

# *LJ Book*

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CERANDOR



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# Chapter 1

## 2011

### 1.1 January

#### 1.1.1 January Movie Reviews (2011-01-19 09:56)

Courtesy of O2's cheap cinema ticket offers, I've been seeing more movies lately than I have in a while. Here's a few thoughts on some recent films.

*It's Kind of a Funny Story*: A deliberately quirky tale of a teenager who commits himself to a psychiatric ward because he's feeling a little depressed and has life-affirming adventures. Despite a few heartwarming moments and at least two bits that are laugh-out-loud funny, it feels a bit too upbeat for a movie about people with serious psychological issues. If you're willing to roll with it and accept it for what it is, there's fun to be had.

*Love and Other Drugs*: Two beautiful people (Anne Hathaway and Jake Gyllenhall) meet, have (a lot of) sex and try to get past their psychological and physiological issues in order to have a relationship. Two impressive central performances and a cynical view of the pharmaceutical industry keep things grounded, but it all dissolves into schmaltz in the final reel. Edginess and nakedness don't make a film great on their own, but Hathaway and Gyllenhall make for an appealing (and attractive) couple.

*Tron*: The sequel to a film I was never really a huge fan of completely fails to make the most of its setting in a straightforward (in)action romp. The best bits are the design and the soundtrack, but the best bits of design were lifted from the original movie. Undemanding and shiny, but if you're looking for anything to excite your brain, look somewhere else.

*127 Hours*: Shot in Danny Boyle's stylish manner, this film can be hard to watch, especially in the climactic scene. Anchored by what's effectively a one-hander (sorry) performance by James Franco, it builds a sense of claustrophobia that's only betrayed by one poorly chosen scene of hallucination among many. The power of the big scene is amplified by the knowledge that this actually happened, but any discomfort is repaid tenfold by the massively uplifting ending.

#### 1.1.2 January Book Reviews (2011-01-26 12:10)

January turned out to be at least as good a month for books as it did for movies. Courtesy of some recommendations from people with good taste, I tried a few pieces that I might not have otherwise. On the whole, it went quite well.

The Devil in the White City, Erik Larson: The fascinating parallel tales of the architect behind the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and the serial killer who haunted the city during that event. Larson dives right into the minds and motivations of his protagonists, getting a lot closer than a pure history would and providing a story that is all the more engaging for it. Meanwhile, around the main narratives of the Fair and the killer swirl a wealth of smaller stories and fascinating facts, at a time and place where everyone in the world seemed to come together.

Cutting for Stone, Abraham Verghese: A desperate tragedy affects the lives of those who live and work in a hospital in Ethiopia in the wake of World War II. Painting a fascinating portrait of Ethiopia as it was after the war, Verghese's story veers into melodrama and magical realism at times but is held together by the strong emotional ties between the main characters. Its theme of the impossibility of fixing the wounds of the past doesn't always satisfy, but the journey is worth taking.

The Snowman, Jo Nesbo: Larsson by the numbers as Nesbo tells the story of a serial killer and the inevitably troubled detective who sets out to catch him. It's not exactly brain-stretching, but the action and incident are piled on fast enough that you don't really notice. Its big failing in its effort to match the "Millennium" books is that there's none of the deeper need to address the real world that Larsson had - just a need to crank out another detective story in order to meet demand.

The Qi Book of the Dead, John Lloyd and John Mitchinson: A collection of brief biographies of fascinating people, all of whom share only one trait: they're no longer among the living. Arranged into various categories, some of which verge on the spurious (People Who Owned Monkeys being the prime example), each one is nicely observed and provides a bite-size slice of history. Keeping things light through their sense of humour, the book's authors delight in the stranger side of life, rather than the better known facts, which means there'll be something new here for almost everyone.

Black Hills, Dan Simmons: Ostensibly the story of a Native American who is haunted by Custer's ghost, Dan Simmons' lightly fantastic historical novel covers the sweep of American history from the Battle of the Little Bighorn to the Great Depression and the carving of Mount Rushmore. These six decades of history are seen through the eyes of a protagonist who endures the tragedy of change and loss without ever becoming pitiful, and the experience is broadened by Simmons' well-researched and colourful details. The ending may not please everyone, but its note of hope is well-earned, and Simmons is certainly not predictable.

## **1.2 February**

### **1.2.1 Game Reviews (2011-02-07 14:54)**

I don't spend a lot of time playing games these days, so this isn't likely to become a regular thing, but here are a few I've spent time with lately.

Lord of the Rings Online, PC: LoTRO has long been one of the best MMOs at representing a licensed setting, in this case recreating the world of Tolkien's Middle Earth, but it wasn't always as well populated as it could be, and it wasn't always too friendly to the soloing player. Well, the decision to go free to play has solved the first problem, and a couple of years of development has eased the latter. It's now extremely welcoming to the new player who wants to explore a story surrounding that of the archetypal fantasy novel, with tons of free content and more doled out as rewards for exploration.

The Mystery of the Crystal Portal, iPhone: A relatively simple "find the hidden object" game that I picked up for free as part of Apple's surprisingly generous "12 Days of Christmas" promotion. It's very well presented, with beautiful artwork, but the writing leaves a lot to be desired, and the gameplay can boil down to tapping everything on screen to see what can be manipulated. It's also very short - I finished it in a couple of hours - and as it is, acts best as a promotional tool for its sequel.

Doodle God, iPhone: Surprisingly for an iPhone game, the problem with Doodle God is bloat. Starting with some basic elements, you're supposed to combine them to create the world amid often humorous quotes, but the further you go, the more contrived the combinations get, and you end up resorting to random combinations or waiting for the clue timer to count down. To be fair to the developer though, they've recognised this flaw and released a few free minigame updates since then, which provide more fun in a smaller package.

Monkey Island Special Edition 1 & 2, iPhone: One of my favourite games from years ago and its predecessor, given some polish as they're pushed into a new platform with their surreal sense of humour and the story of wannabe pirate Guybrush Threepwood intact. The first game struggles due to an interface that's not entirely suited to a touchscreen, something that the second improves on to a large degree, but both benefit from a hint system that eases the player's interaction with the at-times tortured logic of the games' object matching system. Both are well worth buying, either for nostalgia or for a new experience, and there's the added bonus of being able to flip from the new artwork to the old graphics and back again, just to see how far things have come.

Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars, iPhone: Another classic point-and-click game that's received a revamp for the touchscreen era, this is a polished and enjoyable port. Cinematic in the best way, it benefits from appealing, if shallow and horribly stereotyped, characters and dialogue and a story designed to drag the player in and push them forward. The puzzles are nowhere near as obscure as those of the Monkey Island series, but even where they become troublesome, the comprehensive hint system is generally able to help out.

### **1.2.2 February Movie Reviews (2011-02-18 10:18)**

An early selection this month - the Jameson Dublin International Film Festival has started, and I'm planning to catch some of the more interesting pieces on offer. In the meantime, here's what I've seen over the last few weeks.

The King's Speech: Concerns about propping up the monarchy aside, this is a well-told story of an unlikely friendship between King George VI of England and the Australian speech therapist who helped him overcome his stammer. Although Colin Firth steals the show as the reluctant monarch, there are few poor performances: Helena Bonham-Carter is entirely engaging as his wife, Guy Pearce surprisingly convincing as his weak older brother, and Geoffrey Rush an appealing counterpoint to all the upper-crust goings on. With bit parts for the great and good of the English acting scene, it can turn into a game of "spot the actor", but it all comes back to Firth's portrayal of a man struggling with his situation as much as his words.

Black Swan: Darren Aronofsky delivers a creepy and claustrophobic psychological thriller set the world of ballet, using tricks from horror movies to ramp up the tension as he goes. The camera is almost always in someone's face, peering over a shoulder or looking out from a corner, and the constant use of mirrors adds to the sense of unease and dislocation. Natalie Portman is excellent as the fragile and fractured girl-woman caught between a monster mother and an imperious director, but hers is far from the only fine performance in a very

satisfying film.

**Tangled:** An old-fashioned Disney musical princess fairytale gets a dash of Pixar polish and a whole heap of contemporary humour, resulting in a fun way to spend an hour or two. The two lead characters err a little on the bland side, but the support provides plenty of laughs, especially in the form of Maximus, the hyperactive horse-cum-bloodhound. There's a little too much slapstick for it to really tug on the heartstrings the way the best Pixar offerings do, but you'd have to have a heart of stone not to be affected at all during the big "lantern" set piece.

**True Grit:** The Coen Brothers infuse a classic tale of Wild West revenge with their trademark human weirdness and create a film that's beautiful but hard to pin down. Neither the best western nor the best Coen Brothers film ever, it does benefit from fine supporting performances by Jeff Bridges as the shambling, mumbling, brutal Rooster Cogburn and a slightly less convincing Matt Damon as the decent but self-absorbed Texas Ranger LaBoeuf. The heart of the film though is Hailee Steinfeld as the precocious, driven yet naive Mattie Ross, and its an inexplicable shame that her name isn't even mentioned on some of the posters for the film.

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(2011-02-18 12:20:28)

King s Speech was marred for me by the fact that it was meticulously and deliberately constructed to be Oscar bait. The Escapist s Movie Bob sums it up better than I can. <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/escape-to-the-movies/2719-The-Kings-Speech>

cerandor (2011-02-20 00:35:14)

I understand the argument, but on it s own merits it s a well written, well acted, beautifully shot film. You ll get few films made for more than a few million dollars that aren t cynical (I d argue *Inception* to be an exception proving that rule), which is not to say that you can t enjoy them. That said, I don t think that *The King s Speech* is going to be a classic in the years ahead - instead it ll be just another well-made picture.

### **1.2.3 The Revolution will be Tweeted (2011-02-22 10:40)**

Last night, just before going to sleep, I did something I rarely do - opened up the Twitter client on my laptop. Most of the tweets that appeared were talking about an earthquake in New Zealand, so I clicked onto the BBC Web site, only to find nothing about it there. As it was pretty late already, I closed down the computer and went to sleep.

This morning, of course, the news was full of [1]reports of the earthquake, which seems to have been far worse than the one that hit the country last year. The odd thing is that the few Twitter feeds I follow aren't news-based. Most of them are comics writers or technology figures. Yet I found out about an event on the other side of the world before it became global news.

