

Read It, October 2015: Progress Report 2



Figure 1: Word Cloud

I have not really been on top of the progress reports. We've had some cold viruses rampaging through the family. I was quite sick on Saturday. I started improving on Sunday, and so came down for my usual work week. I haven't missed any work, because my symptoms have been mild (acetaminophen helps), and I don't think I'm contagious. But I haven't been getting much reading done. After work, I just fall asleep early, and wake up several times during the night either feverish, or shivering. I'm hoping this virus is done with me soon.

***The Martian* (2015 Film)**

I did get out to see *The Martian* (the movie) last week. I don't find it all that much fun to attend movies alone, but I did enjoy this one. I attended a late showing after a long work day, so I was quite tired, and although it is quite a long movie, at well over two hours, it kept me awake. Having read the book, I went to the movie knowing that a few of the key plot points were based on dubious science. The only version showing when I showed up at the theater was the 3-D version, and that was very distracting. In 3-D, a lot of the beautiful Martian landscapes looked distinctly odd, with the little rover sticking out as looking very toy-like, like those tilt/shift photos that deliberately make a real scene look like a model. While the 3-D effect on the "beauty pass" shots of the spacecrafts were gorgeous, the effect of being, subjectively, inches from Jeff Daniels' age-spotted forehead was much less so. So personally I'd recommend the plain old 2-D version.

There are a few things to comment on. The interiors of the launch vehicles and interplanetary vehicles are ridiculously gigantic. This makes for nice practical sets with lots of places for cameras, I suppose, but it's unconvincing; if you've been to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum and seen real launch vehicles, you know that, in space, space is at a premium, because mass is at a premium, because the energy required to transport objects into space is enormous. The zero-gee effects with astronauts bouncing down the passageways and around turns were not all that convincing. Honestly, probably the only movie I've ever seen with convincing zero-gee effects was *Apollo 13*, because those were actually shot in the "vomit comet," a plane performing long dives, over and over, yielding an inertial frame of reference where everything in the plane was falling together, so the actors and props really were weightless with respect to their surroundings. In *The Martian* the actors are pretty clearly using wire harnesses, and it shows.

I could go on about the silly ways computers are depicted in movies. This film wasn't *too* bad about this, but I was still surprised that, given the film's likely audience of geeks, the producers would still display various forms of code on the screens that made no sense whatsoever in context. As a software engineer, it takes me out of the scene and makes me feel insulted. But still, I guess I should be glad that some of the tech was at least plausible. I liked the portrayal of engineers in the film. Never mind that a sandstorm on Mars could not do the kind of damage that sets the plot in motion, or the heavy risk of radiation on the surface of Mars, or the somewhat ridiculous flying around at the climax of the film. I was just happy to see a majestic, beautiful movie that felt in part like an homage to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and wasn't a complete insult to the intelligence of the audience. So I'd recommend it, but I'd recommend reading the book first. I am curious to see if there will be a Director's Cut that follows the plot of the book more closely.

This week, I continued with my boxed set of David Sedaris audiobooks; I have finished *Me Talk Pretty One Day* which is, I believe, abridged from the print edition.

***Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* by Douglas Adams**

I also re-read *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* by Douglas Adams. I read this book back when it came out, after really enjoying the Hitchhiker books and radio series, and found it confusing and not entirely successful as a novel. Back in the day, I was willing to give it the benefit of the doubt and imagine that the book was just too subtle for me, that there were things going on I wasn't smart or refined enough to appreciate. After coming across an essay by Jo Walton about this book in her collection *What Makes This Book So Great*, I decided to give it another read, as an older adult. It's still confusing. It has some funny and striking scenes, but the plot seems fragmented and overly complex, the character development weak and unconvincing, and the ending very rushed. In other words, it isn't as good as the better of the *Hitchhiker's Guide* books —

the funny bits aren't as funny, the story arc isn't as much of a story, etc. What it has going for it is a series of funny digressions, scenes, character sketches, and dated references to computers. I was wondering about the strange structure of this novel. It introduces *Doctor Who*-like time travel elements in the last few pages, with a character revealed to have Time Lord-like abilities — which in context, doesn't make a whole lot of sense — and discovered that, per Wikipedia, that

The genesis of the novel was in two Doctor Who serials written by Adams, *City of Death*, (in which an alien tries to change history at the cost of erasing humanity from existence), and in particular the cancelled serial *Shada*, which first introduces a Cambridge professor called Chronotis who is hundreds of years old. He has been living and working at a Cambridge college for centuries, apparently attracting no attention (noting with appreciation that the porters are very discreet). In *Shada*, Chronotis's longevity is due to him being a Time Lord, and his time machine is an early model TARDIS. These trademark elements from Doctor Who were removed by Adams for Dirk Gently.

And I realized that hey, I've seen *City of Death*, and that's why the plot seems familiar! I have a copy of the recent adaptation of *Shada* waiting on my shelf to read, too. So there you have it; the novel is basically a recycled *Doctor Who* story, imperfectly transformed into a not-all-that-effective, semi-parody of the well-worn British detective drama.

I'm wondering if I should re-read the follow-up book, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. Does it hold up any better? Oh, and also, I'm coming to think that my taste in books doesn't match up very well with Jo Walton's, at least not in this case. I haven't read all the essays in *What Makes This Book So Great*, and I like some of her insights into, for example, Heinlein's *Friday*, but I don't think we are in agreement about this Douglas Adams novel. Creating a clever puzzle of a plot just doesn't engage the reader enough to make a book worth reading. A book structured as a murder mystery at all, even a parody of one, in which the murder is deliberately meaningless, infects the whole enterprise with a capricious lack of meaning. In fact, the book is so ineffective as a novel that I may wind up not bothering to keep a copy in my library; as space gets tight, I have found myself wanting to more of the "purging" work that necessarily comes with managing an actual, curated library, as opposed to an endlessly-growing collection consisting of every stray book that follows me home.

I'll have to think on that. Maybe I'll give it a third chance, out of my general appreciation for Douglas Adams. Or maybe it's time to just acknowledge that not everything he wrote was great, and let it go, so that it doesn't make his much better work seem poorer by association.

I'm also continuing to read, but haven't finished, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. That book is becoming more interesting as the story proceeds into the wartime

years of the twentieth century, and I should be finished with it soon. Onward!

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
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