



Stories of Your Life and Others

Ted Chiang

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Ted Chiang's first published story, "*Tower of Babylon*," won the Nebula Award in 1990. Subsequent stories have won the Asimov's SF Magazine reader poll, a second Nebula Award, the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and the Sidewise Award for alternate history. He won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 1992. Story for story, he is the most honored young writer in modern SF.

Now, collected here for the first time are all seven of this extraordinary writer's stories so far-plus an eighth story written especially for this volume.

What if men built a tower from Earth to Heaven-and broke through to Heaven's other side? What if we discovered that the fundamentals of mathematics were arbitrary and inconsistent? What if there were a science of naming things that calls life into being from inanimate matter? What if exposure to an alien language forever changed our perception of time? What if all the beliefs of fundamentalist Christianity were literally true, and the sight of sinners being swallowed into fiery pits were a routine event on city streets? These are the kinds of outrageous questions posed by the stories of Ted Chiang. Stories of your life . . . and others.

Stories of Your Life and Others Details

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From Reader Review Stories of Your Life and Others for online ebook

Kevin Kelsey says

Posted at Heradas

Ted Chiang's name continually comes up in lists of great short stories. He's never written a novel, but his short fiction has won nearly every SF award that exists. 4 Nebulas, 4 Hugos, John W. Campbell, Locus, and on and on. He's greatly admired among authors and almost entirely unknown by most readers. I've heard him referenced as an inspiration by several authors that I enjoy reading. Specifically Ty Franck and Daniel Abraham (who collectively write the Expanse series under the pseudonym James S. A. Corey) cite him as "the best SF writer". I figured I should probably do myself a service and check this collection out.

After reading it, I have to agree that his writing is mind-blowing. High concept science fiction that is grounded heavily in the real world. A writer of ideas. Every single story is incredibly unique, tonally diverse and powerful in different ways. If the quality among these 8 stories wasn't at such a consistently high level, I'd say that Chiang was merely a ghostwriting team, comprised of 8 different authors, all exceptionally talented, each with different interests, politics and prose styles. Every story genuinely feels like it could be penned by a different author. I've never come across a creative powerhouse like this guy. He impressed the hell out of me with every sentence.

Tower of Babylon: 5/5

Killer story. The Old Testament cosmology was especially fun to hear described--passing beyond the moon, sun and stars, etc. A telling of the construction and journey up the tower of Babylon, and what lies beyond the vault of heaven. Blew my mind right open. Seriously creative. I get why it won all kinds of awards.

Understand: 5/5

Again, with the unique approach to storytelling. While reading this one, I started realizing how some of these concepts have clearly influenced other stories. Most obviously, the movie 'Limitless' and the Max Barry novel Lexicon. I particularly liked how the language and vocabulary of the story evolves as the protagonist's intelligence and recall increases.

Division By Zero: 4/5

An examination of loss of belief, mental illness, suicide and math. What happens when everything you've worked for in your life, every kind of order that you've relied on, is suddenly incorrect?

Story of Your Life: 6/5

Stop what you're doing now and read this. This is the absolute best short story I have ever read. Chiang's grasp on the English language is deeply integrated into the story itself, causality, and omniscience. It's insanely good. This was the basis for the Denis Villeneuve film Arrival.

Seventy-Two Letters: 3/5

Interesting concepts, but storywise it was a little boring. The power of language to shape action and perception. Reminded me a lot of early 50s Asimov. All conceptual, not much character development.

The Evolution of Human Science: 3/5

Interesting and extremely short little tale about a scientific understanding breaking down between regular

humans and meta-humans. Conceptually cool, but too short to really be that interesting.

Hell is the Absence of God: 5/5

The moral of the story? God is a maniacal motherfucker who doesn't give a shit about humans, and you should love him unconditionally. This one was a real brain twister. I loved it.

Liking What You See: A Documentary: 5/5

Advertisers, elective localized brain damage, culture jamming, politics, coming of age, concepts of beauty, love, relationships. This was terrific and heavily subversive.

Adina says

3.5* for the 4 stories I read

I am not the number 1 expert or fan of short stories so please take my review with a grain of salt. This is the first SF anthology that I read so I am basically a newbie in this genre. I will review 2-3 stories at the time as I am going through other books at the same time and I would not want to forget what I read.

Tower of Babylon 2.5*

As synopsis the story is about people in the Old Testament reality which are building a tower to heaven and a surprise waits when they get there. The question behind this strange subject could be: How far should people go in the pursuit for knowledge?

"Perhaps men were not meant to live in such a place. If their own natures restrained them from approaching heaven too closely, then men should remain on the earth."

Understand 4*

A guy left with brain damage from an accident is treated with an experimental drug in order to regain his normal functions. The results are far better than expected. This story reminded me of Flowers for Algernon, a book I recommend to anyone. The main question here is again about knowledge. I one would get infinite knowledge what it should do with it? The story is very sciency and dense.

Division by Zero 3.5*

A genius mathematician discovers that she can prove that 1=2 and realizes that all she knew about mathematics will never be the same.

Story of Your Life 4*

This one was the best of the 4 stories I read, the inspiration for the Arrival movie.

Although I liked the stories I read, I wasn't too impressed. I lost the interest to continue with the other stories so I decided to give it up. I might come back to the remaining stories some other time but I doubt it.

