

Do that for a while and you'll be able to perform pieces that seem incredibly complicated to the listener. It's really remarkable.

It isn't exactly easy, but Hanson's approach lets you work your way up gradually. For the first few songs, you are playing fixed patterns that don't vary. Then you start varying them, hitting alternate notes with your ring finger, and adding melody notes, and slurs, until you are playing songs that are quit challenging. For example, Hanson's arrangement of "The Water is Wide" featured in the book contains 24 separate chord fingerings for the left hand, in drop D tuning — with the low E string tuned two half-steps down. The right hand picking pattern is constantly varying the patterns, sometimes plucking several strings simultaneously. It's pretty challenging, but when you put it together there is a sense to it — you work around a few fixed positions, and it is a great introduction to some of the big, fat, wide-sounding chords you can play in the key of D with drop D tuning. I am working on that song now. Here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWJk6HN7_2c is Hanson playing the song in a different arrangement, not accompanying a vocal, but as a solo — pretty impressive, no?

Even if the style is not your cup of tea. And I have to say, these traditional songs didn't interest me that much, until I tried to learn how to play them following Hanson's arrangements! Now I have started to listen to the huge variety of styles that bands have used to cover these tunes over the years. Check out the Grateful Dead playing "Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gttPt6ba7qY> and "I Know You, Rider:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpE3a9RSloE> — learn the songs in Hanson's book and you will have learned a couple of Grateful Dead songs as well!

When I have an hour to practice I often go back to the beginning of the book and play every song in it, with a metronome, and make sure I can still play every bar correctly, trying to hammer down parts that are not smooth or where I'm making mistakes. If I have two hours I play all the songs with my metronome, first very slowly, then up to performance speed, then faster. If I have a little more time, I flip ahead to the last song I can play and work on the next one, painstaking measure by painstaking measure. Working with Hanson's book, I always feel like I've accomplished something when I'm done, and the next time I come to the book I'm a little better at it. And I then as a reward for making progress, I give myself a little time just to just noodle and goof around. For years and years, all my guitar practicing was goofing around, also known as "noodling." I also wasn't really making much progress, for those years and years. Now, after making myself play in a disciplined, regular way? My noodling is a lot better!

Hanson has some other books on finger-picking. I have his *Art of Solo Fingerpicking* and *Fingerstyle Guitar* and I have played around with those books a little, but I keep coming back to this one; when I feel like I've mastered everything in this book, maybe I'll take on the other ones.

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville, Continued

OK, so that isn't really reading as such. I've continued on with *Moby-Dick*. I'm nearly finished with my slow re-reading of the novel. The book continues to blow me away although the chapters detailing whale butchering and anatomy in the last third of the book can grow a little tedious. Fortunately some of the best chapters are coming up.

I also did a little project in which I recorded a few chapters of Moby-Dick, using voices for a few of the characters. I did not make it an episode of any of my podcasts. Right now it is just a loose audio file on my web server. I will write a separate post about that small project. I am kicking around some ideas about extending that project — reading the whole book that way, or adapting it into some kind of audio drama — but that is something for another day.

I also started re-reading bits of a book I read a long time ago, E. R. Eddison's high fantasy novel *The Worm Ouroboros*. This is definitely one of the books that wrote me. It just opens up entirely new possibilities in descriptive language and dialect. I might try reading excerpts of this one, too. I've considered recording this whole novel but I'm just not sure I have the chops for it — there are sung verses and rhymes, and potentially a lot of crazy, over-the-top voices one can do. Maybe I'd start with just a chapter or two. I would also like to read the two follow-up books before I die. I was never able to finish them, back in the day. I'd also like to pick up a copy of *Styrbion the Strong* and see how I do with that one.

Casino Infernale by Simon R. Green

I have only actually completed one book this month; on Tuesday I was down in Ann Arbor running errands, and stopped in at their Barnes and Noble, and noticed that they had the latest Simon R. Green novel in the Secret Histories series, *Casino Infernale*, in paperback. I like this series, so I had to read it.

At 400 pages, it's a pretty quick read. I finished it in just a few hours. It moves along, and there are some great scenes, but I'm getting a little fed up with the sameness of Green's plots, the recurrent deus ex machina (he even jokes about it), and the formulaic, "caper" setup and payout. There are also a few points in this one where Green's racism and homophobia shine show up in unpleasant ways. One of our heroes refers to a transgendered character as a "tranny." The Drood family's costumer is a pretty broadly homophobic stereotype. A gang of bad-guy warriors are the "Jackson 55" — black "thug" stereotypes, literally clones. There are a few points where sexual assault and predation is played for laughs. I haven't noticed this so much in his other books, but this one left me angry at a few points — it seems lazy and thoughtless. It's frustrating because even in this same book, Green is often more sensitive to his characters.

Oh, also, especially of interest since I just recently read *Shadows Fall*, Green actually brings characters from *Shadows Fall* into this book, along with a few from

the Nightside. But just as in *Shadows Fall*, he fails to do anything interesting with them. I keep telling myself I'm going to stop reading Green's work, but somehow I can't... quite... stop. I'm starting to wonder why, especially since I also feel like Green's moral world, and his world of characters and stories, is tending to leave me feeling that I'm stuck in a fairly cramped and claustrophobic place; reading more and more of these feels a little bit like eating the same meal over and over again.

***2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson**

I also started (but have not yet finished) Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312*. I'm enjoying it so far. KSR lets his imagination off the leash in this one. He's used Mercury as a setting in several books and stories and I always have enjoyed the way he imagines the city that must circumnavigate the planet to stay between the day side and night side. His vision of life in far-flung outposts of the solar system is beautiful and hopeful.

Doctor Who: 12 Doctors, 12 Stories, 12 Postcards

Let's see... what else? I picked up a set of young adult Doctor Who books called *Doctor Who: 12 Doctors, 12 Stories, 12 Postcards*. There are twelve very short (long short story or "novelette" length, I'd call them) books, each by a different author, each a story about a different incarnation of the Doctor. The first is by Eoin Colfer. They're funny, seem mostly congruent with the Doctor Who canon. They're not too violent, and most importantly, they are short and sweet. They put the younger kids right to sleep while the older ones manage to pay attention. I've read the first two so far, and they are easily broken into two or three evening's story times. I tried to read the kids some longer Doctor Who novelizations, such as *The Krillitane Storm*, and they just move too slowly to keep the kids' interest; honestly, like most spin-off novel series, many of them just aren't very well-written, and have far too little plot given their length, but note that I did really enjoy Alastair Reynolds' Doctor Who novel, called *Doctor Who: Harvest of Time*.

So February only has 28 days this year, and we're just about down to the wire; it doesn't look like I'm going to finish any more books. I expect to finish *2312* and *Moby-Dick* shortly and I certainly have plenty more on my to-read pile, including the third *Mindspace Investigations* novel by Alex Hughes, *Marked*, more NYRB Classics, and a hefty biography of William S. Burroughs. See you in March!

Saginaw, Michigan
February 28, 2015

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