

Dheghōm

Matter 22

Summary

How Strong an Influence

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Report

You know what the problem is with detective fiction these days? The cops have it too easy. They got CCTV, ALPR, face recognition, call records, browsing histories. Your cousin sent a spit sample to Ancestry.com to find out how Norwegian he is? Law enforcement can locate you through him.

What's a writer of detective fiction to do? Where are the clues? Where's the deduction? The false leads, the red herrings, the analysis, the little grey cells? Who needs an amateur detective when the cops can do it all?

Well I'll tell you who: criminals.

You're a smuggler, someone breaks into your warehouse and takes sixteen crates of scotch that didn't ought to be in the country. You're not going to call 911 to find out who did it, right?

So I created this detective, honest guy, name of Dr Chris Eagle, logical thinker, professor of Computer Science at MIT. Yeah, Eagle, eagle-eyed, cliché kind of name for a detective, but I wanted a bird because Twitter led to his downfall. He gave a lecture, made a joke, everyone there knew it was a joke, everyone knew he was digging at the kind of people who'd believe what he said, everyone knew he didn't mean it himself. Someone tweeted a 5-second clip of him saying it. Two million retweets later, he was the world's most sexist professor. MIT had to dismiss him. Career over. A month later, he bumps into one of his former students, clever woman with a kid and a husband, only the husband is in the slammer for money laundering. Turns out hubby did indeed launder money, for a big-time fence who is under the impression that hubby kept more for himself than was agreed. Hubby will be looking at some severe retribution when he's out on parole. Thing is, though, he *didn't* take more than his fee. Someone else siphoned off the rest and framed him. Who? Well, hello Dr Chris Eagle: here's your first case.

I know, I know. This is all stupendously interesting, but what's it doing in a Science Fiction magazine that costs 40 bucks for six issues?

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Well, what if I told you that yesterday, Dr Chris Eagle walked into my office and told me I'd died three days previously?

Yeah, I thought that might wake you up.

It was him, too, I knew right away. He looked exactly like he did in my head – nothing like on the book jackets. He told me stuff that isn't in the books, too, that I know but the reader doesn't. He has an older sister in a sanatorium, it affects how he sees the world but he never talks about her. That's an unwritten rule: I decided right at the outset that her existence would only manifest through occasional anomalies in his behaviour. Only I knew that. Well, only I and Eagle.

So he told me he didn't have a lot of time. He knew he wasn't supposed to be real and he knew he'd be back to not being real next day. He was delivering a message.

He was delivering a message from MIT in the year 2051.

No, this isn't one of your tired, time-travel tropes, except in the sense that you're travelling through time right now as you read this, at the sedate pace of one hour per hour.

In April of 2018 I visited MIT to have a look around. I figured that if my new detective was an MIT professor, I ought to get the lay of the land. I'd only published the first Chris Eagle book at the time – *The Stranded Eagle*, available from all good book retailers and Amazon – but it had gained some traction and I planned on writing more (two

more to date, but you'll want to read them in order). One of the actual profs at MIT was a fan and emailed me, gently outlining some inconsistencies in my description of the place. He invited me to come and see it for myself, so that's what I did. Had a great day, made a lot of notes, took a bunch of photos, came home, that was that.

It would appear I chose an inopportune time.

According to Eagle, that was the day that MIT was cut off from the rest of reality. Now clearly it wasn't, because that's the kind of thing that reality would notice; except, it was. Maybe cut away from the rest of reality would be a better way of putting it.

Seems that close to noon an invisible barrier erected itself around the central campus. Nothing could go in, nothing could go out. It took the form of a cube, 1,122.67 metres along each edge – yeah, MIT people use metric – stretching from the athletics track in the west to the Sloan School of Management in the east, or part of it anyway. North, it went as far as the intersection between Galileo and Broadway; the lower third was the Charles River. Same story vertically, with maybe a third below ground level.

Trapped within these confines were some 10,000 people, mainly faculty and other researchers along with students, service staff. Some of the smartest people in the world were there. Oh, and me.

