

Read It, June 2015: Progress Report 2

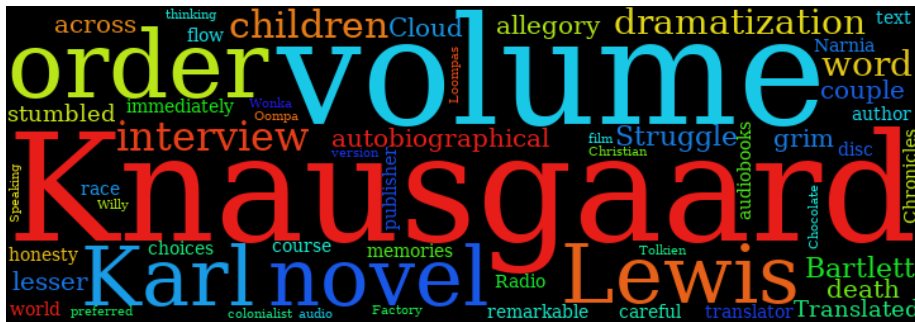


Figure 1: Word Cloud

My Struggle: Book 1 by Karl Ove Knausgaard, Translated by Don Bartlett

I read *My Struggle: Book 1* by Karl Ove Knausgaard. This is the first volume of a six-volume autobiographical novel, translated from the Norwegian. I stumbled across this in Nicola's Books <http://www.nicolasbooks.com/> in Ann Arbor and knew immediately that I had to give this work a try. It has been waiting for me to start it for a few weeks but as soon as I dove in, I was hooked.

This is a work of intense realism. It has been praised for its lack of pretense and utter honesty, although of course even brutally honest, self-deprecating autobiographical writing is a work of careful artifice. In this case the feeling of verisimilitude that flows from the page comes from the way that the narrative jumps around in time, as memory does, and often slows down to explore physical details from Knausgaard's memories, or wander into Knausgaard's musings on art, literature, time, and in this volume, most importantly, death. The whole second half of this volume begins with Karl Ove receiving word of his father's death, and his trip to his grandmother's home to deal with the aftermath of the man's grim death by alcohol. It really is grim, but it also feels very, very true.

Not all grim or tragic work succeeds in producing a cathartic release in the reader. The real triumph of this book is that it does not feel, ever, like phony nostalgia. There are no dancing bears or brightly-lit childhood memories. In

fact it seems that Knausgaard had quite a melancholic life in a cold, rugged, and dark country. His world view has an atheistic, existentialist feel. You can read an interview with the author here. One could wonder what sort of mind writes a six-volume autobiographical novel of such brutal honesty. Really, I think it is our contemporary answer to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is also a remarkable work of translation, and certainly, it was a much *larger* job for the a translator than a typical novel. You can find an interview with the translator, Don Bartlett, here.

I have a few very minor quibbles with the text. I stumbled across a couple typographical errors and a couple of word choices that seem not like artistic choices but more like incorrect usage. I expect that these might be corrected in later printings. But in general the ebb and flow of the text is remarkable. I have the next two volumes lined up on my shelf, in the Farrar, Straus and Giroux paperback reprint editions. The remaining three volumes are not available yet. I am planning to read them all, but I will not race through these books. They deserve careful consideration.

The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis (Radio Dramatizations)

In other news, over the past couple of weeks I have also been “re-reading” The Chronicles of Narnia. I have not been reading them *per se*, but listening to audiobooks, and not unabridged or even abridged audiobooks, but full-cast radio dramatizations. This series, a 19-disc boxed set in a tin, distributed by Focus on the Family, was a Christmas gift from a friend and they are very nicely done, covering every important conversation and event in the stories while moving along at a good clip, turning each book into two or three compact discs.

This series is arranged in the modern way, with the books not in publishing order but in their “in-universe” chronological order. This is called by the publisher the author’s preferred ordering. I’m not going to get into the controversy over whether Lewis really did prefer this order, or whether the publisher should present the books in this order. I will just say that, having first read them in publication order many years ago, it is not *my* preferred order, and it is not the order I am presenting the books to my children. In my opinion, if you read *The Magician’s Nephew* first, there is much that should be mysterious and intriguing in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* which is, instead, drained of mystery.

I don’t quite count this as fully “re-reading” the books, but I am getting a lot out of these audio dramatizations. I’ve been playing them in the car while I commute to and from work. The kids have enjoyed them as well. It has been a long, long time since I last read these books — probably thirty-five years. I watched the first two of the recent film versions and they were really mediocre; I remember almost nothing about them. The audio dramatization is a much more effective way to experience the story.

I am struck by Lewis’s somewhat heavy-handed, but beautiful, Christian allegory

peeping out at every turn. It also is amusing to come across all the story elements that Lewis and Tolkien share. I'm not sure who first used the army of marching trees, although of course both borrowed them from Shakespeare. One set his heaven in the east, and one in the west. Tolkien's introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* in which he talks about how much he despises allegory, takes on a new meaning. there is a darker side to Lewis's world, in which British schoolchildren, because they are "sons of Adam" and "daughters of Eve," are born to colonize and rule the "lesser" races of talking animals and human-like beings that are always portrayed as lesser, although oddly not the children of "lesser God." Just as the beauty of Lewis's Christian allegory peep out everywhere, so does his provincial, colonialist thinking.

***Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971 Film)**

Speaking of colonialist thinking, last night I showed my children the original version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. It remains a fantastic movie, just perfectly structured, and my kids all immediately wanted to watch it again the next day. But speaking of colonialism — parents, have you talked to your children about Oompa-Loompas?

I also have started reading *The Long Ships* by Frans Gunnar Bengtsson. I set that book aside to read *My Struggle: Book 1* but will now return to it.

Saginaw, Michigan
June 12, 2015

This work by Paul R. Potts is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.