

Read It, 2015

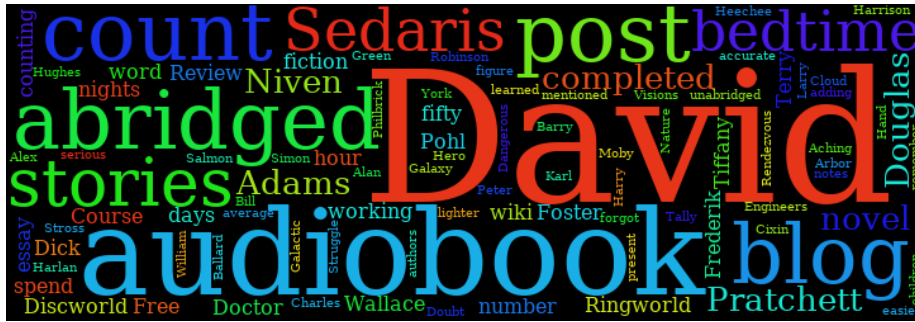


Figure 1: Word Cloud

Introducing the Final Tally

In this blog post, I will present the final tally of books that I completed in 2015. There are a few complications that arise when trying to make an accurate list.

This list is more-or-less in chronological order. I say “more-or-less” because, going back through my previous blog posts to cull the complete list, I found that in some cases I had mentioned books that I read, but then forgot to mention in subsequent blog posts that I had finished them. So I am adding two Narnia books and one Frederik Pohl novel, *Heechee Rendezvous*, at the end of the list. This year’s blog posts were inconsistent, and about halfway through the year I started adding separate “progress report” posts and list books I completed each month. I will try to continue this format in 2016, as it makes the books easier to keep track of.

Things I’m Not Sure About

There are a couple of books I mentioned in the blog posts, but I am unable to remember whether I actually finished them, so I am not going to count them. These books are Nathaniel Philbrick’s short book (an essay, really) entitled *Why Read Moby-Dick*, and *Nature Stories* by Jules Renard, a book from the New York Review Books Classics series. I will dig these up — I think they are buried

somewhere in my office — and make notes about them in 2016. I may actually have completed the Philbrick book, but I just don't remember at the moment.

I think that some of the David Sedaris story collections that I “read” in audiobook form are abridged versions. I believe that three of them were abridged, although it is not entirely clear; these audiobooks came as part of a boxed set and do not have the usual descriptive information include. (Note: I hate the phrase “box set” because I am not describing a set of boxes, but a set of other things that were put together into a box.) So, I am assuming they are the same as the CD audiobook editions described on Amazon, which describes them as “abridged.”

I will count unabridged audiobooks as complete books for the purpose of making a count, but the abridged audiobooks I will count as half a book each. (That is easier than trying to figure out exactly *how* abridged they are; they may actually contain more than 50% complete by word count, but I am not going to try to figure out exactly which stories were left out, or whether the individual stories were abridged). So when I get to the end of the list, I'll subtract two books, so that the four abridged audiobooks each count as half a book.

Books Completed in 2015

Without further ado, here is the list!

1. *Shadows Fall* by Simon R. Green
2. *The Three-Body Problem* by Cixin Liu
3. *Echopraxia* by Peter Watts
4. *The Rhesus Chart* by Charles Stross
5. *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. LeGuin
6. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* by Herman Melville
7. *Casino Infernale* by Simon R. Green
8. *Marked* by Alex Hughes
9. *Vacant* by Alex Hughes
10. *2312* by Kim Stanley Robinson
11. *Burning Chrome* by William Gibson
12. *The Martian* by Andy Weir
13. *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief* by Lawrence Wright
14. *Kingdom Come* by J. G. Ballard
15. *Bill: the Galactic Hero* by Harry Harrison
16. *Bill the Galactic Hero: Planet of the Robot Slaves* by Harry Harrison
17. *The Fox in the Attic* by Richard Hughes
18. *Lexicon* by Max Barry
19. *Red Shift* by Alan Garner
20. *Hav* by Jan Morris
21. *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* Translated by Anne Carson
22. *Doctor Who: 12 Doctors, 12 Stories* by various authors (bedtime story reading)

