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Book Review

Passions Read & Hearts Fed: Science Fiction Orients Library Science to the Anthropocene—A Review of *I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land*

Wendy Highby, Katherine Shull, and Emory Jay Trask

Connie Willis' story, "I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land," appeared in the November/December 2017 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* and was subsequently published as a limited-edition monograph in 2018 by Subterranean Press. The setting for her current-day cautionary tale is a chimeric Manhattan bookstore called Ozymandias Books. The labyrinthine business appears to be a last refuge for endangered books. The protagonist, Jim (an ambitious, forward-thinking blogger), rethinks his penchant for all things innovative when he visits the store and becomes conscious of the havoc wreaked upon books by the circumstances of the Anthropocene. Wars, weather, bookworms, book burning, and thoughtless culling are among the destructive forces used in the bookstore's unique cataloging schema. Jim comes to understand the urgent need for the systematic, proactive, and decisive preservation of information and disaster planning in this era of extreme climatic change.

To be properly understood, Willis' story, like an astronaut on a spacewalk, must be umbilically connected to the mothership, Percy Bysshe Shelley's sonnet. The title of the novella and the bookstore's name are homages to the sonnet, "Ozymandias," below.

OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

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Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”¹

The title references the sonnet’s first line almost verbatim, except for the change of the preposition “from” to “in.” Jim is the traveler *from* Points West but *in* an antique land, an out-of-towner who considers print books outdated and their extinction well deserved. The definition of the word “antique” is contextual; it can be pejorative, meaning passé and anachronistic. Alternatively, “antique” might refer to an enhanced value because of provenance, condition, and/or rarity. By the story’s end, Jim’s opinion changes; he “travels” from technophile to preservationist, appreciating Ozymandias’ antique, collectible tomes.

By casting a blogger as her hero, Willis acknowledges the extent to which authorship and publishing have been changed by the advent of the World Wide Web. Blogs are disconnected and posts often organized in reverse chronology. They are fragmented, much like the sculpture in Shelley’s sonnet: trunkless and scattered, head half-buried in a digital landscape lacking landmarks. Shelley’s sonnet and Willis’ story complete and complement one another and are co-dependent; where one has torso-less legs, the other has a torso.² Without authoritative authorship, we cannot get our bearings—we are missing the torso, the unifying, cohesive core. Initially, Jim’s persona also lacks complexity; he is a one-issue pundit. He gets pushback for his cavalier attitude toward the demise of books, raising the ire of a radio interviewer during the publicity tour arranged by his agent.

Jim is also buffeted and blown about by the weather, a straw man and blogger of no account, but his resolve strengthens by the novella’s end.³ Though his current

¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Ozymandias*. Chicago, IL: Poetry Foundation, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>.

² A “torso” is an unfinished literary work.

³ *Kirkus Review* calls Jim a “straw man.” *Kirkus* describes this story as “a passionate rant about books being lost to changing document-preservation practices, lightly disguised as a novella.”

residence is not specified, there are hints he may hail from the West, as he uses a southwestern metaphor, describing local weather as “wind whipping through the skyscraper canyons.”⁴ A “nasty” rain pounds Manhattan, and although climate change and global warming are not explicitly named, they permeate the story. The extreme inclement weather determines the plot. It delays the mass transit system, the taxis, and the airport, and exerts a chaotic domino effect upon business interactions. Precipitation forces Jim into Ozymandias Books. Killing time prior to his publishing appointment, he shelters in the recessed doorway of the bookstore to escape the downpour. New York City’s inundation by flood provides the extreme opposite to the Fertile Crescent’s desertification described in the sonnet.

Shelley uses Ozymandias’ reign to represent the epitome of Near Eastern Civilization. Likewise, Willis establishes Jim as a typical Westerner, a pivotal witness to and colluder in Western Civilization’s fall. The single-minded straw man is soon revealed to be complex, flawed, and relatable, an Occidental Tourist⁵ and writer out of his element, a *Stranger in a Strange Land*.⁶ He is a disoriented traveler, to whom the New York City streets look identical.⁷ Franchising breeds predictability, and accomplishes a horrific ubiquity, an unhealthy monoculture. The novella is book-ended with complaints about the look-alike streets of New York City. Jim begins by using the adjectival phrase “terrible thing” to describe the sameness of Manhattan streets, and ends by cursing the “goddamn look-alike streets.”

