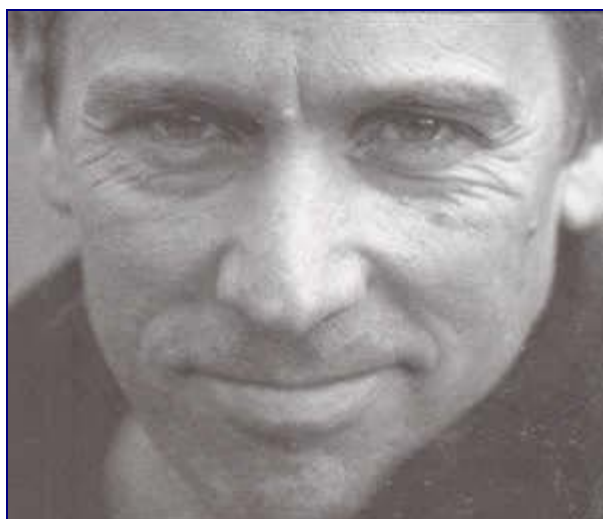


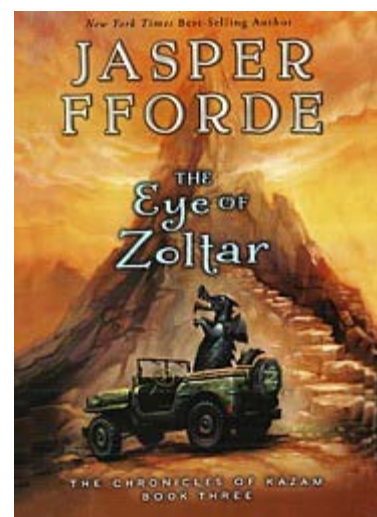
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Eye of Zoltar
A Novel
Volume 3, Chronicles of
Kazam

by
Jasper Fforde
Published by Hodder &
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Book Review by Bobby
Matherne ©2012



Why read a book about magical beasts like the Tralfamosaur? Why not? Fforde writes funny, and the chuckles are worth the read. Like his description of the Tralfamosaur.

[page 1] The Tralfamosaur is about the size and weight of an elephant, has a brain no bigger than a Ping-Pong ball, and can outrun a human. More relevant to anyone trying to catch one, Tralfamosaurs aren't particularly fussy about what they eat. And when they are hungry — which is much of the time — they are even *less* fussy. A sheep, cow, rubber tire, garden shed, antelope, smallish automobile, or human would go down equally well. In short, the Tralfamosaur is a lot like a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, but without the sunny disposition.

If you got a chuckle, read on, if not watch out! There may be a Tralfamosaur nearby looking for a quick snack.

What happens when magic fades, like it has in the Ununited Kingdoms? Well, it's a bit like when NFL linemen hit the age of 35 and are relegated to doing toothpaste commercials.

[page 2] The problem is that in the past half century, magic has faded, so we are really down to finding lost shoes, rewiring houses, unblocking drains, and getting cats out of trees. It's a bit demeaning for the once-mighty sorcerers who work for us, but it's paid work.

What is magic anyway? Fforde offers us a comprehensive definition, one Harry Potter might agree with.

[page 2, 3] Magic swirls about us like an invisible fog of emotional energy that can be tapped by those skilled in the mystical arts, and then channeled into a concentrated burst of energy from the tips of the index fingers. The technical name for magic is variable electro-gravitational mutable sub-atomic force, but the usual term is wizidrical energy, or, simply, crackle.

Our heroine, as you may recall is named Jennifer Strange, an orphan who took over Kazam from the Great Zambini who disappeared like Rice Krispies in a teenagers bowl with a Snap! Crackle! and Pop! and no explanation at all. So, here's the back story to get us all, old and new readers, up to date on what's crackling at Kazam as this story begins.