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They soon established that the normal laws of physics did not apply, or rather they did apply but selectively so. Sunlight came in, but not radio waves. They could see through the barrier, but only the world as it was when the barrier went up. Cars on the road, birds in the sky, people out and about, but none of it moving, like a painted backdrop in a 1950s movie. The river flowed, but the pattern was the same day to day. At 12:54, a 61 kph gust of wind kicked up the surface, gave a few white-tops that eventually got named. Adding people, rubble, made no difference: the water flowed unchanging even when they dammed it.

Oxygen content in the air dropped during the day, but was reset at midnight. Food in the stores, the vending machines, the fruit bowls: if it had been eaten – snap! Back again at midnight, unless there was something solid in the way, then it wouldn't appear until the next midnight that the spot was clear.

The physicists soon concluded that this was a pocket reality. What's more, it was being crudely managed by whatever entity had created it. Essential conditions for basic survival were being met, but less essential ones were not. Sewage was a problem until the biochemists got to work. Toothpaste ran out. Everyday items broke or fell apart from wear and tear – clothes, pots, spectacles. Use of raw materials had to be prioritised. Is it more important to fix a washing machine or to build a sharpener for surgical scalpels?

There were some upsides, though. Electricity was in infinite supply: you could draw as much off the grid as you wanted and it still kept coming. Any garbage that wasn't recyclable, you could just burn – you knew the air would be cleared at midnight.

Adapting to their situation, the engineers pushed at the boundaries of the new physics that dictated their lives. They prioritised robustness over functionality – a high-res computer screen that dies after 5 years was less useful than a lower-res one that carried on indefinitely. They developed new materials, new machines, new ideas. Some of these would work in our reality, some of them only in theirs.

All the while, they sought ways to break down, or if not that, to expand, the walls of the cube surrounding them.

There's a nuclear plant at MIT, did you know? I didn't until I went there. It's not for making power, it's for making neutrons. It wasn't far from the wall, so the nuclear physicists tried blasting a hole through it. Didn't happen. The wall wouldn't even warm up. The neutrons just disappeared when they hit it. Bigger things, they bounce off, but down at the subatomic particle level it's all quarks and wave forms and entanglements and who knows what. It didn't work, anyway. Nothing worked.

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There were four main metaphysical positions that tried to explain the predicament of the cube's residents.

First, maybe there was no reality beyond the cube. All memories of it were false phantoms inserted into the minds of the cube's inhabitants.

Second, maybe the rest of reality had disappeared, or at least got stuck in time, and MIT was all that still worked largely as advertised.

Third, MIT had perhaps been wrenched from reality and was cut off, leaving a cube of empty space in Cambridge that it used to occupy.

Fourth, this MIT (and perhaps others) was a copy forked off from the rest of reality, which continued to plod along oblivious to what had occurred.

Eagle figured that the fourth position was correct, seeing as how he was now in the reality outside the cube and it wasn't missing an MIT.

For some reason time runs faster inside the cube than outside. People had kids, the kids grew up. There are folks in their 30s who have spent their entire existence in there. Life became routine enough to be liveable. Attempts to understand, breach or otherwise affect the invisible barrier continued, but they were no longer at the forefront of everyone's minds.

People died.

The version of me in this pocket reality continued to write. Yeah, I did other things, too, good citizen that I am. Someone has to keep the

streets clear of bird shit. I kept my detective, Christopher Eagle, but had to change his modus operandi. Instead of working for criminals, he worked for the cops. All those fancy cop databases were no longer available, so he could use his noggin to figure things out. He became very popular. My being the only person present with an ounce (28.3495 grams) of talent for writing creative fiction helped ensure that.

Three days ago, on June 15th, 2051, cube time, I died at the grand old age of 77. Bit of a bummer, I was hoping to hit 80, but forewarned is forearmed; maybe I'll take some more exercise and cut back on the burgers and fries. Maybe.

A day after cube-me died, my fictional – that's *fictional* – detective, Dr Christopher Eagle, came into being. This did not go unnoticed. His sudden and sensational appearance among the populace was immediately seized upon by those scientists still scienting. He was new information. Who had created him? Why had he been created? How had he got into their pocket universe? Could he perhaps get them out of it?

