

Read It, Mid-May 2016

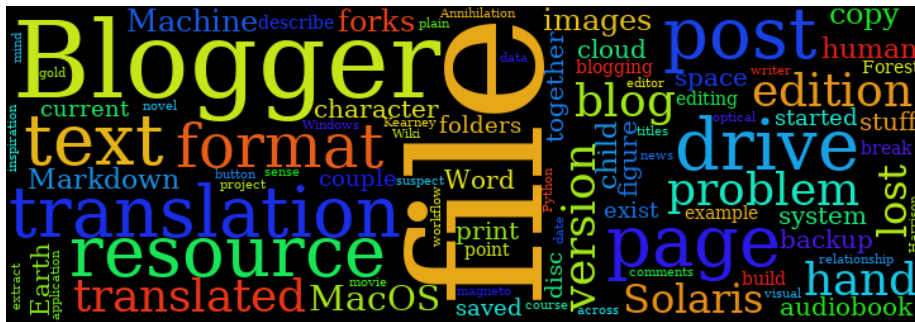


Figure 1: Word Cloud

I've finished a couple of books, so I'm going to write some final notes on them. And, of course, I've started a couple more books. But first, an update on the book project. Or, perhaps, projects.

The Book Projects

First, I've begun a big consolidation and cleanup of folders of files that I've saved for decades.

Folders... Folders Everywhere

There is some bad news. While I found most of what I was looking for, including files dating back to the late 1980s, some material I hoped to find seems to be lost.

I suspect that a few folders of documents, old MacOS documents, are just gone. They may have been lost to HFS file system corruption. I've preserved them from floppies, from old hard drives, from magneto-optical drives, from Bernoulli drives, and across a Mac SE, a PowerBook Duo 230, a Titanium PowerBook G4, and a Mac Pro. There might be some other machines in there that I've forgotten. The oldest files would be almost thirty years old.

I keep regular backups of my current system, in Time Machine format for my system volume, and Carbon Copy Cloner for my data drives, onto two

different sets of backup drives. The files in question would have been on my system drive. But I don't have endless Time Machine backups. Every few years, I've had to delete older Time Machine backups and start over. In retrospect I probably should have sprung for new drives and archived the old ones, although there is no guarantee that old hard drives will spin up.

It is possible the files might exist on some separate media. I have some old magneto-optical discs and flash drives. I'll see if they might be accessible. I know that some of my oldest flash drives have gone bad over the years and my attempts at file system recovery have been unsuccessful. I'm not sure about the magneto-optical discs. The problem I've had in the past with them has not been the discs, which are supposed to be very reliable over time; it has been with the drives. I've had several generations of drives fail, and with disc manufacturers ceasing production, they are going the way of Betamax tape players: even if you have a surviving Betamax tape, you probably can't play it.

Getting Stuffed

There are also some .sit (Stuffit) archives that seem to be corrupted, or missing part of their data. It's possible that some of the missing content was in Stuffit archives.

Being Resourceful

One possible problem is that some older files may have lost their resource forks in the transition to MacOS X. Per Wikipedia:

Until the advent of OS X v10.4, the standard UNIX command line utilities in OS X (such as `cp` and `mv`) did not respect resource forks. To copy files with resource forks, one had to use `ditto` or `CpMac` and `MvMac`.

It seems that if I copied old files from one Macintosh HFS+ to another using `cp` instead of the Finder, the resource forks were silently lost. As I was an early adopter of MacOS X, it's quite possible that this happened. Since a lot of old MacOS files never used filename extensions, losing creator and file type metadata might mean losing the only readily available clue as to what application created a file. And those resource forks didn't just contain metadata — they often contained important data. In HyperCard stacks, for example, the resource forks could contain XCMD code resources, sounds, and other things that were critical to the functioning of the stack.