23. *The Glass Bees* by Ernst Jünger
24. *My Struggle: Book 1* Karl Ove Knausgaard
25. *Slow Bullets* by Alastair Reynolds
26. *Black Swan Green* David Mitchell
27. *Nature's End* by Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka
28. *The Stainless Steel Rat* by Harry Harrison
29. *Aurora* by Kim Stanley Robinson
30. *The Annihilation Score* by Charles Stross
31. *Raising Steam* by Terry Pratchett
32. *Both Flesh and Not* by David Foster Wallace (unabridged audiobook on CD)
33. *Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* by David Lipsky
34. *Jem* by Frederik Pohl
35. *Lucky Starr and the Oceans of Venus* by Isaac Asimov (as Paul French)
36. *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* by David Sedaris
37. *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* by David Sedaris (unabridged audiobook on CD)
38. *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook on CD; counting as half a book)
39. *Holidays on Ice* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook on CD; counting as half a book)
40. *Barrel Fever* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook; counting as half a book)
41. *Naked* by David Sedaris (abridged audiobook; counting as half a book)
42. *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* by Douglas Adams
43. *The Hare with Amber Eyes* by Edmund de Waal
44. *The Long Ships* by Frans G. Bengtsson,
45. *The Rim of Morning: Two Tales of Cosmic Horror* by William Sloane
46. *Proper Doctoring: a Book for Patients and Their Doctors* by David Mendel
47. *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* by Douglas Adams
48. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams (bedtime story reading)
49. *Ringworld* by Larry Niven
50. *Ringworld Engineers* by Larry Niven
51. *The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time* by Douglas Adams
52. *The Wee Free Men* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime story reading)
53. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis (bedtime story reading)
54. *The Horse and His Boy* by C. S. Lewis (bedtime story reading)
55. *Heechee Rendezvous* by Frederik Pohl

That's fifty-five books, minus two accounting for the four abridged audiobooks. So, using the most accurate accounting I'm willing to try to reconstruct, I completed exactly 53 books in the calendar year 2015. That's a book a week, on

average, although of course I didn't read any average books, and both the number of words per book and the rate of words read per week varied considerably.

The Last Few Reviews

There are a few books in the list I completed, but have not yet reviewed in the blog, and since I'm rapidly running out of days in 2015 (I'm writing the first revision of this blog post on December 28th, 2015), I'd better get to it.

***Ringworld Engineers* by Larry Niven**

Ringworld Engineers is a mixed bag, and while it feels slightly less dated than the first book, Niven's story here involves a lot of rishathra and leans towards science-fantasy. Niven's concept of the Pak Protectors was, I thought, intriguing, but very unconvincing. The ending seemed to lack moral weight. The most interesting thing in this book was, I thought, the fact that as the story opens, Louis Wu is a wirehead. Again, I would have liked that to be an aspect of more importance to the story. I don't regret reading it, but I am not planning, at present, to read any more of the Ringworld books. I would like to explore some of Niven's short stories and essays, though.

***The Salmon of Doubt: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time* by Douglas Adams**

The Salmon of Doubt is a book I would often pick up in a bookstore, glance at, and put back down again. I am a fan of Adams and I once saw him speak at an Apple developer conference, back in the nineties. His death at an early age was a shock to me. This collection is of interest mostly for the opportunity to experience his unique voice again, in the non-fiction pieces. His essays are always a joy. The unfinished bits of another Dirk Gently novel? Not so much. There are some funny scenes, but the unfinished work amounts to fewer than fifty pages. He had a promising start, but not much more. I miss his unique sense of humor.

***The Wee Free Men* by Terry Pratchett**

Terry Pratchett's *The Wee Free Men* is an absolute joy. These are technically Discworld books, but publishers often segregate the "young adult" Discworld books from the "serious" Discworld books. They are also often hard to find. For example, our local Barnes and Noble carries the main series of Discworld books with fantasy and science fiction, but none of the Tiffany Aching books, of which this is the first. So one might expect to find some more Pratchett in the children's section. But it isn't there. Fortunately there is a whole new uniform edition of the whole series of Tiffany Aching books out now, and Nicola's Books in Ann Arbor stocks them all. I picked up all the paperbacks, and I'll pick up *The Shepherd's Crown* when the paperback version arrives.

The Wee Free Men is a sort of coming-of-age story about a young witch, Tiffany. It's a surprisingly serious story that is leavened by the recurring comic relief from a tribe of "pictsies" — the tiny but mighty Nac Mac Feegle https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nac_Mac_Feegle. It is one of the great joys of my parenting experience to attempt to read, for my children, the lines uttered by the Nac Mac Feegle in a very poor imitation of a full-on Scottish brogue. Fortunately they are not terribly critical of my performance. It is a real tribute to Pratchett's writing that just reading what is on the page will often trigger, in my children, bouts of genuine ROFLing. I plan to read them the whole Tiffany Aching sequence as their attention span allows.

