

# Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #1



**SPOILER ALERT: Mad Men Season 7 spoilers below.**

One of the best novels I've ever read is almost at an end. This book sits on a list that includes *Les Miserables*, *Infinite Jest*, *Catch-22*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*. Yeah, programs from the electric picture radio make the list. Wanna make something of it? If I were to include short story collections, I'd mention *Twilight Zone* and *Outer Limits*, Chekhov, and Raymond Carver.

Last night I watched the 3rd-to-last episode of *Mad Men*, and out of seven seasons, that image above is one of the most evocative and cool and resonant and hallucinatory and plain badass moments of the entire book. The bare bones of the abandoned SC&P office; the closest thing left we have to play the grand patriarch, albeit thinly represented; and Peggy of our Heart casting it all to the wind, drunk and roller skating through the ruins as Roger plays *Hi-Lili, Hi Lo* on a cheesy organ – the whole sequence felt like that revelatory acid trip moment where you *really, really see, man*.

Roger, the Pale King, grants the princess in disguise a token of power from the One True Patriarch in the form of an antique Japanese porn print (Lear and Ran meeting nicely). Peggy recoils; *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* is not the kind of art a nice Catholic girl would hang in her office.



Peg is an ace copy writer, or as we prefer to be known, cunning linguists.

And then, the best piece of Roger-Peggy dialog in the whole damn book:

*“You know I need to make men feel at ease,” she says.*

*“Who the hell told you that?” Roger replies.*

Who told her that? Joan, the dethroned Queen Bee, back in the very first episode – 7 years ago in our time, 10 years ago in Mad Men time. Peg takes this advice to heart, this blessing of the dwindling patriarch to go and be as badass as she can muster. And while I thought I’d never enjoy an image of Peg as much as the drunken roller skating, I was wrong. Here we see her here striding the halls of McCann like a colossus, brandishing her cigarette and Asian porno like a sword and shield.



## Warrior Princess

This is a woman who has run out of fucks to give, and who has the internal strength to not have to give them anymore. The sequence plays beautifully, rendered in slow-mo as the white collar drones stumble over their feet trying to get out of her way.

Like the best books of my life, I want *Mad Men* to slow down as we approach the end. I can't wait to find out how it ends. Though given their history of landing the biggest blows 2-3 episodes *before* the season finales, we may already know. For example: Joan told Peg in the first episode years ago to defer to men; she now knows she doesn't need to. I think it means we've seen the last of Peggy. She's done here., but I also can't stand the idea that we won't get to follow the characters beyond the final page. Not that I want anything to do with sequels, prequels, spin-offs, board games, *Mad Men*-labeled scotch or filterless cigs, &c.

And yeah, it's a novel. It's as textured and considered and layered as any great novel. People have derided it as nothing more than a soap opera, as though many of the greatest pieces of literature don't also fit that

description.<fn>Paging Emma Bovary and Countess Olenska.</fn>

There are more fully realized characters here than in most great novels, and more than a few secondary characters rendered with greater depth and sympathy than most books/movies/ tv shows can muster for their central players. The detail accorded fashion and cultural context are damned near encyclopedic, on par with Hugo's description of the Paris sewers or DeLillo's shot heard round the world baseball game chapter in *Underworld*.

One thing *Mad Men* delivered that's really striking is the sense that, even when characters are not on-screen for weeks (or years!) at a time, when they re-appear we get the sense that they have actually been *living* the whole time they were away. This is an impressive achievement, and one that not many of our favorite novels can deliver.<fn>e.g., even the implacable Javert seems to have been sitting on a shelf whenever we are not with him on the page.</fn>

And maybe even more pertinent to Your Narrator: I know these people. I lived in the NY suburbs during this period. My Dad was a marketing exec, right at the edge of the Madison Avenue gaggle. I recognize the bosses, the underlings, the sycophants. I know the secretaries whose job description included remembering the boss's kids' birthdays; to recognize their voice on the phone; to 'take care' of us when we visited the skyscrapers at inconvenient moments. I wore the pajamas that kid wore, and I had some of the same toys, and the houses looked that way, and the moms and dads acted that way. The clothes and cars and hairstyles and music all changed the way we see it unfold in this book.

And then one day, they sit you down and tell you that mommy and daddy aren't going to live together anymore, but don't worry because nothing really is going to change and they both still love you very much and the earth opens up because you know it's sugar-coated bullshit even if you're too young to

even know that word.



That's me, second from the left. I swear I had that same shirt.