I just saw The Arrival which is based on Stories of Your Life story. It was amazing! You should go see it! Now I need to read the whole collection.

Eh?Eh! says

These are amazing, more than 4 stars, and worth propping open on my steering wheel and glancing down to grab up a thought-ful of words at a time on straighways and gentle curves.*

As far as I can gather, Ted Chiang is an egghead scientist (technical writer?) who attended a fiction writing workshop and began belting out these incredibly well thought out short stories that have much more science than the typical science fiction. He's won enough awards that he once turned down a Hugo nomination for a story that he felt wasn't just right.

This collection holds 8 of his works. They're all gems with each facet edged razor-shart (I meant "sharp" but I'll leave what I typed, heh) to make you thinkthinkthink, not with difficulty but with wonder. Very much worth reading. At the end, Chiang offers a short explanation on what inspired each story.

"Tower of Babylon" - A different take on the old story and the shape of the world. From a structural engineering perspective, I don't think so.

"Division by Zero" - How the self can shatter when a core belief is proven false. Beautifully combined with a dissolving marriage and mismatch of empathy. Math-y.

"Understand" - Cerebral action movie! Experimental treatments lead to what sounds like more than full brain use and a pursuit of gestalt, of everything. Then he learns he's not alone.

"Story of Your Life" - It jumps between alien contact and a mother's memories about her child. The tense of the writing is odd until you realize that the linguistical (why isn't this a word? it should be and I want to use it) effort to understand the aliens' spoken and written languages is playing with the memories, casting doubt as to whether they're real or the thoughts of the linguist, the mother, as she pictures a child from beginning to death...whoa! I've garbled it terribly, but it's layered and that was one that caught me.

"The Evolution of Human Science" - Very short piece on what it might be like if advances advanced beyond normal understanding.

"Seventy-Two Letters" - Wow. I wish I'd paid better attention in history classes when we covered parthenogenesis and different early theories on reproduction. Set in Victorian times, referring to golems and steampunk-like ideas (I think?), it reminds me a little of the ending of the newer BSG series.

"Hell Is the Absence of God" - The most eloquent instructor I'd ever had who spoke about creation and God in the classroom was a thermodynamics professor. Chiang's story reminds me of him. The world in this story witnesses regular angelic visitations, which bring miracles but also great havoc and often kill more people than benefit. The rules seem arbitrary and unfair. Fascinating.

"Liking What You See: A Documentary" - Argh, another amazing one! Presented as a series of interviews on the political, ethical, and personal impacts if recognition of facial beauty could be flipped off. Also, the advertising industry is the devil.

*Uh, if I was one who would be so irresponsible to do such a thing.

Apatt says

"Interfering Gremlin of GR" Alert!

This review was originally of the anthology *Stories of Your Life and Others*, then recently I wrote a separate review for the individual story "Story of Your Life". Today I woke up to find GR have merged the two reviews. WTF? Now it looks super long-winded! OK, I'd better reorganize this review a bit.

Review of the novella "Story of Your Life"

Story of Your Life is one of Ted Chiang's best stories. Ted Chiang is one of the greatest sci-fi short stories writers ever (in many SF readers' estimation), he has won numerous Hugo and Nebula awards. This short(ish) story (novella) has been adapted into a into a film called Arrival. It is part of Chiang's legendary anthology *Stories of Your Life and Others*.

Story of Your Life has a twin narrative timelines or plot strands. Here is an example from each timeline:

"There's no easy way for us to write our own sentences in their language. We can't simply cut their sentences into individual words and recombine them; we'll have to learn the rules of their script before we can write anything legible. It's the same continuity problem we'd have had splicing together speech fragments, except applied to writing."

"It'll be when you first learn to walk that I get daily demonstrations of the asymmetry in our relationship. You'll be incessantly running off somewhere, and each time you walk into a door frame or scrape your knee, the pain feels like it's my own."

The writing of the two timelines not only seems to be from different books, but also by different authors. One of the timelines deals with the main story arc. Aliens are orbiting Earth in their craft for unknown purposes (certainly not to invade), they initiate communication with humans through mysterious "looking glasses" devices. Neither humans or aliens have any understanding of each other's language, so the military enlists ace linguist Dr. Louise Banks to study and somehow learn their language.

It turns out that the "radially symmetrical aliens", nicknamed "heptapods" by the humans, have separate spoken and written languages, called (by Louise) Heptapod A and Heptapod B respectively. The Heptapod B language is based on the aliens' perception of time as simultaneous, not sequential like how humans perceive it*. In learning Heptapod B Louise also learns to perceive time as they do. The other timeline is a more intimate story of Louise's life with her daughter, curiously written in second person future tense.

The narrative switches back and forth between the two timelines. Diehard sci-fi fans are likely to find the business with the aliens more interesting than the story of Louise's daughter's life. Personally, I find both timelines interesting, with very different appeals. Fans of China Miéville's excellent *Embassytown* will find the linguistic and philosophical explorations of this story quite fascinating. On the philosophical side, the story explores the idea of predestination, free will and how these things can affect the key decisions we make in life.

Story of Your Life was previously legitimately available free to read online or download, but I suspect the movie studio has put a stop to that**. It is a well-deserved Nebula Award and Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award winner. Ted Chiang is a wonderfully versatile writer he can be erudite, technical, philosophical, or lyrical as the story requires. I also highly recommend that you buy his amazing anthology *Stories of Your Life and Others* (see review further down this page). There are mind-boggling wonders to be found there.