Twitter's ability to beat the media to a story is hardly news any more, but this was my first direct experience of it, and with the current turmoil in the Middle East and Africa being linked to the ability of protesters to follow each others' activities online, it seemed worthy of comment. It's fascinating to see the technology transcend its beginnings as a repository for brief messages about not much at all, courtesy of those who have both a need for instant communication without restrictions.

Whether that lack of restrictions will last is another matter. Egypt and Libya both tried to shut down the Internet services that they saw as breeding grounds for revolutionary move-



ments, but the smarter heads in those regimes are already looking to co-opt them instead, whether by monitoring online activity or setting up their own social networks, over which they will have complete control. Many of those most interested in a democratic voice will be able to defend themselves against these moves, but if they're to stop new technologies being added to the arsenal of repression, they're going to have to develop ways to make it easier for those who are less technologically aware to sidestep such controls.

1. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2011/feb/22/newzealand-natural-disasters>

#### **1.2.4 Film Festival Reviews (2011-02-28 12:43)**

Ten films in ten days. Not exactly normal for me, but I did my best to take advantage of the Jameson Dublin International Film Festival this year and was rewarded with some excellent cinematic experiences and no complete duds. So well done to whoever came up with the selection this year.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams: Werner Herzog creates one of the few genuinely 3D films I've ever seen, using handheld cameras in his exploration of the Chauvet Cave and its 30,000-year-old paintings, creating an experience that's both unsettling and entirely immersive. As the walls of the cave loom toward the viewer and recede into darkness, strings, flutes and choral voices add to the sense of entering an alien yet familiar place. Herzog's skewed perspective can seem stagy at times, but his interest in the human experience of those who created the paintings and those who study them is sincere and profound, and the documentary he's created is one of the closest things to a spiritual experience you can have in the cinema.

Outrage: Takeshi Kitano weaves a story of oaths and deceit, greed and power in the hyper-masculine world of Japan's criminal underworld. Kitano himself is excellent as the weary, inscrutable small-time gang boss dragged into the machinations of his superiors, but few of the rest of the characters make a mark, and it's easy to suspect that the shallowness of their characterization is deliberate. Despite being punctuated by moments of extreme violence, the film as a whole moves slowly as the feud between Yakuza families doesn't so much spiral out of control as proceed inevitably to its bleak, depressing conclusion.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec: A slice of French whimsy from Luc Besson, this is a pulpish adventure set mostly in pre-World War I Paris that uses a generous dose of the occult to create a French counterpoint to the Indiana Jones movies. Louise Bourgoin is delightful as the heroine of the tale, who relies on her wits (not always successfully) to get what she wants, but most of the rest of her co-stars are hidden under prosthetics, false teeth and odd facial hair. It's a bit of a mess, never more so than when it tries to blend slapstick and sentiment, and the ending is dragged out purely for the purpose of delivering two jokes, but overall it's simply a fun experience.

Congo - An Irish Tale: A fascinating and saddening documentary about the Irish role in the UN mission to the Congo in 1961, focusing on the five-day Siege of Jadotville in September of that year. Using archive footage to good effect, it crafts a picture of the post-colonial world and the Western attitudes that created the crisis in the Congo, as well as the experiences of the Irish soldiers, many of whom had never left their country before. Clearly targeted at Irish audiences, it deserves to be watched as much for the quality of the film as for the mostly forgotten story of the soldiers involved in that conflict.

The Housemaid: A young woman is engaged as housemaid and nanny to an opulently wealthy Korean family, but she's more fragile than she seems, and peaceful domesticity soon gives way to lust and hatred. This is very much a film about women, with the sole male role being that of

a relatively clueless penis on legs and font of money, whose actions set off the vicious scheming and awful consequences that follow. The real targets of the film are those who assume themselves free of consequence due to their wealth, and their glittering lives are well depicted as tawdry and twisted in an atmosphere of unease and symbolism.

**The Tempest:** Julie Taymor's presentation of one of Shakespeare's most enigmatic plays proves to be a thing of beauty, albeit with a few odd missteps, particularly its strange musical shifts and its distracting costumes (look at them in close up). Helen Mirren is magnetic, commanding attention in the gender-reversed role of Prospera, and most of the other actors are solid, but the younger players fail to convince, and Russell Brand and Alfred Molina feel like they've wandered in from a different play. Despite the art put into its creation, it fails to lend the source text any further depth and feels like a tribute to beauty rather than a deeper meditation on the meaning of its source.

**Unknown:** Liam Neeson continues his late-career shift into action hero mode in this twisty psychological thriller set in Berlin, which draws upon the Bourne Identity before dissolving into implausibility in the final showdown. Few actors do weary and troubled as well as Neeson, who's fine in the role of a man who wakes from a coma to find that his life has been stolen, and the supporting cast is full of familiar faces, offering such delights as Ming the Merciless's bedside manner and Hitler's detective skills. Overall, it's solid entertainment with only a few minor problems: January Jones' stiff performance, a few annoying cliches and the aforementioned implausible ending. (Edit: Not Ming the Merciless in actual fact - I always mix up Max von Sydow with Frank Langella for some reason.)

**The Adjustment Bureau:** Yet another Philip K. Dick story gets a cinematic outing, this time with Matt Damon doing his exceptional everyman thing in the lead role as a man fighting against destiny and Emily Blunt being appealing and quirky as the other half of the love match at the centre of the film. It's easy to root for the likeable Damon and Blunt as they fight to stay together, but the shadowy forces opposing them are neither sinister nor implacable enough, and while that fits with the film's vaguely explained premise, it makes them less of a threat. Having never read the short story the film is based on, I can't be sure, but I suspect this is another case of a fascinating PKD idea having been flattened into an easily digested Hollywood morsel.

**The Eagle:** Heavy on atmosphere but surprisingly light on action, Kevin Macdonald's Roman-era buddy film takes about an hour to get going but manages to satisfy in the end, thanks partly to a haunting score and some beautiful cinematography. There's a lot of superficial authenticity in the design work, but there are also quite a lot of implausibilities involved in the tale of a Roman soldier's effort to recover a lost legionary standard beyond Hadrian's Wall with the help of his British slave. The details may not bear thinking too much about, but the lead performances are solid enough, and it's even oddly appropriate for the Romans to speak with American accents.

**Anton Chekov's The Duel:** The languid yet troubled lives of 19th century Russians in a sea-side resort in the Caucasus are depicted with some skill in this film, in which unexpected news unsettles the lives of a malcontented young man and the mistress whom he is trying to discard. The mostly British and Irish cast are excellent, and they have to be, as the drama revolves around troubled relationships and dissatisfaction, with tensions rising until the climactic duel of the title. An actors' film, it's satisfyingly complete and detailed.

### 1.2.5 Fianna Fallen (2011-02-28 14:58)

With only a few results yet to come in, the outcome of the 2011 Irish General Election is [1]pretty clear - a massive rout for coalition partners Fianna Fail and the Green Party and major improvements for everyone else, with old coalition partners Fine Gael and Labour now deciding whether and how they'll go about forming the next government. All of this was predicted some time ago, but it's still impressive to see it all come to pass. However, how much of a historic moment this truly is will depend on what the next five years bring.

Fianna Fail have suffered the worst result in their history, exacerbated by the fact that they received few transfers from those who gave other parties their first preference. As a result, not only do they face a period on the opposition benches, but they won't even be able to dominate those benches - they have Sinn Fein nipping at their heels and a large number of independent TDs who'll want to make themselves heard. Quite what they're going to do about it isn't clear as yet. The most likely and depressing option is for them to sit back and stoke up discontent with the hard decisions the new government will have to make and wait for the public to forget just how many of those hard decisions came about due to Fianna Fail's decisions while in office.

However, if this election does mark a generational shift, such a strategy could prove suicidal. Fianna Fail's [2]sole purpose has long revolved around gaining and holding power, and in the lack of a prospect of power, there's a chance they could dwindle. In addition, Sinn Fein threaten to eat away at their support outside Dublin as the "Republican" party. A night of the long knives can't be ruled out, though with their leader Micheal Martin the only FF candidate to be elected on the first count (albeit just scraping over the quota), quite where any impetus for change would come from remains a mystery. It's going to be a hard, confusing few years for the Soldiers of Destiny.

Fianna Fail's erstwhile coalition partners, the Greens, are both worse and better off. Worse in that they've lost all of their TDs and will have to rebuild from scratch, and better in that they don't face the genuine loathing felt for Fianna Fail and possess principles and an ideology around which they could rebuild. With no TDs, they could yet disappear, but the election of so many independents shows that there's room for other voices in the Dail, and a period in the wilderness and the appropriate indications of contrition and lessons learned could end with them making a small comeback when the elections roll around again.

Fine Gael took advantage of the public mood and ran an intelligent, focused campaign, putting clear water between themselves and Fianna Fail in terms of perception, if not always in policy. Their reward is their best showing in any election and the dominant hand in the next government. Of course, their reward is also the blame or glory for how things turn out over the next five years, during which the public are likely to face further privations. If Fine Gael play the old game of fudging, avoiding the tough decisions and blaming everyone else for their problems, they'll open the door for either Fianna Fail to make a comeback or the public to finally realise the problems of the system as it has been for decades and look for a new (not necessarily better) option.

Labour must have the most mixed feelings over the result. Despite having enjoyed their best result ever, there was a time when the polls suggested that much better was possible, and that might have come to pass but for a poorly run campaign, which ended with begging appeals to the public not to give Fine Gael a clear majority in the Dail. Now they face the perennially poisoned chalice of watering down their principles in order to become a junior partner in a government facing difficult times and choices that are likely to anger the electorate.

Were Ireland in a less dire situation, there would be a strong argument in favour of Labour remaining out of coalition with Fine Gael and [3]taking command of the opposition in the Dail. A clear ideological division between the ruling and opposition party is one potential benefit of such a move, and the further marginalisation of Fianna Fail is another. However, few people will have voted for Labour with the thought that they'd be in opposition, and a decision to stay out of government, thus condemning Ireland to a weak Fine Gael-Independents coalition during the continuing economic crisis, would be seen as little short of cowardice. Insofar as the decision is theirs, Labour will have to roll up their sleeves/hold their noses (delete as appropriate), try their damndest to make things work and do a much better job than they have before with communicating with those who aren't their natural supporters.