*Don: "I'm not going, I'll just be living elsewhere..."*

*Sally: "That's GOING, you say things and you don't mean them, you can't just do that!"*

I can attest to the veracity of the dialogue, the setting, the emotion, the whole package. No cluster of words on a page has ever devastated me more than watching this scene of this "soap opera" on the idiot box. I don't remember any printed words causing me to explode into broken-hearted sobbing like this one.<fn>The death of Gavroche Thénardier on the barricades caused me to burst into tears. But no heart-tearing sobs.</fn> (For that matter, I rarely laugh out loud while reading, but often do so while watching tv or movies.<fn>That Your Narrator may be an unwashed Philistine is a question disposed of quickly. He most certainly washes.</fn>)

So does the electric picture radio matter? Since I casually

name-dropped Emma earlier, let's hear from her on the delights of reading:

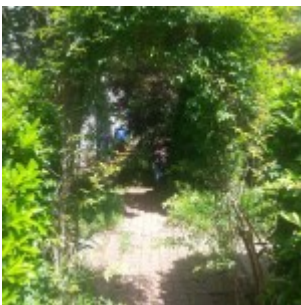
*"You forget everything. The hours slip by. You travel in your chair through centuries you seem to see before you, your thoughts are caught up in the story, dallying with the details or following the course of the plot, you enter into characters, so that it seems as if it were your own heart beating beneath their costumes."*

Television at its best delivers the same experience. Sure, it serves up some weak sauce, but we don't let Bulwer-Lytton or 50 Shades of Grisham keep us from the pleasures of [insert your favorites here]. The long-form format – especially on cable – enables stories that can contain Tony Soprano and Omar and Al Swearingen and Frank Pembleton, with characters and storylines that put to rest any argument that television cannot be as profound and *literary* as books.

It's a fair bet that I'll write more about *Mad Men* as time goes by. I'm going to take a break for a while and then re-read it, just like my other favorite novels.

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## A Walk Down the Garden Path



*nos·tal·gia*

*nə'staljə, nə'staljə/*

*noun*

*1. a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations.*

Nostalgia is a great way to escape the present. And despite a few half-hearted attempts at addressing the latest episodes of state-sponsored violence and racial disparity, your Narrator finds that refuge irresistible right now. A sharp observer with keen understanding and insight could make sense of recent events playing large in the news. I'm not that guy, so if that's your desire, I recommend this recent piece from Ta-Nehisi Coates and this one from a year ago. He puts a bow on a package that too many people are afraid to unwrap.<fn>In fact, you really could just skip my meander down memory lane and deal with Coates. And I'll say again: that Coates is not twice-a-week at the NY Times while mendacious hacks like David Fking Brooks and Ross Cardinal Douhat are gainfully employed is a fundamental crime. Never mind the demented harpy Dowd. But I digress.</fn>

I spent last weekend in Atlanta, mostly in the neighborhood we called home for 17 years. The photo up top is a peek down the garden path to the side of this place, our last home in the 'hood before we decamped for the Swamp.



## The Home of Aspiration! The CCA

This former Sunday school building was our home from 2002 to 2006. We lived upstairs in a gorgeous loft-style aerie. Downstairs was home to the Center for Creative Aspiration, a 501(c)(3) arts organization that we established to host a variety of fun, rewarding, and indescribable experiences. See that landscaping? We did that. After we left, the grounds fell into sad disarray, but recent new owners have reclaimed the beauty.



I love that little maple tree.

Also, too...the church next door, which closed right after its 100th anniversary celebration in 2003, has been resurrected<fn>See what I did there?</fn> and is now home to a vital, primarily Africa-American congregation. Even cooler: the downstairs of the church is now home to a 501(c)(3) arts and music organization called HealiUm.<fn>That alone kind of makes this a My Favorite World post.</fn>



Crazy Carl doesn't come screaming at you from the darkness any more.

As much as I loved living at the CCA, it's the Blue House that still has a hold on my heart.



I expected to leave this house feet-first. I really thought it was the last stop.

The Blue House is a classic Craftsman built in 1907. We lived there from 1993 to 2002. The first time I walked in, I felt like this house belonged to me.

Standing outside last weekend, I still have that feeling. The current owners are terrific friends who moved from three doors down, because they also love this house. It shows.



Note the little library. My Favorite World.

The library is their addition. They've also restored the floors and much of the original detail. The yard looks even better than when we left. But they had limits.