Notes:

*Similar to how Kurt Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians aliens perceive time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

** There are still some great Ted Chiang stories that you can read online or download. One is *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* is a brilliant story that you should not miss. Try Googling for others.

- Among other things, this story is also a nice tribute to Jorge Luis Borges, who is one of Chiang's influences.
- Ted Chiang reveals how *Arrival* went from page to screen.

- **Update Jan 22, 2017:** The movie *Arrival* is not too shabby, more of a *Departure* than *Arrival* (?° ?? ?°), but the changes are tolerable. The military crisis they added on seems superfluous to me but the general filmgoers may need that kind of tension, I don't know. I certainly think you would appreciate the movie better after reading "Story of Your Life" first.

Quotes:

"I remember once when we'll be driving to the mall to buy some new clothes for you. You'll be thirteen."

"It was strange trying to learn a language that had no spoken form. Instead of practicing my pronunciation, I had taken to squeezing my eyes shut and trying to paint semagrams on the insides of my eyelids."

"The semagrams seemed to be something more than language; they were almost like mandalas. I found myself in a meditative state, contemplating the way in which premises and conclusions were interchangeable. There was no direction inherent in the way propositions were connected, no "train of thought" moving along a particular route; all the components in an act of reasoning were equally powerful, all having identical precedence."

If you want to keep up with the Joneses in the sci-fi reading community you will have to read this short story collection. Considering he has published less than 50 stories and not a single novel Ted Chiang is one of today's best-known sf authors among sf readers, this does not make him a household name but he is a force to be reckoned with. It is also remarkable how many major sf awards he has won given the relatively small number of stories he has published. In other words, he is terrific without being prolific.

Stories of Your Life and Others is the only collection Mr. Chiang has published at the time of writing, he also has a few other stories published which are not included in this volume. Having read this collection it is easy to see why he is so revered among the sf readership. All these stories are based on ideas which range from damn clever to ingenious, they are all beautifully written and most of them feature well-developed characters. I will just briefly comment on each one:

"Tower of Babylon" (Nebula Award winner)

The collection starts with a wonderful fantasy story that reads like sci-fi thanks to the logic employed. Imagine climbing the Biblical Tower of Babel to the very zenith, way above the clouds, all the way to where you would imagine heaven to be. Well, you don't have to imagine it, Mr. Chiang has done it for you with some amazingly visual description and immersive storytelling.

"Understand"

A sort of Flowers for Algernon crossed with the Cronenberg movie "Scanners" with a literally mind-blowing climax. It is very intelligently written and fast paced. I do wonder if Ted Chiang himself is a recipient of "Hormone K" therapy, his intellect does seem to be superhuman. A riveting novella-length tale.

"Division by Zero"

Obsession with maths can drive you mad. Not really my favorite story here, but like all the others it is clever and well written, short too!

"Story of Your Life"

(*This is my original mini-review for this story, I'm keeping it!*) One thing I hate about aliens on sci-fi TV is how goofy and anthropomorphic they tend to be. If they didn't have green skin or furry faces you would not know they are aliens. They are often just money grubbing, lusty, greedy, noble, heroic or vain as the human characters, and their language tends to be just as translatable into English as Chinese or Italian. The aliens in this story are very alien, they are beyond comprehension and if you want to speak their language you have to alter your entire way of looking at the world. This story is about more than just "first contact" however, it is also about the perception of time, fate, and predestination.

"Seventy-Two Letters" (Sidewise Award winner)

Another weird story set in a world where golems can be animated when embedded with names. This story is more about ideas than plot and moves at a stately pace. Again not a personal favorite but it is still interesting and not very long.

"The Evolution of Human Science"

More like an essay or journal article written in a fictional world than a (very) short story. It is basically about posthumanism and well worth reading and pondering afterward.

"Hell Is the Absence of God"

Another gobsmacking story, the fourth one in this short volume! A mind blowing fantasy set in a world where angel visitations and miracles are well known and documented facts. Religion, faith, good and evil are portrayed here in an intelligent, compassionate and logical manner. The most emotionally charged story in this collection. This one will stay with you for the rest of your days.

"Liking What You See: A Documentary"

Not really a documentary, but a story about how different our perception may be if we can filter out facial beauty and how "lookism" is ingrained in our lives. Written from multiple viewpoints and partly in journal style for that "macro" effect. Another excellent thought experiment.

This collection of stories is generally very readable, erudite, fascinating and memorable. A book like this is the reason most of us read sf/f books. What we have here is a real "sensawunda" merchant, one of the all-time greats.

After finishing this collection I immediately downloaded and read Chiang's The Lifecycle of Software Objects which the author and publisher have kindly made available to be read online. It is also amazing and a

must-read.

Cecily says

Ted Chiang is a technical writer in the software industry (as many of the best people are). He occasionally publishes short stories, a remarkably high proportion of which have won major sci-fi awards, including 4 Nebulas and 4 Hugos for only 15 works.

That indicates the quality of what's within these pages, but may mislead about the genre, content, and style. Some are set in the far past, and the only aliens and space-faring are in the title story, though there is futuristic technology in most. Speculative fiction, more than sci-fi.

