

Read It, Late April 2016

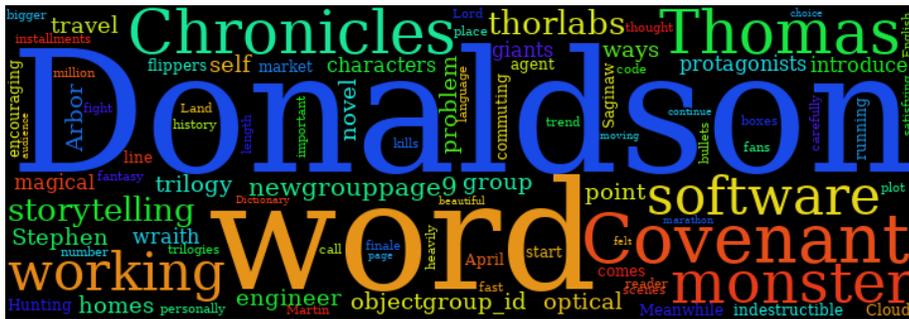


Figure 1: Word Cloud

House Hunting

Life goes on. We've been looking at homes in Washtenaw County, working with a buyer's agent. We've seen nine homes. What we've seen isn't encouraging. Properties are coming on the market and even homes that wouldn't pass an inspection are being snapped up. It looks to me like an army of flippers and would-be flippers is trying to extract money from just about any home that comes up for sale within a short commuting distance of my workplace. Meanwhile, we have met with a seller's agent to start considering whether we can sell our home in Saginaw. That situation is not encouraging, either. The housing market here does not seem to have improved substantially, if at all.

Work News

The job is going well, and I can announce that the product line I've been working on since last June is officially announced and available — a series of optical instruments with a common case and chassis and motherboard, running software that integrates and controls all the components. As the team's full-time software engineer, I personally wrote the bulk of this software, working closely with the electrical engineers. I did not write all of it — I integrated work, or adapted work, or built on work, of several other engineers who also deserve credit for getting this code finished. I'm a very experienced and productive software developer, as

I've been doing this kind of work for a living for decades, but even so, there's only so fast I can write and test and debug code, and we could not have reached version 1.0 of the full software suite, in under a year, without help.

Some of the boxes are optical transmitters, some are modulator drivers, and some are tunable laser sources. My group in Ann Arbor has also designed a smaller set of boxes, variable optical attenuators. I'm proud to say that we are manufacturing these devices right in Ann Arbor. So buy one! Well, if you need this sort of thing, that is.

***The Last Dark* (The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Book 4) by Stephen R. Donaldson**

In the midst of the working and commuting and house-hunting and budgeting and trying to spend some time with my family, I haven't gotten a lot of reading done, but I did read Stephen R. Donaldson's final fantasy novel about Thomas Covenant and The Land, *The Last Dark*. This book has been sitting on my shelf for a while. After the three previous installments in *The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, the four-part finale to the arc begun with *Lord Foul's Bane* in 1977, I was hesitant to dive back into to Donaldson's work. The first and second trilogies were important to me when I was younger, and I re-read them not long ago, and found that I still enjoyed them. This series has been a slog, though.

This site: <http://loopingworld.com/2009/03/06/wordcount/> claims that the *Last Chronicles* books add up to just over a million words, while the first trilogy is 506,000 words and the second trilogy is 548,000 words. Just to put that in perspective, *The Lord of the Rings* — once often referred to and thought of as a long fantasy work — weighs in at 470,000 words.

I get that there is some kind of a trend now towards bigger and bigger novels, and I don't completely hate that trend. I'm not afraid of big books. I've been reading Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-volume *My Struggle*. I've read many heavyweight classics such as *Moby-Dick*, and sometimes re-read them, for fun. But it comes down to a question of whether all that storytelling really pays off. Personally, having grown up with Donaldson, I would have pretty much been constitutionally unable to *not* finish the books. I've been waiting a long time to find out how the whole thing ends. And the story arc was, in many ways, quite satisfying. But getting there was needlessly painful. Let's look at a few of the ways that the *Last Chronicles* abuses the willing reader.

First, the length. Simply the length. The single biggest sin of this work is a near-complete refusal to elide or compress scenes to move the story along. Also, we are accustomed to the Covenant books including an enormous amount of introspection — self-examination, self-laceration, and a lot of internal monologue. So it's not a surprise when Covenant does that. But at this point, we have *three* protagonists — Jeremiah, Thomas Covenant, and Linden Avery. And all three of them do this. Endlessly.

Second, the tetralogies relies very heavily on *deus ex machina*. In this story arc there's an answer to every crisis, in the form of the arrival of an Insequent, or one of the *Elohim*, or a new gang of giants, or a new group of *Haruchai*. These folks drive the plot when the protagonists can't.