There is some good news. I think the oldest stuff exists in paper form. At least, most of it does. I have saved almost everything that I ever felt was worth saving, at least since college. So, I can scan it, or retype it, if I really get motivated. A few things have been lost to other people. I had a seminar class on Ulysses and the students exchanged journal assignments to write comments on them. The student who took home my hand-written journal entry manage to lose it, and I

still miss that particular bit of writing. Of course, it is probably not as good as I recall, but I'd like to be able to be the judge of that.

Digital Decay

I knew back in the 1980s that file formats were a problem. It was not very likely that I would have been able to do much with the oldest files, anyway. Working with Microsoft Word 5.1 and earlier files can be tricky. I had a few old Word for Windows 1.1 files that had screen shot images in them. I was able to get the text out, but it looks like the images are hopelessly lost. Were they PICT resources? Who knows? And who can open up files that I originally created with Illustrator 1.0, FreeHand, MacDraw, MacDraft, Canvas, PageMaker, Ready, Set, Go!, Resolve, WingZ, Nisus Writer, MacWrite, WriteNow, and CricketGraph? There might be some things I can do using virtual machines and emulators, but the emulator programs are getting further and further out of date with current hardware as well, so it's not necessarily easy, and I'd have to find undamaged copies of the applications.

Fortunately, most of my writing during the 1990s was stored in plain text formats. My earliest web sites, written by hand in HTML, I have archived. I kept a blog using Bloxom, adding posts to it as inspiration struck, from about 1998 to about 2006. I was also an early advocate of writing with Wikis, so for part of that time from the late 1990s through early 2000s, I also did some "blogging" using Wikis. Those files still exist. I could theoretically even get to earlier versions, since I kept CVS repositories of some files.

Escape from Blogger

Starting in January 1996, I began doing most of my blogging in Blogger. Getting stuff out of Blogger is a bit tricky. It isn't that you can't open up a blog post and copy out the text, if you wrote in plain HTML. It's that if you wound up editing the text with the visual editor, it will be heavily tagged with "span" elements, break tags, and other stuff you probably don't want. And manually editing over 1,000 blog posts to get the text out sounded like no fun at all.

You can get the posts out from Blogger itself using some administrative pages on Google, in the form of an .atom file (which is XML). But it will put all the posts from each blog in one big file, along with all the comments. That file is difficult to work with. I know things can be done with XSLT and various tools that will parse the XML and extract things.

I tried a few, which led to at least a day wasted trying to different versions of Python and different versions of Python libraries to work right together. I finally had to give up on that approach. It was more complicated than it should have been, but I have managed to safely extract every bit of text from my Blogger blogs. I now have these posts in .xml, .html, and .md (Markdown). I started out with a tool called Blogger Backup, which got me part of the way there, and then I used a Python script I cooked up, together with Pandoc. I'm not sure I

could replicate exactly what I did even if I tried, so this is not a how-to-guide, but I have it all. I even have the comments.

There is a lot of formatting inconsistency from file to file. Some files I wrote using Blogger’s visual editor. Most were written by hand in HTML on the blogger page. Some I wrote using the Blogger app on the iPad (which does not seem to support writing in plain HTML). Some I wrote in Markdown, and then translated that into HTML, which I then pasted into the Blogger editor.

Markdown to HTML to Blogger

That’s actually the workflow I want to use, going forward, because the Markdown source files are so damned easy to read and work with. It’s adequate formatting for blogging, but to really build a book, with the exact typography I want, page breaks where I want them, a table of contents and footnotes and and index, all that stuff, will require some extensions and tooling.

I know it can be done; the book *Pro Git* was done this way. I just need to figure out a workflow that will work for me, and hopefully will work in a cross-platform way, and won’t rely on code or configuration files in languages and formats that are going to be hard to use in the future.

Of course, what I really want is *semantic* markup, with style sheets applicable to different destinations. For example, I’d like to be able to tag book titles, as distinct from movie titles, as distinct from album titles. I’d like to be able to write footnotes right after the paragraph where they are referenced, and have them show up at the bottom of the “page,” whatever the page is. I’d like to be able to mark things for indexing.

If I can’t manage those things, which were child’s play decades ago in Scribe, TeX, or Microsoft Word, I’d at least like to have my hyphens turn into hyphens, and my quotation marks look right, and my accented characters look right, in all the different output formats. I’d like my pages to break where I want them.

