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Ted chiang movie adaptations

Within the world of science fiction, Ted Chiang is legendary. He's won four Nebula awards, four Hugo awards, and a staggering number of other honors, all for a body of work numbering about fifteen stories. This is especially remarkable for a genre forged in the pulps, where top writers still regularly publish a raft of short stories and a novel or two yearly. But Chiang's work is worth the wait. Each story is a carefully considered, masterfully constructed, profoundly moving, and occasionally dangerous machine. He manages to capture the human drama behind philosophical questions, in clear and spare prose that seduces with its simplicity. No matter the genre, he's one of the best and most dedicated short story writers working today. Chiang was born in 1967 in Port Jefferson, New York, and received a computer science degree from Brown University. He had been submitting to science fiction magazines since he was in high school, and after he attended the Clarion workshop in 1989, he sold his first story to the legendary Omni. That story, "Tower of Babylon," also won him his first Nebula award, kicking off his remarkable career. His collection Stories of Your Life and Others, originally published in 2002, has just been re-released by Vintage. The title story is currently being adapted into the film Arrival starring Jeremy Renner and Amy Adams. In other words, if you want to be in on the secret of Chiang's fiction, now is the time. I met Ted over a decade ago, when I attended the Clarion West workshop in Seattle. At numerous science fiction conventions and workshops since, I've gotten to know him as a thoughtful, ambitious, and endlessly curious writer, as well as a good friend. What I'm saying is, if you're sitting in a hotel lobby at 1 a.m. and want to debate the nature of language, Ted is always game. He and I spoke over several rounds of email this June. Meghan McCarron: You published the first story in this collection in 1990, and the collection as a whole was first issued in 2002. Collectively, these stories have won 4 Nebula awards, a Sturgeon Award and a Hugo (and you've won even more awards since). What's it like to look back over your work, and your career from the vantage of 2016? Ted Chiang: The first thing that strikes me is the change in the status of science fiction over the last twenty-five years. Back when I first started publishing, science fiction was still very much a marginalized genre, and the word "genre" itself had a pejorative connotation. I remember trying to get into a creative-writing class in college and hearing the professor announce that she wasn't interested in students who wanted to write science fiction or any other genre fiction because the department's goal was to encourage original writing. The idea that contemporary realistic fiction might itself be a genre was pretty much unthinkable then. Obviously, there are still plenty of people who dismiss science fiction out of hand nowadays, but there are also plenty of people who pay little attention to the question of genre when looking for fiction to read. Now there are college classes devoted to science fiction; a writer like Nalo Hopkinson can be a professor in creative writing solely because of her work as a science fiction and fantasy author. I didn't really expect to see such things in my lifetime. So when I look back on my career, it's sort of like being a polka musician for a while and then seeing polka music become cool. (To polka fans who are offended at the suggestion that polka is uncool, I apologize.) When I first entered the field, I did so with the expectation that I could only ever reach a niche readership. Now it seems like there's the potential to reach a more general audience. McCarron: How do you think your writing has changed over that period? Has your writing been impacted by the growing popularity of science fiction? Chiang: I don't know if I'm qualified to say how my writing has changed; that's probably a judgment for others to make. I haven't deliberately tried to make my work more accessible to readers who aren't familiar with science fiction. I do think more general readers have become acquainted with certain reading protocols that were formerly the province of readers of speculative fiction; for example, in the past a lot of people would have been baffled by stories that take place in a world like ours but with a different history than ours, but now that's pretty standard fare. Readers are more skilled at figuring out the background setting of a story even when it's not laid out at the beginning, and I'm probably benefiting from that. McCarron: You and I were recently discussing that we struggle to imagine what we would be like if we had been born in a pre-literate culture, since written words are so embedded in our consciousness. You've mentioned in other interviews that Asimov was your first inspiration to write science fiction. But what drew you to reading and writing, period? What's your relationship with them now? Chiang: It's interesting to think about how profoundly we're a product of the culture we're raised in, even to the level of our modes of cognition. We'd all like to think there's something essential about us as individuals that would persist no matter where or when we were born, but so many of the pursuits that define us are entirely culture-specific. Music seems to be found in all cultures, so maybe a musician would be drawn to music no matter what form it took in the culture she was born into, but what would I be drawn to in a culture without the written word? I doubt I'd be a storyteller, because oral storytelling is all about performance and I'm not a performer. As for what