

Read It, September 2015: Progress Report 3

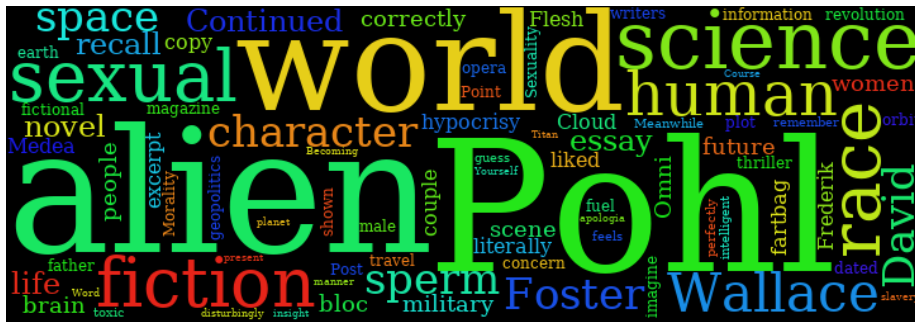


Figure 1: Word Cloud

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

It's been a pretty uneventful week-and-a-bit. I have continued to listen to the essay collection *Both Flesh and Not* by David Foster Wallace, in the car. After the challenge of his review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, it is a bit of a relief to have some lighter essays. I'm currently listening to "Rhetoric and the Math Melodrama," which is especially relevant to me given that I have read a couple of the books he mentions, including *The Man Who Knew Infinity: a Life of the Genius Ramanujan*. It also really drives home what a polymath Wallace really was. It seems almost unfair. I think I would have liked to meet him.

***Jem* by Frederik Pohl**

I also picked up a paperback copy of a Frederik Pohl novel I read a long time ago: *Jem*. If I recall correctly, an excerpt from *Jem* was published in *Omni* magazine around 1979 or so. If I recall correctly, it contained a bit of a sex scene. If I recall correctly, this led 12-year-old me to read the novel.

Thirty-six years later, *Jem* isn't so great; its gender politics and its geopolitics are pretty dated, but its three science-fictional alien races are still very cool. It's basically a minor thriller with science fiction elements, but it is more space opera than science fiction; the geopolitics could have played out on earth, and the aliens don't seem that integral to the plot. I have to remind myself that it

was written a few years after the 1970s oil crisis and so concerns a future where the world is broken into a fuel bloc, a food bloc, and a “people bloc” of countries that export service workers. The prospect of nuclear war is also very much on Pohl’s radar in this story. And so this is really a political/military thriller, and one might think of it as fitting vaguely into the military science fiction sub-genre.

The failures of Pohl’s science-fictional imagination in this book are almost more interesting than its successes. In this world, tachyon propulsion from orbit makes the most expensive part of space travel the fuel cost of lifting a ship initially into orbit. But there is no concern shown at all to the problems of relativity associated with faster-than-light travel. In this high-tech world, people exploring an alien world transport gasoline-powered planes and boats there, record audio on magnetic tape, and send information on paper or microfiche(!)

Sexuality and Morality in *Jem*

The really badly dated parts of *Jem* center around sexual morality. Post-sexual revolution, pre-HIV, male science fiction writers liked to imagine, and teach impressionable young readers, that we would all soon be living in a sexual utopia where women would use men sexually the same way that men use women, and all would be content with this situation. So we have a protagonist who is a military officer, a West Point graduate, with a highly-placed father, leading the American expedition to Jem. She cheerfully fucks her way along in the world, to get what she wants at any given time. She’s not even a serial monogamist; at one point, she has donated an egg to a sperm and egg bank on the alien world Jem, and discovers that the egg was fertilized. She finds herself wondering just who the father might be, because she honestly isn’t sure. The women on Jem are, apparently, routinely donating their eggs to use later, perhaps with surrogate mothers. Meanwhile, in the real world, egg extraction is a non-trivial medical procedure, but Pohl is happy to imagine that it will be routine under primitive field-encampment conditions on toxic, hazardous alien planets. I guess it takes a real man to properly trivialize female reproductive biology.