None of that is happening yet, but I’m working on it. It seems like in 2016 it shouldn’t still be necessary for a Jedi to build his or her own lightsaber, but that does indeed seem to be the case. I’d like to do as little hand-editing on any intermediate file formats as possible. And, really, I would like to pick a toolchain that will require the least awkwardness and incompatibility should I want to do something, or should my descendants want to do something, with these files, thirty years from today.

Maybe I’ll have to build my own lightsaber, but the problem is that there are an awful lot of lightsabers out there, and they are all different colors. Some have buttons, some have sliders, and some have knobs. Some don’t work. Some explode when you turn them on. Some send their beam right through your chest, a move now known as “Doin’ the Old Han Solo.”

Anyway, There's This Huge Pile of Text Files

Most of them would need some hand-cleanup before they could be republished in any form. But, frankly, most of them are not worth republishing. A lot of the technical blog posts are very dated. They describe the process by which I got some particular obsolete version of some particular piece of software running on some particular obsolete version of MacOS or Windows or Linux to do some particular thing with some particular obsolete piece of hardware.

That stuff is not, I think, of general enough interest, although I leave them up on the web because every once in a while, someone has a similar problem, comes across one of my posts via a Google search, and it proves useful.

I've started browsing through my old posts, picking ones that I think are of interest, and get them into cleaned-up basic Markdown text format, to use as a source for generating e-books and other formats. I'm not quite satisfied with the results yet, but I'm getting there. I've only completed a small portion of the files I want to work with, and this has already yielded at least fifty pages. So there is more than enough material to generate a book. The key will be to figure out what to leave out.

And, meanwhile, having proved the concept, I have a new workflow for blogging. I'm now writing these posts directly in Markdown, using MarkdownPad for Windows, or BBEdit on MacOS. Then I'm using pandoc to generate the HTML, and pasting that into Blogger. That last part is still manual, but maybe it won't have to be indefinitely. I'm generally happy with this way of writing. I can preview the file without using Blogger. If I want to edit a complete post, that is more work than just editing the HTML on Blogger, but hopefully with visual previewing outside Blogger I won't be doing it as often.

Images remain an issue. I have not made a coherent attempt to extract images directly from Blogger, at least not yet. Most of the images probably exist in original form on my hard drive, saved with iPhoto (recently Han Solo'ed by Apple, now Photos) or Aperture (Qui-Gon Jinn'ed, Mauled to death). I haven't necessarily saved the intermediate files, exported from these applications. At some point I should figure out what I'm going to do about establishing some kind of persistent links to images for the blog posts that need them.

Anyway, enough of that for now. Back to the books.

The Dark Forest

I finished *The Dark Forest* by Cixin Liu, translated by Joel Martinsen. The ending is enjoyable. The loose ends are tied up. It is intellectually quite satisfying, if not artistically. It has a big, big story arc and big, big ideas. But it is still a hard book to love.

There is an odd romantic subplot, in which Luo Ji develops an imaginary romantic interest and, apparently, gives up his real-world relationship with a

flesh-and-blood woman, Bai Rong, in favor of his fantasy. He speaks to a doctor about his illusory relationship:

“Don’t you get it? I’ve given my most profound love to an illusion!”

Later after Luo Ji has become a Wallfacer, he makes it his mission to find the woman of his dreams. He mobilizes resources in this direction, but there is some debate over whether this is an appropriate use of these resources:

“But we can’t use society’s resources to allow a person like him to live the life of an emperor!”

Eventually Luo Ji is brought the woman of his dreams:

Luo Ji gripped tightly to the match with two fingers as it burnt down. He needed the pain to tell him this wasn’t a dream. It was like he had ignited the sun, which now shone on a dreamwork-turned-reality. Outside, the sun could remain forever hidden by clouds and night, so long as his world had her and the firelight in it.

