



Fire Watch

Connie Willis , James Patrick Kelly (Introduction)

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From Reader Review Fire Watch for online ebook

M Hamed says

i don't care !

Peter Derk says

Pretty good book, quick read, all that.

The main thing I wanted to talk about is time travel because I really do want to talk about what I want to talk about. That would make a great chorus for a pop country song.

What's cool about Connie Willis is that, for my money, she handles time travel well. It's not explained in this story, but I had a kindly office mate explain to me that Connie Willis' other books that take place in the same universe involve something called "slippage." Slippage is the thing that keeps you from going back in time and killing Hitler, for example. If you tried to go back in time to change a large historical event, you would find that your ability to travel accurately, to an exact time or place, would be limited. The larger your potential for changing history, the more time keeps you from placing yourself accurately.

I like that. It's a pretty decent explanation for the way in which time travel can still work in a narrative without answering the question of why someone didn't kill Hitler, which is really the ultimate time travel question (The Hitler Paradox, as I like to call it).

I've been thinking a lot about time travel narratives lately. At first I thought that the only way time travel narratives work was in comedies, such as Back to the Future. But that's not entirely true because it can also work in things like 12 Monkeys or (on a self-contained level) Memento.

So what is it that makes a time travel narrative work, if it's not about theme?

The answer, as far as I can tell, is that the time travel is the path the writer takes in order to talk about something that he or she is passionate about. In other words, Connie Willis uses time travel, but really it's mostly about the fact that she wants to write about the Blitz. Additionally, the beauty of time travel is that you can write about something like the Blitz from a modern perspective, which means that you can discuss it while still being respectful of it.

Because (as I understand it) characters are not allowed to time travel backwards within their own lifespans, the other problem of time travel is dealt with as well. You know, that whole thing where you run into yourself and then you explode or something? I call it the Hitler Paradox II, not because it has anything to do with Hitler but because I name all my time travel paradoxes that way just so I can index them properly.

And if you think about it, the idea of traveling back to see your own young self makes no sense.

Normally, it goes one of two ways:

Alpha Pete travels back in time. He runs into his young self (who is supposed to also be Alpha Pete) and then

changes time somehow.

That doesn't make sense because what has happened there is, essentially, cloning. Because the universe now exists in such a way that there are TWO Alpha Petes, yet the only process that occurred was time travel, not cloning. So rather than being one consciousness that is Alpha Pete, there are two iterations of Alpha Pete. But why?

Okay, here's the other common scenario:

Alpha Pete travels back in time. He is wearing a red sweater. He sees his young self (Beta Pete). This fulfills a pattern that Alpha Pete remembers from his childhood (when he was Beta Pete), a time when a mysterious stranger in a red sweater (Alpha Pete) showed up.

This works a little better for me, although if this is the case time travel is very pointless because once young Beta Pete sees grown Alpha Pete, in this scenario, this event will ALWAYS happen for Petes Charlie through Zebra and on and on. Not only that, but it will have always happened in the past as well. In other words, this event is replicated infinitely in the "past" and "future" and is therefore kind of silly and pointless.

Anyway, time travel rant over, thanks to Connie Willis for figuring a decent workaround that's good enough to satisfy, yet nebulous enough that it's not fully explained. Because if you ask me, fully-explained science fiction is not only boring, it's not really science fiction anymore. It's just a fictionalized textbook.

Beth says

Quite possibly the best bit of time-travel fiction I've ever read. 'Scuse me while I devour the rest of the series...

Chris says

Pretty good short that introduced us to the time-traveling historians of Oxford. When comparing this to *Blackout/All Clear*, you can really see how much Willis has honed her craft over the years.

oshizu says

I had every intention of reading Connie Willis's Oxford Time Travel series next year, so I began this month with this prequel.

This novel features the St. Paul's Watch but, since I know nothing about war-time London, I had to go read an article about the fire watch volunteers at St. Paul's Cathedral during 1939-1945.

I used a dictionary constantly during this novella, which didn't interest me much until the last 10-15 pages. I did enjoy all the semi-philosophizing about "the historian's mission."

Hopefully, I will find Doomsday Book and To Say Nothing of the Dog better reads than this prequel.

Veeral says

This novelette which won the both Hugo and Nebula, serves as a good primer to Connie Willis' works.

I just read To Say Nothing of the Dog a few days ago, so I thought it would be good to read this novelette before reading Doomsday Book.

But my advice to anyone interested in her books would be to start directly with To Say Nothing of the Dog or Doomsday Book. Arguably, these two books could be considered to be her best efforts.

Sara J. (kefuwa) says

That was - perfect! All the feels! Man I did not expect that. And I've read Doomsday Book & Blackout/All Clear! T_T Great start to my 2019 short stories/novelettes reading!

First read: 4jan19

kris says

JESUS FUCK THAT ENDING THOUGH.

"Of course they're relevant!" I shouted. "They *are* the history, not all these bloody numbers!"

Angela Demott says

This short story isn't as developed as the novels in the Oxford Time Travel series in terms of characterization or even plot, but it does still offer that unique and identifying style that is all Connie Willis. Some readers hate it, but this reader can't get enough.

Steve says

I don't know how I would feel about this story if I had never been to St Paul's Cathedral in London. I have, though, and been awestruck. Among other things, this story celebrates the courage and dedication people of the fire watch at St Paul's during World War II. (There is a great photograph of St Paul's surrounded by smoke taken during a German attack on London in 1940. It was taken by Herbert Mason and titled "St Paul's Survives." It can be found on Google under the title of the photograph.)

"Fire Watch" is basically a time travel science fiction story and it works very well as that. It is part of a series written by Connie Willis, which includes the novels *Doomsday Book*, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, *Blackout*, and *All Clear*. Like "Fire Watch," *Blackout* and *All Clear* (which really make up one novel in two volumes) are also largely set in World War II England.

I think "Fire Watch" is a fine and moving story, (view spoiler)

Leseparatist says

Very good, but damn if the bit about Russia/Communists (who, you know, bombed places left and right) didn't age. The moment I got to it I knew when it must have been written.

Karen's Library says

Interesting story about a time-traveling historian trying to save St. Paul's cathedral during the blitz in London during World War II.

Oleksandr says

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Chris Cutler says

A great introduction to Willis' Oxford Time Travel series. A short story, this excursion into WWII concisely introduces the ideas, feeling, and ethic of her approach to "History" in a way that converts her readers, rather than just informing them. Which, of course, is the whole point.

Scott says

I read this after I finished *Blackout* and *All Clear*. There are some minor discrepancies but nothing that a little willing suspension of disbelief won't cover up. It was nice to see Kivrin again.

I think Connie Willis has it correct. How often have you romanticized about traveling to the past? I never really take into consideration language differences - let alone differences in norms and folkways - in my flights of fancy.

I looked up *The Battle of Britain* on 29. December 1940 on the internet and found this link. What a time! Living in the United States where, until September 11th 2001, there has been no enemy invasion or destruction; it is hard to imagine what life in London would have been like in the fall and winter of 1940. As I scrolled through the images of the destruction it really hit me how much of a psychological punch that must have been for the whole nation night after horrible night. And then I got to the image with the little boy - not much older than my son - sitting on a pile of rubble clutching a misshapen stuffed animal looking as if he is either too scared to cry or he is summoning every last bit of his fortitude in effort not to cry. I completely lost it and started crying myself. I am tearing up right now just thinking about that image.
