

Introduction

Some days you wake up and it seems very quiet here in the world since you fell, yestereven, into the Sleep. But you get out of bed and think you might as well stick it to the end: that is certainly one meaning of the title chosen here. How long O Lord.

Sticking to the End is almost all recent work. Except for an obituary notice on John Sladek, which I'd lost track of two decades ago and have now found again and print here out of love for his memory, nothing precedes the pieces assembled in my previous volume of similar material, whose title sounds like it's waiting for the current title to finish the sentence: *Stay* (2014). Several addresses or talks from the past several years were given extempore and I've made no attempt to re-realize them here. They included a presentation of Aby Warburg's concept of *Pathosformaln* in Zurich in 2013 [for the relevance of this to *Fantastika* see "The Sacred Grove", page pp 171 ff below]; some Readercon sessions on the Lateral Fantastic, and on visual renderings of the boundaries of *Beast Fable*; and an inaugural address for the opening of the Clute Science Fiction Library at Telluride¹. I'd intially thought as well of "rescuing" some other pieces I'd long ago missed putting into *Strokes* (1988), my first collection of this kind of material, and got so far as editing a review of Philip K Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965), which I'd read an advance copy of over Christmas 1964 in *Toronto Nation* when snow blocking that was on the ground, as well as unredacting most of an 1981 *Washington Post* column about some later Dick novels, a long piece which had been lost decades ago and only disinterred after Michael Dirda visited the physical archives and found it. But by the time I'd finished assembling these relics an earlier century, they began to seem no better in any distinguishable way than the hundred or so other reviews and essays left out of that 1988 volume, mostly for reasons of space. Moreover, the draft of *Sticking to the End* had now hit 180,000 words, and I began to quail. It was time to lighten ship. These two pieces, plus some essays that on reflection seemed to repeat things said long ago, plus one or two hobbyhorsical forays into woowoo land, plus a few "professional" obituaries that could not be humanized sufficiently to preserve, have been deep-sixed. It is hope that what survives will not sink this argosy.

¹ viewable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFZnJUJWUQA&t=1110s>

The title also refers, half jokingly, to Anti-Spoiler Fetish, the exceptionalist claim that privileges the individual reader over the community by asserting that any single snowflake not wishing a piece to reveal how a story ends is justified in blocking that exposure. Decisions as to how to reveal the significance of the shape of a book are *not for the critic to take*. Even tales published a century ago or longer, we now understand, should not be "spoiled" by discussing them in their entirety; the presence of Spoiler Alert imprimaturs in twenty-first century critical works on nineteenth century stories – sometimes boxed in **boldface** for prominence – touchingly evokes a pre-*Chatterley*-Trial world where gentlemen scholars were chary of saying anything that might distress a maiden. Whisper it not: that a decades-long failure of reviewers and critics to contemplate good and bad endings *may* have contributed to the fact that so many recent books end in unshrifed stupor: nobody can hear the confession of ending in a vacuum.

In *The Upswing: How We Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (2020), the sociologist Robert D Putnam persuasively updates, from its seminal iteration in *Bowling Alone* (2000), the concept of "social capital": social capital being what Paul Collier in the *TLS* (16 April 2021) describes as "the web of non-contractual associational relationships that constitutes a community." The substance of *The Upswing* is a braiding together of this complex pattern of indices to reinforce the argument that, starting in the 1960s, there has been a thinning down of "social capital" from the community-based episteme which for a century had alleviated the solitudinous individualism of nineteenth-century America. His analysis of the narcissistic "I"-based individualist environment that daily asphyxiates us, the entitlement I-cabals we tug forelock to, is massively comprehensive. *Spoiler alert!*: Only one index of narcissistic self-privileging over community seems to have escaped Putnam's notice.

So, much of *Sticking to the End* seems to have been written in exactly that world Putnam describes, the ears of the mind battered by the increasing acoustic and psychic decibel level of the new race. At the darkest psychic pitch of this immurement – the Covid lockdowns seeming at times no more than a Body English of the solitudinizing of the world – it got worse than merely having to fend off a few thousand skinned Solitudes of Me: because the past seemed to have gone belly up. It was as though a bleeding out of the tesserae or ragas of lives in the

company of others might never be caulked. I do remember earlier this year scratching a note on the fake windowpane of my Facebook account: that it was kill-me-deadly odd in here, so far from the home dayspring of our kind, of lives concelebrant of differences like the taste of honeys.

But this did begin to lift, hence the getting of this book done.

Some further implications subtend from the title. If there was once a Middest to the world and its stories, a raft for stories to float upon, as Frank Kermode suggests in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), it seems to have shrunk into prelude. The title *Sticking to the End* clocks an apprehension that our lives are suffering asphyxiation through fixated adherence to the End of things; a sense that the tesseractal interjaculations of *Fantastika* are in danger of sticking to the end-moraines of this dishonoured home planet abandoned by its glaciers and all other water. Some of this sense, sagaciously condensed into assertions without proof, appeared in a **Scores** column for *Strange Horizons* in 2018, and has been considerably revised here [see p 171 ff below], *caveat lector*. In this piece, and in "The Sacred Grove" (cited above), I violate the protocols that have governed my previous six collections of previously assembled material, and which are otherwise applied again here: that revisions are restricted as much as possible to making original iterations fail better, without application of hindsight; and that later thoughts appear [*like this: within square brackets, in italics, and dated 2022*].

There are fewer friends and editors to thank this time around, because some are dead, and because I write – mostly on my own initiative – for fewer journals than before. As far as journals do go, my thanks to Niall Harrison and Aishwarya Subramanian of *Strange Horizons*, to Kevin Maroney of the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, to Charul Palmer-Patel of *Fantastika Journal*, and to Liza Groen Trombi and Tim Pratt of *Locus*. Thanks to Patrick Nielsen Hayden of Tor Books and to James Rose of The Folio Society. Thanks to John Crowley for our conversation, which appears below, with the help of B Diane Martin and the Readercon Committee; thanks also to Bradford Morrow of *Conjunctions*. Multiple thanks to David Langford of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Leigh Kennedy did the index, as always, with indefatigable patience, thank you again. Roger Robinson and I've been friends for forty years; and I've been publishing most of the stuff that is closest to my heart with his Becon Publications for almost two decades now: thank you again. For everything I thank Liz Hand. For everything

Judith Clute. *Sticking to the End* is dedicated to my oldest friend. We met in 1957. We saw Chicago, Colorado, New York and London together. What happens next, it's fair to ask.

The title of this book is loaded with omen, but nothing is not.

John Clute

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