A few years ago when I drove by they were outdoors and invited me in. As I walked in, I was wondering (and dreading) what they had done to cover the 360° mural Judy had painted in the dining room. This was a very personal piece that featured idealized-but-recognizable versions of the two of us, our daughter (pre-Ben days), and our dogs Starr and Fira. So it was reasonable that the new owners would get rid of it.

Wrong. As they told me: "It's part of the house!"

As I was going all verklempt<fn>Like I'm doing as I write this.</fn>, Liz invited me to look at the kitchen. It was gorgeous, completely re-done the way we would have done it. She waved me over to the door to the basement. And there, with

a completely new and different paint job covering everything else, was the door jamb where we tracked the kids' height with pencil marks...unpainted and unchanged except for the additions of their kids' height markers and dates. They had re-painted everything...except for one side of one door jamb.

I said some quick goodbyes and thank yous and scurried out of there in time to save my meltdown for the inside of my car as I sat looking at this view of My Favorite House.



The view from the back. I love that maple tree.

They weren't home last weekend, but several of our old friends and neighbors were, and we held an impromptu street party, and while I was not wishing I still lived there, I was pretty well washed in the water and enjoying the warmth of both the memories and the present moment.

Both these houses represent some pretty significant moments in the lives of our little clan. Children arriving. Dogs

departing. Concerts played and recordings made. Musicians of substantial and lesser renown from all over the world stayed here while on tour. The CCA hosted 18 guitar players for a 3-month stretch in 2003, thereby guaranteeing Judy an aisle seat in Heaven. Shortly after that, the California Guitar Trio moved in for a 2-week writing and rehearsing retreat. We hosted some great friends and their gang who had to flee Katrina damage, up to a dozen at one point.



18 guitarists for 3 months. How cool is that?

Lots of good things happened there. And for a brief time last weekend, the memories of that time gave me a tremendous sense of comfort and understanding of my place in the world, both then and now.

And then I drove home, with plenty of time to reflect. And as I approached my current home of almost 7 years<fn>Ho-lee shit!</fn>, I realized that I couldn't imagine a better place for me to live now than this one.



Mi Casa, protection provided by Maggie, the Wonder Dog of Wonderment

It's no turn-of-the-last-century Craftsman. It does not boast a loft-style aerie with a 60-foot long and 10-foot wide central hallway.<fn>The kids kind of learned to ride bikes in there, and it was a great bowling alley.</fn> And it certainly doesn't have room for 18 guitarists to visit the evening, much less bunk in for three months. But it's a damned fine place to live a good life. Like anyplace else, whether that happens is pretty much up to me.

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# My Favorite World #23



That happy little spot – complete with mini-library kiosk – is the Norton Arts Center in Hapeville, GA. A close southern suburb of Atlanta, featured prominently in *Gone With the Wind*. I paid my second visit there on Saturday, this time as part of *RoboCromp – Chamber Fusion for a New Millenium*.



RoboCromp – The Band That Refuses to Die

RoboCromp has been active-even-while-dormant since 2004, with two CDs recorded. Only one released. It is available for a few shekls to the interested. It is also fking terrific.

We played two sets of mostly Crompton originals, with a few covers from the songbooks of Steve Lacy, Ornette Coleman, Abdullah Ibrahim, and Bill Frisell.



## Legions of Fans

Turns out we were scheduled cross-town from an appearance by Marshall Allen of Sun Ra Arkestra fame. A handful of our intrepid pals came to hear us, but to be honest, I would have made the Ra pilgrimage myself if I had not been gigging.

Still, it was a terrific night. My first gig since September, so a bit ragged here and there, but generally a spirited and satisfying performance. There may be a recording, but so far, no confirmation on that. The only bummer is that we had been working a new piece pretty hard lately, and then we forgot to play the damned thing.

Guess we need to keep doing this until we get it right.

Playing the music. My Favorite World.

PS – Eagle-eyed followers of the blog<fn>If such a creature exists.</fn> will have noticed the absence of the Monday diversion this week. It will be along shortly, and before the next Monday diversion is due. Perhaps. No promises.

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## My Favorite World #22



All that stuff is packed up and I'm on my way to the ATL for a gig. First public noisemaking since September. Say hallelujah.

If you're in Atlanta Saturday, here are the details.

This is the band that will not die: RoboCrompt. We've been playing together off and on for 27 years. This project goes back 11 years. Here's what RoboCrompt sounded like in 2004.

What do we sound like now? Find out on Saturday. Just like us.

My Favorite World.