

Blastr Article:

## Top Ten Books

I've been asked to list the top ten science fiction books that inspired my work. That's a tough assignment, particularly because I didn't read contemporary science fiction until I took a science fiction class at the university and first read *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Leguin. Until that time I thought that Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs pretty well represented the field. I had never heard of Tolkien or Heinlein or Frank Herbert or Fritz Leiber or J.G. Ballard or any of the other brilliant science fiction and fantasy writers that I was about to discover, to my vast pleasure. That being said, looking back over my fifty years as a reader and writer, it's absolutely clear to me that the books I read as a child and adolescent had a vital influence on my writing. It was those early books that turned me into the kind of writer I became. I grew up reading Steinbeck and Twain and Conan Doyle and Poe and heaps of obscure books that I found in my mother's library, including Readers Digest Condensed Books, not knowing what "condensed" meant until I had read through *The Seagulls Woke Me*, *Up the Down Staircase*, *Good Morning*, *Miss Dove*, and dozens of other such books that I still happily carry around in my mind.

So my list (in the approximate order in which I read the books) is going to be eccentric, probably puzzling, and I'll warn you that I'm going to take some liberties with the assignment.

*The Brownies and the Goblins*, by N.M. Banta.

"... magical spectacles hang from the trees, swinging and swaying like leaves in the breeze."

*The Brownies and the Goblins* is the only book I recall from my early childhood, and is the inspiration for a children's book I wrote in the 1980s titled *The Magic Spectacles*. The book was my first introduction to Fairyland and to science fiction, particularly a story titled "A Trip to the Moon," in which the brownies and goblins sail to the moon in their wonderful flying machine (the origin of the bat-winged airship of the elves in my novel *The Elfin Ship*) and help the Man in the Moon find his lost spectacles.

*The Return of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle

Not, of course, either science fiction or fantasy, but (to the best of my memory) the first adult book I read. I was around 10 years old. I had no idea that

Holmes had been away, and much of it was over my head (not a drawback in those days) but I was immediately caught up in the fog-shrouded, gaslight atmosphere of Conan Doyle's London. I've been a fan ever since, not a surprise to anyone who has read my Steampunk novels and stories.

*Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne

Seeing that we were book enthusiasts, my mother began hauling my sister and I down to the Stanton Free Library on Tuesday afternoons, where I'd find two or three books to bring home. I still have a mental image of her handing me several Jules Verne novels, including *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which should also be on this list. Those two books helped cement my interest in all things oceanic – fish and finny submarines and waterweeds waving in the current – and also in the notion that the Earth is in fact hollow, and that dinosaurs and prehistoric tribes are carrying on unchanged and unaware beneath our very feet. My first novel (failed, but later rewritten as *The Digging Leviathan*) is evidently in debt to these two books by Jules Verne, as is my recently published *Zeuglodon, the True Adventures of Kathleen Perkins, Cryptozoologist*.

*At the Earth's Core* by Edgar Rice Burroughs

The Stanton Free Library had all of the Tarzan books, including *Tarzan at the Earth's Core*, but I went stone crazy for Pellucidar when, some years later, I found a used copy of the Ace paperback edition of *At the Earth's Core*, the first of the Pellucidar novels. It was the brilliant cover art by Roy Krenkel Jr. that got me, two cave women riding brontosaurus through a jungle glade, one of them apparently waving at me and casting me a come-hither look. The first sentence of the third paragraph reads, "Then Perry interested me in his invention." Yes indeed. The invention turned out to be a mechanical mole. I hopped aboard, so to speak, for the trip to Pellucidar, and I seem to return fairly often.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson

No author's writing more influenced my own than that of Robert Louis Stevenson. My first Steampunk story, "The Ape-box Affair" is a sort of mélange of Stevenson and P.G. Wodehouse. *Homunculus*, my first Steampunk novel, is even more Stevensonian, and in fact I borrowed characters wholesale from *The New Arabian Nights* and atmosphere and tone from Jekyll and Hyde. There's a good deal of Hyde in my own Dr. Narbondo. My main debt to Stevenson, however, has to do with language. Stevenson wrote that he learned to write by "playing the sedulous ape": that he wrote pieces that mimicked other writers, especially William Hazlitt. I did the same, first with Twain and Steinbeck, later with Stevenson. It's not hard to hear his voice in my prose, especially in my early work.

