

Pick Up & Deliver 780: Reading Roundup, Q2 2025

Editor's note: Due to time restrictions, we did not have time to carefully edit this auto-generated transcript. Apologies for any errors you find.

Welcome to Pickup and Delivery, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder, set out for a walk, and deliver an episode to you while I stroll around. I'm Brendan Riley. Well, good morning, listeners. It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago. The sun is out, the weather is pleasant, and I'm taking a stroll in between doing some work. I was looking back at the archive recently, and I realized that I had a fair amount of time since last time I talked to you about what I've been reading. Last time that I covered reading on the podcast, I talked about quarter one of 2025, which is January, February, March. So this time I'll be talking about quarter two of 2025. That is April, May and June. I read a bunch of books over the course of that time, and I've got them here in a list, in no particular order. So I'm going to talk about as many of them as I can in the time that we have for the podcast, and then we'll be done. So let's jump right in.

For those of you who have not been part of our Reading Roundup episode before, if you're looking for strictly board game content, this won't be it. A couple times, about once or twice a month, I will do an episode where I'm talking about movies or books, and I often do bring board games into the conversation, but they're often tangential as opposed to central. In this case, the things I've been reading will be central, so consider yourself warned. All right. The first book that I read in quarter two, or they finished reading anyway, was *The Hand of Oberon*. This is the fourth book in *The Chronicles of Amber* by Roger Zelazny. I've been slowly reading this series over a few years now. Originally I read the first two, I think, and now I am just working my way through. I have the *The Great Book of Amber*, which is a collection of all of the Amber novels that Roger Zelazny wrote. I'm told that there won't be any more that part of his will. He stipulated that for his family to retain rights to the books, they were not allowed to commission anymore or have anyone else write any Amber novels, so they are done. Of course, I've mentioned before that I am part of a every other week role playing group that needs to play *Amber the Diceless Roleplaying Game*, and have been doing that for a couple years now. I think we're in our third year and that's a good time. So the context for that provides a lot of what's going on for me there. Uh, *The Hand of Oberon* is the next book in the series. The lore of this series gets really arcane and complicated, so I'm not going to try to relate what happened here, except in this one. The main character is the the main character of these books as Corwin, and he's discovering that, uh, his father Oberon, has kept influence in the universe in ways that Corwin did not realize he had. It's all very dramatic and exciting. I'm interested to see the next one. It's probably time to read another one. I'm reading like two a year, so maybe when I've got my current crop of library books cleared off, I will head on and read the next in the series. I think there's nine books all together and I've read four, so I think there's five in the Corwin series, and there's four more with a different character as the main focus.

Next up, I read the hearse you came in on. This is the *Hitchcock Sewell murder Mysteries*, number one by Tim Cockney. Now, I finished this in April twenty ninth, so I'm counting it in this quarter. But I actually spent about a year reading it. Not that I didn't like it. I did like it just fine. It's just often I would read a chapter or two and then something else would catch my eye, and it never grabbed me in a way that pulled me to the end. So I'm slowly working my way through it. That said, it's pretty good. It was funny and enjoyable and a nice twist. The main character is a former reporter who runs a funeral home that he inherited from his parents. Uh, and so, because of his reporter's instincts, he still gets messed, gets tangled up in mysteries from looking online. I can see there's a bunch more mysteries in this series. I don't imagine myself reading very many more of them, although I think I have one more on the shelf downstairs. So at some point in the future I might be like, oh, here's another death pun in a mystery book title, and I'm looking for something relatively light. If that's the case, I will happily read the next one in the series. Um. All right. Well. Oh, I have not talked about a game here. I mean, the closest game I can think of in terms of investigating mystery and the reporter element would be *Deadline*, which is a case based mystery game that I've played about half of the mysteries out of. It's amusing and interesting. Uh, it's the there's a little light game mechanism that you use to then get clues. Lose. And if you do that well, you get enough clues where you can solve the mystery. This is a game that came out in twenty seventeen. I bought it at origins. It was new and exciting there. And then I heard nothing about it from anyone ever again, which seems to be one of the things that happens at *WizKids* particularly, or used to, is that they would publish these games and then there would be almost no promotion for them at all, and either they would hit or not. But whether they hit seem to have nothing to do with *WizKids* themselves or I

don't know. So I haven't heard very many other people mention this game, but it is interesting and worth checking out if you get a chance. So that's the hearse you came in on. By Tim Cockney.