Instead, these stories are primarily about **inner** space and ideas, especially seeking meaning by **analysing patterns** of language, maths, and nature. That leads to more theological and philosophical questions about good, evil, God, and what it means to be human - and at what point we cease to be such (see also Vonnegut's Galapagos).

I've reviewed each story individually; the links below are to those fuller reviews.

Tower of Babylon, 4*

Drilling through the vault of heaven in ancient Babylon.

Understand, 4*

Exponential intelligence enhancement.

Division by Zero, 4*

The devastating consequences of realising one's love object is fundamentally flawed.

The Story of Your Life, aka Arrival, 5*

Language Whorfs (warps) your mind. ;)

Seventy-Two Letters, 2*

Silly steampunk biotech.

The Evolution of Human Science, 3*

What's the point of humans when there are metahumans?

Hell is the Absence of God, 3*

Alpha Course studies Job in a world where angelic visitations are real. How to love God in an unjust world?

Liking What you See: A Documentary, 5*

Eliminating lookism.

Bonus story (not in this collection)

The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate, 4*

A theological, philosophical, and alchemical look at time travel, set on Earth, many hundreds of years ago.

Matthew says

Stories of Your Life and Others is a very interesting collection of stories. I think you really need to be into the “Sci” part of Sci-fi to truly enjoy them; they are thick with scientific terminology and theorems. For me, that reduced my enjoyment of a few of the stories while others had the perfect balance for me.

My favorites were Tower of Babylon, Hell is the Absence of God, and Liking What You See: A Documentary. One story (The Evolution of Human Science) was only 3 pages and, therefore, too short to rate. My least favorite story was The Story of Your Life, which is disappointing as it is the story the movie *Arrival* is based on and I was looking forward to seeing that.

I took all my ratings for each story and got the average – I give this book 4 stars even!

Tower of Babylon - 4.5 stars - A very strong start. The writing is great and comfortable to read. Chiang's speculative fiction set in biblical mythology is thought provoking and fascinating!

Understand - 4 stars - An interesting but complex and heavy story. This what-if? scenario just might drive you insane! Limitless anyone?

Division By Zero - 3 stars - Another story of mathematics and madness. I didn't really feel like a while lot happened here, but it was kind of interesting to think about what would happen if everything you have always fundamentally believed was proven, without a doubt, to be wrong. I believe if I was a little more into math, I would have connected to it more.

The Story of Your Life - 2.5 Stars - Quite drawn out for so little resolution. Mysterious for the sake of being mysterious. Interesting premise, but the confusion that comes when it gets really technical is not balanced by an enthralling story.

Seventy-two Letters - 4 stars - the premise of this story was fascinating and it was the first story in this collection with something that could be considered an action sequence. Still heavy on complex theorems, but still interesting when not too confusing.

The Evolution of Human Science - no rating - 3 pages so too short to rate. Lots of big complicated words crammed together. I believe the concept is that the world where it takes place is so advanced, they have to restrict development so humans don't get too smart.

Hell is the Absence of God – 5 Stars - Best story so far - pacing was great and the premise was fascinating: what if Heaven and Hell existed on the same plane as Earth and we had the potential to interact with angels on a frequent basis? This one got my brain juices flowing the most.

Liking What You See: A Documentary - 5 stars - my favorite out of the collection. A perfect balance of speculative science and storytelling. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder . . . or is it?

Michael Finocchiaro says

[UPDATED] This collection of short stories was quite insightful. There are seven stories here:

Tower of Babylon was probably my favorite. It is based on the Biblical story but with great twists and insights about human pretentious at higher knowledge and how the universe conspires silently to confound them.

Understand was an interesting one, but for me ended kind of abruptly. The idea of augmented intelligence was addressed famously (and better IMHO) in Keyes' Flowers for Algernon, but still this story does have some interesting ideas about the dangers of isolation and paranoia for particularly enhanced individuals.

Story of Your Life was a beautiful, moving story about language and extra-terrestrials and different ways at looking at phenomena in the natural world. My second favorite. Apparently, it was shot as a movie in "Arrival", but I missed that one in the theaters. I watched it in an airplane and enjoyed it a lot despite the Hollywood modifications to the plot. I thought visually they did a good job of rendering the aliens, but they overplayed the military aspect that was not really a factor in the short story. The lesson was more about finding common ground. The coolest aspect of the story, besides the linguistic aspect, was the bit about non-linear time. No spoilers though, you'll have to read it for yourself!

Seventy-Two Letters was a sort of interesting story but I got hung up on the names idea and never really was fascinated with golems and cabalistic philosophy. Not my cup of tea perhaps, or over my head? Not sure: I really wanted to like this one, but it eluded me.

The Evolution of Human Science is a really short report from a meta-human of human science. Kind of bizarre.

Hell Is the Absence of God was a great story about angels and belief in God and I really enjoyed it. I used a similar idea in my first book, so it was nice to see someone else thinking along similar lines.

Liking What You See: A Documentary was the last story in the collection about a calli, a technique for combatting what the author calls "lookism" or the discrimination against folks based on their looks. Set on a college campus, the debate rages over the benefits vs the costs of this technology. Interesting, but for me, not compelling.

The stories are followed by story notes which provided insight into what inspired Ted Chiang to write each story. I find his writing fresh and interesting and will probably seek out other work (but not after making a dent in my current reading list). That being said, as interesting as his ideas are, for short fiction in the sci-fi arena, I still prefer Ken Liu and his The Paper Menagerie.