Pohl also introduces a character who is a carping moralist, and we hear her inner monologue of disgust and loathing towards anyone expressing sexual interest in her, or the couples hooking up all around her. Pohl made her a translator who has had the hemispheres of her brain split, to further her career in simultaneous translation. I remember this fascinating concept from reading the excerpt in *Omni*, as a child, but back then I didn’t really even begin to parse the way Pohl apparently uses her to illustrate sexual hypocrisy. She spends the book casting judgment on other people’s sexual mores, but she’s literally of two minds about it and hard-wired for hypocrisy — the half of her brain that does engage in sex outside of marriage apparently literally doesn’t, and can’t, know what the other half is up to, or at least can’t discern the disconnect. She feels perfectly justified in adoring her chosen partner, even when it quickly becomes clear that he does not have any particular passion for or particular interest in her, or sterling character himself. I am not entirely clear what Pohl is getting at here; is

he illustrating sexual hypocrisy in order to mock it, to claim that all scolds are hypocrites, or to show her as a tragic figure who would otherwise be virtuous, had she not been damaged in this way? It just does not seem very clear.

The Alien Races of *Jem*

As I said, even though they are not very well-integrated with the overall plot, the aliens are interesting. *Jem*'s 3 intelligent alien races are an underground, mole-like race, a surface-dwelling, crab-like race, and an aerial race of gasbags (the characters sometimes refer to them contemptuously as "fartbags". The life on *Jem* is apparently mildly toxic to humans; they can have a severe allergic reaction to exposure to environmental proteins. *Jem*'s life has a similar sensitivity to earth organisms.

Pohl had a world here where he could have come up with interesting symbiosis between the different intelligent races, and done much more with the contact scenarios and developing significant relationships between human and alien characters. He really doesn't do much of that, though. The human sympathy for the aliens is disturbingly limited; if that is his intentional message, it seems like quite a dark one. By the end of the book the humans are engaging in plantation slavery, and there is some kind of a rant about how this is consensual, but it is impossible to tell whether Pohl is writing a apologia for slavery, or mocking such apologia.

An Alien Discothèque

All through the book, the alien races are there to be exploited; in an early scene, a biologist shoots them down and the injured sentient aliens drag themselves around the camp, slowly dying. Humans literally use the "fartbag" balloonists for sexual gratification; it turns out that a mist of aerially-released fartbag sperm, drifting down onto humans, is a combination hallucinogen, euphoric, and aphrodisiac — so potent, in fact, that it triggers an immediate orgy among the humans present. The release of sperm can be triggered by strobe lights, and so the colonists of *Jem* begin holding regular dance parties. This makes *Jem* sort of like Studio 54, I guess, with its a high concentration of drugs and sperm — again, just what *was* Pohl intending to portray, or parody, here, and for what reason?

I'm reminded a little bit of John Varley's *Titan* and also of the aliens of *Medea* from *Medea: Harlan's World*, which I believe was also excerpted in *Omni* magazine, which also led me to that book; I want to pick up a copy of *Medea* and read it again and see how well those stories have shown up. I'll bet it holds up a lot better than *Jem*, and I know that *Titan* certainly does. It seems unfortunate that Pohl's reputation rests on a handful of works that are quite memorable — for example, *Gateway* and *The Space Merchants*, but would be far stronger if not for a lot of mediocre work. To be fair, I have not read more than a selection of his novels, so perhaps I am missing some information. If you're interested in a

satirical, polemical space opera, I'd recommend reading Pohl's much earlier book *The Age of the Pussyfoot*, which is at least light-hearted and often quite funny.

There's more to tell about planet Jem and its unusual star, but really, by the standards of better hard science fiction, it's not that interesting. Oh, and the sex scenes I remember from my childhood? Let's just say they were a lot more exciting when I was twelve. "The future of sex that wasn't" would be a good topic for a con panel on sexuality in science fiction. White male science fiction authors envisioning a post-sexual-revolution world that perfectly preserves, as if in amber, their own attitudes towards the subject? Don't sign me up for this particular future — although it could inspire a really fun convention costume event!

Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, Continued

Meanwhile, I am just about finished with *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, which is essentially a transcript of a long series of conversations with David Foster Wallace. There are some real insights here. Disturbingly, Wallace's tendency towards suicidal ideation is present as a subtext all through his comments — he is constantly talking casually, in a joking manner, about blowing his brains out, in a manner that was, at the time, probably just shy of setting off his interlocutor's alarm bells. Reading Wallace talk about his insecurities and painful introspection about all his perceived faults feels voyeuristic, but there is some insight here about all writers, and all artists. I feel closer to him as a person than I do when reading his brilliant and often self-revelatory essays. I'm just not quite sure he was really comfortable with what he actually revealed. But his thoughts on media and television and music are more than worth the price of admission.

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
September 26, 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/>.