Having been written as a very smart character, Eagle himself was very smart. He knew he was fictional. He knew he shouldn't be there. He reasoned that because his creator – that would be me – had just died, he'd been read from his creator's mind. Whether he'd been inserted into the world automatically or deliberately he didn't know. He figured that he'd been manufactured to blend in,

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and that whoever or whatever had manufactured him was clueless as to what “blend in” meant in practice.

He also knew, because of being the first booking to show on the Boston Marriott computer system in over three decades, that he would not be staying after mid-day on day four of his existence. Today is day three.

Much as the MIT faithful would have liked to experiment on him, they didn’t have the time. They ran some speedy tests, found he was as human as anyone else. This information didn’t help.

What other quick and easy experiments could they run that might return useful data? Rigging him with monitors for when he disappeared might be interesting, if he was up for it, but prior to that?

One of the mathematicians had an idea: throw a chocolate bar from a vending machine at the barrier.

This is why you want mathematicians. They don’t think the same as regular people.

A chocolate bar was duly retrieved and duly hurled at the cube’s wall. It duly passed through. In all the thirty-two years of the cube’s existence, no-one had tried throwing food through the barrier before. There’s something to be said for not bringing up responsible, well-behaved children.

Food was replaced every midnight. It was created within the cube by some power outside of it.

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Eagle had also been created within the cube by some power outside of it.

They took him to the barrier. He put his hand on it. He put his hand *through* it. He retrieved his hand.

He could leave the cube.

Could he take anything with him? Could he take a person with him?

No, he couldn't. If he was holding anything that wasn't with him when he arrived, he couldn't push it through the barrier. OK, so food he could, but nothing else. Food with writing on it? No: the writing came off at the barrier while the banana went through.

It was just Eagle and snacks.

Could he come back inside once he'd fully stepped out? Well he could certainly move his limbs through with little difficulty, but maybe if there was no anchor point inside he'd find himself barred once outside. It was an experiment they could only perform once.

They told him everything they needed the world beyond the cube to know. They existed. They lived. They missed their loved ones. They had made new discoveries. They had opened new avenues of science.

Eagle remembered all he could.

With one day of life left, he stepped outside the cube for a count of ten, then tried to step back inside. He succeeded, it worked: he had two-way passage.

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Ten seconds outside had been ten seconds inside. The cube-dwellers thought that it was 2051 in general reality. Seems that the relationship between our time and cube time is variable. Sometimes, they trundle along at the same rate. Sometimes, cube time is faster. Maybe Eagle's appearance slowed cube time down to our time, or sped ours up to theirs. I'll leave that to the temporal physicists to chew on.

Eagle left again, this time with a mission. He was to pass on to us what he'd been told and maybe take a message back.

Yeah, right. I know my character: he's smarter than that.

He ignored MIT and made a beeline for the car rental off Harvard Square. He had dollars and a driver's licence in his pockets, because people do, you know? One four-hour drive later he was in New York, knocking on my apartment door.

He told me his story and the cube's story. I'm telling you both. He's fulfilled his duty. Those of us in regular reality now officially know about the cube reality – not that we give a shit.

Eagle came to see me because I'm his author. He was created from my words. The me in cube world, God rest my soul, may be dead, but to the best of my knowledge I myself most certainly am not.

I can still write.

Eagle made a request of me, which I'm inclined to grant. Here goes.

When the deadline for Eagle's disappearance passed inside the cube, he was outside of it. Had he been inside of it, on the stroke of noon he would have been consigned to oblivion. He wasn't inside of it, though. He survived the demise that had been arranged for him, and so lived on. He could travel between our reality and that of the MIT cube at will, bringing knowledge with him in both directions and enhancing the well-being of humanity as a consequence – in addition to making both himself and his author insanely rich.

Who says that writing detective fiction doesn't pay?

How strong an influence works in well-placed words.

*Chapman, The Gentleman Usher, Act IV,
scene 1.*

Notes

H. Gregory McCain is not insanely rich.