Trish says

Review once I'm home. For now, let's just say that the final story got me into trouble with some people at the train station. *lol*

...

Now that I've had some time to reflect on all the stories I've listened to in this collection, I can honestly say that not one was bad. Sure, three were rather mediocre, but the others were either at least good or even so exceptional that they made up for the mediocre ones without much effort.

There are 8 short stories in this book:

- 1) Tower of Babylon
- 2) Understand

- 3) Division by Zero
- 4) Story of Your Life
- 5) Seventy-Two Letters
- 6) The Evolution of Human Science
- 7) Hell Is the Absence of God
- 8) Liking What You See - A Documentary

The first was good but not outstanding, the second and third were mediocre, the fourth (which is the basis for the movie **Arrival** that is now in theatres and the reason I read this book) was spectacular, the fifth was mediocre again, the sixth was as good as the first, and the last two were as fantastic as the fourth.

For this review I'd like to focus on the three stories I found exceptional.

Stories of Your Life: As a linguist, I was delighted to find a story where a linguist is the most important person. Because I can tell you from personal experience (and yes, I'm totally biased) that linguistics is NOT boring. Quite the contrary. Nevertheless, I often see people's eyes glaze over when I try to explain why not. To see Hollywood making linguistics popular (hopefully) is therefore a dream come true. The story did not progress the way I had expected but the concept as well as the execution were so stunningly beautiful that I'm still marvelling at both. Also, the emotional and moral implications are very heavy (in the best of ways). And the process of establishing communications with the aliens was fairly realistic (fairly because we're talking about aliens, realistic definitely in Terran terms like when the author explains the importance and difference between written and spoken language).

Here is a link a friend here on GR posted, showing the opinion of a linguist who saw the movie (beware of spoilers!): <http://gizmodo.com/what-arrival-gets-...>

I, personally, haven't read the article yet since it contains spoilers to the movie (which seems to be slightly different from the book so I wanted to wait) so I will get into more detail after having seen the movie.

Hell Is the Absence of God: The story was fantastically sarcastic - or at least I chuckled and laughed out loud at it. It shows very clearly why I could never be religious and everything that is wrong about religion (which means some people should probably not read it). Again, very intelligently executed too. Also, which is very important especially with such a topic, the reader is not forced to accept the author's opinion because he doesn't exactly show it - instead we have all the facets and are given the choice whether we hold with this or that character in the story and the respective world view.

Liking What You See - A Documentary: This was by far the funniest. A very important story especially nowadays that so many groups of people claim the moral high-ground, are constantly offended by everything so they constantly cry "ban this" or "ban that" and voluntarily hand over their rights and freedoms because they are desperate to feel "safe" (aka they are addicted to the illusion of being safe). I was very impressed with the different POVs here.

Some of the ideas used in this book aren't new but the way they were presented was always intelligent (yes, even in the mediocre stories). What I also liked was that there were two narrators alternating in narrating the stories (except for in the last one where they both narrated together, depending on who "spoke").

Although every story was completely different from the others, the characters were always true to life, their fates moving, and every situation was portrayed in a sort of 360°-examination; I suspect so as not to influence the reader opinion-wise.

Overall, this little collection proves that the author knows a lot about science and classic scifi themes and that he has a great talent for writing and making readers think critically about the world around them. I'm not surprised his stories have won several different awards and am now impatient to see the movie **Arrival**!

Cecily says

“Reading is nothing; comprehension is everything”.

Sarah Richards

I read the title short story while away at a conference for technical writers. The quote above came from a presentation about transforming the Government Digital Service, but the issues of communication (context and audience) that are at the heart of this story are key to technical writing and had echoes in many of the presentations. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ted Chiang is also a technical writer.

Note: This review is just the title story. I've reviewed the others in this collection [HERE](#).

Same Old, Same Old? No

Aliens arrive. They are suitably weird-looking: radially symmetric, with seven eyes and seven limbs on a barrel-shaped body, topped by a puckered orifice, but with no face and no front and back. They seem keen to communicate via devices humans nickname looking glasses. The military take charge. Of course they do. That's what always happens. Then things escalate...

But this is different. Linguist Dr Louise Banks tells, in linear fashion, how she and colleagues learned the alien languages. But that narrative is interspersed with non-chronological episodes from her daughter's life.

The heptapods' spoken and written languages are unrelated to each other, and the latter has strange properties that affect Louise's consciousness, specifically her perception of time and free will. This shapes the telling and curious grammar of her daughter's story, “I remember [past tense] what it'll [future] be like to...” It is a Borgesian paradox.

Linguistic Relativity - Sapir-Whorf

The story is underpinned by the idea that the structure of a language can affect the cognition of those who use it: Linguistic Relativity.

Heptapod A (spoken) is relatively straightforward and uninteresting; it “sounded vaguely like that of a wet dog shaking the water out of its fur”.

But Heptapod B (written) is very different. It is a totally separate language: the symbols don't relate to individual spoken words (logographic) or objects (picture writing), and there is no word order, in part because there are no words as such. Heptapod B has its own visual syntax (semasiographic), akin to mathematical equations, some sign languages, and the notation of music or dance.

It is written in a single smooth, sinuous, and rippling style that reflects the heptapods' own physical movements. It's also described as an Escheresque lattice and being like psychedelic posters. More significantly, it is not sequential. This seems to reflect the heptapods' modes of thought and it certainly comes to affect Louise's perception of the world and the way she tells the story of her daughter's life.