He takes her to the Louvre, and gazes into her eyes:

The dam in Luo Ji’s soul had sprung a tiny leak, and this trickle eroded it, expanding the tiny fissure into a turbulent stream. He grew afraid and strove to patch the crack in the dam, but was unable to. A collapse was inevitable.

I won’t quote any more of this section of the book, but the prose gets a lot more purple than that. It’s one of those passages, I think, that will be “make or break” for some readers; either you grit your teeth and plow through it, to figure out what happens next, or you throw the book across the room.

This is all part of one subplot which becomes largely irrelevant to the overall story arc. This is how a space opera that was fairly taut and fast-paced in book one, *The Three-Body Problem*, leads to a rambling 512-page sequel. I still think it’s a really impressive piece of storytelling, and the twists in the storyline are, for the most part, quite entertaining and occasionally mind-blowing. But I just can’t call all of this good writing. The plot keeps grinding to a halt to bring us more infodumps or dialogue that is of questionable quality. Yes, I know that it is translated. I suspect the translation is more literal than it needs to be.

I’m reminded of some other translated work. In the original dubbed American theatrical release of *Akira*, there are some passages that are laughably awkward:

“Humans do all kinds of things during their lifetime, right? Discovering things, building things... things like houses, motorcycles, bridges, cities, and rockets. All that knowledge and energy... where do you suppose it comes from? Humans were like monkeys once, right? And before that, like reptiles and fish. And before that, plankton and amoebas. Even creatures like those have incredible energy inside them. Because of genes, I guess. And even before that, maybe there

were genes in the water and air. What if there were some mistake and the progression went wrong, and something like an amoeba were given power like a human's?"

Anyway. I'm not sure how to sum up my, err, "issues" with *The Dark Forest*, except that I suspect Ken Liu was a better translator. It makes me wonder just how thoroughly he worked over the first book. Did he condense or trim some of the digressions and subplots, and is that why the first book moves faster?

According to Wikipedia, Ken Liu will be translating the third book. It is due this fall and I'm looking forward to it.

Light

I've completed *Light* by M. John Harrison.

This is an imaginative work, and the plot lines do eventually come together, sort of, and it all kind of makes sense, for some vague, new-agey, hand-waving value of "makes sense."

I have some problems with this book, *morally*.

Michael Kearney is a serial killer:

Kearney let go of him and began kicking his head. Sprake pushed his way between them and held Kearney off until he had calmed down. They got Meadows to the edge of the water, into which they dropped him, facedown, while they held his legs. He tried to keep his head above the surface by arching his back, then gave up with a groan. Bubbles came up. His bowels let go.

At the end of the book, Kearney is asked:

"As a matter of interest, why did you murder all those women?"

Then the Shrandar tells him, moments later,

"You can forgive yourself now."

That's it. That's his penance and absolution.

At one point, another character, Seria Mau is transporting a group of humans in her ship. She found one day that they were getting on her nerves, so she

...dumped their equipment from the hold and then opened the human quarters to the vacuum. The air made a thick whistling noise as it blew out. Soon the K-ship had a little cloud of its own, comprised of frozen gasses, luggage, and bits of clothing. Among this floated five bodies, blue, decompressed. Two of them had been fucking and were still joined together. The clone was the hardest to get rid of. She clung on to the furniture, screaming, then clamped her mouth shut. The air roared past her, but she wouldn't give up and be evacuated.

After a minute, Seria Mau felt sorry for her. She closed the hatches. She brought the human quarters back up to pressure.

Seria Mau has just killed five people, but faces no consequences or guilt to speak of for this action. Later she abandons the clone, Mona, with another character, to die on the surface of a planet, infected by some kind of fractal entity. Again, there are no consequences, and she eventually receives absolution and is transformed into an angelic figure.

As you might have guessed, I have a bit of a problem with this. Even in the context of the novel, where it isn't entirely clear that any particular scene is entirely *real* — because reality is bubbling and morphing all over the place — this is troubling. There's a general thread of misanthropy, and Harrison's male characters behave in appallingly misogynistic ways. And I'm not sure what any of this behavior really has to do with the "art" of this book; is there any justification or rationale at work here?

