burnt by thunderbolts of twenty three the Six(es),
The ancient dame shall fall from then high place,
Of the same sect many shall he killed.

Note: vingt trois in old French was used to mean three times 20, so sixty, and then 6 added to it. Also, this "vingt" (20), might have been written "vint" in the original text (to come) I need to investigate this further. And so the date is still alright, because then it become trois les six (or three sixes), 1666. Which would make more sense, since "les six" means "the sixes", it is plural. And more in the spirit of Nostradamus to even hide his dates so nothing is that clear, though in this case it is quite clear, but still confusing. It has also been said that this could be about the witch hunts, then you have two prophecies in the same quatrain, though witch hunts were ongoing at that time, but became more pronounced later on in England.

Gosh, one little quatrain, and I have already written two pages and visited a dozen websites and read for two hours.

To be continued...

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