

I Survived a Month of an Incurable Disease (comments by Mark R. Leeper):

WARNING: This account graphically depicts one of the hazards of getting older and demonstrates that one should avoid aging at all costs.

One of the most frightening months of my life was after I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. There is no cure and it causes progressive brain damage.

Last summer I would notice a problem when I was taking my walks around the block. I would be out walking and notice that my hand would start quivering rhythmically on its own. Actually I thought the motion was more or less like my hand was repetitively winding a watch that was invisible between my fingers. Some of my younger reader may have no idea what it means to wind a watch. Look it up in Google.

As I was saying, I could stop my hand from the motion, but it might start up on its own again. Twitching my hand would feel as natural as leaving it sit at rest.

I was not too disturbed by the problem. I thought it was a natural symptom of aging. I also noticed my balance was suffering. Standing in the shower it felt like I was standing in a rowboat and shifting my weight back and forth between my feet. I made a mental note to tell my doctor on my next check up. The doctor gave me a list of local neurologists. I picked one conveniently located and made an appointment. All this took a while, since I did not yet feel a sense of urgency. That was soon to come.

I went to see the neurologist. (His name is withheld to avoid legal entanglements.) He told me the moment he saw me he noted posture changes that go with Parkinson's disease. My feet shuffled. My back bent forward. My face looked like a mask, showing no expression. He gave me some tests and I found my knee-jerk reaction just did not work on my right side. If he hit my left knee with a little hammer, my knee would kick. Then on my right side the leg felt no urge to kick. The neurologist ordered a brain MRI and a blood test. I made an appointment to see him again in about four weeks to among other things go over test results. So this was getting real. I really had Parkinson's disease.

That afternoon I took out of the library all their books about Parkinson's. The more I read the more it worried me. Parkinson's Disease was incurable and progressive. In other words there is no improvement. It does brain damage that does not cure. In it advanced phase it is really debilitating. I had no idea of how long that would take and how much time I had left. I lost a lot of sleep. And I fretted. Boy did I fret! The second week of the month was the week the MT VOID reached it 2000th issue. I tortured myself with questions like how much longer could I continue publishing the VOID with a progressive brain disease. On the other hand, if I tried to publish in brain damaged condition would anyone notice the difference?

The afternoon of the MRI the neurologist called me and said he needed another MRI. With this one they needed contrast. I got it and there were still two or more weeks until my appointment. More fretting. That's it. They are trying to measure the degree of damage.

We started planning a trip to South Korea and Taiwan. If it was still possible for me to travel, it is best to do it sooner rather than later. When the Parkinson's advances I will no longer be able to travel as much. So I wanted to go while I still could.

Finally came the day for my second neurologist visit. While I was planning what to ask first about my situation I realized he was telling me how he knew I did NOT have Parkinson's. He was going through the same set of symptoms he had told me about last time, but this time he was telling me each symptom had gone away and so I could not possibly have Parkinson's. The posture related symptoms were either over or in decline. Why then did I have the symptoms of Parkinson's?

There is a viral attack that had many of the same symptoms as Parkinson's. It was Epstein-Barr virus. Like the common cold, which is also a virus, runs its course and goes away. The blood test had found lots of Epstein-Barr antibodies in my blood. My body was detecting Epstein-Barr viruses in my blood and was creating antibodies to kill it. Sounds good to me.

I naturally smiled at the news and he pointed out that smile is more evidence that I did not have Parkinson's.

The neurologist wanted to see me again in six months, but that I should just wait for the symptoms to go away. One of the worst worrisome months of my life was over. I could just wait and the problems would go away. Apparently Epstein-Barr mimics Parkinson's disease, but your body knows how to fight it. The neurologist gave me vanilla physician advice like get lots of aerobic exercise. And the other symptom were the natural effects of aging. [-mrl]

AUTONOMOUS by **Annalee Newitz** (copyright 2017, Tor Books, 298pp, ASIN B01N4P14CI, ISBN 0765392070) (book review by Joe Karpierz):

I don't necessarily read many debut novels during any given year, at least not until the Hugo Finalists are announced (as they be later today as I write this) and one or two are on that list. Ann Leckie's *ANCILLARY JUSTICE* comes to mind as the most

recent example. I typically want to try to get through a few books on my to-read list, or new novels that are coming out from authors that I like. But every once in a while a novel is published that gets so much buzz that I can't ignore hearing about it, and if the story sounds like something I might be interested in, I'll give it a try. *AUTONOMOUS*, by Annalee Newitz, fits that description.

Jack is a pirate, but not the kind that has a hook for a hand, sails on a ship that flies the skull and crossbones, or is Johnny Depp. Rather she is a humanitarian pirate, one who is attempting, in her own way, to take down big pharma. She sells recreational and other fun drugs to raise money for her real cause: reverse engineering drugs that will help humanity. But as we all know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Jack reverse engineers a drug called *Zacuity*. *Zacuity* is a productivity drug, intended to help the people who take it, under controlled circumstances, become more focused and well, get more work done. The key phrase is "under controlled circumstances". Jack unleashes the reverse engineered drug on to the populace, and those who take it become addicted to it, to the point of focusing on tasks so intensely that many die because they don't eat, sleep, or do anything else that a person needs to do to survive.