drew me to reading, I was a voracious reader as a child, but there was a period in elementary school when I was more interested in nonfiction than in fiction. I remember reading stacks of books about animals in general and reptiles in particular. I also liked books about strange phenomena, like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. I recall that in the fourth grade, when we were reading From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler in class, I was also reading In the Wake of Sea Serpents by Bernard Heuvelmans on my own. Wow, I haven't thought about that book in years. I suppose that was how I satisfied my appetite for strangeness before I discovered science fiction. Nowadays, I'm distressed to say that my relationship to reading is changing. I'm absolutely still a reader, but I know that my attention span is shorter now because of the internet. The critic Katherine Hayles has proposed a distinction between the "deep attention" used when reading a difficult novel and the "hyper attention" used when switching between many different tasks, and I imagine most of us have felt ourselves shifting from the former to the latter. I wish I were able to stop it. McCarron: That a shortening attention span is a problem for you is both fascinating and mildly terrifying, because as a writer you're not active on social media. Where do you spend your time online? Do you see any positives to spending time there? Chiang: I think the internet has an impact even apart from social media simply because of the way it's changed our expectations of how often we should expect updates on anything. In the past you got general news every day, but for the latest updates in a specific field you were interested in, you got a magazine once a week or, more likely, once a month. Nowadays you can keep a bunch of browser tabs open on various websites that are being updated on an hourly basis, so you get accustomed to regularly switching tabs and reloading those pages to see what's new. And of course the articles online are usually shorter than articles in print, so your reading habits adapt. Everyone always had a threshold at which we'd say, "This looks like an interesting article, but it's kind of long; I'll save it to read later"; I think the more time we spend online, the lower that threshold becomes. I'm not sure what the positives of spending time online are, if by "positives" we mean "actually good for you" rather than just "seductive or fun." I suppose getting frequent news updates makes us feel more connected, either to the world as a whole or to a particular community. I'm conflicted; part of me is definitely technophilic, and as a science-fiction writer it probably also behooves me to have some awareness of internet culture. But I wish I were better at using the internet as a vast library without also using it as a wall of TV screens all tuned to different channels. McCarron: Your writing process is very distinct, and (from the outside anyway) seems highly systematic. You spend part of the year on freelance technical writing, and part of the year on a short story. I know you tend to do a lot of research, and always write the story's ending first. What's your process of composing and revision like? Do you write very differently when you do technical writing? Chiang: The way it usually works is that I have an idea that I've been turning over in my head for a long time: for example, the idea of a world where everyone is engaged in lifelogging. I think about different possible stories set in such a world; I can usually come up with a bunch of starting points, but I don't know where those would go. It's only when I come up with an ending that I can actually begin writing; I need to have my destination in mind. I don't have the whole story worked out in detail, but I have a general sense of what needs to happen. Sometimes I'm able to borrow elements from the other starting points that previously seemed like dead ends to me, although not always. And of course, things evolve over the course of actually writing out the story. Technical writing is radically different from fiction writing for me; the only thing they have in common is that they draw on the sentence-creation part of my brain. I'm not sure that technical writing has had a direct impact on my fiction, but I think the impulse that originally drew me to technical writing is also one that underlies my fiction, and that is a desire to explain an idea clearly. I think there's something beautiful about a good explanation; reading one isn't just useful, it can be pleasurable, too. McCarron: Relatedly, you tend to bring drafts of your stories to the Sycamore Hill workshop in North Carolina (a peer workshop run by Richard Butner which I've also attended). What role do workshops play in your writing process? Your larger writing life? Chiang: I like to get feedback on my stories before I submit them for publication, and at Sycamore Hill I can get feedback from a lot of smart readers all at once. And of course, spending a week doing nothing but talking to other writers is terrific. Unlike a lot of writers, though, I don't find workshops useful for motivating me to write by giving me a deadline by which to finish something. On the occasions that I have hurried to finish a story in order to have something to bring to a workshop, the need to meet the deadline caused me to make bad decisions with regards to the story, and I wound up spending more time fixing those mistakes. So now I sometimes decline an invitation to a workshop if I think it would force me to unduly rush the writing process. McCarron: In addition to Sycamore Hill's peer-review model, you've also experienced the Clarion workshop as a student, and you've recently begun teaching