The back of the book features encomiums to this novel by some of my favorite writers: China Miéville, Iain M. Banks, and Alastair Reynolds. I feel like perhaps I have to re-think my generally positive impression of all three of these writers, because they apparently are fine with this book; not just fine with it, but were eager to praise it.

Were they high?

In any case, it's a good reminder that you can't put a lot of confidence in the endorsements that appear on book covers.

Maybe I'm just getting old, but I don't get it. I feel like I'm missing something. Should I try to read it again to make sense out of it? I don't think so. It would be like re-watching a pornographic film to study the plot. Despite Harrison's linguistic sleights-of-hand, there's really no "there" there. I can't recommend this book. I'm wondering if the second one is better.

Annihilation

I just finished reading *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer. I picked up this book because it was recommended by fellow Reddit users. In fact, it was April's book of the month in the "SF_Book_Club" subreddit, although I did not know it at the time. I started reading it just a few days ago, but since it is a slim book, under 200 pages, it only took a few hours of actual reading time to complete.

It is the story of an expedition into a "zone" where strange things are happening. We don't know exactly what. Is it an alien invasion? Is it a biological infestation? A bit of both? Some kind of rip-in-the-fabric-of-reality sorta thing?

It might be inspired at least in part by *Roadside Attraction*, the wonderful and troubling novel by the Strugatsky brothers. There's a hint of John Campbell's novella *Who Goes There*, which became the movie *The Thing*. There is a strong suggestion that the author has read the books of Peter Watts. It seems like a

couple of scenes pay explicit homage to his best books, *Starfish* and *Blindsight*. I've seen this described as Lovecraftian horror, and there might be a sort of "Color out of Space" thing going on, but to me it seems more like the work of William Hope Hodgson. It reminds me of Hodgson's story *The Voice in the Night*, and also his novel *The Boats of the Glen Carrig*.

There's some body horror, some spooky nihilism, some "what is really going on?" exploration of consciousness and perception. That's all well and good. But the thing I like about the book so far is the narrator character. She's a very introverted female character who is not passive or weak and does not have a lot of empathy for your problems, but she is also not an over-the-top badass with a machine gun:

At some point during our relationship, my husband began to call me the ghost bird, which was his way of teasing me for not being present enough in his life. It would be said with a kind of creasing at the corner of his lips that almost formed a thin smile, but in his eyes I could see the reproach. If we went to bars with his friends, one of this favorite things to do, I would volunteer only what a prisoner might during an interrogation.

In general this book is very nicely written and edited. It moves along well. Digressions that might seem, at first glance, to be irrelevant to the story, are referenced again and effectively help to build the sense of disquiet.

VanderMeer seems to like complex sentences, and I don't mind that, and he seems to like to chain together a lot of prepositional phrases, and I don't mind that, much, but he seems to occasionally forget a comma right where one is most needed. For example, in this sentence:

The myth that only a few early expeditions, the start date artificially *suggested* by the Southern Reach, had come to grief reinforced the idea of cycles existing within the overall framework of an *advance*.

One can get up a good head of steam and lose oneself in the text, only to be brought up short when one trips over a sentence that was not properly planed and sanded. Fortunately, I noticed only a few of these.

The protagonist is fascinated by changing ecosystems, and bits of her back-story are echoed by later events in the book. Superficially, the story may seem to have an unsatisfactory ending. But I am not disappointed. This is a philosophical work, that lingers in the mind. There is something going on in the storytelling itself that I have not quite discerned, as if reading the book implanted in me a post-hypnotic suggestion that has not yet been triggered.

This is the first book of a trilogy. I've been warned that the others are not as good, but I think maybe I'll have to judge that for myself.

So, I have completed three books so far this month:

- *The Dark Forest* by Cixin Liu, translated by Joel Martinsen

- *Light* by M. John Harrison
- *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer

And the month still has a couple of weeks to go, so I might squeeze in another book or two. Meanwhile...

