

Read It, September 2015: Progress Report 2

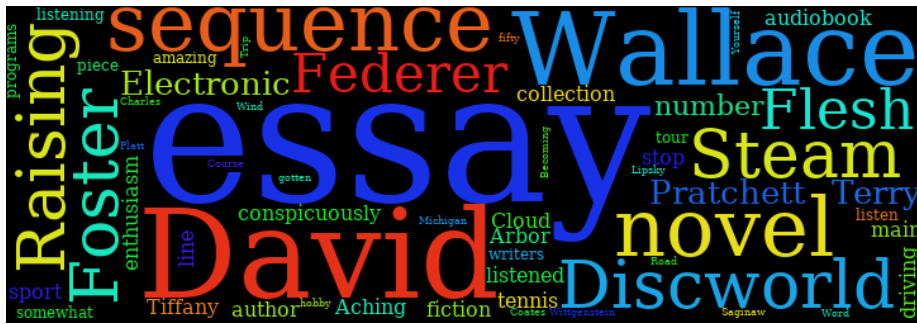


Figure 1: Word Cloud

Raising Steam by Terry Pratchett

I have a line-jumper to report. Somehow, Terry Pratchett’s last Discworld novel, *Raising Steam*, jumped the line and I read it before a number of other books that have been waiting patiently for months. (Well, last “regular” or “main sequence” Discworld novel; the Tiffany Aching book *The Shepherd’s Crown* is a young adult Discworld novel in the Tiffany Aching sequence and it came out after *Raising Steam*, so it is, truly, sadly the last Discworld novel). *Raising Steam* is about the development of railroads in Discworld. It fits nicely into the Moist Lipwig sequence, but does not really stand out as better or worse than the others. Really, the whole sequence is quite good. It does not do anything special to close off or round out the sequence, and so reading the main sequence of Discworld novels will forever leave readers with a slight feeling of incompleteness. I think that in itself is a tribute to the author; the world, and not just the series of books, will hereafter always have a Terry Pratchett-shaped hole in it.

I’ve been reading many things this month, including a number of things that aren’t books. I read the *New Yorker*’s article on Donald Trump and his relationship to the White Nationalist movement. I picked up some discounted audiobooks on CD at the Book Warehouse in the Birch Run outlet mall, specifically a boxed set of David Sedaris audiobooks, and an unabridged version of the David Foster Wallace essay collection *Both Flesh and Not*.

***Both Flesh and Not* by David Foster Wallace**

Both Flesh and Not opens with the essay “Federer Both Flesh and Not” and I listened to that essay driving down to Ann Arbor on Monday morning. I have very little interest in professional sports of any kind, but DFW makes tennis very interesting, and his enthusiasm for the sport becomes contagious at least as long as I am listening to his analysis. Like all DFW essays, this one is about many things, including the history of tennis, the way we react to and treat athletes, and the way they respond to this attention. Having never really heard of Roger Federer, I had a very strange instance of the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, or recency illusion. Just an hour or so after I had listened to this essay, I overheard two co-workers talking about Federer. The essay dates from 2006. Apparently, Federer has been enjoying a recent comeback after a number of years of relative obscurity. Wallace’s genius is not obscure at all; it’s an amazing essay, a real tour de force.

The next essay, “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” is somewhat more difficult to get through in audiobook format. Wallace starts off discussing the then-recent crop of “conspicuously young” writers and winds up tackling some very heady topics, including the notion of just how contemporary culture manifests and shades a piece of writing, and how recent fiction has been morally damaged by television writing, an inescapable influence for young authors. He also lays into MFA programs, which no doubt deserve the tongue-lashing. When he wrote this, Wallace was about 26 years old. It seems almost inconceivable to me that at 26 he could be so insightful, and so well-read (although at that age somewhat more showily and conspicuously so than he was in later writing). He really was so very, very brilliant.

It is hard to listen to this essay in audio form and I have had to listen to the whole thing repeatedly. I’d like to be able to back up just a few seconds, but my car’s CD player will only back up to the beginning of a track (or if it will scan backwards, I don’t know how to make it do so). The essay is so dense that if I was reading it in print, I would require frequent breaks to stare into space, think admiringly about the argument he was making, and perhaps Google a few of his references. It’s hard to do that while driving.

Now I’m working my way through his long review of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and I am at sea here, knowing even less about Wittgenstein than I do about young writers and MFA programs circa 1988. I may not finish reading (listening) to this collection of essays this month, but I am trying.

***Of Course You Wind Up Becoming Yourself: a Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* by David Lipsky**

I have also started reading *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* by David Lipsky. The multiple introductions are heartbreaking, and I haven’t even gotten to the real dialogue yet. I would

love to see the movie adaptation, called *The End of the Tour*. I'd have liked to see that one in the theater, but I don't think it played anywhere within fifty miles of Saginaw, Michigan, so I'll have to buy a DVD when they are available.

Non-Fiction in Progress

Finally, I read half of the most recent long essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic* magazine, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration." I will read the rest, but it is so grim that I had to stop for now. This is another of those essays by Coates which will prompt me to buy paper copies, and give them to my friends. But I had to stop, for now.

I've also been reading bits and pieces of *The Art of Electronics, Third Edition* by Paul Horowitz and Winfield Hill. This is an amazing book, and I understand more of it than I ever would have, a few years ago. I've also been reading chapters from *Make: Encyclopedia of Electronic Components Volume 1: Resistors, Capacitors, Inductors, Switches, Encoders, Relays, Transistors* by Charles Platt (yes, the same Charles Platt who wrote science fiction, including *The Silicon Man* I've gotten more deeply into my electronics hobby; at the age of nearly fifty, when I can barely see well enough to solder parts together, I finally have the electronics hobby that my grandfather tried to teach me when I was eight or nine years old. And I am trying to pass his enthusiasm for the subject on to my own children. (No grandchildren yet!)

And so I will stop there. Another update soon!

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
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