

Read It, November 2015: Progress Report 3

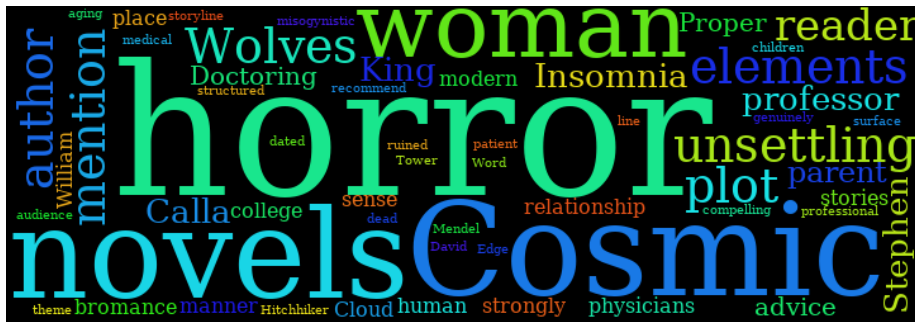


Figure 1: Word Cloud

***The Rim of Morning: Two Tales of Cosmic Horror* by William Sloane, Concluded**

I finished *The Rim of Morning*. I've made some comments on *The Long Ships* already, and so won't say a lot more, except to mention that it concludes in a pretty satisfying manner, tying up some plot lines and giving us pretty much the closest thing to a "happily ever after" ending that we could possibly find convincing.

The Rim of Morning contains two short novels in the "cosmic horror" vein practiced by writers like H. P. Lovecraft and William Hope Hodgson. I don't have a good working definition of "cosmic horror," except to say that it does not focus on traditional horror tropes, such as the ghosts of humans, or werewolves, or zombies, or pedestrian human-scale threats such as serial killers. "Cosmic horror" comprises stories which undermine whatever sense of meaning and security we might have about our place in the universe.

To Walk the Night is a story about two friends, and the woman that comes between them. I'm not sure how much of this the author intended, but the close relationship between the two men is what might in modern terms be called a "bromance," and to a modern reader strongly suggests a homoerotic or at least romantic relationship. A college professor has been killed under bizarre, inexplicable circumstances, and the woman is the professor's widow. She is a

cipher, lacking back-story. It is in some ways seemingly a very misogynistic story, on a surface level the story of a bromance destroyed by a selfish woman. Beneath the surface it is an unsettling story of possession, and perhaps alien invasion.

The Edge of Running Water is a story that might have come from the era of Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini, and centers around the spiritualism of the early twentieth century — the world of seances and mediums. A college professor is building a device to communicate with his dead wife, and has driven himself to near madness with his quest and his unholy alliance with an unsavory woman — again, there are strong misogynistic elements to the story. However, these don't completely destroy the genuinely unsettling elements of the story. Both of these novels would make good short films, and some of the more dated elements could easily be updated to be less sexist and misogynist while retaining the core storyline.

I want to mention Stephen King today, because he wrote the introduction to this volume. I have come nowhere near reading every one of Stephen King's novels or short stories, although I think I have read most of the well-known ones: *The Stand*, *Firestarter*, *Pet Sematary*, *Christine*, *Cujo*, *Carrie*, *The Dead Zone*, *Insomnia*, and the whole Dark Tower series (I have not finished *The Wind Through the Keyhole*, but it is on my to-read pile). I read these books at various points in my life, most of them when I was a teenager, but some later. *Insomnia* is the only one that I have read more than once. It is an interesting book that has, as a theme, aging, and so I can imagine that I might want to read it again as I get older.

***Wolves of the Calla* by Stephen King (a Digression)**

But in particular I want to mention one of the Dark Tower books, *Wolves of the Calla*. I found this book to have that genuinely unsettling quality that can come about when the right story lands in the brain of a receptive reader. I was a new parent when I read *Wolves*, and the plot involves “roont” (ruined) children, who are kidnapped and returned overgrown and monstrous, their minds damaged and the potential their parents imagined, ruined. It was and still is a deeply disturbing image for a parent.

Nothing in the two novels in *The Edge of Morning* unsettled me quite like that storyline in *Wolves of the Calla*, or the visions of the aging, sleepless protagonist of *Insomnia*. But they are unsettling nonetheless. Some very dated characterizations and plot elements can't entirely detract from that, and so I provisionally recommend them, for readers who may be willing to overlook the novels' flaws.

***Proper Doctoring* by David Mendel**

I have some vacation time this week, and some coming up at Christmas time. I pulled a book from my New York Review Books Classics shelf, *Proper Doc-*

toring by David Mendel. This is a book of advice for physicians on, basically, professionalism and bedside manner in medicine.

The book seems to contain a lot of good advice, but it is a bit of an odd read. Much of it seems like common sense. Much of the rest seems like it might be of greater interest to physicians in training than a general audience, despite the subtitle, *A Book for Patients and Their Doctors*.

For a general audience, I would say that I can't strongly recommend it. I think the book would be more engaging and readable if it had been structured around more personal anecdotes and the arc of the author's medical career, rather than the way it is structured, around themes, broken down into rather generalized pieces of advice and guidance for different situations. Clearly the author has a lot to say, but somehow the professional detachment and sensitivity towards patient confidentiality he preaches seem to weaken the book. I have read many essays by medical professionals, and they can be fascinating and compelling. This book is less so. Although I'm sure it has some kind of permanent place in the literature used to train physicians, I'm not sure it makes a compelling read outside of that context.

I'll finish *Proper Doctoring*. I'm not quite sure what I'm going to read next. I've been reading my children *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. They love it, and it is a reminder to me of just how funny and thought-provoking Douglas Adams could be at his best (and, as I've mentioned before, how not all his work lives up to the standard set in *Hitchhikers*). I might continue with a re-reading of *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*. I will start to look back over this year of blog posts and figure out just what my final tally and list of works read in 2015 will look like, and consider what I might line up for 2016.

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
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