Kicking the bums out can only be step one of any kind of new politics in Ireland. There are still too many problems. The ridiculous scarcity of women TDs, making up less than a fifth of the total, is one indication of how much work remains. The success of Sinn Fein, who played the rabble-rousing card at every turn, and the arrival of the odious Gerry Adams, who's all for forgetting the past except when mentioning hunger striker Bobby Sands while celebrating his victory, aren't promising either. Worst of all is the fear that this may just be a blip, the result of circumstance, and that when the wheel turns round to the next election, we'll find ourselves once again looking at the Civil War choice between Fine Gael and Fianna Fail.

The influx of younger TDs, independents and our first openly gay TD are all heartening signs, as is the ending of several calcified political dynasties, but they won't lead to anything if most of the populace are satisfied with the notion of voting every 4-5 years as the sum total of their contribution. Thanks to technology and circumstance, there's probably more interest in, and knowledge about, politics in Ireland than ever before, and the massive shift in the February election does show that change is possible. Depending on how things come together over the next five years, it's possible that there could be people and movements as yet unnoticed that have the loudest voices next time around.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2011/0228/1224291011457.html>

2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/28/irish-elections-vote-cast-anger>

3. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2011/0228/breaking33.html>

## **1.3 March**

### **1.3.1 February Book Reviews (2011-03-01 09:19)**

Plenty of books read in February, mostly because there were no weighty tomes among them. Which is not to say that there wasn't some class to be found.

The Way of Shadows, Brent Weeks: In this tale of an apprentice assassin, Weeks manages the useful trick of making the most archetypal fantasy cliché - the young boy/ordinary person who becomes a great hero - both readable and engaging. The setting is colourful but sketchy, which is perhaps forgivable in the first book in a series, but the characters offer plenty of motivation and secrets to uncover. Starting in a very dark and gritty place, it accelerates into higher and more fantastic events as it rushes towards a conclusion, though keeping track of everything as incident is piled on incident becomes ever harder.

Crash, J.G. Ballard: Populated with grotesque characters, Ballard's book seems deliberately unpleasant to read, for all that his command of the language is excellent. The author takes one idea - the sexual fetishisation of the car and car accidents - and beats you over the head with it, the relentless use of explicit sexual language swiftly losing all eroticism. I can admire

the effort to depict the malaise of the modern world in an extreme way and the skill with which it's done, but this isn't a book I'll be looking to return to.

*The Book of Lies*, Brad Meltzer: A thriller that surfs slightly above the Dan Brown level with its allusions to conspiracy theories, comic books, Nazis and religion, Meltzer's book never quite decides what it wants to be. The characters veer between implausible omniscience and annoying foolhardiness, and how much you manage to engage with them will depend on your tolerance for father-son psychodramas. There's an interesting story here, and it moves along at a fair clip, but overall it's neither wild nor dark enough to leave a lasting impression.

*Gold Coast*, Elmore Leonard: My first venture into the books of Leonard arrives with this slice of sun-drenched noir, featuring a mob widow trying to escape from her late husband's legal chastity belt. The tight cast of characters are impressively human, with all the doubts and desires attendant thereto, and no one's motives are entirely clear, right up until the end. A little bleak but a lot engrossing, it's a speedy and enjoyable read.

*Shadow's Edge*, Brent Weeks: The second book in the trilogy that began with *The Way of Shadows* shows both the good points of that book and the bad points of being stuck midway through the story that Weeks is telling. The action keeps rolling along, but there's not much sense of an ultimate direction, and the cast expands to an unwieldy size, with several characters left unmentioned for long stretches and a few remaining in limbo at the end of the book. It's still very readable, though there's an increasing sense that the author is losing control of his creation, with some of the characters making fairly inexplicable choices in order to push the story on.

*The Death of Achilles*, Boris Akunin: An arch tone and a youthful and idiosyncratic protagonist distinguish this Russian detective tale, set in the latter days of the 19th century. Following a case of suspected murder, the detective, Erast Fandorin, finds himself plunged into the machinations of murderous and revolutionary forces in a well-drawn Moscow that contains the highest and lowest of societies. Towards the end, the book takes a twist that turns it into something a little more than a straightforward detective story, but there's wit aplenty in the telling of this tale.

*Beyond the Shadows*, Brent Weeks: The Night-Angel trilogy comes to an end in a suitably epic fashion, but the fact that I was glad to get to the end of it demonstrates just how hard it is to put together a sprawling, multicharacter story. While still very readable, it suffers from inconsistency in its characterisation and a need to up the stakes constantly without ever providing a clear focus for the conflict it portrays. This is a book desperately in need of editing, as too many factors go unexplained, too many easily spotted mistakes are made and there are too many contrived decisions, *deus ex machinas* and last-minute saviours for any kind of suspension of disbelief to be upheld.

### **1.3.2 The Best Jobs for the Best Boys? (2011-03-11 11:09)**

The new Irish government hasn't hung around in terms of generating its first media kerfuffle, as it seems to have spurned several leading women in handing out cabinet posts. There have already been efforts to balance this out in handing out the [1]junior ministries, and the [2]*New York Times* even weighed in with an odd attempt at gender balance, but most of the story still revolves around Labour's longstanding finance spokesperson, Joan Burton, and the fact that she [3]wasn't appointed to the newly created position of minister for public expenditure and reform. There's a certain amount of justice in the complaints - while Burton didn't have the most impressive election campaign, she certainly has the experience and knowledge required, and as someone who argued against the now widely reviled bank guarantee, she would bring

credibility to the post.

With the decisions on the makeup of the cabinet made behind closed doors by the usual suspects, it's impossible to know the exact reasoning behind the choices made. The post Burton received, Social Protection, is going to be an important one in the years to come, but it's neither as high profile nor as well suited to her as the one she was expected to get. Was she just down in the queue when the limited number of cabinet positions available to the Labour party were handed out, did those making the decision worry about her poor performances on television, or did, [4]as plenty of people seem certain, the fact that she was a woman stand against her?

The last suggestion is the most worrying, and while it can't be proven, there comes a point when the weight of circumstantial evidence is hard to ignore. For all the talk of new beginnings, the new cabinet seems well packed with old stagers who have "waited their turn," with a few younger TDs and women mixed in to offset any criticism. This is the big danger that the electorate will face over the next few years - that having seen off Fianna Fail, we find ourselves thinking that a Fine Gael-Labour rule that amounts to not much more than a name change is the only viable alternative. A lot could happen over the next five years that this government is likely to last (despite further looming economic troubles and potential splits within the coalition itself, they have a massive majority to work with), but if they do nothing with the mandate they've been given to distance themselves from the failed cronyism and self-serving policies of the past, they'll do us all a disservice.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2011/0311/1224291886074.html>
2. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0311/1224291885679.html>
3. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0311/1224291885667.html>
4. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2011/0311/1224291883279.html>

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mopti (2011-03-12 11:05:20) Labour pains

I find it peculiar that the focus on the numbers (as distinct from the discussion on the stereotyping of the "Ministers for childer and pin money" assignments) has also been on the Labour Party when Fine Gael has performed proportionally worse is appointing women to ministerial positions at either rank.

### **1.3.3 Strange Nations (2011-03-23 10:52)**

2011 brought an odd kind of Six Nations tournament. England won fairly comfortably, but suffered a severe thumping in the last game, reminding them that a Grand Slam typically requires a little more (and leading to some [1]embarrassment). France sparked without ever catching fire and went down to a notable defeat at the hands of a very fired-up Italy, Wales again failed to make the most of the talent at their disposal, Scotland remain mired in the depths of underperformance, and Italy showed that they can give anyone problems but that they're at least a few years away from the consistency and quality needed to get more than one or two wins a year.

As for Ireland? Well, the aforementioned thumping of England probably raised the nation's Happiness Index by a few points, but it only highlighted the fact that this was a tournament that was there to be won with a little more discipline and a lot more drive. There were good points: the return of Paul O'Connell to something near his top form has provided the forward line with a leader to match Brian O'Driscoll, who continues to play at a dizzyingly high standard and probably will do so until he spontaneously combusts; Mike Ross and Sean O'Brien have provided a further infusion of fresh blood into a team that has been well balanced between experience and youth for a few years now; and the scrum and lineout both operated

well. However, the ongoing confusion over the best scrum-half and fly-half combination hasn't been solved at all, and for all that they scored plenty of tries and conceded very few, the team just gave too much away to their opponents.

In a way, it's not a bad outcome - a fillip of confidence in what they can achieve on top of an awareness of the amount of work to be done before the World Cup in the autumn. The provincial sides will go back to working towards European and Magners League silverware, and the fans will hope that no one important breaks any bones over the summer months. The potential for the first decent World Cup performance in a while is certainly there, but it's going to require a consistently high level of performance that hasn't been achieved yet, and I'm not sure where that's going to come from.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2011/0322/breaking30.html>

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laine316 (2011-03-23 11:01:39)

Lineout did not operate that well I thought. But then, Rory Best can't throw, so in that context it was super!

cerandor (2011-03-23 11:15:21)

Yeah, as an Ulsterman, I wasn't overly happy with Rory, but it certainly seemed solid enough compared to some of the past disasters. Maybe England just made us look good at the weekend.

#### **1.3.4 Travels With My iPhone (2011-03-25 20:10)**

I'm off on the road again tomorrow, this time heading to Chicago for a week. Just as I did on my trip to Malta a few months back, I'm travelling technology-light. No laptop, just an iPhone and a compact camera. Honestly, I could probably do without the camera, as the iPhone 4's photos are pretty good in most circumstances, but it's no great hardship to bring along something offering a little more of a professional sheen. The big change is that I don't bring my laptop with me on holiday any more - and it's a move I wish I'd made a long time ago.

It's a little frightening, in an exhilarating way, just how capable the graven slab of metal and glass I carry in my pocket is. (Androids and other smartphones are presumably just as capable, but I'm not talking about them.) I don't really want to be as connected on my holidays as I am when at home, but if I did want to be, it wouldn't be a problem. As it is, I'll settle for occasional wifi views of the wider world while the slab provides me with books, video, music, games, and whatever else I can fit onto it. I don't miss the laptop at all. I even appreciate the absence of several pounds of technology in my shoulder bag along with assorted leads and accessories. (And the worry of avoiding knocks and bumps.)

Perhaps the only thing that I might miss about the absence of the laptop is the keyboard and the chance to get some serious writing in. But honestly, when I'm in a new place with new things to see, I'd hope to be more inspired with new ideas than with the need to crank out a few thousand words in a chunk. For taking notes, the iPhone does just fine, whether they're typed or spoken (it does voice memos too), and a pen and a notepad offer a relaxed way to scribble down thoughts in an old-school fashion.

