

I don't read much fiction. However, this past year I've probably read more fiction than I have in 30 years. Sometimes life encourages escapism. Sometimes it practically mandates it. I just finished my most recent escape. I tore through the books of Cixin Liu's *Three Body Problem* trilogy. Perhaps Netflix will send me a check for mentioning here that they're turning the books into a series and the entire first season is already bingeable.

Every good story I can think of has an intriguing idea, question, or moral at its core. This is true for novels, movies, campfire tales, and trials as well. And, boy, does Liu's series begin with a real banger! Now, if you're a fan of deeper science fiction and you want to get through Liu's books someday, you'll want to skip to the next full paragraph because I'm about to reveal the big idea of the first two books of the trilogy. This is your last warning. In *The Three Body Problem*¹ earth makes contact with an alien civilization that happens to be right around the cosmic corner from us. A direct consequence of our desire to shout into the ether and test for echoes. The call back, however, reveals that humans knocked on the wrong celestial door. The discovered alien civilization is in the process of trying to abandon its doomed world and we've just clued them into two key facts about our own: First, earth *isn't* a doomed planet. Second, we who occupy it are technologically ill-equipped to defend it. Through the strange, subatomic world of quantum mechanics, the aliens thwart our scientific progress, effectively freezing our technology in place. Oh, yeah, and they use this science to spy on all of our scientific work and all of our political handwringing about their pending invasion. On the macroscopic scale, they've just launched 1000+ colonizing warships toward our little rock. They're going to take a while to arrive, however. 400 years to be exact. And, thus, the big idea: What do you do when you have 400 years to fend off an overpowered war-fleet, but you can't use those 400 years to try to match the vastly superior technology of your invaders?

I was hooked. Liu does a masterful job of posing other big questions in line with this bigger idea and then placing the fruit of the answers right at the end of our reach. The second book of the series is even better at this. The need to keep reaching, to keep turning the pages, consumed me. I'd reach the end of a chapter, look at the absurd time displayed on the dial of my watch, and keep right on reading. Turning the page started to feel involuntary. We've all felt that while reading, no? Sensing this compulsion in me pushed me into a little rabbit-hole of research about this compulsion. If there was a secret to it, it's one I'd like to tap for my own work and it's one I'd like to share with my students for the sake of theirs. The further this tool could tap into provoking involuntary responses from audiences, the better. I don't know that I stumbled upon a magic spell, but I found a set of tools that I think is both teachable and practical. The fact that the researcher calls this set of tools "involuntary curiosity" certainly helped me to believe that I'd found what I was after.²

Lowenstein's idea of "involuntary curiosity" comes from his lengthy review of the existing science on human curiosity at the time of the publication. Says Lowenstein, "Although people sometimes expose themselves voluntarily to situations that they know will make them curious, it is probably more common for curiosity to arise spontaneously as a result of unintentional exposure to curiosity-inducing stimuli."³ He describes 5 instances of involuntary curiosity, and I shall do my best to summarize them here. First, "the posing of a question or presentation of a riddle or puzzle..." Second, "[e]xposure to a sequence of events with an anticipated but unknown resolution..." Third, [t]he violation of expectations often triggers a search

¹ Cixin Liu, *The Three Body Problem* (Ken Liu, trans., 2014)

² George Lowenstein, *The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation*, 116 PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN, no. 1, July, 1994, at 75-98, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/57670355/A87B8E9688874C46PQ/1?accountid=12085&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>

³ *Id.* at 91.

for an explanation ... and curiosity is frequently a major factor motivating the search.” Fourth, “[p]ossession of information by someone else...” Or, to put it another way, when we are aware that someone knows or has discovered a secret, or other information, we feel we may want. Finally, where “past attainments” are compared against “current attainments.” More simply, where we generally have the experience of receiving easy access to information that is now currently not attainable.⁴ For example, people generally report past events or data with relative ease, but our curiosity peaks when our source tells us, “Oh, I just can’t remember exactly what she said.” After that, and in our thirst to hear the precise quote, don’t we often think to ourselves, “Well, THINK ABOUT IT! It can’t be *that* hard to remember!”

Perhaps you look at this list and see how intuitive most of it is. If you look at the second list item, for instance, that seems to supply the principal reason for compulsively page-turning through a good book. Yet I still think I’m going to bookmark this list as I prepare for significant scholarship presentations or while I help my students craft a more interesting story for their opening statements. Heck, I can even finish this blog by applying what I’ve learned. Getting back to *The Three Body Problem*, how do you suppose the entire earth might survive this impending doom? (Tool 1 from the list.) You might not know, but those of us who’ve read the entire series really possess the answer. (Tool 4 from the list.) Now, I was going to give you one little hint about how it all turns out, but I simply cannot remember what I was going to say.⁵

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ That’s tool #5 from the list. And, if you’re here, it’s because you were curious!