So, over fifty books. I have not actually finished reading *The Wee Free Men*, but as I have a few vacation days, I think we'll probably do it. It would have been a little higher, I think, but during this past year, there were just too many days when I couldn't spend time reading.

My Working Life

Since June, I've been working in Ann Arbor four days a week, spending three nights a week there. Those nights alone in a quiet environment seem like they would be great opportunities to get some reading done. But I often found myself working late, and eating dinner late, going to bed too tired to read. On some evenings I'd bring work home in the form of a printout, or a pile of notes, or diagrams, or datasheets, and work on that stuff until I fell asleep. On some nights I'd call my wife, or read a bedtime story to my kids using FaceTime. So many of those nights didn't turn into reading time.

So, when did I find the time to read so many books? Well, I prioritize reading. I'm told that American adults spend an average of almost three hours watching television per day. I didn't watch any television shows as they premiered, although I did watch some DVDs, and some downloaded episodes of Doctor Who on my iPad. I'm not sure how people find the time to watch that much TV.

How much reading time is reasonable and fits into a balanced life? I think ideally I'd like to spend between one and two hours a day reading. I like to read a bit immediately after waking up, and again before bedtime. I can't read much longer than an hour at a time without fatiguing my eyes. The time I actually manage to spend reading is closer to one hour than two, but even at an hour a day, I can usually manage to get through a book in a week.

My Reading Habits

I've learned some things about my reading habits by carefully logging and studying my reading for the year. I've learned that, while I often want to read serious non-fiction book or heavy work of literature, if lighter fiction is around me, I will gravitate to that. Magazines have the same effect; if I want to get through my books, I shouldn't bring any magazines or newspapers such as the

New York Review of Books with me, or I will spend my reading time reading those instead. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but it interferes with my goals of getting through certain books.

I have learned that I can impose a certain degree of discipline on myself just by limiting which books I bring into the room that I'm staying. If I leave most of my books in the car and only bring one book with me into the room where I'm staying, I will read the one I've got with me, because I'm too lazy to get dressed and go get another one from my car. If I bring in a lot of lighter fare, I won't stick to the one.

On the other hand, I have tried not to beat myself up when I find my mind wandering, and I allow myself to set aside a book. If it is really good and really of interest to me, I will probably come back to it, a week or a month or a year later.

A Finite Number of Books

And so slips by another year. I am not yet fifty, so I expect to have more years of reading ahead of me, but I have to acknowledge that the number of books I'll be able to get to, in the years remaining to me, is starting to look distressingly finite. If this really is a typical year, and I have thirty years left in which I'll still easily be able to read, then I have, perhaps, at best, 1,500 books left to be written by. And I have other things I want to do — more music, more writing, more podcasting — that might require giving up many of those books, leaving perhaps a far fewer number that I can get through. I would like to make them count. What books should they be?

Some Reading Goals for 2016

I don't have a detailed plan for 2016, but I do know that I would like to read some work by the following authors:

- J. G. Ballard, mostly some novels I've read before, but not for many years
- Harlan Ellison, editor: *Medea: Harlan's World*
- Harlan Ellison, editor: I'd like to re-read *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions* (and, of course, *The Last Dangerous Visions...* that's a joke, son...)
- Henry James (perhaps some of his lighter novels to start with)
- Charles Dickens (I have read *A Tale of Two Cities* but there is, sadly, a lot of Dickens I have never read)
- Karl Ove Knausgaard (the second and third volumes of *My Struggle*)
- Cixin Liu (*The Dark Forest*)
- Gene Wolfe (I want to re-read or finish some of his earlier novels and stories that I either read long ago and forgot, or abandoned)
- David Foster Wallace (especially his essays and short stories)

- Kurt Vonnegut (some of his earlier novels, collected in volumes published by the Library of America)

I'd also like to watch some movies that are inspired by or related to the books:

- *The End of the Tour* (based on *Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: a Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*)
- *Screamers* (the Peter Weller movie, based on a Philip K. Dick short story)

There are a few other books already piled up and waiting, including *Hyperion*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Three Californias* trilogy, *Call Me Burroughs* by Barry Miles, *Another Roadside Attraction* by Tom Robbins (this was an important book to me when I was a teenager, and I'd like to re-read it and see what I think of it now), *Alan Turing: The Enigma* by Andrew Hodges, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, *The Worm Ouroboros* by E. R. Eddison (to re-read), *Involution Ocean* by Bruce Sterling (to re-read), and the *Gormenghast* books by Mervyn Peake (I think I need to re-read the first, and finish the others).

What else?

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
December 27, 2015

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