China Mieville's sci-fi novel, *Embassytown*, also features aliens with a totally different sort of language to

those known to humans. I reviewed it [HERE](#).

Orwell takes the idea of linguistic relativity to an extreme with Newspeak making “thoughtcrime literally impossible”. See *Nineteen Eighty Four*, reviewed [HERE](#).

Fermat's Principle of Least Time

Fermat, Sapir-Whorf, free will, and Heptapod B are intricately connected. At times, I wondered if the linguistics and maths/physics was getting too esoteric, but it didn't quite jump the shark and it all wove together brilliantly.

The detail below is for reference, and is spoiled, because understanding this is what the story is about (on the page, though not on screen).

(view spoiler)

UPDATE re Film

A good film, but not a great one, imo, and it makes more sense if you've read the story first. It was released in November 2016: *Arrival*. I feared, from the trailers, there would be very little linguistics, physics, or philosophy, and that it would be mostly a standard CGI-heavy, alien-action movie, with the world at risk, and a Hollywood ending.

The soundtrack is slightly ethereal, but not distractingly so, and Heptapod B looks beautiful and equally ethereal. There were some new and heightened plot threads, which is OK when adapting for a different medium (a new, dramatic intervention, and more international geo-political stuff).

I liked the way it didn't shy away from some of the technicalities of the linguistics, but what was really odd was that Ian's position as a theoretical physicist made no sense, because he never explained, or even mentioned, the maths/physics stuff about perception of time that was key to it all (see spoiler re Fermat's Principle of Least Time, above)!

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised, though people wanting standard Hollywood fare might be disappointed.

There's a really informative video about what changes were made for screen, and how those decisions were reached: [here](#). It's 13 minutes, with captions if you can't listen.

Other Links

I read this story thanks to Apatt, whose excellent review is [here](#).

This is the title story of a collection that I reviewed [HERE](#).

That collection includes a story with a non-linear, ideogrammatic language, *Understand*, which I reviewed here.

Posts about the linguistic aspects on Language Log (one of the few sites where it's worth reading comments):

1. Language is Messy (includes film trailer)
2. Language is Messy part 2, Arabic script
3. Alien Encounters

See also this interview about the linguistics in the film with Prof Betty Berner.

NY Review of Books on the book, the film, and the physics: [here](#).

Other sci-fi books with a linguistic theme on this GR list.

Thoughts to Ponder

- If you could read a Borgesian Book of Ages that records every event, past and future, would you? (Overview of JL Borges stories reviewed [HERE](#).)
- We know we're all going to die, but would you knowingly choose (view spoiler)? Except that knowing the future and having free will are mutually exclusive, which presumably means you have no choice in the matter.
- So, if you had a choice between knowing the future and having free will, which would you choose?
- “The rabbit is ready to eat.”
Who will be eating what? Context is all, and one interpretation excludes the equally valid other.
- “The only way to learn an unknown language is to interact with a native speaker... No alien could have learned human languages by monitoring our broadcasts.”
So is there any point in the Pioneer Plaque, illustrated at the top, or Carl Sagan's Arecibo Message?

Emily (Books with Emily Fox) says

I don't read very many short stories collection but after this one I feel like I now need to.

This one contains the most mind bending and original sci-fi stories I've read in a while.

My favorite what the last one!

Simeon says

Story of Your Life

Told from the perspective of a mother remembering her child. Absolutely heartbreakingly. And it was only 50 pages.

The mother, a linguist, is recruited by the government to interpret the language of an alien species, and she adopts a new perception of reality.

Easily one of the best short stories ever written.

The Tower of Babylon

A weird and mysterious way to start the short stories collection. Rewriting legend; as always with Chiang, best prefaced with the words: "Imagine if..."

Understand

Mind-blowing for its brevity, Ted Chiang's best stories are so compact, less talented authors would be tempted to expand them into novels.

Understand begins with the harrowing experience of being trapped beneath the ice. A new treatment for brain damage turns into something unexpected.

The story has parallels to the movie *Limitless*, but with the Hollywood crap replaced by meaningful, philosophical implications.

Division by Zero

This is a beautiful story inside the life of one of the world's foremost mathematicians as she discovers a new theorem...

Hell is the Absence of God

Ah, what if religion were based on scientific evidence, and the apparition of heavenly interference were something consequential... What if angels were a little more...

[image error]

Cognitive dissonance abounds.

Joe Valdez says

My introduction to the fiction of American author Ted Chiang comes with *Stories of Your Life and Others*, a 2002 collection of eight hard science fiction short stories published over the previous twelve years. My anticipation was to dust off one tale in particular, "Story of Your Life", the source material for a movie titled *Arrival* starring Amy Adams and Jeremy Renner that opens in the U.S. two months from the time I'm posting this book report. I dove into the collection due to Chiang's gift for immersing me in worlds where physics, linguistics and engineering are used as tools for characters grasping at the very essential and emotional questions of what it means to be human.

-- "Tower of Babylon" (*Omni*, 1990). In the world of the Old Testament, a miner named Hillalum from Elam arrives by caravan in the storied city of Babylon, where the fabled tower has extended to the vault of heaven itself and a team of miners has been contracted to tunnel through. Chiang's supplants biblical myth with physical and mechanical engineering to create a world where man is using tools and technology to create marvels and unlock the very secrets of God. This story is everything the Bible isn't when I try to read it: sensual, clear and full of wonder. The ending is one I'd like to think that Rod Serling would've appreciated. ***** (5 stars).