Next up we have *The Strange Tales of Oscar Zane*, volume one, a graphic novel. Obviously, this is a comic. I picked it up because it had hints of the art style of Mike Mignola from *Hellboy*. A very, sort of very high contrast line art with kind of a chiaroscuro effect. And this felt in the neighborhood of that to me. And the storytelling style was similar, kind of Lovecraftian in, uh, feeling. And the overall approach to the story was pretty interesting. The main character is a kind of adventurer, similar to Johannes, uh, in *Hellboy*, a guy who who's like a spirit in a suit. And the main character is that sort of same thing. He's like a ghost. And if he were to be doing ghostly things, then he would. Oh, and he's doing ghostly things. As he investigates mysterious happenings. There is an element of a curse about him as well, and a seafaring adventure as well. It's really weird comic and I would encourage you to check it out if you like strange stories like *Hellboy*, without the kind of action part more meditative. Like if Chris Ware drew a *Hellboy* comic, it would get closer to the neighborhood of Oscar's on, so I did enjoy that. I probably will check out ones later, although I don't know how aggressively I'm going to pursue reading those, so it might just be if they happen to show up on the library shelves. Uh, the writer of that one is Tri Vuong. I'm sure I pronounced their name wrong.

Next up, we have the *ten thousand doors of January Harrow*. Oh, *ten thousand doors of January*. This was written by Alex Harrow. Uh, and I listened to it on audiobook. This is a really interesting sort of magical adventure story about people from beyond Earth who have come to Earth in various ways, and there's a sort of multiverse of different people and places, and the interaction between these different people and places is fascinating. It's a really interesting book, very well told, really thoughtful. Uh, I enjoy the way the Harrow describes these other places. The main character, January, is her name is very thoughtful and engaged. It is a book that involves interesting struggles. This is a part I have a harder time assessing as a straight white dude, but it feels authentic in terms of struggling with belonging. The most of the book takes place in the sort of late Victorian or early Gilded Age moments. So for what it's worth, that's the sort of society that it takes place in. But there's lots of really interesting interactions and character development among this adventure story about doors between worlds and people who take advantage of them. Well worth a listen if you like. If you think that sounds good. That was the *ten thousand Doors of January* by Alix Harrow.

Let's see what's next out there screaming an anthology of new black horror. This is edited by Jordan Peele, although it's a series of short stories by a variety of different writers, a lot of these stories have fascinating turns of different pieces of culture. Some of them directly address experiences of inequity and racism in America. Some of them address other kinds of horror tales, sometimes adopting elements from black cultural traditions or African cultural traditions. Um, some other ones are just interesting horror stories where the characters happen to be black. They're not always about race issues necessarily, although that is a common part of the story landscape in these tales. They are generally very well written and creepy. And the audio narration, because it's a it's a fully cast kind of album. Different readers for each story. Um, they're all great. Well, well worth listening to if you get a chance that's out there screaming an anthology of *New Black Horror*.

I did look at a couple other comics I read *After the Rain* by Okorafor, which I thought was a good it was another it was a sort of horror graphic novel. The main character is African, but she lives in the United States.

I read *Masterpiece* by Brian Michael Bendis. Now Bendis is somebody I've followed for a long time, although I haven't really followed his career in the last fifteen years or so. I was really interested in his early work, and I know he became sort of a bigwig at Marvel Comics for a while. I don't know if he's still doing that or not, but I came across this comic in the store, and it had been a while since I read something from him. I thought it was fine. It's an interesting idea. There's a kid who's got sort of superpowers and she's an orphan, and it turns out her parents were superpowered people, and she's being hunted by this kind of supervillain who wants to take her into his stable and use her as part of his plan. But it also turns out that maybe things aren't as cut and dry about heroes and villains as she thought. It was a good start. I just it didn't grab me.

