

REVIEW OF *THE TIME TRAVELER'S ALMANAC*

Until today, I thought the phrase “diamond in the rough” meant finding something valuable (the “diamond”) amidst a larger collection of valueless stuff (“the rough”). Like, a diamond in a field of pebbles or something. But I’m paranoid, so I googled the phrase to make sure I wasn’t misusing it, and learned “the rough” is actually just referring to the diamond being uncut.

That anecdote has nothing to do with the book except that I was planning to open this review by saying “The ratio of diamonds to rough in this book is less than optimal”, and I decided it would be easier to explain to you that I now recognize the stupidity of that opening line than it would be to come up with a new one.

Anyway, this collection has a lot of stories. Some are great, some are mediocre, some are insufferable. I won’t name the insufferable ones because the author of at least one of them is still alive, and my conscience allows me to speak ill of only the dead (in public, at least). So let’s focus on the good.

The most memorable story for me is Michael Moorcock’s “Pale Roses”. It’s a distant-future story exploring the alien values that might arise in a society without scarcity or challenges. The protagonist, Werther, is a misfit who romanticizes the precarious lives humans lived in the distant past, and is exhilarated by the opportunity to meet a holdover from that era. (I enjoyed Werther’s misguided attempts to recreate artifacts from our time, such as “a toy fish-tank (capable of firing real fish)”¹.) Ultimately we learn this is a ruse created by Werther’s friend as a gift to him—the gift being the opportunity to experience what sin and guilt are like.

Barrington J. Bayley’s “Life Trap” follows monks who are investigating what happens to a person after death. The story’s opening paragraph foreshadows that they won’t like what they find:

...all seekers after hidden knowledge run the risk of finding that ignorance was after all the happier state.²

¹Michael Moorcock, “Pale Roses,” in *The Time Traveler’s Almanac*, ed. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, First U.S. edition (New York: Tor, 2014), 93.

²Barrington J. Bayley, “Life Trap,” in *The Time Traveler’s Almanac*, ed. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, First U.S. edition (New York: Tor, 2014), 536.

And it is indeed a creatively terrifying revelation: that when you die, you experience your life in reverse, and then forward again from birth, back and forth, forever.

Peter Crowther's "Palindromic" deals with a small town's reaction to aliens who appear suddenly and behave in a mystifying, indifferent manner. It turns out that the aliens were moving through time in the opposite direction of us.

Nalo Hopkinson's "Message in a Bottle" is a tale of strangely precocious children who are in fact time travelers—bioengineered to be small in order to cut down on the cost of sending them backward. And bioengineered to be long-lived so the future won't have to pay the cost of retrieving them with a time machine. They're searching for the shell of a mollusc which they consider to be an influential artist.

There are two fun stories from Kage Baker's "Company" universe, which reminds me a bit of Connie Willis's Oxford Time Travel series.

Some other interesting ideas that come up:

- Someone who can relive his past in near-endless variations but must always jump backward before a certain day arrives—this is the subject of Geoffrey A. Landis's "Ripples in the Dirac Sea".
- A device that stops the world around you, but also shortens your life by an equal amount of time—explored in Steve Bein's "The Most Important Thing in the World".
- Being able to see all possible futures at once all the time, but only the view from your current location—John Chu uses this to tell a love story in "Thirty Seconds from Now".
- Being able to influence the minds of people in the past, but not necessarily directly control or communicate with them, creates challenges and opportunities for the military in George R. R. Martin's "Under Siege".
- Traveling to past battlefields provides a disturbing outlet for a psychopath's bloodlust in Steven Utley's "Where or When".
- Psychic mediums are actually talking to oblivious instant-messaging app users from the future in Kim Newman's "Is There Anybody There?"
- Refugees from other timelines face the prejudices and mistreatment of real-world refugees in Greg Egan's "Lost Continent".
- Time passes at different rates at different latitudes in David I. Masson's "Traveller's Rest".
- A timeless awareness of their whole lives is granted, even retroactively, to anyone

who eats a certain plant discovered on an alien world—this is the subject of Norman Spinrad’s “The Weed of Time”.

- Aliens escape imperialist human conquest by the expedient of moving and thinking too slowly to be useful to us in Eric Frank Russell’s “The Waitabits”.
- A spaceport where sailors sometimes arrive before they leave forces individuals to shoulder the responsibility of avoiding paradoxes in Geoffrey A. Landis’s “At Dorado”.
- People rent homes in their favorite eras and commute to the future in Karen Haber’s “3 Rms, Good View”.
- A pregnant woman makes a phone call to the future to ask her child, “Are you *glad* you were born?”³ in Adam Roberts’s “The Time Telephone”.
- Everyone gets to write one letter to their past self, to be delivered on a particular day in their last year of high school, in Kristine Kathryn Rusch’s “Red Letter Day”.

³Adam Roberts, “The Time Telephone,” in *The Time Traveler’s Almanac*, ed. Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, First U.S. edition (New York: Tor, 2014), 827.