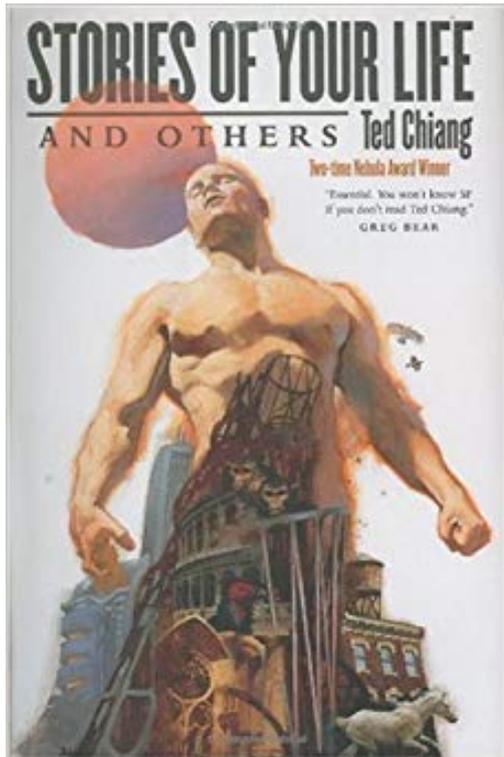


Stories of Your Life and Others *by* Ted Chiang



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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.



Reviews of the **Stories of Your Life and Others** by Ted Chiang

Risa

I bought this after seeing Arrival in order to read the short story on which the movie is based (Story of Your Life). It was one of those rare occasions where I'm glad I saw the movie first and the book was a great accompaniment to what I saw on the screen. It really exposed a whole other layer to the story and filled in the blanks in a way that was complementary to the movie. Quite different from the movie in how it's told and in some of the details, but worked well. Sort of like two friends telling you about the same event from their individual viewpoints.

Aver

This is actually the first set of short stories I've ever read. Bit of background, I have a deep aversion to short-story collections, especially if it's by a mix of authors. Feels like eating a couple of potato chips and nothing more: frustrating. And indeed, that colors my review just a bit, both overall and also on a number of individual stories in this collection, but more on that later.

OVERALL REVIEW: the collection is excellent. This actually feels a bit like reading a collection of Black Mirror episodes; each story is a sort of runaway exploration of a singular "what if?" concept. In fact, each story is written in a distinct style, especially impressive since these were written over the course of many years. Several are in first person, some are told in a distant, omniscient 3rd person, one is told in a confusing 1st and 2nd person narrative. Some are distinctly emotional and colored in vivid emotional tones, some are distant and cold and detached feeling. The stories run the range of ancient, Biblical settings to late 19th century, to modern day, to near future. But overall, this collection of short stories feels satisfying in the sense of each one being a standout.

Now I'll give short reviews on each individual story, spoiler free:

TOWER OF BABYLON

This takes place in ancient Babylon, and is ostensibly historically accurate; all the place and people names are real. But this story centers around these ancient people improbably building an enormous tower to heaven, to LITERALLY open the vaults of heaven. The story is told from such a mechanically sound and realistic sense, with so much detail, that as the reader, you're more than willing to set aside some disbelief and go with the premise. The twist to this story is actually just as mechanically mindful as the rest of the telling of the story was, and despite the nature of it, I found it oddly satisfying and quaint.

UNDERSTAND

This story, like Tower of Babylon, and most of the stories, starts out on solid footing before shooting into the sky. The premise is solid and instantly believable in today's world of medical breakthroughs, and involves a patient being brought back from a vegetative state with an experimental drug. But the drug results in some unexpected side-effects ... Ultimately, I found the ending to be bizarre and just about senseless. It's one of those endings that makes me wonder if I'm just too dense or slow to read into it enough to be blown away. That said, the author's literary style during the telling of the story is spot-on, perfectly illustrating through narrative structure the rapid changing of the character themselves.

DIVISION BY ZERO

This is one of the less fantastical stories in this collection, but still uses a specific narrative design to tell a story both literally and figuratively. Of course, this story is also about math, one of my weakest areas, so much of the story kind of flew over my head. However, one of the two characters is not a mathematician, so this creates an opening for some exposition for the less versed readers. In the end, the story is not as much about math ... and I sort of got the ending to this story, but it's one of

those things where it would probably help to discuss this with a reading club or a literature class to tease out all of the layered meanings.

STORY OF YOUR LIFE

This is the short-story that is inspiring the movie "Arrival". It's also one of the more interesting and mind bending stories, since it switches narrative styles constantly, and involves flashbacks. Essentially (without spoilers, but this helps first-time readers), there are two time-lines: the main story, in which communication occurs with aliens, and various flashbacks. Making this more intriguing is that the main story is told in 1st person, but the flashbacks are told in 2nd person, in a strange sort of future tense. There's a reason for this, be assured. The eventual ending is emotional in a way I didn't expect and left me wondering about the implications set up. I look forward to seeing the movie version of this, because, like several of these short-stories, this deserves a full-length movie and/or novel adaption.