Solaris

Yes, I'm talking about the venerable *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem, originally written in 1961, and the inspiration for two movie versions — but with a twist.

The original English translation of *Solaris* is actually a translation of a translation. The Polish text was translated into French, and then the French text was translated into English, by a different translator. The result is pretty leaden, a serviceable story that has none of the lilt and verve of Michael Kandel's wonderful translations of some of Lem's other books, such as *The Cyberiad*.

In 2011, Audible commissioned a new translation. It was released as an audiobook, and then an e-book. I had hopes that I would soon be able to purchase a print edition. Five years later, a print edition is still nowhere to be found. My credit card gives me reward points in the form of periodic iTunes gift cards. When my latest gift card arrived in the mail, I decided to use it to purchase the audiobook.

It has been some time since I last read the old translation, but I can confidently say that the new one, by Bill Johnston, is a big improvement. The relationship between Kris Kelvin and the re-embodiment of his dead wife, Harey, is much more affecting. The audiobook is read quite well, too, by Alessandro Juliani.

I have not finished listening to the audiobook, but I can recommend it, if you like audiobooks. Meanwhile, I continue to hope and wait impatiently for a print edition of this new translation. Like *Annihilation*, *Solaris* is a philosophical work, and if bits of the story seem dated and clichéd in 2016, it is largely because the original story was, itself, so influential.

Be warned that Amazon is incredibly stupid in its presentation of different translations of the same original work. The new audiobook page has buttons that link to different “formats and editions” — supposedly the Kindle, hardcover, and paperback editions. The Kindle button links to the new translation, but the buttons for the hardcover and paperback editions will take you straight to print editions of the old translation.

There is a similar, long-standing problem with reviews. The same reviews appear on the pages for all the different versions: different formats, different print editions, and even different translations. Unless the reviewer explicitly mentions that he or she is reviewing the 2011 translation or the 1971 Polish-to-French-to-English translation, there is no way of knowing. Stupid!

The Story of Earth and Sky

I'm reading a book to my kids that I read, years ago. It was a very significant book to me as a child — a book that introduced me to the deep history of planet Earth, in terms of its cosmology, astronomy, geology, and evolutionary biology. The book is *The Story of Earth and Sky* by Carleton Washburne, Heluiz Washburne, and Frederick Reed, illustrated by Margery Stocking.

This is an old book — the copy I have was published by the Children's Literary Guild in 1933. The introduction mentions the recent discovery of Pluto, which is an ironic bit of news to read in 2016.

It describes the origin of the earth and the moon, and the processes that led to the origin of life. It's often out of date with current thinking — for example, the authors describe the formation of a “sun-cloud” containing molten rock and metal, torn from the sun by a “rogue star.” The moon is described as spinning off from the molten earth as it spins, separated due to irregularities in the shape of the original spinning mass. These are not congruent with the most popular current theories. However, the book is surprisingly humble and very up-front in acknowledging that the theories it presents are quite speculative and are likely to be refined in the future.

In retrospect, it was not the details of the thinking about the origins of the earth that I found fascinating, but the simple fact that there *was* thinking about these subjects, and it was based on observation and hypotheses. In other words, this book may have given me some of my earliest exposure to the scientific method.

I don't remember exactly how old I was when I first encountered this book. It was probably via a copy in the McCord Memorial Library in North East, PA. I must have been quite young.

I have my own copy now. It is wrapped in mylar and the dust jacket is very, very faded. But the binding still works and the pages are clean and readable, and I am very glad to have it.

I believe the book's approach to visualizing travel through space and time, using an imaginary “space-plane,” very reminiscent of NASA's space shuttle, may have been an inspiration to Carl Sagan as he developed his “spaceship of the imagination.”

Gene Wolfe describes a child's “book of gold,” the book that first engaged a child of an age ripe for learning. It is a different book for every child. It is gold only in memory. It holds an oversized place in that memory. It is one of the books that wrote the child. This book is, if not *the* singular book of gold, at least one of the books of gold that wrote me. It is a treat to read it again.

Saginaw and Ann Arbor, Michigan
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