The laptop will come into its own when I get home of course, sucking up all the photos, notes and records and helping me to organise and present them back to the world. But in the meantime its absence leaves a nice empty space in my luggage that might just be filled with something else on the way back. We'll see.

## 1.4 April

### 1.4.1 March Film Reviews (2011-04-05 14:57)

March would have been a quiet month for films if it weren't for two long plane trips - I managed to watch five films over the two trips, some of which I'd missed without meaning to in the cinema. So be aware that some of these reviews were composed under the influence of jetlag.

Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring: Courtesy of the Screen's recent classics program, I had a chance to be reminded of just how powerful a cinematic experience this was when it came out in 2001; meticulous attention to detail, a painterly eye for composition, a sweeping score and some very solid performances combining to more than do justice to the source material. The three films in the series form a powerful argument that genre blockbusters can have artistic merit, and this is the best of them, with few missteps to mar the experience. The pace can seem to plod at times, but there are few scenes that don't advance the plot or reveal character, and as an adaptation of a difficult novel to the screen, it's hard to top.

Paul: A laid-back, meandering film that trades heavily on the chemistry between stars Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, who also cowrote it, this isn't a patch on Shaun of the Dead or even Hot Fuzz, but it's amiable enough and manages to raise a few smiles and even one or two laughs. Lacking the sharp direction of Edgar Wright, it's a little too clunkingly obvious in its allegiances as it takes the two heroes on a road trip through middle America with a foul-mouthed alien. The repeated riffs on popular films and science fiction tropes might gladden more geekish fans, but for all its obvious warmth there are too many missed opportunities here.

Rango: Johnny Depp and Gore Verbinski reteam for an Western-infused animated movie that's far from being a kid's film, stuffed as it is with surreal imagery, dark themes and more fourth-wall-breaking and metatextual playfulness than you could shake Halliwell's film guide at. There is a basic story, a cross between The Playboy of the Western World and Eastwood's Man With No Name films, to provide something for younger viewers to latch onto, but the vast majority of the jokes and references will go flying over their heads. Although Depp isn't doing anything new in his role as a thespian chameleon, there's plenty of fun and laughs to be had and enough intellectual meat to chew on in any after-the-film pub discussion.

Morning Glory: Rachel McAdams and Harrison Ford enliven this fun, if formulaic comedy about the manager of a failing breakfast TV show. McAdams is endlessly endearing in the lead role as a klutzy but ambitious producer, and Ford enjoys himself in the viciously curmudgeonly role of an award-winning journalist forced to slum it in morning television. McAdams' romantic subplot fails to convince, but otherwise the support is good, and the relationship between McAdams and Ford is the star of the show anyway.

Inside Job: A scathing look at the political, financial and academic structures that led to the financial crisis of 2008. Matt Damon narrates as the causes of the catastrophe are picked apart, and the identities of the people who refused to be interviewed are in many cases as telling as the insights of those who agreed to talk. It's obviously not balanced at all, but when the final conclusion comes down that no one has been held accountable and that nothing significant has changed, it's hard to argue with.

You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: The foibles and pitfalls of love and relationships are picked at in this Woody Allen film, set in his new favourite locale of London. The cast is excellent, but the characters they play are so broad and self-absorbed that it's difficult to em-



pathise with them or worry too much about how their lives turn out. There are a few moments of insight, but the overall feeling of being manipulated isn't helped by the smarmy, know-it-all narrator.

Limitless: Bradley Cooper is well cast as a smug know-it-all, less so as the feckless loser who gains access to a mind-expanding drug, facilitating that transformation. For a film that's essentially about addiction, it rarely gets as dark as it needs to, and the ending is a massive cop-out considering what's come before. Writing a super-intelligent character is ridiculously hard, but this film does a good job of it most of the time, even if it fails to stretch itself in areas other than its funky, drug-induced special effects.

#### **1.4.2 March Book Reviews (2011-04-07 09:18)**

Going on holiday isn't so good for reading time if you spend most of that holiday seeing the sites (and the bars) rather than relaxing on a deckchair. Still, a few compulsive page-turners helped to keep the numbers up. (For the record, the books for March are the books I finished in that month.)

The Diamond Age, Neal Stephenson: A tale of a fractured future, with lives interweaving among societies that have reverted to older models, told with Stephenson's usual eye for dry humour, human frailty and technological possibilities. The author's interest is in the potentially massive impact of new technologies on how people live their lives, and as a result the story can veer away from its most interesting protagonist, a young girl being brought up by a very unusual tutor, in favour of others whose points of view provide a better perspective on those technologies. It's still fascinating and well told in parts, but the ending in particular feels quite abrupt, zeroing in on a personal conclusion while leaving everything else hanging.

Napoleon's Pyramids, William Dietrich: A swashbuckling tale of ancient conspiracy amid the desert sands of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, Dietrich's novel is full of mystery, marksmanship, beautiful women and scheming villains. All as shallow as a bowl of sand, of course, but still fun and written with just enough historical detail to keep the reader interested without boring them. The fact that it's merely part of a series might frustrate, with the ending clearly pointing towards future adventures, but taken on its own merits it's engaging and immersive while it lasts.

Geomancer, Ian Irvine: Coming in at the start of the second sequence of books set in Irvine's Three Worlds may not have helped here: although there's a lot of imagination on show, the setting is relentlessly grim and brief mentions of events in the distant past/previous books don't do much to add to the flavour. It also doesn't help that the main protagonist is one to whom things tend to happen, rather than an actor in her own right, while the rest of the cast are far from sympathetic or deeply drawn. The overall impression is of a cramped opening to a series that doesn't stand too well on its own, even to the extent of failing to give much of an idea where the story goes from here.

Carthage Must Be Destroyed, Richard Miles: Rome's shadowy classical antagonist gets its moment in the spotlight in this very fine addition to the popular-history shelves, telling the story of Carthage from its beginnings with the Phoenician traders of the Levant to its final defeat and destruction. Where the book shines is in placing Carthage as an heir to an older world of Phoenician traders and then charting its seemingly inevitable clash with a new world in the form of Rome, piecing together its history and presenting it as a readable, if occasionally dry, tale. There are understandable lapses in detail (many, many undistinguished Carthaginian leaders called Hannibal, for example) due to the fragmentary source material, but as an exploration of why Carthage succeeded and why it was destroyed, this is a fine piece

of work.

True Grit, Charles Portis: Now the subject of two excellent movies, Portis's novel is easily the equal of the films it inspired, depicting the dying days of the Wild West with all the grit and dirt they likely entailed. The narrative voice of Mattie Ross is that of a crotchety older lady retelling her harsh adventure as a child, and it rarely fails to raise a smile through her matter-of-fact approach to the escapade her determination to avenge her father has brought her into. Portis depicts both the setting and the supporting characters with direct but telling detail, which also helps to make the moments of action all the more compelling.

Divine Justice, David Baldacci: A tale of hunter and hunted, crossed with the "stranger arrives in a town with a dark secret" trope, this novel kicks off with a blast of action and continues to move swiftly, with short and snappy chapters. Given their histories, the lead characters are a little too upstanding and decent, but they're nicely arrayed against a set of utter bastards, making it all the easier to root for them. Dodgy editing has left a few stumbling blocks in an otherwise smooth read, and there are issues of timing that don't seem credible, but it's a rollicking good adventure overall.

A Game of Thrones, George R.R. Martin: The upcoming TV series and the supposedly forthcoming fifth book in the series provided me with ample reason to revisit this book and remind myself just how powerful a grip it exerted on me first time out. Out of two initial plot lines a massive number of strands quickly branch out, with well-drawn characters struggling with each other and their own flaws as they head for either doom or glory (with a lot more of the former than the latter). As gripping a read as it is on its own, it's even better as a series opener, depicting a world rich in history and establishing the stakes in a shocking twist towards the end.

### **1.4.3 March Miscellania Reviews (2011-04-08 12:10)**

And by miscellania I mean a few iPhone games, one PC offering and a play. Maybe not as varied as I'd like, but I wanted to fit them in somewhere, and here is the best of places (available to me right now).

Games...

Game Dev Story, iPhone: A horribly addictive little game, in which you're the manager of a Game Design company, trying to craft the perfect game and conquer the industry. The help system is pretty sparse, but it's not a chore to figure things out, and a lot of the joy comes from experimenting with genre and style combinations amid a cutesy, 8-bit Nintendo-style world. Towards the end, it can become repetitive and you might find yourself wishing for more depth, but there's plenty of fun for both geeks and non-geeks at a low, low price.

Infinity Blade, iPhone: A real showcase for the graphical power of the iPhone, Epic's Unreal Engine title is a fairly simple combat game, with swipes and taps replacing button mashing as the player fights his way through a horde of spiky-armoured foes. Longevity amid this repetitiveness is provided by the need to gain experience with an array of weapons and armour, and the developers have bolstered the initial offering with new foes and equipment in a major update. However, for all the clarity of the iPhone4's retina display, the screen remains just a little too small for this kind of thing, and if you don't have a lot of finger dexterity, this probably isn't the offering for you.

Helsing's Fire, iPhone: A clever little pick-up-and-play puzzle game that involves destroying colour-coded monsters with the use of torches and explosions, this starts off speedy and

easy and gradually ramps up to tricky yet still speedy. New gameplay elements are integrated into the action in a well-paced, clear manner, and the humour of the interaction between the lead character and his assistant(s) and assailants will raise a few smiles. The main campaign, split into three sections, isn't all that tough, but there are a few extra modes and challenges to extend the game's life if you're hooked at that stage.

Dragon Age 2, PC: The first Dragon Age is one of my favourite games of the last few years, and Bioware have now delivered a streamlined sequel that's still packed with interesting characters and a massive, intricate plot. As before, the characters and their interactions are at the heart of the game's appeal, and with a story set in a single city over the course of ten years, there's plenty of time to flesh them out and present the lead character with enough dilemmas to colour their experience in many different ways. The combat is faster and a little less tactical than that of its predecessor, but there's still more than enough intricacy to satisfy those who want to approach it in that way.

Scrabble, iPhone: The classic board game gets an iPhone edition that offers a decent basic experience but not much beyond that. The single player game suffers from the fact that there's a big leap between the normal (pretty beatable) and hard (massively loquacious) difficulties, the lack of alternative game modes, and the lack of an online leaderboard or persistent scoreboards, meaning that all it's really good for is practice before taking on human opponents. It also suffers from a lack of online play, as hot seat play is annoying and having two iPhones connected by wifi is a relatively rare occurrence.