Etymologically, the word “orientation” evokes the East and rising sun, and “occident” the western setting sun. Jim’s narrow-lensed, futuristic view is balanced by his wide-open “western” curiosity, which is piqued by his discovery of the subterranean book preserve. Jim’s intelligence (along with, or in spite of a nostalgia for old Westerns, and attraction to a capable and leggy blonde) makes him educable, able to change. This attribute of openness is critical, as systemic change is what Willis ultimately advocates. It is the core message contained in the novella, essentially a bibliophile’s survival guide to

Kirkus disregards the layers of complexity in the novella and Jim’s transformation into a heroic character and fails to acknowledge the puzzles with which Willis deftly challenges her readers. *Kirkus Reviews*, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/connie-willis/i-met-a-traveller-in-an-antique-land/>.

⁴ Connie Willis, “I Met a Traveller in an Antique Land,” *Asimov’s Science Fiction* (November/December 2017): 172.

⁵ Here, Jim is similar to Anne Tyler’s travelogue-writing homebody in her 1985 novel *The Accidental Tourist*. Anne Tyler, *The Accidental Tourist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

⁶ Willis’ story is rife with references to other literary works, both obliquely and explicitly. Willis’ title, directly evocative of Shelley’s sonnet *Ozymandias*, with its homage to travelers and antique lands, also seems to reference Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1961).

⁷ He is lost like Jack Lemmon’s character in Neil Simon’s film script, *The Out-of-Towners*.

the Anthropocene. It is significant that the hero exhibits the dominant culture's stance toward Native Americans and women, as this traditional hierarchal stance toward nature arguably needs to change in order to halt our lemming-like trajectory toward the precipice of climate crisis.

Ozymandias is appropriately located in New York City, a nexus of the media and publishing industries and a coastal area predicted to be affected by sea level rises due to climate change.⁸ The bookstore's clandestine backroom operations (an understaffed, subterranean warehouse with a belching chute of books) are accelerating toward systemic breakdown. This seems to be aggravated by austerity (a hallmark of disaster capitalism) and stems from consequences of the Anthropocene. Cassie, the novella's lipstick librarian,⁹ serves as the harried harbinger of the bibliographic Apocalypse; she is docent, travel guide, and controller of the central processing unit. She supervises a preservation system that is woefully inadequate yet mysteriously impervious to smoke, water, and GPS triangulation. Jim first meets Cassie as he explores the recesses of the store. He becomes curious about the lack of an intelligible ordering schema and encounters an almost Escherian series of stairs. These tiers lead him into an alternative reality, much like M.C. Escher's lithographic print *Relativity* where laws of gravity differ.¹⁰

Science fiction fans familiar with Willis' oeuvre and genre can't help but subconsciously search for evidence that Ozymandias' tomes travel through time.¹¹ By contrast, Jim's preferred genre, the Western adventure story, concerns cattle rustlers and roundups rather than wrinkles in time. Thus, Willis lassos her readers and herds them out of familiar territory into her confounding plot, as seen through Jim's eyes. He steers the narrative as a protagonist who is out of his element but persistent in his inquiry. With logical and methodical reasoning, he follows both his intellectual curiosity and his feelings, and quickly makes emotional attachments. His cavalier stance toward the demise of the book soon crumbles like pulped paper when his sentimental memories are aroused by remembrance of a favorite childhood book, *Ambush in Apache Canyon*. Nostalgic and vulnerable, he falls fast for the lithe blonde—"Cassie, I thought, glad to know her name. Was it short for Cassandra?"¹² —and simultaneously starts to comprehend the classification scheme. The western metaphors continue: "Cassie...led

⁸ *States at Risk*, "New York Coastal Flooding," <http://statesatrisk.org/new-york/coastal-flooding>. Accessed October 20, 2019.

⁹ Linda Absher, "What Is?" *Lipstick Librarian* (2001). <http://www.lipsticklibrarian.com/what-is/>. Accessed October 20, 2019.

¹⁰ M.C. Escher, *Relativity* (1953), lithograph, 294mm x282mm. M.C. Escher Foundation and the M.C. Escher Company B.V., <https://mcescher.com/lw-389/>. Accessed October 20, 2019.

¹¹ Consummate examples include *Doomsday Book* and *Blackout*.

¹² Willis, "I Met a Traveller," 179.

the way...in a zig-zagging trail just like the one the kid had followed through the red rock canyons in *Ambush in Apache Canyon*.”¹³

Jim’s [and our] need for connection and his natural ability to reason may eventually be his [the book-lover’s] salvation. Through Willis’ narrative, readers may become Occidental Eco-Tourists and perceive the systemic problem, the big picture (if they can cowboy up, escape the narrow-viewed urban box canyon, and see the big sky). Jim is well on his way in this journey when he begins to see the importance of preservation. Big picture thinking is an essential prerequisite for an ecologically sensitive worldview.¹⁴ Ecologists call this type of thinking “eco-mind” or “eco-systemic.”

