

## Read It, October 2015

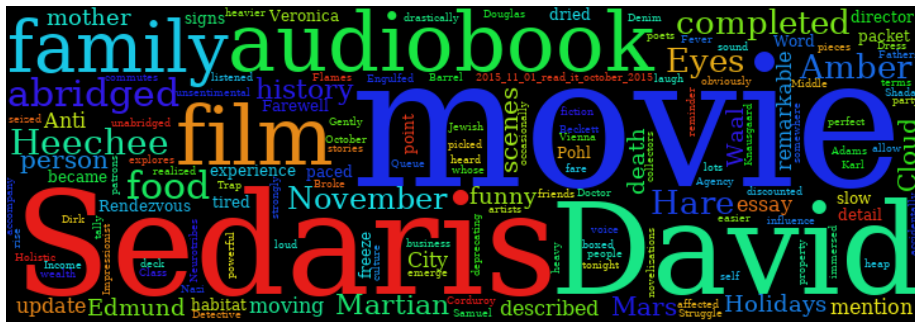


Figure 1: Word Cloud

### Books Completed in October

Here's the final tally:

- *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* by David Sedaris
- *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* David Sedaris (unabridged audiobook on CD)
- *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook on CD)
- *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook on CD)
- *Barrel Fever* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook on CD)
- *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* by Douglas Adams
- *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal

That list is obviously pretty heavy on the David Sedaris. It's because I picked up a discounted boxed set and it seemed perfect to accompany my long commutes. Some of the audiobooks seem to be abridged, but not too drastically. His earlier work is some of his best. *Holidays on Ice* has the stories that are the most laugh-out-loud funny, while some of his later work is funny but often quite dark, especially when he explores the death of his mother in a completely unsentimental yet moving way. I realized as I listened to these that a little Sedaris goes a long way, in terms of influence — even having only heard a few of his pieces on NPR over the years, his self-deprecating, dry style has strongly affected my own essay-writing. That's not a bad thing, but it is a reminder that I need to do

enough writing to allow my own voice to emerge. When I only write an essay occasionally, it seems like it is easier for it to accidentally sound like the other people I've been reading.

## **Books in the Queue**

For November, I've got lots of books on deck including both some very light fare (the Doctor Who novelizations of *Shada* and *City of Death* and some heavier work (Samuel Beckett) and some work that is somewhere in between (Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle, Book 2*). There's also a heap of non-fiction, including the rest of *Neotribes* and *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle Class Mothers and Fathers are Going Broke*.

### ***The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal**

I don't have a lot of time to write tonight, but I want to mention *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. This is a remarkable book — the history of a powerful Jewish family fully immersed in the business and culture of Vienna, whose wealth and property was seized by the rise of the Nazi party. Once the patrons and friends of Impressionist artists and poets, art collectors and contemporaries of Rilke and Proust, the war left the family forcibly dispersed and their assets “Aryanized.” The author began studying this part of his family tree when he inherited a cabinet full of tiny Japanese ornamental sculptures called netsuke. It's a tragic story but a fascinating one, so I highly recommend it to anyone interested in art history and especially the history of Anti-Semitism.

### ***The Martian* (2015 Film), Again**

There is one more thing I want to mention. In my last update I described seeing the movie *The Martian* in 3-D. Last weekend I noticed that my oldest daughter, now 11, was reading the book, and asked her to come with me to see the movie. It is technically PG-13, but that is entirely for some colorful cursing; not a single person actually dies in the story, and there is no inter-personal violence whatsoever, which seems pretty remarkable for a big-budget movie in 2015. I had described the trouble with watching it in 3-D, and how the 3-D effect makes the scenes of the rover on the surface of Mars look very fake. I can confirm that these scenes are more convincing in 2-D. From my perspective, the 3-D effect is interesting, and impressive in a few scenes, but ultimately I think it makes the experience more distracting than immersive.

My impressions of the movie, having seen it twice? It's definitely a bit slow. Last time I watched it quite late at night, and chalked up feeling tired to simply *being* tired. I saw it earlier in the evening this time, and it became clear that it is just a bit slower-paced than is ideal for immersion and entertainment. And I say that as someone who generally really likes what a director can do in a long, meditative movie such as Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

What did Veronica think of it? She was not thrilled. She seemed mostly annoyed that the movie plot differed slightly from the parts of the book she had completed.

When questioning her about it later, it became clear that she had missed a lot of the detail the director put in there to add structure and texture to the film. For example, there's a sort of countdown going on in the way the protagonist's food supply is slowly running out. As he packs to leave the habitat for the last time, he writes on a packet of freeze-dried food "Farewell to Mars" or something to that effect; he also signs his name to the calendar of Martian days he has marked off on the wall of his habitat.

Later in the film when he is actually preparing for the terrifying experience of lifting off in a rocket stripped of windows and nose cone and just about everything else, we see him eating the reconstituted, freeze-dried food from his very last food packet, the one marked "Farewell to Mars." We also see him shave and clean himself up and he is emaciated, with sores on his body — these are two signs of just how close he has come to starvation.

Veronica didn't seem to put together the significance of any of these details. I guess some of that just comes from being a young person not accustomed to looking for the meaning in the things on the screen. I think, also, that she is used to movies that are often much faster-moving, often animated. I hope that when she finishes the book we'll be able to talk a bit more about the differences between book and film, and why the media of film requires a different approach, and the different kind of excitement one can get from a more thoughtful, slow-paced movie.

Happy November!

### ***Heechee Rendezvous* by Frederik Pohl**

Update written at the end of 2015: at about this point in the chronology, I finished Fred Pohl's third Heechee book, *Heechee Rendezvous*. Unfortunately, I did not make a note of just when I completed it. Apparently I didn't find it all that memorable. We do meet the Heechee, but it seems a little anti-climactic when we do. The book has some interesting ideas about the point at which a computer-modeled personality suddenly gains a "soul" of sorts; that is one of the more interesting elements of the book. There is also some thinking about uploading a dying person into a virtual world, but no one has written about that better than Greg Egan, in his novel *Permutation City*, so just read that, okay?

*Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan*  
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