Third, magical travel through time. I'm not entirely opposed to the idea that the protagonists can go back into the Land's history — this history is interesting to any long-time fans of the series. But time travel has to be very carefully handled, or it invalidates all the cause-and-effect in the story. It must be limited, and it shouldn't just feel like pointless padding, or a way to retrieve another plot coupon. In these books Donaldson lets the time travel genie out of the bottle several times, and I'm not entirely happy with the results.

Fourth, magical travel through space. There are good reasons that Aristotle's storytelling "unities" of time and place are important concepts. If characters can open up magical portals and jump out of danger anytime they feel like it, it again tends to water down the carefully constructed sense of an alternate reality, with its own different (but self-consistent) rules.

Fifth, monster mash, or indulging in a monster "greatest hits." Donaldson brings back all the monsters from previous installments, and brings them back pretty much all at once. Then, so that his entire company isn't simply killed immediately, he has to *recalibrate* the monsters. A good example of monster recalibration takes place in the Stargate Atlantis television series. When the producers introduce the wraith, they are nearly indestructible — "bullets can't stop them." A whole episode revolves around a heavily armed group trying to fight a single wraith. But they quickly realize, later in the series, that this isn't very realistic, and it isn't much fun to have nearly-indestructible monsters. So they have to weaken the wraith; they become more ordinary badasses, tough but not at all impervious to bullets. Similarly, Donaldson has to make the *skurj* and the Sandgorgons — originally nearly indestructible — weak enough to fight by the dozen.

There are other problems, but I want to call out only one more — something I'll call "George R. R. Martin's Disease." Donaldson kills off a huge number of characters in this book. In fact, he kills off so many giants that he has to introduce more, lest he run out of secondary characters entirely. So about the point where the giants Dimwit Redshirt and Tailwind Cannonfodder (it is possible I'm recalling some names incorrectly) are having limbs amputated and then running marathons on their stumps, I began to feel that Donaldson had somehow started to mistake, as Martin has for some time, sadism for the kind of dark storytelling that can allow the reader a real catharsis and *caamora*.

Finally, I want to point out one "problem" that, in my view, is not really a problem at all. Donaldson takes great joy in language — his Oxford English Dictionary must be very well-thumbed, and I get the feeling he goes even farther afield to find obscure and beautiful words that may not even be in the OED. These Thomas Covenant books continue to introduce me to English words I have

never read before. That's unusual, as I'm approaching the age of fifty and I have read incessantly from a very young age. Most authors never teach me any words or idioms I haven't read before. But Donaldson keeps finding intriguing words that send me to my own dictionary, and I respect and admire him for that. And not just words, but archaic but meaningful phrases and wordings of all kinds. It's a stylistic affectation, but one that I quite like. His love of language has, in fact, shaped my own.

So anyway — the story is done. The conclusion is in many ways moving and satisfying. A number of storylines are wrapped up quite well. There are many beautiful scenes.

I've long felt that the Covenant books are not for anyone, and most people will simply self-select as to whether they are part of the books' audience or not. In the final tetralogy, Donaldson turns everything up to eleven, and in some ways that is amazing. But he also turns up the worst aspects of his writing in the Covenant books along with the best. And so I think he has, potentially, narrowed his audience further, and I'm not sure it had to be this way. A brutal round of editing or two — cutting a few hundred pages from each book — could have helped enormously. When a story is moving fast enough, it is easier to forgive clumsy storytelling because you are pulled along by the events. In the *Last Chronicles* we, like Covenant, have more than enough time to mull over our choices, especially the choice to continue reading, and many fans of the earlier trilogies will probably drop out of the million-word marathon of the *Last Chronicles* before reaching the finish line. In fact, I know several who have.

Books Completed in April 2016

So, in April 2016, I finished only one book:

- *The Last Dark (The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Book 4)* by Stephen R. Donaldson

That's it for tonight — I have to go read the kids a story! Meanwhile, I am working on the second novel in the trilogy by Cixin Liu, *The Dark Forest*. This one is translated by Joel Martinsen. The first book, *The Three-Body Problem*, was a fascinating and odd work. This book starts slowly, and at the 170-page mark, is drifting into some strange storytelling territory, but becoming more interesting at the same time, so I'm still reading.

I watched the end of the SyFy channel's show *The Magicians*. I have thoughts to share. I felt that the show was improving, but the season finale contained many surprises, most of them unpleasant. I will have to save that until next time!

Saginaw and/or Ann Arbor, Michigan
April 23, 2016

This work by Paul R. Potts is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this

license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.