there as well. What was your experience as a student? As a teacher? Chiang: Attending Clarion was a life-changing experience for me. Before Clarion, I hadn't known anyone who wanted to write science fiction; I barely knew anyone who even read science fiction. Suddenly I was surrounded by people who had read the books I'd read and wanted to talk about the ideas I wanted to talk about. Within days I felt closer to them than to people I'd known through four years of college. I was familiar with science fiction as a literary genre, but Clarion was my introduction to science fiction as a community of people, and it's hard to fully describe the impact of that. I recently came back from my second stint teaching at Clarion; it was exhausting, but I had a great time. The caliber of students in recent years has been very impressive, far higher than when I attended, and I'm not sure what the explanation is. Part of it might be that Clarion is better known now and so gets more applicants than it used to, but it also seems that there's a much greater interest in writing in general nowadays. Even ignoring the explosion in MFA programs, there are lots of classes available online or locally, so people are more likely to have had some experience in writing before attending Clarion. McCarron: "Story of Your Life" concerns a linguist's personal transformation in the process of learning an alien language, and now the story is being made into a movie. What has it been like seeing the story transformed into the alien language of film? Chiang: That's a good way to put it! Film really is an alien language. Or at least it's a language that I have some fluency in as a listener, but one that I don't speak at all. I've always been aware of this at some level, but I was definitely reminded of it when I was first approached about the adaptation of "Story of Your Life," because it's not a story that I would have ever pitched to be made into a film. And this ties in with what we were saying about how deeply the written word is embedded in our consciousnesses. Because when a story idea crystallizes in my mind, what I'm thinking about are sentences. I assume that if I were a screenwriter, I'd be picturing scenes, and it makes me wonder about how deep are the differences between these two modes of storytelling. The process of adapting a book for film is also mysterious to me. In particular I'm thinking of the differences between the movie L.A. Confidential and the James Ellroy novel it was based on. I read the novel after seeing the movie, and was really surprised by it. The plot of the movie is fairly complicated, but it's nothing compared to the vast, sprawling conspiracy in the novel. If I had read the novel first, I would have said it was impossible to adapt into a movie. But what the screenwriters did was take the protagonists of the novel and construct a completely new plot in which those characters could play the same basic roles. The resulting movie is faithful to the spirit of the novel even though it's radically unfaithful to the text. That's an approach that would never have occurred to me; I think I'd be too reverent of the original to adapt anything to film. And then there's the whole industrial-production side of movies. Based on the tiny bit of the process that I've become aware of, making a movie seems like trying to plan the invasion of Normandy and creating a piece of art at the same time. It's kind of a miracle that any movie turns out well, given the logistical nightmare that's required to make one. The process for the "Story of Your Life" adaptation has been relatively smooth, I think; not fast—it's been five years since I was first contacted—but there haven't been too many cooks involved. It seems like the project has managed to avoid the typical Hollywood disasters you hear about. I'm looking forward to seeing it. McCarron: Are any of your other stories under option? Or do you have any stories you'd especially like to see interpreted by another medium? Chiang: I have a couple others stories that have been optioned, but they're still in the early stages of the development process so it'd be premature to talk about them. Some years ago I was approached by a director who wanted permission to pitch a cable TV series based on my story "Hell Is the Absence of God." Again this is not something that would ever have occurred to me, since the story seemed too relentlessly downbeat to ever appeal to a wide audience. But he envisioned a series that focused on people wrestling with questions of faith as they dealt with the repercussions of angelic visitations on their lives, and after some conversations he won me over; it sounded like a series I wanted to watch. The director pitched his idea to a network and they were interested enough to have him to write a pilot script, but eventually they got nervous about the religion angle and decided to pass. The window of opportunity for a TV series of that sort might have closed now that The Leftovers has aired, but I would still be interested in seeing the story adapted into a visual medium. McCarron: You often describe your work as concerned with philosophical questions, or as a means of exploring scientific ideas or alternate histories. But that obscures how human your characters are. Often a great deal of the tension in your work comes from characters who are self-centered, aggressive, or cruel, and the resolution is often an epiphany resulting in moral growth or peace. Do you see your writing as also possessing a moral dimension? Chiang: I don't set out to teach any moral lessons with my fiction, but I also don't like writing about characters who are, shall we say, doomed. What I'm thinking of are the James Ellroy novels I've read (maybe because I mentioned