-- "Understand" (*Asmiov's*, 1991). A graphic designer named Leon Greco revived after an hour drowned under the ice is treated with the experimental hormone K. Side effects for those who suffered major damage to their neural network turns out to be elevated levels of intelligence. Developing genius level skills in strategic thinking, Leon anticipates the CIA will attempt to recruit him so he goes on the run, discovering he's not the only test case to get that idea. This is an intellectually thrilling story in which Chiang very clearly and very cleverly depicts what might be capable and become of an average person who begins using their brain's capacity. ***** (5 stars).

-- "Division By Zero" (*Full Spectrum 3*, 1991). Mathematician Renee Norwood checks out of a mental facility and returns home with her husband Carl, who anticipates he'll be able to help his wife recover from her suicide attempt due to hitting rock bottom himself in college. He doesn't anticipate that the formula Renee has discovered erodes the foundation of mathematics, forcing her to question the very nature of the reality she knows. I liked this story okay, which is more fiction with science in it than science fiction. Chiang documents the perils of a career in theory when the theories cease to be sufficient, creating a theological vacuum. I want to reread it with a dictionary. *** (3 stars).

-- "Story of Your Life" (*Starlight 2*, 1998). When extraterrestrial ships appear in orbit and their "looking glasses" materialize in meadows around the world, linguist Louise Banks is recruited by the army for fieldwork. Working with physicist Gary Donnelly, Louise deploys to one of the screens in the U.S. Her assignment is to help establish communication with the aliens, which have seven limbs, seven eyes and are being called heptapods. Communicating with two heptapods they name Flapper and Raspberry, Louise and Gary determine that learning a new spoken language (Heptapod A) will take longer than communicating with a written one (Heptapod B).

The idea of thinking in a linguistic yet nonphonological mode always intrigued me. I had a friend born of deaf parents; he grew up using American Sign Language, and he told me that he often thought in ASL instead of English. I used to wonder what it was like to have one's thoughts be manually coded, to reason using an inner pair of hands instead of an inner voice. With Heptapod B, I was experiencing something just

as foreign: my thoughts were becoming graphically coded. There were trance-like moments during the day when my thoughts weren't expressed with my internal voice; instead, I saw semagrams with my mind's eye, sprouting like frost on a windowpane.

Louise unlocks heptapod communication, which is not based on the sequential consciousness of humans but simultaneous consciousness, which takes into account the future as well as the past and present. Louise becomes fluent in this alien consciousness, which has the side effect of (view spoiler) and stripping Louise of what she once considered to be free will. Like the stories that precede it, this one is so good that my only criticism is that it could've been expanded into a novel. The characters seem too comfortable around the aliens, but the story is riveting and emotionally resounds. ***** (5 stars).

-- "Seventy-Two Letters" (*Vanishing Acts*, 2000). I abandoned this story is muddled in fantasy and/or scientific concepts that I couldn't wrap my mind around. Worse, it's also the longest of the collection. I like knowing where I'm at and what the rules are quickly as opposed to belatedly. * (1 star).

-- "The Evolution of Human Science" (*Nature*, 2000). I abandoned this story as well, the shortest in the collection, a three-page essay of some sort that doesn't attempt to tell a story but looked like jargon-filled writing to me. * (1 star)

-- "Hell Is the Absence of God" (*Starlight 3*, 2001). The archangels (Nathaniel, Bardiel, Rashiel, etc.) exist and visit earth with the shock and awe of superheroes. Neil Fisk is forced to reevaluate his belief in God when his wife Sarah is killed by falling glass during a visitation. He seeks out a religious communicator named Janice Reilly who was not only born with flippers instead of legs, but as an adult, has her legs restored for unexplained reasons by God during a visitation. In addition, a family man named Ethan Mead has waited all of his life for a sign and struggles with what God wants from him based on the non-eventful visitation he witnessed.

Ethan attended the support group meetings that followed and met other witnesses to Rashiel's visitation. Over the course of a few meetings, he became aware of certain patterns among the witnesses. Of course there were those who'd been injured and those who'd received miracle cures. But there were also those whose lives were changed in other ways: the man and woman he'd first met fell in love and were soon engaged; a woman who'd been pinned beneath a collapsed wall was inspired to become an EMT after being rescued. One business owner formed an alliance that averted her impending bankruptcy, while another whose business was destroyed saw it as a message that he change his ways. It seemed that everyone except Ethan had found a way to understand what had happened to them.

This is my favorite story in the collection. The imaginative leaps and bounds Chiang takes to build a fully functioning world are staggering. Angels do exist in this world, but they're nothing like those in angel-themed movie or TV series we've seen before. In this story, as many innocent bystanders are killed or witnesses cast into lives of confusion as souls are saved. The designs of God and His messengers remains a mystery to man, who grasps at even more straws to determine their place in the world as we do in ours. Each of the three characters are taken on a spiritual journey filled with equal parts soul searching and levity. It's a truly amazing read. ***** (5 stars).