[page 3] So there I was, assistant to the Great Zambini, learning well and working hard, when Zambini disappeared, quite literally, in a puff of smoke. He didn't return, or at

least not for anything but a few minutes at a time and often in random locations, so I took over the running the company at age fifteen. Okay, that *was* a biggie, but I coped and , long story short, I saved dragons from extinction, averted war between the nations of Snodd and Brecon, and helped the power of magic begin to reestablish itself.

But, as we learned first from the Wizard of Oz, wizards are not all-wise, and are often bumbling idiots, and Jennifer echoes this sentiment from her long year of experience with the wizards that worked for Kazam, such as the Once Magnificent Boo.

[page 4] If you think wizards are all wise purveyors of the mystical arts and have sparkling energy streaming from their fingertips, think again. They are for the most part undisciplined, infantile, argumentative, and infuriating; their magic only works when they *really* concentrate, which isn't that often, and misspellings are common. But when it works, a well-spelled feat of magic is the most wondrous thing to behold, like your favorite book, painting music, an movie all at the same time, with chocolate and a meaningful hug from someone you love thrown in for good measure. So despite everything, it's a good business in which to work. Besides, there's rarely a dull moment.

Jennifer could be easily describing the novels of Jasper Fforde which are all well-spelled feats of magic with rarely a dull moment. As with a bag of potato chips, one cannot just read one chapter of a Jasper Fforde novel; one reads until the last page of the book, like the last chip in the bag, has been devoured. Her cohort, Tiger, is younger than she is.

[page 6] Tiger was twelve and, like me, a foundling. He was stuck at Kazam for four years and after that could apply for citizenship or earn it fighting in the next Troll War, which probably wouldn't be far off. Troll Wars were like Batman movies: both were repeated at regular intervals, featured expensive hardware, and were broadly predictable.

Our two heroes are going out on a Tralfamosaur hunt in the Cambrian Empire which "made good money out of what it called jeopardy tourism: vacations for those seeking life-threatening situations." (Page 8) Does that sound familiar to our own times? Perhaps it is the modern, super-safety conscious, seatbelts and baby seats, airbags, and smoke-free environments which are the root cause of such thrill-seeking expeditions which have replaced just plain living spiced up by a bit of street drag racing as jeopardy sports.

Speaking of driving irresponsibly, read how driver's licenses are granted in the Ununited Kingdom.

[page 11, 12] The Kingdom of Snodd grants driver's licenses on the basis of *responsibility*, not age, which can frustrate forty-something guys no end when they fail their responsibility test for the umpteenth time.

In a typical Troll War battle, huge multi-story armored tanks filled with human soldiers were sent into battle against the Trolls, "who impertinently called them Meals on Wheels." (Page 14)

The very concept of *snail mail* being slow compared to email is inverted by Fforde-crackle as he imagines snails used as homing pigeons, only much faster. But it is the way the spell was created to make snails so fast that is funny.

[page 17] We jumped as a snail shot in through the open window and skidded to a halt inside the windshield, leaving a slippery trail across the glass. Homing snails were one of wizard Moobin's recent discoveries. He had found that all snails have the capacity to do over one hundred miles per hour and find a location with pinpoint accuracy, but didn't because they were horribly lazy and couldn't be bothered. By rewriting a motivating spell commonly used by TV fitness instructors, communication by homing snail was entirely possible — and snails were more reliable than pigeons, which were easily

distracted.

Whatever has happened to our good old word, *whatever*? It used to have only its dictionary meanings, like, *anything at all that*, or *all that which*, or *at all*, or *no matter what* but it has now morphed into an adjective for existential angst, it seems, besetting even princesses. Take this example from when the King is talking to his daughter.

[page 39] He turned to the princess, waiting for her homework to be completed for her. "Peaches, would you come over here, please?"

"What now?" The princess rolled her eyes in a *whatever* sort of way.

I am embarrassed to admit that I know exactly what that look is, as any teenage daughter in the 21st Century learns that look by age 12 and is expert at it before their first baby-sitting gig. I heard that being a father of a girl is fifteen years of aggravation for one year of baby-sitting. That is, if you're lucky.