...and a play

The Cripple of Inishmaan, Martin McDonagh: As much as anything else, this play is an assault on the stereotypes of Irishness, laying bare the begrudgery, self-regard, brutality and masochistic streak in the national psyche. Moments of genuine tenderness do occasionally break through, but the playwright keeps them tightly under control as he refuses to provide the audience with what they expect or require. The Druid Theatre Company production is a dark piece about self-delusion and the scrabble to believe that life is worth living, but it's also very funny as it explains that the best of us are terribly flawed and the worst of us are capable of acts of heroism.

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giguclam (2011-04-09 07:58:41)

Iâ ve recently started a blog, the information you provide on this site has helped me tremendously. Thank you for all of your time & work.

#### **1.4.4 Mastering One's Nerves (2011-04-11 09:38)**

Two people have real reason to celebrate after the end of yesterday's U.S. Masters: the winner, Charl Schwartzel, and whoever it was at Setanta who secured the Irish rights to the world's most prestigious golf tournament. In a year when the BBC scaled back its coverage and Sky finally got its foot in the door, Setanta was the go-to location for Irish viewers, who got to watch one of the most dramatic final days ever.

Schwartzel himself secured the title with a string of four birdies in his last four holes, but before that the day had already etched itself in golfing history, with a broad array of established and up-and-coming players in with a shout of the title and making some ludicrous shots for birdies and eagles. Tiger Woods almost made himself the story of the day, burning up the opening nine and getting into a share of the lead at one point before running out of

steam on the way home.

For all that, the story of the day had to be Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy. Leader for the first three days and the first half of the fourth, it all [1]fell apart from the tenth tee onwards. One wayward tee shot led to a triple bogey, and from there he slipped all the way to an 80 and a share of 15th place. It was hard to watch, but the signs had been there on the opening nine holes, as he'd looked nervous and struggled to hold onto his lead, missing several short putts.

McIlroy proved that he's not the automaton that Woods seemed when he first appeared, but he's still only 21. He'll be back and learn from the experience. Given the talent he showed in maintaining his lead over the first three days, it's hard to imagine that he won't master this major or some other sooner rather than later.

1. <http://thescore.thejournal.ie/day-of-promise-ends-in-disappointment-for-mcilroy-118930-Apr2011/>

## 1.5 May

### 1.5.1 April Film Reviews (2011-05-03 14:42)

This April felt like something of a truncated month for films. The first two here were caught on a flight back from the U.S., and the last on the list sneaked in as a preview screening just before the month closed. Still, two enjoyable films, two interesting ones and only one disaster probably account for a good month.

**The American:** The old cliché of a hitman who's grown disenchanted with his profession is given a dash of glamour by the casting of George Clooney in the central role and an Italian locale for a backdrop, but the resulting movie is so sombre it verges on the glum. Hardly anyone ever breaks a smile, and the movie itself is neither gritty nor particularly believable, with Clooney meandering through his exile, encountering a few stock characters along the way. There's a flash of cleverness at the end, but overall it's more atmospheric than gripping, with only Thekla Reuten's icy hitwoman offering a glimmer of something different.

**Never Let Me Go:** A very British dystopia is depicted in a tale that is, in many ways, an anti-The Island. Quiet, gloomy and offering no hope to its doomed protagonists, it's anchored by Carey Mulligan's expressive, emotionally tormented performance as the most human of a group of young people brought up to be organ donors. Rarely touching on its setting, it is instead a character piece, and although the other performances will be a matter of taste, it's certainly worth the little effort it requires to engage with their predicament.

**Source Code:** Doug Jones' sophomore film as a director is a fascinating two-layer tale of alternate realities, both a tricky thriller about identifying a train bomber and a more emotional story about the ultimate fate of the reality-switching protagonist. The first twenty minutes suggest that this is going to be an intricately constructed puzzle, but that isn't quite borne out, and it's the latter strand that takes over, especially towards the end. If this film had possessed the emotional strength of Jones' first film, Moon, this would have been a very good thing, but although it isn't quite as satisfying as the earlier film, it is still well worth seeing, solidly anchored as it is by Jake Gyllenhaal's stricken hero and Vera Farmiga's sympathetic operative.

**Your Highness:** Some of the funniest films ever made have shown that the best route to a successful spoof is to turn the knobs up to 11 and play it deadpan, but Your Highness takes a different route, dropping modern-day cynicism into the fantasy realm, with mixed results. A

talented cast struggles with flat dialogue and some half-hearted accents, raising a few laughs here and there, but merely inserting the word "fuck" into every other sentence isn't enough to stop most of the jokes from falling flat or whizzing off into the ether. Shot in Northern Ireland, it looks very good, but much like Danny McBride's central character, it feels like it's trying too hard to be cool.

Thor: The first of Marvel's big superhero movies of 2011 provides the most fun outing for one the comic company's characters since the first "Iron Man" movie, offering a big action spectacle that ably balances peril, humour and human moments. Kenneth Branagh proves a good choice as director, lending the conflict at the heart of the movie some weight with a good dose of family secrets and drama, and he's ably assisted by some great design work, which includes making one of Marvel's dafter creations into a (briefly) credible threat. The 3D, added in post-production, does little other than make some scenes murkier than they ought to be, and if you can suspend your disbelief long enough to support the concept of extradimensional alien science gods, this is an epic, exciting kickoff to the popcorn-chomping summer movie season.

### **1.5.2 April Book Reviews (2011-05-06 09:05)**

From fiction to nonfiction: April kicked off with three books I grabbed to amuse myself while travelling in the U.S., then saw me dive into a pile of historical works left behind by my most recent flatmate. Some weighty stuff in there, enlivened in particular by Sandman Slim, but it's all been interesting.

Oryx and Crake, Margaret Atwood: Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction are mixed together in this fascinating book, which follows the parallel tracks of the memory and experiences of the lonely survivor of a pestilential end of the world. Atwood prefers not to think of her work as science fiction, but this very much belongs to that sector of the genre that holds fiction up as a mirror to current-day concerns, and her examination of genetic technology, social mores and the current path they're taking us on is as thoughtful and clear as any. Bleak it may be, but although it ends on a cliffhanger, there's more than enough substance in its story, setting and central character to satisfy anyone.

Sandman Slim, Richard Kadrey: Rather than review this book, I really ought to post a snippet of it, as the chief joy of this horror-pulp-noir mashup lies in the gleeful use of colourful metaphors and adjectives: "stomping down the stairs like god's littlest tyrannosaur" being the one that's stuck foremost in my mind. The protagonist, James Stark, is the archetypal noir bastard-with-a-heart-of-gold, though the latter element is well concealed during a vengeance-laden plot appropriate for a character who's just spent more than a decade in hell and come back to find his girlfriend dead at the hands of those who sent him there. The plot is satisfyingly twisty too, with seemingly unrelated strands tying nicely together come the bloody end, and I can say that I haven't wanted to jump straight to a sequel this much since I read *The Lies of Locke Lamora*.

Drood, Dan Simmons: Charles Dickens' famously unfinished story is used as a jumping-off point in this dark and twisting tale, told by a very unreliable narrator in the form of Dickens' collaborator and rival, the jealous, self-centered and laudanum-addled Wilkie Collins. The uncertainty of the tale that stems from the increasingly unlikable but very human narrator's tenuous grip on reality does little to harm the dark and sometimes gory horror of the tale, but it isn't all that hard to figure out what's going on if you pay attention. The final revelations might not satisfy everyone, but the sheer depth of the tale and the recreation of Dickens' world offer plenty of meat for readers to get their teeth into.

Kublai Khan: The Mongol King Who Remade China, John Man: Acting as a sequel to the author's previous retelling of the career of Genghis Khan, this colourful history book takes a look at the world of Genghis's most famous grandson. Man tells his story in the voice of someone relating the tales he's heard on his journeys in the far east, mixing personal experience with historical references to build up a picture of the Mongol conquest of China and the new regime they built there. Kublai himself remains a frustratingly ambiguous figure at the centre of the story, and Man could have erred on the side of more detail in his retelling, but for anyone who enjoyed the earlier book or is interested in this turning point in China's history, it's well worth a read.

Conquest, Juliet Barker: The strange and complex existence of the English kingdom of France in the decades after the battle of Agincourt is covered in exhaustive detail by Juliet Barker, who looks beyond the star figures of Henry V, Jehanne d'Arc and the Dauphin. Telling the story mostly from an English point of view, Barker offers up a parade of characters who sometimes prove hard to keep track of, but she does an excellent job of picking apart the motivations and alliances that at first kept this conquered realm together but eventually doomed it. It's not light reading by any measure, but it's a fascinating and thorough look at a patch of English history that tends to get overlooked in the gap between Agincourt and the Wars of the Roses.

### **1.5.3 Garret Fitzgerald (2011-05-30 10:41)**

I'm a little late to this one, due to a crazy couple of weeks, but bad timing has never stopped me before.

Growing up when and where I did - Northern Ireland in the 1980s - it was hardly a surprise that I soured on politics at a young age. The examples I had were hardly outstanding: the tribalism of Northern Ireland politics was not a vehicle to inspire anyone with more than a pair of brain cells to rub together, and our nearest neighbours offered up two contrasting but equally flawed dominant figures: Margaret Thatcher and Charles Haughey. I came out of the 80s with a dismissively cynical attitude to politics, and it took ten years and some good examples from my friends to transform this viewpoint into a more productive engaged scepticism.

The recent death of Garret FitzGerald has robbed Ireland of one of the few political figures of that era who didn't tarnish on closer inspection. Scholarly, sincere and thoughtful on first impression, he remained scholarly, sincere and thoughtful long after he was no longer an elected politician. To be fair, I was only 11 when he was ousted as Taoiseach and party leader of Fine Gael, but even that young it was pretty clear to me that there was a vast gulf between FitzGerald on one side and the slicker Haughey on the other (reminiscent in some ways of Michael Foot versus Thatcher, another early political exercise in contrasts for me).

FitzGerald's death has brought out the eulogists (including myself now, I suppose), which has gone some way to obscuring the fact that, elder statesman though he was, his wasn't an example that the Fine Gael party went out of its way to follow. Few of the modern crop of politicians seem to have taken inspiration from him, which may explain why the political figures of my own generation have yet to inspire me much. But there's always hope. It's far from certain that we're entering a new era in politics, but as singular as FitzGerald was, the decision of one or many to look back on his example and get involved could make a big difference in the years to come.