The warehoused books present an overwhelmingly undifferentiated landscape, reflecting Jim’s emotional emptiness and highlighting his need for orientation and connection: “There must be something I could orient myself by—a book’s distinctive color or its title—but I couldn’t see anything I recognized.”¹⁵ This bleak landscape matches Shelley’s devastating picture of the desert land of the sonnet: “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.” Jim grasps for structure, pattern, and relationship as he observes and analyzes the co-location of books in Ozymandias’ warehouse and thinks about the cross-referenced causes of bibliographic destruction.

The libraries’ losses result from and are metaphors for the degradation in our current environment, a ubiquitous scourge. The county in which the author Connie Willis resides is one of the country’s largest extractors of oil and gas and a huge source of methane emissions, a contributing cause of global warming.¹⁶ Dutiful Cassie represents those who are actively contending with the consequences of climate change. She is always in crisis mode, perpetually reactive, her labor pool insufficient and on call for the disaster. An unstanchable flow of books bleed out of the baggage claim-like chute. Jim is caught in this box canyon of shelves. Accustomed to a sky much bigger than the sliver he can see above the steel towers, he is dizzyingly distracted in the subterranean warehouse

¹³ Willis, “I Met a Traveller,” 182.

¹⁴ Frances Moore Lappé, *EcoMind: Changing the Way We Think, to Create the World We Want* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2011).

¹⁵ Willis, “I Met a Traveller,” 189.

¹⁶ Weld County, Colorado has 23,753 active oil & gas wells, most using the technology of “fracking” (the environmentally controversial technique of extraction via horizontal drilling and pumping of water and chemicals into the shale formation, thereby fracturing it). Ben Markus, “Colorado Drillers Pumping Record Oil, More on the Way,” *Colorado Public Radio News* February 16, 2018, <http://www.cpr.org/news/story/colorado-drillers-pumping-record-oil-more-on-the-way>.

and on Manhattan's cross-streets, and his predicament will get worse before it gets better.¹⁷

His frustration increases when he attempts to return on a subsequent day. Unable to locate Ozymandias, he consults phone books, maps, and local expertise. Google search algorithms yield oddly co-located results and quirky cross-references. The demise of phone books, the unreliability of cell coverage, the ascendancy of Amazon's monopoly, and the fall of independent bookstores all serve to signify the End Times. Inadequate classification schema and preservation protocols, unpredictable weather, the decay of normal business relationship etiquettes, an unfortunate series of appointments made and cancelled, transportation delays in the form of flooded subways and non-existent taxicabs combine to create a water-soaked environment of chaos.¹⁸ Is Ozymandias a maladaptation—a bookstore, mafia front, delusion, hallucination, dream, mail-order warehouse, book refuge, book preserve, or book morgue?

Devoted readers of Willis may be disappointed if they expect the witty repartee and happy endings of the author's typical romantic sci-fi comedies¹⁹ though the story does concern relationships and displays a sense of humor. Cassie and Jim, when paired, embody reason, sympathy, and action. They are the love interests, the bibliophiles, the sonnet's "passions read" and "heart[s]...fed" by the space-time-transcending power of books. Willis' novella is a clarion call to all who believe in the importance of the written word. This common value is the centering Rosetta Stone, a compass or key with which to enter and navigate Willis' labyrinthine world. Armchair travelers/readers might sympathize with Jim's disorientation and/or Cassie's determination, as they read the traveler's survival guide replete with catalogs, classification schema, and a protagonist whose reasoning is transparent and easy to follow. Starting with the title, Willis provides

¹⁷ Equally as prescient and perceptive as her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley wrote the book *Frankenstein*, a horror story about technology gone monstrously awry. The Cornell University professor and engineer Dr. Anthony Ingraffea uses Mary Shelley's book as metaphor when he uses the epithet "Frankensteinian" to describe the subterranean stone-shattering technology commonly known as "fracking" that is used to extract oil and gas: "Modern shale gas development is, in my opinion, reversing what nature has done over the last 400 million years or so. In shale gas development we're releasing carbon that nature stored for all that time...And we get it out by pumping water down. This is at a time in human existence when global warming from excess carbon dioxide and methane and water shortages are problems worldwide. To me that is Frankensteinian—a devilish, deadly process." See: Ellen Cantarow, "Meet Anthony Ingraffea—From Industry Insider to Implacable Fracking Opponent," *DeSmogBlog*, January 3, 2013, <https://www.desmogblog.com/2013/01/03/meet-anthony-ingraffea-industry-insider-implacable-fracking-opponent>.