Princesses, like any teenage daughter these days, are in for surprises in life before they reach twenty-one, such as happened to the real princess in this novel who accompanies our heroes on a road trip and sees a billboard for the first time. The princess speaks and Jennifer answers.

[page 52] "I don't usually see much beyond the castle walls," she said in a quiet voice.

"What's that?"

"It's a billboard, advertising toothpaste."

"Doesn't it come already squeezed onto your toothbrush each morning?"

"No, it doesn't."

"Really? So how does it get from the tube to the toothbrush?"

Reminds me of my grandkids raised in a rich family who refused to eat a large sweet blackberry I picked for them (they didn't seem to know how it got into one's hand). Seems food had to come already wrapped in plastic from a Kroger's Supermarket. Hopefully, like the Princess, their adventures outside the castle will enlighten them to such things, like, e. g., the blackberries so carefully wrapped for Kroger's are hand-picked by Mexican laborers.

Some of the magic spells seem to make a lot of sense, and maybe some have already been performed, like this one, which the Mighty Shankar is considering for implementation.

[page 61] The Mighty Shankar pointed to a clause in one of the notes he was looking at.

"Are we sure about this?"

"Yes, sir," replied D'Argento. "They want the state of Hawaii moved to the middle of the Pacific."

"I thought it was fine between Montana and North Dakota."

"The venerable Lord Jack of Hawaii requested the move on account of the climate — and they want to retrofit the collective memory so everyone thinks it's always been there."

"Standard stuff," said Shankar. "They didn't quibble over the price?"

"Not a murmur."

At last we meet the Eye of Zoltar, which is described to Jennifer as the object the Mighty Shandar wants her to find for him or he will destroy the last two dragons. It is, he says, "a magnificent pink ruby the size of a goose's egg. It belonged to a wizard I admire greatly. You may find me . . . The Eye of Zoltar." (Page 63) It is the MacGuffin which our crew of magical misfits will chase into the most dangerous territory in the world, against all odds, and attempt to retrieve. Actually the odds are about fifty-fifty, in other words, statistics show that only half of their expedition's crew will survive the "jeopardy adventure." If this were a 60s Star Trek, half the landing party on the foreign planet would be wearing red shirts, as any Trekkie will attest.

A road trip for a Princess can be a dicey experience, such as when she returned holding a roll of toilet paper. "Do I fold it or crumple it before I . . . you know?"

[page 73] Tiger and I looked at each others.

"Don't give me your silent pity nonsense," said the princess crossly. "It's a huge sacrifice to live without servants, a burden that you pinheads know nothing about. . . . and I think I may be dying. My stomach has a sort of gnawing feeling inside."

"You're hungry," I said simply. "Never felt that before?"

"Me, a princess? Don't be ridiculous."

Did the princess ever do anything for herself at the palace? She admitted that she did her own sleeping. "Usually." (Page 77)

If you have ever bitched about the difficulty of pitching a tent in the wilderness, you would love this enchanted tent "that swore angrily to itself when self-pitching, thus saving you the effort." (Page 93) In other words, it was also a *self-bitching* tent! One could get hooked on spells like this and soon you'll want stronger and stronger spells, which you can get in a new *zork* second.

[page 106] After that you'll be always looking for the next spell, and when the spells lose their power you'll be lost, frightened, and bewildered, and your life will tip into a downward spiral of recriminations and despair."

They are greeted by their guide to the treacherous land of Cambria this way:

[page 107] "Welcome, noble traveler and adventurer," said the woman in a long-rehearsed patter, "to the land that health and safety forgot. In these risk-adverse times, the Cambrian Empire is one of the few places where danger is actually dangerous. The possibility of actual death brings fear and excitement to even the most mundane pastimes; the adrenaline surge that comes by cheating death is a wild ride you will wish to repeat time and time again."

When one member of her team, Perkins, who was Jennifer's age, had to do a magical reset of some spells besetting Ralph, two things happened, Perkins aged ten years and Ralph got 1.6 million years younger, turning into an Australopithecine man. Perkins assures Ralph's friend Ignatius that Ralph will evolve back.