-- "Liking What You See: A Documentary" (*Stories of Your Life and Others*, 2002). Transcript of a "documentary" in which a college debates whether to ban "calliagnoisa," a medical procedure in which young people can be temporarily blocked from discriminating on the basis of physical appearance. They can see faces but have no reaction as to whether it's an attractive or unattractive face and are able to consider people on substance, not superficiality. It's "interesting," which means I didn't care for it. The transcript

approach wasn't to my liking. A narrative about a college freshman who unblocks her "calli" protection and then has it reinstalled might've worked. ** (2 stars)

Kristijan says

Dok ne sro?im nešto o ovoj kolekciji pri?a, evo mojih ocena:

Vavilonska kula - 4

Shvati - 4

Deljenje nulom - 3

Pri?a tvog života - 5

Sedamdeset dva slova - 5

Razvoj ljudske nauke - 3

Pakao je odsustvo Boga - 5

Voleti ono što vidiš: Dokumentarac - 4

Dakle, prose?na ocena za celu zbirku je: 4,125

Ove tri pri?e koje su doibile peticu su baš baš baš odli?ne!!!

Montzalee Wittmann says

Arrival by Ted Chiang is an ebook I picked up from the library because everyone was talking about the movie and I wanted to watch it but I like to read the books before seeing the movies, I have a thing about that. I didn't know this was a book of short stories. Again, I have a thing about not reading blurbs if I can help it in books I have already. (If I am looking for a book, that is different.) This book is not a novel but a lot of short stories. Each one is drastically different and each make the reader really think, think deep. I like that. The one that became the movie, wow. I enjoyed it too. I am glad someone told me about the movie so I tracked down this talented author. I really enjoyed these short stories. My emotions and brain was all over. It was stretched and it felt good. Now, I can't wait to go watch the movie! Can't wait to see how they made this short into a full length movie! I hope it did story justice.

Bradley says

Update: Saturday the 12th, November 2016

I just watched the movie The Arrival and OMG it was amazing. :) :) :)

I cried. Like, a lot. I had chills and sat on the edge of my seat and I was totally engaged.

What's worse? The personal aspects of the movie just blew me away. And even worse? The mental ones were profound and beautiful and amazing. :) I AM SQUEEING!!!!

Now here's the big question: Am I a fanboy because the movie only improved my appreciation of the original story? Or am I just blown away by the better presentation of the original story?

The mathematical implications in the original story and the way it described what was going on is not to be discounted at all, mind you. I loved what the text could do and did. But the movie got me on a whole different level and I was laughing and crying and it was soooo damn bittersweet and glorious all at the same time. I was MOVED. Jeeze. I'm amazed, even.

So? Best movie of the year? I think so. There were a lot of great ones out there, too, but this one took the cake. *shiver* :)

Old Review:

I can't believe that I took so long to check out this story collection.

In fact, I don't believe it. For one good reason: I read one of his short stories when it came out and hadn't remembered that I had until a few pages in. AND I remembered loving it! Golems! Names of God! MURDER. :) That was one hell of a pleasant surprise.

As for the rest, I admit to wanting to know the story that The Arrival is based on before I watched the movie this weekend. And here's the strange part: While I loved it, I loved all the other stories even more!

shock

Seriously, this man is a walking powerhouse of sharp-as-hell storytelling and erudition, all wrapped up in an utterly fascinating intensity and focus on singularly awesome issues. I'll skip discussion on the stories that didn't blow me away, but that still leaves almost all the stories in the book!

What do I mean? Okay, take Tower of Babylon. If having a world where the building of the tower wasn't hampered, where reaching the city of God at the top takes more than a full year of pilgrimage, where we're immersed in ancient Babylon is twisted with one singular difference, can you guess what that difference is? I laughed-out-loud after I discovered it. Just imagine the old joke of half glass full/empty when applied to engineers. The glass didn't meet design specifications. Oh my god.

Anyway. :) Then there was Understand, which made me think of Flowers for Algernon with a seriously different bent. Let's go ultimate intelligence with the focus on understanding the real nature of thought. Hell yeah. I mean, we didn't even need the techno-thriller aspects of this modern retelling or the fight between ultimate intelligences. Not really. But it was also fun as hell.

What about Stories of Your Life? The one that is tied to the new movie? It's about linguistics and the nature of similar concepts linking the ways we think about higher physics and the fact that we need to make that bridge before we could even speak to this alien intelligence. Or how our conception of time, of cause and effect, is completely useless inside their language. If we actually begin to understand it that heavy concept, how can that change our lives? It really is gorgeous.

Seventy-Two Letters: Golems as a great twist on artificial intelligence, featuring the problems of reproduction and natural selection as a linguistic issue, focusing on the Kabbalah as the key to unlock the power and creative force of God. And it's a great adventure, too! :)

Liking What You See: A Documentary: Oh goodness, this was a blast. It's all focused on the nature and the use and misuse of beauty with a major twist. What if we could block the paths in our brains that let us see

and feel the effects of beauty? Purpose: To see people as they really are below the skin. No more pre-judging assholes as really great people because they're pretty. No more ignoring the uglies who might be great people. Level the playing field and judge people by their actions.

Great, huh? Well this documentary focuses on pilot schools and whole social movements for the treatment and the backlash of whole industries that want the slavery to continue. Really great thought-experiment, and beautifully written.

Cult of personality, indeed! How much of it is skin-deep?

Sorry. I got really excited about all this. :) I love it when I read really great books. :)