¹⁸ *New York 2140* by Kim Stanley Robinson (2017) speculates about New York's flooded future. Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140* (London, UK: Orbit Books, 2017).

¹⁹ See, for example, Willis' *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, *Crosstalk*, and others.

clues that the novella's subject is time travel (the very act of reading Shelley's sonnet spans centuries).²⁰ Reading, enmeshed with reasoning and imaginative, sympathetic comprehension, establishes a transcendent relationship between travelers (authors, readers, and books). The act of reading interconnects the trajectories of travelers; thus, readers become enmeshed and invested in the story's outcome. The books pile up on Ozymandias' stairs and the unconsummated romance of Cassie and Jim becomes a sphinxian riddle for readers to complete, hopefully projecting upon it their love of books and reading.

Willis, like Nicholson Baker before her,²¹ critiques librarians who take a cavalier stance toward preservation. Surpassing Baker, she not only throws the book at them, she literally catalogs the bibliographic apocalypse. Over 70 books and over 30 authors are mentioned in the story, such that some readers may feel compelled to create an Excel spreadsheet and verify titles in WorldCat.²² Willis' ingenious trap is more effective than quicksand, more alluring than a siren's call. The reader is stuck in the devilish details long enough to learn about disasters and book preservation. The books in Willis' story are time travelers too. As dropped clues, they are more nuanced and evocative than breadcrumbs. The story is a puzzle for book lovers; where there's been a fire, there should be a smell of smoke in the pages of the surviving books. The catalogued books are connected by their singularity, yet not necessarily singular. They are connected by their antiquated status, yet not equally valued as collectibles. Willis' title-dropping and author name-dropping is an enigmatology of Shortzian proportions.²³ As information professionals, our knee-jerk reaction may be, why didn't Jim just check WorldCat? Can't he google and be reassured by the plethora of "last book" policies posted by libraries for public perusal?²⁴ Willis' point is made effectively, despite or maybe with the inclusion of, Jim's lack of awareness of the finer points of library preservation policy. If we are scrupulously honest, we may

²⁰ The authorial timeline of the sonnet and this story, in reverse chronology: "I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land" was initially published in *Asimov's Science Fiction* in 2017. Connie Willis, author of that story, was born in 1945. The *Ozymandias* sonnet was written in 1817; Percy Bysshe Shelley, author of the sonnet, was born in 1722. Historian Diodorus Siculus, who described the statue of Rameses II, lived in the 1st century BCE. Rameses II died in 1213 BCE. Shelley's sonnet identifies the author as traveler, critical interpreter of the past, messenger to the present, and interpolator to the future.

²¹ Nicholson Baker's book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* was published in 2001. Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

²² Fellow readers be forewarned, some of the titles are devilishly fabricated by Willis, and the Excel spreadsheet project may become a box canyon in which you are trapped!

²³ Will Shortz is the New York Times crossword puzzle editor at the time of this writing.

²⁴ Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, "Last Copy Policy," May 20, 2015, <https://www.coalliance.org/sites/default/files/LastCopyPolicyMonographsMay2015.pdf>.

find that in our daily practice of library and archival science, our actions sometimes fall short of the ideals expressed in policy.

Willis is obviously conscious of the enormity of the amount of work involved, the weight of the responsibility, and the complicated nature of the task of implementing systems of book preservation and disaster planning. This is reflected in the challenge of Shelley's stone-faced despot, Rameses II: "If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work."²⁵ The intricate locational and deliberational systems are disintegrating in Jim and Cassie's world, and Jim's curiosity, powers of observation, and logic/reasoning skills are no match for the problem; neither is Cassie's perseverant and diligent management of Ozymandias. Jim reaches a nadir, revealing that "Ozymandias wasn't a book preserve—it was a morgue," and descends further, in another epiphany, when he realizes: "...everything I said about our only allowing things we don't need to disappear was a gigantic lie. There's no decision-making in the process. It's all completely accidental."²⁶ This is the protagonist's ground zero; his denial is denied. Jim has reached rock bottom and may yet rise and recover.