[151] "Evolve back? That's a relief," said Ignatius. "I promised his mother I'd have him home in a week."

Perkins and I exchanged looks.

"It'll take a little longer than a week," I said.

"I suppose we could keep him in a spare room or something," said Ignatius. "How much longer?"

"About 1.6 million years. I'm sorry to say that Ralph will spend the rest of his days as a primitive version of a human. He'll still be Ralph, only with one-third brain capacity, some peculiar habits, and a mostly obsolete skill set. Despite this, he'll pick up a few words and may even learn how to use a spoon."

"Ook," said Ralph, staring at us all with his small dark eyes. He still looked like Ralph, just shorter and hairier and more extinct.

Harry Potter had to deal with Deatheaters, and Jennifer Strange has to deal with Lifesuckers, one of whom performs its feat on a live rabbit which ages, withers, and turns into a dry piece of fur on a skeleton within a minute. Any sign of life will trigger it to pounce again, so Wilson warns everyone.

[page 211] "Shh!" whispered Wilson. "It's strongest when freshly nourished. It will be hunting for more prey — I've seen one take an entire herd of sheep before collapsing into a gorged stupor. If you can push anything charismatic and life confirming to the

back of your mind and fill your head with utter banality, now's the time to do it."

"How do I do that?"

"I usually start with daytime TV, and then work my way down through celebrity biographies to international road aggregate trade agreements."

You'll notice I haven't mentioned much about the plot — there is a good one, but best discovered on one's own as one giggles through the minefield of hilarious folderol laid down by Fforde for us readers. Like this one:

[page 275] We paid for the tea and scones and made our way toward All Rise, the combined bakery/courthouse, to take our seats for the trial.

Remember Perkins who gets older when he casts a spell, well, he has to cast a bunch more spells and gets much older, so Wilson tells consoles him saying, "with age comes wisdom."

[page 294] "I think wisdom comes with years, not age," replied Perkins sadly. "I've managed to separate the two. I think I'm going to be old *without* wisdom."

"If that is the case," said Wilson, "you won't be alone."

We'll skip over Saint Aosbezkcs, the Patron Saint of Fading Relevance, who I doubt is also not alone, (Page 295) get right to matter of drone army which springs to life when anyone tries to leave the area our heroes had to enter in search of the pinkeye, I mean, the Pink Eye of Zoltar. Perkins demonstrated his discovery which would keep them alive, although trapped.

[page 315] "See that bundle of drone clothes over there?" he called. "Watch."

He took another six steps, and the bundle of clothes sprang to life like a jack-in-the-box. Stacked in the vertical order they hung on the body, the clothes moved with a slick liquidity: pile of empty clothes one moment, lethal killing machine the next. The drone drew a sword that had been buried up to its hilt in the ground and brandished it menacingly.

When they find the pirate, Bunny Wolff, who was supposed to possess the Eye of Zoltar, she had been turned to lead, and Jennifer observes the position of Wolff's hand indicated that the Eye had been pried, NRA-style, from her cold, *lead* fingers!

Running low on puns and magical ploys, Fforde winds the story down to an end which leaves open the possibility of another sequel, after he has cast his net into the great Text Sea to refuel his stock.

You will want to know how Perkins managed to defeat the Hollow Men (the killer drones), and you will not be disappointed with his efficacious method when you read the book. Will the *Eye of Zoltar* ever come to light, or will it be, like the H-Bomb, too dangerous to ever be used? Will Colin, one of the two remaining dragons, the one turned into rubber in a magic spell, ever become unvulcanized? Will Jennifer be re-united with her Volkswagen Bug, the cradle in which she was found when she became a foundling in the first place? Will Perkins be too old, but not too wise for Jennifer? Will other Strange adventures in the offing for the next volume in this series. Stay tuned to this same Quark Channel, same Quark time, to find out.