Um, I also got a chance to read *The Luminous Dead* by Caitlin Starling. Caitlin Starling this was a novel that grabbed me with its premise and its cover. The cover shows a gloved hand that looks sort of like a spacesuit grabbing onto the edge of a cliff, like coming up from below the cliff and grabbing on like either just climbed to the top or hanging on for dear life. And the premise is that it is about a caver who is down in this cave exploring it for presumably a mining company. You don't really understand what they're looking for. There are mysterious and dangerous things in the cave. There is a psychological component that's really interesting. It's

a very eerie and thoughtful book, meditating on what we owe one another and what we're what people are willing to do to try to make things better, including betraying the past. We'll say that much. It's a I thought it was really good. It was a little slow. Maybe it was fifty pages longer than it needed to be, but overall really good. It also tapped into something that I genuinely enjoy every time I get a chance, which is stories of caves and caving. Of course it's science fiction, but there's still lots of really interesting caving stuff. So that's the Luminous Dead from Caitlin Starling. Well worth checking out.

Uh, next up, I read *Dead Lies Dreaming*, which is the next of the Charlie Stross Laundry Files novels. Of course, we have sort of finished the story of our main protagonist, Guy, and we're now into the second run of stories. These all take place under new management, meaning that it's sort of after the climactic events of the first series. This is the second book in that series. The first one I read, this actually might be the first book in that series. No, this is the second book in the series. The first one I read by accident a while ago. I sort of out of order, but I really liked it. Uh, this one fits back into that order, and so I'm kind of filling in the stuff around it. Uh, these novels are much more fantastical and weird than the early Laundry Files novels, which were fantastical and weird, but grounded in this idea that we're in. They take place basically in the world we live in now. Whereas, uh, with these newer novels, the under new management part means that we are fully in a different place than we were before. We're not treading those same waters, and things are vastly different and scary. That said, I really like the characters that are in it, and the repetition of them. Seeing them grow as we go along is a really delightful and sort of seeing the peril that they wrestle through works really well. So yeah, all in all, I'm enjoying continuing the laundry files and I'll probably follow it through to the end. This was another of those that was an audiobook again, by the way.

Uh, next up is *The Lathe of Heaven*. This is a one of the Ursula Le Guin novels that I've always meant to read, and I never got around to reading. Um, it is a classic set around the idea of a guy who, when he dreams in a particular way, the dreams. He has become real. And the psychologist who has the ability to kind of influence dreams, starts taking advantage of him in his delicate state to try to change the world. Now it takes place in an already sort of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic world where things are really bad already, economically and legally, for people who are having trouble. You know, if somebody's got mental issues, the stuff going on in the novel is not going to help them. They are going to be worse off for it. And, uh, it doesn't get better. Like, essentially he is taken advantage of by one person and then by another person. But the problem is his dreaming patterns are sort of a monkey's paw situation. Um, just one example. At one point there is a menace orbiting the Earth, and the psychiatrist wants the dreamer guy to make it so the menace is not orbiting the Earth anymore. And that's what he dreams. And of course, this means they they land. So they're not they're not orbiting anymore. They've landed. So that kind of thing is what happens. It's really interesting. Um, it is very psychedelic. The the writing style reminds me of *Through a Glass Darkly*, the Philip K Dick novel. It's a lot less enjoyably straightforward than a lot of the leguin books that I do like, so this wasn't my favorite. It's pretty weird. That said, I'm glad to have read it, and it is a novel that is sort of one of the standout novels of the era, or gets mentioned a lot, at least, so I'm glad to have read it, but I didn't really like it that much. All right. Finally.

Uh, I also had a chance to read *After the Rain* by Nnedi Okorafor. This is a African graphic novel in which a woman opens the door and there is a sort of ghostly The boy character there, and the way that she interacts with him leads to various kinds of dramatic moments in her life. I thought it was pretty good, really interesting evocation of a culture that I'm not familiar with, but. And really beautiful art. So definitely worth looking at if you get a chance.