## 1.6 June

### 1.6.1 New Apple Shiny Software (2011-06-01 11:13)

In an unusual move, Apple has [1]announced in advance what it will be unveiling at next Monday's Worldwide Developers Conference, and it's all software: Mac OSX Lion, iOS 5.0 and a new iCloud online service. Lion has already been extensively previewed, and while there might be new things to be seen, it will probably remain a substantial overhaul of the Mac OS interface, incorporating all sorts of elements culled from iOS. Which leaves the other two thirds of the announcement to carry the bulk of the speculation.

iOS: The existing iOS, 4.x, was built for the iPhone and iPod Touch, and it shows when being used on the larger iPad. It remains smooth and easy to navigate, but there's a lot of unused space there and a sense that all that power and screen real estate is not being used to its utmost - certainly not as well as in some iPad apps. I'm expecting fairly dramatic changes in iOS 5.0, driven partly by the iPad's success and partly by Apple's need to tie its devices closer to each other and to the the Web. There have already been rumours of this, in the form of system-level Twitter integration, but I doubt the overhaul will stop there.

iCloud: Apple has had a poor record in providing online services - there's little that its aging MobileMe offering does that can't be done better, smoother and more cheaply elsewhere. This has to stick in Steve Jobs' craw a bit, and iCloud is probably going to be the latest push to make Apple a much bigger online player. Most of the limited speculation has focused on the idea of an online iTunes music locker, perhaps as a first step to untethering iPhone, iPad and iPod users from their iTunes-laden computers, but iCloud is likely to spread itself a lot wider, perhaps hooking into the most successful online services, such as Facebook and Twitter. If it can provide a clean, easy way of managing an online presence from an i-Device or a Mac, it will be a step above anything Apple has managed so far.

Of course, there could be something extra added on for a further surprise, perhaps in the form of a new iPhone or MacBook Airs, but I doubt it. These days Apple more often releases new hardware at smaller, private events, and with so little known about iOS 5.0 or iCloud, they'll provide enough surprises to carry the event. To venture into the realm of prediction, I expect Lion will be announced for imminent (same day or later that week) release, with iOS 5.0 coming a month or two later, along with iCloud, replete with features that will tie the two operating systems together.

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-13605219>

### 1.6.2 May Film Reviews (2011-06-03 09:28)

It was a quiet month at the movies, partly as a result of having better things to do with my time. Still, I did manage to make it to the cinema a couple of times and the results were, well - you'll see.

Fast & Furious 5: I went to see this because I had a cheap ticket and a free evening, and having sat through it, from grotesquely stupid opening to utterly ludicrous finale, I can't really offer any better reasons for anyone else repeating my experiment. The cast of implausibly muscled men and improbably pretty women careen from one action set piece to another, occasionally pausing to furrow their brows in futile efforts to impart some depth to their paper thin characters. On the plus side, it's not as leering as I might have expected - this is mainstream mayhem in the A-Team vein, with no blood and all death and sex kept tastefully off screen - and is carefully polished in its formulaic fashion.

Priest 3D: Rarely has such a collection of cliches been deployed with as little effect as in this film about kung-fu clerics taking on feral vampires. A shaven-headed Paul Bettany essays his best Clint Eastwood impersonation as he slums it in a sketchily described but beautifully designed postapocalyptic alternate reality, in which the last members of an elite corps of vampire-fighting priests must go rogue to save the lives of one of their family members, etc, etc. Most of the fun to be had comes from playing a game of "spot the reference", as the film itself is annoyingly po-faced and never manages to be coherent or thrilling enough to hold the audience's attention.

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kaleandwine (2011-06-03 18:38:01)

<em>Fast & Furious 5</em> sounds \*amazing\*.... I'm going to have to make a point to see it asap. ;-) I do hope you were in good company and slightly tipsy when seeing that one. Not too bad a way to watch a bad film, honestly. I still look back, with a ton of fondness, on the night that <em>Mega Shark vs Giant Octopus</em> invaded my home... Or watching <em>Twilight</em> with Jen and having a drink every time Edward made his maudlin pouty/yearny look (we were completely drunk within 30 minutes, obviously). Excellent times.

cerandor (2011-06-04 10:23:49)

Sadly sober and alone while watching <em>F5</em>. Which may account for the bitterness. I'm not really sure that I could have persuaded anyone I know to watch it. Though I did get someone <cough>Brian<cough> to watch <em>Priest</em> with me. It's always nice to have someone who's good at sarcasm to watch a bad movie with you.

### 1.6.3 May Book Reviews (2011-06-04 11:29)

For all the fun and games that May brought, I did manage to read a few books. Wrapped up an unplanned detour into French history, then relaxed the brain with something more adventurous before diving into some true crime and conspiracy.

The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars 1290-1329, Rene Weis: Drawing upon testimonies collected by the Inquisition, Weis recounts the tale of the last Cathars in southern France and Catalonia over the decades following the Albigensian Crusade. This is a surprisingly intimate tale, focusing as it does on a handful of families and several villages, and the thorough nature of the Inquisition's records means that it offers a clear view of life in late-13th/early-14th century Languedoc. However, for all the personal, and occasionally bawdy, detail, it can be quite dry, with the drama of the persecutions downplayed, and there's not much help for the reader in keeping track of the cast, many of whom share names.

The Perilous Crown: France Between Revolutions, Munro Price: France's dalliance with constitutional monarchy after the fall of France is told entertainingly in this book, which focuses on France's last king, Louis-Phillippe, and his indefatigable sister, Adelaide. The author's bias towards what he sees as the historically neglected "July Monarchy" is clear throughout, but he paints an engaging and clear picture of the personages and events of France in the first half of the nineteenth-century and never goes too far in ascribing motives where the evidence is unclear. For anyone with an interest in the upheavals of France in this era, it's a must-read, and anyone with an interest in politics or French history is liable to enjoy it nearly as much.

A Clash of Kings, George R.R. Martin: If the first book in Martin's "Ice and Fire" series was all about establishing the setting, players and stakes, the second is where the action kicks off, pushing forward from the first's shock ending with a war that engulfs the seven kingdoms of Westeros. Two major threads are added to the tapestry, deepening and broadening the world of the story, but Martin keeps it all in check, with only an occasional sense that some parts are being neglected. Genuinely epic, well-crafted fantasy with an array of monstrous and



sympathetic characters and several mysteries lurking at its heart, it's a gripping read, even at the third or fourth time of asking.

The Monster of Florence - A True Story, Douglas Preston and Mario Spezi: Two different dark-nesses from Italy are explored in this novelistic nonfiction work - a serial killer seemingly born from its criminal underworld and a conspiracy born from official corruption and ass-covering. The first half of the book, telling of the murders of the Monster of Florence and the efforts to catch him, is the strongest, whereas the second half, in which the authors get embroiled in the investigation, is undercut somewhat by the personal involvement and the presentation of a theory about the killer very different from the official version. A thriller with a twist as much as a history of a murder case, it's fascinating but might make you feel wary about a visit to Italy.

#### **1.6.4 Three Times the Trouble (2011-06-13 22:20)**

Although I tend to be a pretty cautious person, every now and then I like to challenge myself with something a little strange or difficult, usually without too much forethought on my part. Past (successful) challenges have included learning Ancient Egyptian, writing a novel in the space of a month and growing a moustache (okay, so the last one wasn't much of a challenge, but I did raise a fair chunk of change for charity).

My latest challenge might be the biggest leap: I've signed up for the [1]Focus Ireland Triathlon at the end of July. Even though it isn't a full triathlon (clocking in at a 750m swim, 20km cycle and 5km run), it's a bit much to ask of someone who hasn't run further than needed to catch the bus since he was 14 or owned or ridden a bicycle much since he was 17. For those of you keeping count, that's more than half a lifetime ago in both cases. Even swimming, the one segment of the event I was quietly confident about, requires me to swim in the sea, which I haven't done much of, in a wetsuit, which I've never done.

With just over a month and a half remaining before the big day, training has been mixed. Running, which I had expected would be the toughest part to master, has been surprisingly fun, due to my early-rising tendencies and a nearby park that allows me to run a 5km+ loop in the company of a variety of waterfowl. Cycling has been harder, since I still don't own a bike, but I've managed 13km on the cycle machines in the gym at medium resistance, most recently in combination with a 5km run. So I'm getting there.

Ironically, it's the swimming that has me the most worried. A few months ago, I was regularly doing 1,000m+ in the pool, but the day after I signed up, Trinity Gym's pool closed for repairs and isn't going to reopen until the end of June. Hopefully. Once it does, with any luck, things will all come together. At the very least I'm hoping to finish the event without collapsing.

Regardless though, I'm glad I took up the challenge. Glad too that it's a charity event. My personal fundraising page is [2]here if you feel like giving. Either way, I'll see you at the finish line.

1. <http://www.focusireland.ie/index.php/events-a-challenges/challenges/triathlon>

2. [https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1\\_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor\\_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011](https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011)

## 1.7 July

### 1.7.1 Roadblocks in the Swimming Pool (2011-07-01 09:16)

The much-delayed stage two of the triathlon preparations finally kicked in yesterday evening as the Trinity Gym pool reopened. As it happened, I was the first person to use the pool in over two months (I had my swimming gear in to use another pool and found out that the pool was reopening so decided to go with it) and got a Trinity goodie bag for my good fortune.

The swimming itself was a bit tricky, as I was reminded just how long it's been since I was in a pool and just how weak my front crawl is. Lots of stopping and starting in the early going, but I managed to string together about three hundred metres non-stop before the end. Something to work on, but there's still a month to go, and the bike side of things should be dealt with this weekend too. (I even ran into work this morning, in the absence of a bus ticket - hey, it was warm, and the Trinity Gym showers aren't far away from my workplace.)

Just as a reminder, my personal fundraising page is [1]here if you feel like giving. Many thanks if you already have.

1. [https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1\\_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor\\_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011](https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011)

### 1.7.2 June Film Reviews (2011-07-04 09:49)

Halfway through the year already? Wow. When did that happen? (Other than a few days ago, obviously.) June was a quiet enough month for films, not because there was nothing to see but because things continue to be a little crazy. It make for an interesting life, but cinematically it's not so good. Anyhow, I managed two outings to two satisfying films.