Willis' cleverly cloaked time travel saga begs for big-hearted, book-shelving volunteers and logistical experts. There are so many travelers and trajectories in *I Met a Traveler in an Antique Land* that the reader could easily become as overwhelmed and disoriented as the protagonist Jim. The story demands effort and interactivity from the reader. If the reader accepts the challenge, then orientation is possible. In this novella, Willis asks her readers to think, much as did her predecessor Heinlein.²⁷ And she also has

²⁵ The backstory behind the sonnet: During a visit in 1817, friends Horace Smith, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (author of *Frankenstein*), discuss archaeological discoveries in the Near East (in the context of Napoleon's 1798 conquest of Egypt). They recall that Roman historian Diodorus Siculus had described a statue of Ozymandias (aka Rameses II), and quoted this inscription on the statue (no longer surviving as of 1817): "King of Kings Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work." Smith and Shelley then wrote sonnets based on Diodorus' words. Smith's poem's title was "On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below." Shelley wrote *Ozymandias*. See David Mikics, "Percy Bysshe Shelley: 'Ozymandias,'" *Poetry Foundation* (2010), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69503/percy-bysshe-shelley-ozymandias>.

²⁶ Willis, "I Met a Traveller," 197-198.

²⁷ From a review by Kurt Vonnegut about *Stranger in a Strange Land*: "The novel [*Stranger in a Strange Land*] was not written, he explained to one fan, to promulgate any set of beliefs. 'I was *not* giving answers. I was trying to shake the reader loose from some preconceptions and induce him to think for himself, along new and fresh lines. In consequence, each reader gets something different out of that book *because he himself supplies the answers*...It is an invitation to think—not to believe.'" Kurt Vonnegut. "Heinlein Gets the Last Word," *New York Times*, December 9, 1990, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/28/lifetimes/vonnegut-stranger_heinlein.html?mcubz=0.

the audacity to ask them to feel, and then to act, to legislate with the poetic sensibility of which the idealist Shelley thought them capable, when he declared that poets were itinerant legislators.²⁸ Who decides what is “great” or “classic”, whose works survive time? The story’s subterranean book repository is no magical refuge for rare endangered books; it offers no panacea. It is an understaffed sweatshop. It is a mirror that obscures, a desert mirage in midtown Manhattan, like Bradbury’s wicked carnival sideshow Mirror Maze that shocks and tantalizes; it may reveal a torso-less gutless reality of denial, avoidance, and cynicism.²⁹ Be brave and acquiesce to Willis’ appeal to the legislative poet in each of us, dear reader, devoted bibliophile, and intrepid traveler.

It seems that Shelley prognosticated the crisis of the Anthropocene in his poem, expressing its emotional core. Linking sonnet to story, Connie Willis has peered into our not-too-distant future and penned a survival guide for the bibliophile who recognizes books as the ultimate vehicles of time travel. The tale is suitable for anyone along the continuum from impatient technophile to reluctant Luddite. Willis’ words demonstrate her awareness of the amount of work involved in thoughtful disaster planning and decisive preservation, and librarians and archivists should not react to her clarion call with defensiveness. Instead, we might be predisposed to find her book entertainingly didactic. It is a name-dropping paean to authorship, amusingly conceived to tease the earnest reader (but mildly tortuous for those prone to obsession with details). The protagonist loses a bookstore and a love, but may, in the end, be saved by his agent. Likewise, we the readers have agency, a choice, and certainly a worthy obsession.³⁰ Willis asks much of her readers, and perhaps too much for some. We archivists and librarians have indeed been given something to think about and upon which to act. The order is not too tall for if we

²⁸ Shelley’s rhetoric lionizes poets—“poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,”—and defines literary genres as follows: “There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds...A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful; poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.” Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (Chicago, IL: Poetry Foundation, 2018 [first published 1840]), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>.

²⁹ The Mirror Maze is a feature in Ray Bradbury’s novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; in his classic *Fahrenheit 451* books are preserved by memorization. See: Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962) and Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (New York: Ballantine, 1953).

³⁰ Which among the more than seventy book titles, ringers and real, capture your attention? Perhaps the hilarious and thinly veiled reference to Theosophy and Madame Blavatsky, conflated as *Visitations from Beyond the Veil* by Madame Shirotsky?

continue to cooperate and boost one another, we can reach those top shelves. We can build a resilient and effective preservation and disaster-preparedness system for the future generations to whom we have left a legacy of climate-related catastrophe. It is the least we can do: Plan for the worst and hope for the best. Through the preservation and protection of books, we enable the transcendence of the bounds of time and space. Books provide an escape *into* the imagination by following the creative arc of another's thoughts. The trip down this parallel path (and oft-times in an antique land) is the quintessential time travel experience. Reading engenders empathy, a melding of minds that makes us eco-systemic thinkers, full of hope for the future.

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