*The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* by Rudolf Erich Raspe

I first ran into Baron Munchausen when, at twelve or thirteen, the *Fabulous Adventures of Baron Munchausen* directed by the brilliant Karel Zemen. Around that same time I saw Zemen's *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne*. Together they virtually define Steampunk, and they're the only two films that I'd set the alarm to see if they were showing on television at three in the morning. It was several years later that I found a used copy of Munchausen, published by Three Sirens Press and illustrated by Gustave Dore. I read and reread it. It's a perfectly eccentric book, and I was infected by it for years. It should be required reading in all middle school English classes. We'd produce weirdoes of the best sort.

*The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien

I read *The Hobbit* when I was twenty and first reading modern science fiction and fantasy. I followed it up with *The Lord of the Rings*, which I still reread from time to time, but of the lot of it I prefer *The Hobbit*. The atmosphere of my first novel, *The Elfin Ship*, evidently owes something to *The Hobbit*, and my main character, Jonathan Bing, has some of Bilbo Baggins genetic material in him. *The Elfin Ship* owes as much, however, to Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. I have a strong suspicion that Tolkien was also a great fan of Ratty and Mole, and especially to the "Wayfarers All" chapter, which is one of the most wonderful things ever written. *The Wind in the Willows*, is certainly among the top five books that have influenced me as a writer and as a person, but I can't list it here because it's not science fiction or fantasy.

*That Hideous Strength* by C.S. Lewis

I was knocked out by *Out of the Silent Planet*, which I read in that science fiction class I was talking about earlier. I decided to tackle the other two novels in the trilogy, and although I loved the strangeness and the color of *Perelandra*, it was *That Hideous Strength* that most affected me as a writer. Without it there might have been no *Last Coin* or *All the Bells on Earth*, two of my favorite of my own books. It simply rang true to me that the "great fight with the dragon," as John Ruskin put it, would take place on the streets and avenues of the neighborhoods that plain people inhabit from day to day, and that good people might be done down by their own small weaknesses – the small weakness being sufficient to destroy us, the goodness being sufficient to save us if we catch ourselves in time, and with a little help from our friends and family. I'm going to cheat again and say that the books of Charles Williams worked that same way on me, and so I'll surreptitiously add *All Hallows' Eve* to this list.

*Time Out of Joint* by Philip K. Dick

Finally, an authentic science fiction novel! You were beginning to think that I hadn't actually read any of them. There might be a couple of Phil Dick novels that I *haven't* read, but I've certainly read most of them, and I reread my favorites from time to time, none more often than *Time Out of Joint*. It's the most Blaylockian of Phil Dick's novels, although he published it when I was nine years old, which means that there are elements of my novels that are pretty clearly Phil Dickian, something about which I'm very happy. The book is full of quotable quotes, including, "Can a lunatic go out of his mind? What does it take to get a ticket on the Nonpareil Line? Will I be here forever?" No other writer could be so funny and frightening at the same time.

*Lud in the Mist* by Hope Mirlees

Well, we *won't* be here forever, because this is number ten, unless I've counted wrong, and I'm about to collect my ticket on the Nonpareil Line and go off to eat lunch with my wife and sons. Tim Powers made me read *Lud in the Mist* many years ago. He allowed that it was quite likely the best fantasy novel ever written. I read it and agreed with him. It's beautifully written – Fairyland prose to my mind (and ear) – and a perfectly compelling, unhurried pace and colorful, strange characters and settings. The whole thing is magic, and Hope Mirlees was evidently one of the most interesting and talented writers of her generation. She was also one of the richest when her inheritance came in, making it unnecessary for her ever to write another book. Strange, sad business, to my mind. She should have written dozens of books. I love it when I read a novel or a story and think, "I didn't know anyone could do that with words." *Lud in the Mist* is one of those, a door-opening book.

Thanks for reading!

Jim Blaylock