

## Read It, December 2015: Progress Report 1

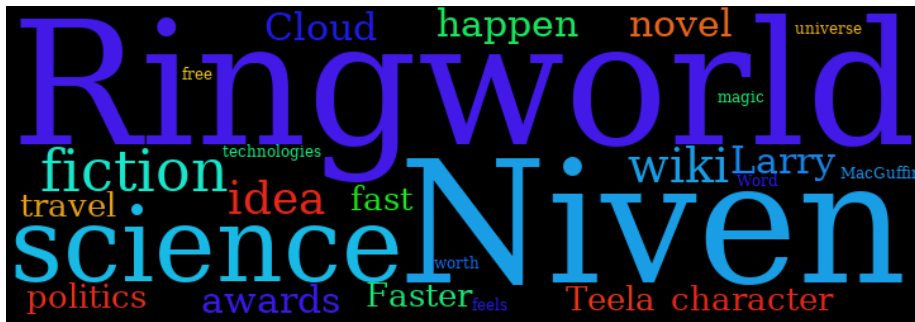


Figure 1: Word Cloud

### ***Ringworld* by Larry Niven**

I finished reading *Ringworld* by Larry Niven. It's a relatively short novel. This is considered a classic of science fiction, and won a lot of awards. I can see why. It's a novel of big ideas: the ringworld concept itself, interesting alien characters; detailed technology; interestellar statecraft and politics; and the conception of luck behind the storyline of the character Teela Brown. That was enough to win awards, when science fiction was stuck, in many cases, in a storytelling ghetto, practiced by writers who were better at the science than the fiction, and fans who weren't, perhaps, all that critical.

The book is fairly dated in its utopian vision of the future. Chemical immortality (or at least very extended good health) is readily available. Faster-than-light travel is fast and easy (although the story does center around the idea that faster technologies could give races strategic advantages, and so are worth fighting for). Certain materials and technologies are pretty much magic — for example, the General Products spaceship hull, which is completely indestructible, and completely protects the inhabitants, no matter what happens to it. These magic items become “plot coupons,” “get-out-of-jail free” cards, or MacGuffins. Niven's descriptions include enough technobabble to make *Ringworld* seem vaguely like hard science fiction, but really it is not very “hard.” The space opera aspects are not well-developed either. The universe of *Ringworld*, compared to a much

richer work like *Dune* or *The Lord of the Rings*, feels more like a sketch than a painting.

Interstellar travel is fast and painless. Sexual politics are friction-free, but straight out of the 1960s, which sometimes manifests in disturbing ways. I'm not going to enumerate them all now, but Niven's development of Teela and Prill is troubling. So, honestly, I can't strongly recommend *Ringworld*. It is worth reading if you are able to appreciate some of Niven's big and interesting ideas while at the same time pointedly ignoring his sexism.

There's one more thing: the book does not end well. Niven sets up the ending and so the reader is pretty sure what is going to happen. But then he doesn't describe what happens, even briefly, or provide a coda to the story arc. It feels strangely unfinished to me. There are a number of followup books set in the same universe, but it seems that *Ringworld Engineers* picks up twenty years later. After this book, I'm not at all sure I want to read it.

*Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan*  
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