X-Men - First Class: Bryan Singer's X-Men films get a retro-themed prequel in this Swinging Sixties-set action piece, which bowls along with enough humour and excitement to cover a paper-thin story and vaguely sketched minor characters. The heart of the tale lies in James McEvoy and Michael Fassbender's portrayals of Professor X and Magneto in their younger days, and both do sterling work, with McEvoy capturing the overconfidence of a youthful telepath and Fassbender the driven nature of a Holocaust survivor seeking revenge (even if his accent slips occasionally). The friendship and conflict between the two men offers plenty of scope for further sequels, as the ending makes clear, but more work will need to be done on some of the supporting cast if that's the case, as several of them barely make an impact.

Senna: Every sport has its genuises, and one of Formula One's is depicted in this intense, stripped-down biopic, assembled from archive footage and interviews with knew the three-time world champion personally. Senna's darker side is given short shrift, but it's nearly impossible not to get caught up in following the story of a young Brazilian who came to Europe as a go-kart driver, became an iconic figure in Formula One due to his rivalry with Alain Prost and his clashes with the sport's governing body, and ended as a hero to his nation. At times it can be hard to watch, especially in the last fifteen minutes, which linger on the fateful weekend at Imola, but it's just as hard to tear your eyes away.

### 1.7.3 June Book Reviews (2011-07-05 08:56)

A better month for books than the cinema, overall. Books can be fitted into the nooks and crannies of life with less trouble than films, and I had plenty of options as always, both fictional and not. Old favourites and some new discoveries: it was pretty good overall.

A Storm of Swords, George R.R. Martin: The hardback was so big that it had to be split into two paperbacks, and indeed this volume shows the first signs that Martin's "Ice and Fire" series is creaking at the edges, but it remains engrossing throughout nonetheless. One of the plotlines introduced in the previous book is entirely sidelined, but the rest of them barrel onwards through shocking changes of fortune for some major players, and by the end of the book, nearly every major character is a long way from where they began it. So it's long but not padded, and Martin's genius for compelling characters and willingness to do horrible things to them keeps the reader focused, even if there's little more idea at the end than at the start as to where it's all going.

Creation - The True Story of Charles Darwin, Randal Keynes: The book on which the Paul Bettany/Jennifer Connelly film of the same name was based, this is an intimate tale of Charles Darwin's life and work, based on Darwin family letters gathered by the author, himself a descendant of Darwin. The book centers around the tragic death of his eldest daughter, aged only ten, with the author sympathetically depicting the impact of this event on Darwin, his family, and his work on the Theory of Evolution. It's a portrait of Darwin as a man rather than as a scientist, and as such it might be short on evolutionary biology if that's what you're looking for, but as a depiction of a thoroughly decent man and his loving family, it's deeply appealing.

A Feast For Crows, George R.R. Martin: The initial plan for the events in this, the fourth book in the Ice and Fire series, was to deal with them as flashbacks or remark on them in passing, and this very much comes through in the text, as a story lacking a driving narrative begins to suffer from serious sprawl. It's entertaining, well-written sprawl, fleshing out an already fascinating world still further, but with the adventures of the three characters most central to the overall plot relegated to the next book in the series, there's a real feeling of marking time until then. The use of specific narrative viewpoints also starts to break down, with one plotline skittering between three viewpoints and a new viewpoint character proving to be even more despicable and foolish in her own head than she seemed to be through everyone else's eyes, as she drives the main plot of this book to its rather depressing conclusion.

Good Omens, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman: This tale of a very English apocalypse is one of the funniest books ever written, its blend of wry humour and pointed wisdom only rivalled by the best of Douglas Adams' work. Making free use of "The Omen" as a launching pad, it throws in references galore, from the "Just William" books to conspiracy theorists and prophets of all stripes and ages, albeit with such a light touch that it never gets bogged down in its own cleverness. Time and familiarity have smoothed out the best jokes, but the characters are so uniformly delightful and the truths at the heart of the tale so timeless that, if I had to get rid of all my books but one, this would be the one I would keep.

The Men Who Stare at Goats, Jon Ronson: When faced with the problem of trying to verify boundlessly crazy facts, Jon Ronson doesn't bother - he takes interviewees at their word and follows the resulting trail wherever it leads, leaving the reader to bounce along, amused but uncertain, in his wake. Or at least it seems that way at first - in fact, Ronson just presents the crazier opinions without prejudice even as he follows the bumpy and obscure trail back to some of the darker doings of the U.S. military in the recent and more distant past. Readers will have to make up their own mind as to how much they believe, but it's doing the book a disservice to concentrate too much on the whimsical title (as the recent film adaptation did) at the expense of what it conceals.

#### **1.7.4 Golfing Capital of the World (2011-07-18 10:56)**

If you're a golfer and from Northern Ireland, there's a better than normal chance that you've won a major tournament. Darren Clarke's [1]victory at the Open yesterday brings up the remarkable statistic the three of the past six majors have been won by Northern Irish competitors. Throw Ireland and Padraig Harrington into the mix and you have six wins in the past seventeen majors - one more than the U.S., with South Africa and the Rest of the World splitting the difference. Not bad for a small island, albeit one with a great many clubs.

Clarke's win was perhaps the [2]most emotional of the Northern Irish triumphs. Rory McIlroy has been hailed as a major winner for years and had been close several times before taking the U.S. Open four weeks ago. Graeme McDowell, who triumphed at the U.S. Open a year before McIlroy, spent much of his early career in the U.S. and still talks with a mid-Atlantic twang. Clarke, though, is of an earlier vintage, having been almost the sole standard-bearer for Northern Ireland for years, mixing triumph and tragedy in his career while remaining one of the most personable men on the tour. It had seemed that he was making his slow way towards the quieter last days of his professional golfing life, but on a wet and windy St. George's course, he kept his head while all around were losing theirs and ran out the winner by three shots.

With McIlroy still at the start of his career and McDowell capable of more triumphs, only a fool would bet against more silverware making its way to these shores. For now though, the memory of Clarke's winning grin as he sipped on a pint of Guinness at the press conference after his victory is one that will linger long and pleasantly.

1. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/sport/2011/0718/1224300884744.html>

2. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/robhodgetts/2011/07/clarkes\\_rocky\\_road\\_ends\\_in\\_ope.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/robhodgetts/2011/07/clarkes_rocky_road_ends_in_ope.html)

#### **1.7.5 The Final Fortnight (2011-07-19 12:45)**

With two weeks to go before the Focus Ireland Triathlon, I finally managed to do all three elements of the event, one after the other. Well, sort of. On Sunday, I swam 750m and ran 5km in the gym, and I cycled somewhere north of 20km. Mind you, the cycling was broken up by the gym and brunch with a friend in Rathmines, but it still counts, right?

Hmm. Well, I'm counting it anyhow.

A few things remain to be done, the main ones being a bit more cycling practice and some sea swimming with the wetsuit that's obligatory for the event. The former I'll do my best to manage over the next two weeks, and the latter I'll try to sort out this weekend, quite possibly on the notoriously shallow Rossglass Beach. Hopefully the jetskiers won't be out in force that day. (And the waves will be swimmable, and there won't be sharks, and the tide won't sweep me out to sea, and I won't freeze, etc etc.)

Should be fun.

Finally, of course, the shilling for donations: my fundraising page is [1]here and my fulsome thanks for any support is given without reservation.

1. [https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1\\_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor\\_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011](https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011)

### **1.7.6 The Last Week (2011-07-26 09:32)**

Less than a week now to go before I plunge into Dun Laoghaire Harbour for the Focus Ireland Triathlon, and with my usual sense of timing, I've managed to make things tougher for myself.

A trip home at the weekend was accompanied by some sea swimming in the mandatory wet-suit, which not only reminded me just how tough swimming in the open water is but also incurred near-fatal chafing to the back of my neck. I probably didn't do myself any favours by swimming into the current (and the waves) but it was still a knock to the confidence and I'm going to have to adjust my strategy and hope that the sheltered waters of Dun Laoghaire Harbour are a little more conducive to my swimming efforts.

The second strike came yesterday evening, at an otherwise nicely successful softball game. Walloping my knee and straining something in my foot wasn't on the menu, but seeing as I'm going to be concentrating on swimming for the next little while, that's probably not as major a problem as it might be. I should still be fine for next weekend, when a couple of very dedicated friends have agreed to be there at 8am, when this whole thing sets off.

Next time I talk about this, it should all be over. Until then, one last time: my fundraising page is [1]here and to all those who have already contributed, I am massively grateful.

1. [https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1\\_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor\\_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011](https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011)

## **1.8 August**

### **1.8.1 July Book Reviews (2011-08-02 16:49)**

A busy month for books, all in all, though that's likely to change - I'm hoping to shift from heavy reading to more writing, and my schedule is all over the place for the next few months anyway. All sorts of reading material this month, from fantasy to reality and back again. Mostly good too, which is always a relief.

Between Worlds, Robert A. Heinlein: A boy gets caught up in an interplanetary war and becomes a man in a boy's-own tale that unapologetically makes some political points along the way. Originally written in 1951, its scientific anachronisms are more interesting than off-putting, as are its politics, which come down on the human side of libertarian - unsurprising given that the war at the centre of the book is clearly based on the American War of Independence. Although writing for a younger audience, Heinlein doesn't talk down to his readers, and although it's neither long nor deep, the story will hold your attention even if certain points (the only female character getting written into the "stays at home while her man goes to war" corner) might vex.

The Borgias and Their Enemies, Christopher Hibbert: The most infamous family of the Renaissance are given an up-close-and-personal treatment in this book, which tracks their lives from just prior to the accession of Rodrigo Borgia to the papacy to just after the death of Lucrezia Borgia. In the process, they are humanized far beyond their popular image as incestuous poisoners who used treachery and bribery to get what they wanted, even though the many actual crimes of Rodrigo and his son Cesare are never downplayed. The author does seem to be more fascinated than appalled by them, and it's not hard to see why, as the few decades in the spotlight of history that these complicated characters enjoyed were some of the most eventful and important in western history.

The Hunger Games, Suzanne Collins: The latest big thing in Young Adult Fiction co-opts the genre of dystopian science fiction and makes it work by sticking close to its teenaged female narrator as she faces all the challenges inherent in trying to grow up while people are doing

their level best to kill you. Katniss Everdeen works as a protagonist because her evident capacity for survival is balanced by her confusion about her emotions and her interactions with other people - this is a coming-of-age tale in which the central character is never aware that this is what she's doing. The setting and the supporting characters are all well drawn and full of potential (except for one slightly manipulative turn on the part of the author to head off an easy ending), but this book stands well enough even without its sequels.