him when answering your earlier question). He often has a protagonist who's on a path toward self-destruction, but has a moment where he sees an opportunity to redeem himself, and then decides not to take it; he heads toward his doom with full deliberation. I'm not sure I could write a story like that; I can take some of that as a reader, or as a watcher of television, but I doubt I could live in that head space for the time needed to write a story like that myself. I prefer to write about characters who seek redemption when it's available. And I suppose that, if abstract philosophical questions were the only thing I was interested in, I'd probably write some form of non-fiction, like speculative essays. But I think philosophical questions are most interesting when they have significant consequences for a person's life. McCarron: How do you go about imagining a character who might embody or inhabit the questions you're concerned with in your stories? You accomplish the uncanny feat of pairing a massive, seemingly unsolvable human question with a specific human perfectly situated to grapple with it. Chiang: I don't have a specific procedure that I can describe, but your question does make me think of an idea that I heard from the critic John Clute: the notion that certain scenarios are easily storyable, meaning suited to being told as a story, while others are not. I remember once having a conversation with him during which he noted that climate change, as a topic, was not very storyable. I was inclined to agree, but felt that a lot of ideas don't seem storyable until someone actually does it. There's a Greg Egan story called "Luminous" in which the consistency of mathematics has become such a high-stakes matter that the protagonist is on the run from assassins because of it. So I suppose one of the things that interests me as a writer is finding ways to make philosophical questions storyable. McCarron: Your work has primarily been published in science fiction magazines up until now, though I'd argue your influences run the gamut from Asimov to Borges. What literary tradition do you see yourself in? What contemporary writers do you admire? Chiang: I definitely see myself as working within the science fiction tradition. Asimov was a huge influence on me when I was young—I read all of his work when I was in junior high and high school—but I wouldn't say my current writing is very much like his. I didn't read much Borges until after college, and I'm kind of glad I didn't; if I had read more of his work earlier, I might have given up on writing out of the conviction that there was no point in trying to do anything in his wake. I'd say it was in college that my writing matured, after I started reading writers like John Crowley and Gene Wolfe. In particular I have to call out Edward Bryant; he's not well known, but of all the writers I've mentioned, I think his work shows the clearest influence on my own. As for writers of contemporary fiction, let me mention some stories I admire: "Ralph the Duck" by Frederick Busch; "You're Ugly, Too" by Lorrie Moore; "Men Under Water" by Ralph Lombreglia; "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" by Alice Munro; "Memory Wall" by Anthony Doerr; "Archangel" by Andrea Barrett; and "Medium Tough" by Craig Davidson. McCarron: Many of these stories concern, on some level, the collision of different cultures or types of consciousness. You also have a significant international following. Has it been particularly interesting to you as a writer to see your stories translated and read by people with different cultural perspectives? Chiang: I'm fascinated by the question of why a given writer's work is popular in certain countries but not in others. It's tempting to look for some generalizations about, say, what Japanese readers like or what German readers dislike, but there are so many different factors at play that I don't think anyone can say much with real certainty. I have wondered if the fact that my work isn't steeped in the nuances of American culture makes it easier for readers outside of America to relate to it. On the other hand, lots of very culture-specific novels have been immensely popular in translation, so that hypothesis probably doesn't hold water. I am conscious of my good fortune to be someone who writes in English, because English works are so often translated into other languages; if I were writing in Swedish, for example, it's likely no one outside of Sweden would have ever read my work. McCarron: At some point in every interview with you, the interviewer points out that you're not particularly prolific. The story under that story, it seems to me, is of your extraordinary grit as a writer. You've been submitting work since you were in high school, and fought through years of rejection, and then grappled with the shock of success. And I know writing is something you describe as "hard." How do you keep going? What's your advice for people who work slowly? Chiang: There's a passage in Annie Dillard's The Writing Life where she's telling her neighbor that she hates writing and would rather do anything else, and her neighbor says, "That's like a guy who works in a factory all day, and hates it." Writing is so difficult for me that I have often wondered whether I'm actually suited for it, and I've had experiences with the publishing industry that made me quit writing for years. But I keep coming back to it because, I suppose, writing is an essential part of who I am. As for advice to slow writers, I'd say that writing is not a race. This isn't a situation where only the most prolific writers get an audience; publish your story when you're ready, and it will find readers.

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