SEVENTY-TWO LETTERS

This takes place in an alternate reality version of late 19th century / early 20th century England. It's hard to say, because the central premise is that the world is built on using combinations of the Hebrew alphabet (a 72 letter combination) to invoke a "name" to induce certain magical qualities in things. I know what I said must sound stupid, but like all of these short stories, the author sets this up in a way that is well grounded, logical, and believable enough for you to set aside disbelief. The author also does a fantastic job of adopting the type of language, slang, and style that would be appropriate for a story told in this time era, making it that much more immersive. That said, I thought the ending was too sudden and weak and like the central conflict was barely resolved.

THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN SCIENCE

This is the shortest story in the collection, and is written in the style of a magazine article. Thus, it's also only a dozen or so pages in length. Therefore, this functions less like a story, and more like a bit of open-ended speculation on the author's part. This makes this entry the weakest and least satisfying in the collection.

HELL IS THE ABSENCE OF GOD

This is one of the more fantastical and imaginative stories in this collection. It's heavy on the religious speculation, but not preachy by any means. In fact, I liked this story for it's rather interesting and almost darkly comical depiction of a real-world Christian God and his angels. I can't say much more without spoilers, but suffice to say, I rather liked this story. The ending feels trite and odd, but I think I kind of understood it in the context of the rest of the story. And the author's narrative style is perfect, taking on a detached but wizened sort of air, like that of a classic parable or fable.

LIKEING WHAT YOU SEE: A DOCUMENTARY

This story is told in a faux documentary style, like the sections are transcripts of recordings taking from various people being interviewed, along with a few news broadcasts and speeches. There is no back and forth question style here, but more like someone was asked to give their full-length thoughts on something and the story here is that. It actually works pretty well for the premise, which is that a neural implant is developed which deprives people of the ability to recognize facial beauty. This is actually based in true observational science of people that have suffered a brain lesion in a particular part of the brain that controls this. Anyway, the idea is interesting, and explored evenly from both sides of the issue, as to whether such a technology is good or bad. This is less a story and more of a work of speculative, train-of-thought type of story, but it's still very satisfying as a work of fiction.

Overall, I recommend buying this collection of stories. I'd love to see a few of them optioned as TV shows, movies, or full length novel adaptations (beyond just Story of Your Life / Arrival).

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I got Ted Chiang's "Stories of Your Life" because I saw the movie "Arrival" which is based on Chiang's "The Story of Your Life" which is included in this volume. I admit I cheated and went straight to "The Story of Your Life" and when I read the rest of Chiang's stories I found them as fascinating, innovative and as challenging as "The Story of Your Life."

Since I did jump to "The Story of Your Life" it approaches its subject, aliens making contact with humans deftly. Chiang makes the aliens, alien, not some anthropomorphic proxy that is supposed to be representative or illustrative of some human characteristic. Chiang is a writer who takes both aspects of the phrase science fiction seriously. The challenge of Louise Bank in "The Story of Your Life" is to find a way to communicate with the aliens, called heptapods. Chiang is well-versed in semiotics. In other stories Chiang very well distills mathematical theory ("Division by Zero"). However, he also doesn't shy away from fantastic scenarios such as in "Hell is the Absence of God" which posits what the human race and faith would be like if God was a known entity and angels frequently visited earth or at least the physical plane and what their effect on life and lives would be, as well as the effect on faith.

The stories included in "The Stories of Your Life" are so unique and exciting to read I was ready to recommend the book even before I finished "The Story of Your Life." I'm glad I stuck around to read the other stories as well.

Quamar

This is a hard one to review. First, I bought it after seeing and enjoying the movie. The movie is adapted from one of the short stories in this collection. First, the author is extremely inventive when it comes to fashioning novel situations or "could be" worlds in these stories. He then plays that novel situation out over the course of the story. As an example: what if you lived in a society where you could modify your mind so you couldn't recognize the pretty or ugly faces. An interesting idea that he plays out for 20-30 pages. But, as in most of these stories, when it ends I have no feeling of conclusion. Maybe it's my problem in that I like stories that leave me with an AHA at the end. These stories are a sort of "slice of life"-- well, a "slice of unusual life". The characters and dialog are well written. So 3 stars says it's okay.

Ice_One_Guys

I went to the theater to see, "Arrival", I liked the movie so much I bought the book to see if it was even better: it is! I was surprised to find the book to be an anthology of short stories. I liked the other stories just as well.

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