*Fragile Things*, Neil Gaiman: A collection of "short fictions and wonders" from a writer who's a proven master of both, this is a mix of fragments, poems and more substantial short stories, all of them infused with Gaiman's love of the stranger side of humanity and its interaction with the world of dreams, myth and the imagined. Two novella-length pieces bookend smaller pieces that rarely lack for some degree of insight or mystery, and most of them are short enough to offer the choice of lingering or moving on as swiftly as the reader feels comfortable with. Often scary and frequently inexplicable, not everything in here works perfectly, but Gaiman casts his net wide enough that anyone who delights in things of wonder will find something that they won't forget in a hurry.

*A Dance With Dragons*, George R.R. Martin: Long-awaited, this weighty tome moves Martin's "Ice and Fire" saga forward at first in parallel with and then beyond the previous book in the series, *A Feast for Crows*, but there's a dose of frustration to go along with the entertainment. The well-drawn characters, the rich world they inhabit, and the author's willingness to do horrible things to them are all present, but so too is the sense of narrative sprawl, with a major new plotline introduced and sent spinning off to join the many others without resolution. With so many cliffhangers and unresolved mysteries piled one on top of the other, it's hard not to feel that Martin's goal of finishing the series in two more books is looking overly ambitious at his current pace.

*The Art of Travel*, Alain de Botton: Not so much a travel book as a book about travel, this is a contemplation of what travel means for the state of mind of the traveller, wherever they go and whatever they do. De Botton draws upon his own experiences of travel and the works of noted artists and writers to delve into the reasons why we long to be elsewhere and what that longing says about us. The author's tendency to muse upon the implications of everything that crosses his path is something that might not appeal to the more irritable reader, but his genuine fascination with the world and our place in it is winning throughout.

*Catching Fire*, Suzanne Collins: Having sketched out a post-apocalyptic world and created a compelling central character in the first book in the "Hunger Games" series, Collins pushes forward the story in compelling ways in terms of the world and the character. Some elements of the "coming-of-age" tale remain, but the story is all about building tension, as the problems that Katniss Everdeen faces are mirrored in the rumblings of rebellion, with both exploding into bloody conflict by the end of the book. Broader and deeper than the first book, it maintains its humanity by sticking tightly to Katniss as a narrator and following her discovery of what makes both her and her world tick.

*Four Kings*, George Kimball: Boxing's 1980s Golden Age of Hearn, Hagler, Leonard and Duran is brought to life with an insider's detail in this intertwining record of the careers of all four men. Following the stories of all four men as they fought their way to the top of the boxing ladder and then fought each other, clearly setting out their qualities and frailties and how they differed from one another. Except maybe for those who loathe boxing, this is a fascinating work, fondly depicting both a unique period in a sport and the wider scope of the sport itself in all its glamour and its squalor.

*The Psychopath Test*, Jon Ronson: Ronson's unique brand of self-aware, subjective reportage is brought to bear on the topic of mental illness and psychopathy and where those two topics diverge as he follows a trail that begins with the publication of a very strange book. An engaging witness to the strangeness that he dives into, Ronson isn't afraid to jump to conclusions and then admit later that he was wrong, but as he keeps on digging, he gives readers plenty of information on which to draw their own conclusions. It's not a highly detailed take on mental aberration, but it might be more enlightening for all that, as it demands that the reader think

about their own complicity in categorising others as "psychopaths".

### **1.8.2 July Film Reviews (2011-08-03 16:05)**

This was a month for following other people to the cinema - specifically one of my friends, who proved keener than me to get out there and engage with blockbuster season. The results weren't too bad though - one stinker and two fun experiences. And, given that I saw the stinker coming and went anyway, I have no one to blame but myself.

*Transformers 3*: When cinema finally dies and the time comes to tot up the atrocities that killed it, Michael Bay is going to be foremost among those with blood on their hands. The third movie in the "Transformers" franchise isn't as leeringly repellent as the second one, but what it lacks on that front, it more than makes up for with characters who are either nonentities or collections of annoying tics, an unfailing ability to misjudge the tone of every scene, lashings of right-wing jingoism and a final battle/demolition of Chicago that goes on half an hour longer than it should. On the bright side, the five-minute pre-titles sequence is quite good, the music is appealing when it doesn't dissolve into soft rock, Alan Tudyk shines in what could have been a nastily offensive part, and the 3D doesn't offend the eyes too much, but really, these are small beans compared to the overall weight of this blockbusting cowpat on the cinematic landscape.

*Bobby Fischer Against the World*: There won't be many purer alternatives to the summer blockbuster season than this, an examination of the career of Bobby Fischer, from child chess prodigy through his brief reign as world champion to his eventual decline and death. Centering around Fischer's famous match in Reykjavik against Boris Spassky, it does a fine job of depicting the quality of mind that brought Fischer the title but rendered him unable to deal with the worldwide fame that resulted. A little too brief to provide enough detail for the interested fan, especially on the latter stages of his life, it is still a touchingly sad tribute to a very flawed genius.

*Captain America*: Marvel continue their pitch-perfect recreation of their comic-book heroes with a period piece set in World War II, which apes the spirit of Indiana Jones and *The Rocketeer* (and gleefully admits it in the case of the former). Managing the tricky task of being earnest and heartfelt without being mawkish, it's simply a well-written, well-cast delight of a movie that revels in the high adventure of WWII while remaining wisely clear of the darker elements of that conflict. There are plenty of hooks to tie it into the rest of Marvel's offerings, but it stands just as well on its own, and the fact that the ending seems to preclude further period adventures for the titular character stands as something of a shame.

### **1.8.3 Apres le Triathlon (2011-08-04 09:33)**

So I went for a [1]run this morning. Just far enough to see the ducks and swans and just fast enough to work up a sweat. Partly I ran because I don't want to waste the good effect that the last few months has had on my fitness, but mostly I ran because I wanted to check that I'd recovered from the stiff neck and strained calf that were the only lingering bad effects of last Sunday's triathlon.

Focus Ireland had a very good morning for their second annual [2]charity triathlon: neither too warm nor too cold, and with no sun to glare into the competitors' eyes, save right at the very end--and isn't it better to cross the finishing line in glorious sunshine than under a cloud? Courtesy of the Lawyer, I'd made it out there in good time for the sign-up deadline, picking up my goodie bag and changing into my wetsuit. Compared to several others there, I was a rank amateur, but I had no cause to complain in terms of my equipment, or my support.

I was in the second wave to set off, the first being those who'd opted for the shorter swim distance of 350m, and the third consisting of those who were the true contenders to actually

win, rather than just complete, the event. My swim went about as badly as it could have without being a complete disaster. Despite pacing myself at the start and being rapidly overtaken by everyone, I began to struggle for breath and switched to backstroke after about 100m. As a result, I proceeded to bump into a marker buoy, headbutt a yacht and get warned off from swimming into a concrete pier. By the time I'd finished, most of the third wave had overtaken me, but for all that, my time of 22:28 was faster than I'd expected.

I struggled through the transition, taking nearly four minutes to get changed and on my bike, and it took me the best part of a 4-5km lap around Dun Laoghaire's streets to get into a good rhythm. All of which I spoiled by getting a little too close to a rider ahead of me and tagging her back wheel, resulting in me almost coming off my bike and facing the windiest, steepest part of the route from a standing start. Not a lot of fun. Still, by the end of the 19-20km distance, I was passing more than I was being passed, and while my time of 45:08 wasn't too impressive, it was in the same ball park as those around me.

The final run, two laps along the harbour pier, turned out to be my best stretch. Whether I'd unintentionally held some energy back or was just benefiting from the three full months of practice at longer distances, I felt pretty comfortable on my feet, even when running into the wind. I ignored those who overtook me at speed and instead just focused on catching the next person ahead of me, reeling in one after another. My final time of 20:11 for a bit over 4km was better than anyone else around me and comparable to many who finished much higher in the rankings than me. I even had enough left for a sprint finish!

Overall, I finished 107th out of 149 who completed the [3]750m swim (PDF) and the rest of the course. Not too impressive, but it was my first event, and I was very pleased with my final time of 1.31:42. I can see myself coming back and doing it again next year, perhaps a little better prepared in terms of swimming and cycling. There will be photos online on Focus Ireland's Flickr stream eventually, but they're not up yet.

Lastly, a few thanks to those who helped out and without whom this whole thing wouldn't have been half as successful or half as much fun. Des for the early Sunday morning lift to the triathlon, and Mick, Paul, and Lorraine for coming out to lend their support. Denise, Denis and Sally for their early morning support and the use of their shower afterwards. Peter for the loan of his excellent bike and Louise and Kalin for their advice and encouragement. My brother Ronan for being an inspiration. Finally, everyone who sponsored me, [4]online or off, helping me raise over €300 for Focus Ireland.

1. <http://runkeeper.com/user/cerandor/activity/46187549>

2. <https://www.focusireland.ie/index.php/events-a-challenges/challenges/triathlon>

3. <http://www.focusireland.ie/files/750m%20results%202011.pdf>

4. [https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1\\_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor\\_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011](https://www.focusireland.ie/htm/fundraising/challenges/triathlon/V1_controller.php?action=search&mode=sponsor_friend&step=details&tid=1390&month=August2011)

#### **1.8.4 And so to an end we come... (2011-08-14 21:50)**

I started this LiveJournal in 2005. Since then, its purpose has changed for me several times over, but it's been a consistent presence for me online. I've dabbled with other sites, but this one has kept on going, even though I'm not posting as often as I have been.

Well, that's over now - this is my last post here.

Not only have I been posting less, but LiveJournal itself has been deserted by most of the people I knew who used it, leaving behind only Russian spam. Thus, it's time to move on. My new site is [1]here. It's a work in progress for the moment, but it will expand as time goes on. The archives of this LiveJournal are already [2]there, in PDF form.

So farewell to all of this. It's been a fun place to blog, but these are interesting times in my life, and the new site will be ground zero for all kinds of fun and revelations, I hope. I'll see you over there.



1. <http://cerandor.wordpress.com/>
2. <http://cerandor.wordpress.com/the-livejournal-years/>



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Gad's LJBook v0.8,  
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<http://www.ljbook.com>

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