Meanwhile, the IPC has traced the drug back to Jack. Newly awakened bot *Paladin* is teamed up with an IPC agent named *Elias*, and the pair go in search of Jack in order to bring her to justice. Jack, on her part, is desperately trying to find a drug that will cure the addiction and stop people from dying. She discovers that *Zacuity*, in fact, *is* addicting, and that the corporation that is marketing it did not perform sufficient testing to determine any nasty side effects. In effect, Jack perfectly reversed engineered the drug, and now she has to not only fix the problem she caused but try to take down the manufacturer in the process.

The novel, then, on the surface looks to be a standard, run-of-the-mill crime story, with the possible twist that the well-intentioned pirate may actually win the day and take down the big, bad, nasty pharmaceutical corporation in the process. Of course, things aren't that simple. And in fact, that particular story line is just a small part of what Newitz is doing here.

Bots, and some humans are born into indentured servitude, and must earn their way out. Humans also can voluntarily enter into this indentured life style because they don't have much choice. *Paladin* is an indentured bot, for example. Newitz explores the implications of this system and what it means to society. Newitz is also exploring the nature of sexuality and gender fluidity and the ability to make choices. Bots, for example, are generally considered male, and *Paladin* is presented with a choice she's never had before, a choice bots don't generally get to make.

Relationships and characters are explored in detail as well. *Elias* and *Paladin* develop a romantic relationship; we learn about Jack's past relationships and how her character developed to get to where it is at the time of the novel and *why* it developed the way it did. The bottom line here is that this is a very complex, layered novel that may be an adventure crime story on the surface but is really much much more than that by the time it is over.

Newitz also doesn't present any easy answers, doesn't tie anything up in a nice little bow for the characters or the reader. Life is dirty and messy, and the reality is that things rarely turn out such that people live happily ever after, and the big bad corporations rarely get their comeuppance.

AUTONOMOUS is a complex, involved, and many layered novel with engaging characters and terrifically written. Since I began this review earlier today, the 2018 Hugo finalists were announced, and *AUTONOMOUS* did not make the cut for Best Novel. It is a strong novel and deserved to be on that list. It certainly deserves your consideration the next time you're looking for something to read. [-jak]

This Week's Reading (book comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

My first observation is that the ballot is getting too long. With nineteen categories (counting the non-Hugo John W. Campbell Award and the Young Adult Award) and six finalists per category, this means the voter has to evaluate 114 finalists. Even if one eliminates the art, dramatic, and editing categories, there are still 78 finalists--and six of them are for *series*. Out of curiosity, when the series category was being discussed, did anyone raise the issue of how/whether a single voter could be reasonably expected to be familiar with six different series? One might theoretically read six *novels*, but it is totally unreasonable to expect voters to read six *series* in the three to four months between announcing the finalists and the voting deadline, especially if they hope to vote in other categories.

And one of the main characteristics of the voting system used is that it operates best when voters are familiar with, and rank, all the choices. It is hard to have truly representative results if most voters are familiar with only two or three of the finalists--and for each, it's a different two or three.

Okay, there's too much on the ballot. What about the actual finalists? Well, all the "Puppy" nonsense seems to have disappeared. The prevailing theory seemed to be that it was too expensive for the supporters to maintain, especially as one can no longer get three years' worth of nominations for a single supporting membership.

The fiction categories are overwhelmingly dominated by women. (The novella and short story categories are entirely women.) In the bicentennial year of Mary Shelley's writing of FRANKENSTEIN, that seems somehow fitting. Does this reflect a change in the demographic of the authors, i.e., are male authors perhaps being marketed more as mainstream, and hence not being considered by genre-focused nominators?

Continuing a trend, the novella category had five of the six novellas published as individual books, rather than as stories in magazines, and all five of those were published by Tor. The novelettes and short stories are almost all from on-line magazines rather than print magazines (eleven of the twelve).

I cannot say that I am familiar with all the fiction finalist authors, but I do want to read at least the short fiction works. One advantage of all this electronic publication is that the short fiction is much more available to readers than the print magazines ever were.

The Retro Hugo ballot is a bit more manageable. There are only nine categories (after all, there were no podcasts back in 1942, or fan artists, or editors--long form (hardly any qualifying novels published in book form). The few dramatic presentations that would have been long form are within the margin for relocation to short form.

However, the novel category is a problem. ISLANDIA (by Austin Tappan Wright) is hard to find (my library system has no copies), the cheapest copies available are \$15-\$20, and it is a thousand pages long. On the other hand, missing entirely is THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS by C. S. Lewis. Much as I love Olaf Stapledon's work, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS should be on the ballot instead of DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT. But I intend to read all the nominees (except ISLANDIA), and more comments will follow.

Of the short fiction, it is all relatively easily available from collections and anthologies. The one story not really anthologized ("There Shall Be Darkness" by C. L. Moore) is available from archive.org. (Note: The two stories from Asimov's "Foundation" trilogy have been renamed; "Foundation" is now called "The Encyclopedists", and "Bridle and Saddle" is now "The Mayors".)

For dramatic presentations, there are six, varying in length from 68 minutes to 100 minutes, straddling that 90-minute boundary most inconveniently. The "Golden Age" of speculative fiction on radio seems over, so there are no truly "short" dramatic presentations. Again, through the magic of home video, all the finalists are fairly readily available. (But you can save yourself the time--CAT PEOPLE is clearly the best in the category.) [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

It is with children that we have the best chance of studying the development of logical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, physical knowledge, and so forth.

--Jean Piaget

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