The next novel that I read that I want to talk about is actually the last on my list today is the *Dark Tower* seven *The Dark Tower*. So you know that over the past year or year and a half, I've been slowly reading my way through the *Dark Tower* series, listening on audiobooks to them as I'm able to get Ahold of them. *Dark tower* seven was particularly hard to get Ahold of because it was not available on streaming in any way. Fortunately, my friend Paul came through. He was also working his way through *Dark Tower*, and he got the last one from the library on CDs and was able to loan it to me that way. So I have listened to the last book *In the Dark Tower*. Now there is still book four point five, *The Wind Through the Keyhole*, I think it's called, which is written after book seven and is often pointed to as another book you could read if you're interested, but that people say you should read it after you read book seven. So I left it till after I read book seven. And frankly, having read book seven, I don't know that I want to. It's interesting also that *The Dark Tower* came with an epilogue, and the book kind of ended, and then it had an epilogue, and at the beginning of the epilogue says, Stephen King says, don't read this epilogue. I don't like it. I think the book's better without it, but I know some people

will be unhappy without it. It was a really interesting authorial choice, and of course I read it. It's like, who's who's not going to read it? I don't know either. People who have the self-control to not read the epilogue that comes at the end of a seven book series. I don't know if there are. Um, but I think I think the book would have been better without it. Nonetheless, it does sort of answer a few questions and create a little bit more sense to the whole story, even if that comes at the cost of a little bit of the mystery. So what did I think? I think The Dark Tower is great. I thought it was really, really good. I don't think I would put it at the top of every book I've ever read, or even necessarily the top of the Stephen King books, although I will confess that I generally enjoy his books, but I don't think they're incredible. I remember really liking The Stand when I read that. I remember thinking it was pretty great, although there's some stuff in it now that looking back is kind of gross. Uh, I haven't read a lot of the other tentpole books. I've never read The Shining. I've never read Mr. Mercedes, the follow up to The Shining. I've never read Pet Cemetery, so it's hard to characterize it. That said, I did really like these books. I thought they were very good. The drawing of the three was very, very, very good. The wasteland was very, very, very good. And the wizard. The Wizard's the wizard and the glass or whatever that one is, was very, very good. I thought the last two were not as good. Susannah's song and then The Dark Tower I did not like as much. There were parts in the Dark Tower where it felt like, oh, he just needs another thirty pages. So here's another thing that happens that like, had it not happened, I don't think the book would have been any less interesting. But, you know, the the buildup of the journey is such a key part of what's happening that I don't I don't know how else it would have ended. So The Dark Tower is great if you're somebody who thinks you'd like it, I think it's well worth reading. As I said, I don't think the first book, I think the first book is among the weakest of all the books. It might be interesting to go back and read the first book. Now that I've read the whole thing, see if it's better. I don't think it would be. It's very meditative, and it's hard to have a meditative, a really good meditative book. Be the start of a series. So what do I know? All that's to say, I really enjoyed reading The Dark Tower and I'm glad I have. It does sort of make me wonder when's when's the next time I'm going to get that Stephen King itch? And what book am I going to read in order to satisfy it. I don't know. We'll see.

Well, that brings me to the end of my reading roundup for quarter two of 2025. Um, April, May and June. I'd love to hear what you've been reading during that time. You can head over to BoardGameGeek Guild three two six nine and let me know there. We often have a conversation about it. In fact, Gabriel might already have posted there about it. I'll have to go check. Um, so you definitely should if you get a chance. Uh, if you have ideas for games to go with any of these books, I kind of stopped recommending games to go with them, I guess. Here, let me let me take a quick stab at it out there screaming an anthology of new black horror. I don't know. I don't know what game that would be. I mean, I would think The Blackening, the movie would be a nice accompaniment. Um, or as well as any of Jordan Peele's films, but those aren't games. Um, After the Rain has an interesting sort of surreal feel to it. So there are a number of sort of surreal adventure games that you could look at. Um, something like the laundry files, Dead Lies, dreaming, obviously, Arkham Horror The Card Game is the way to go for that. It's got that investigation element. There are other overlaps, I would think, but generally not a ton. I don't see a ton of board games connecting to the books that I read this time, so no good answers for for me about those.

Well, that's about it for me today. I'd love to hear what you think of those books or what books you read in April, May and June or anything else. Until next time, thanks for joining me on walk today. I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was. Bye bye. Brought to you by Rattlebox Games.