

Read It, Early August 2016

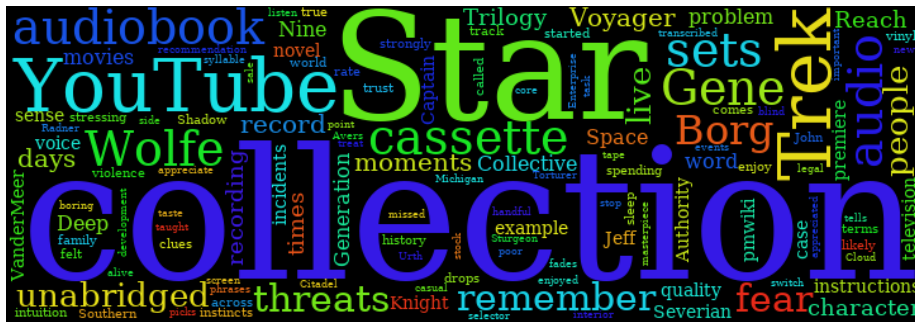


Figure 1: Word Cloud

We’re in the “unpleasantly hot” phase of summer here in Michigan, those few days (in most years, just a handful of days; this year, a few more days than usual) in which I avoid spending any unnecessary time outside at all. It’s been a long work week and the rest of my family is out of town today. In fact I will only see them Sunday evening, and then Monday morning I will head back down to Ann Arbor for another work week. So I have some quiet time to work on writing, and I’d like to take full advantage of it.

In reality I’m not always able to turn my concentration from one thing to another on a dime, and I find myself spending some of this valuable time in “decompression.” I don’t always sleep well when I’m away from home, and do my best to eat well but rarely can eat as well as I’d like to. My software development work can be a grind at time, when a supposedly simple development task turns into a minefield of bugs and tool problems. I don’t always realize that I’ve been stressed out and sleep-deprived until the stress goes away and suddenly all I want to do is nap. And while it is nice to get a break from the noise of a whole gaggle of kids once in a while, I’ve been spending far too little time with my family, and that is stressful in its own way.

I was feeling exhausted and like a cold or allergy attack was coming on. I got back onto my regular diet — bulletproof coffee for breakfast, and low-carb meals. I got some extra sleep in my own bed. I’m de-stressing just a bit — just in time to handle the transition as everyone comes home tomorrow!

The Book of the New Sun

I came across audiobook versions of Gene Wolfe’s masterpiece. They are odd recordings — originally made as recordings from the blind, they seem to have been transcribed from 4-track mono cassette at low speed 15/16 inches-per-second. There are instructions to “set the side selector switch” and “turn the cassette over.” There is tape hiss and there are moments when the audio drops out, or fades, as old cassette audio drops out and fades. But in addition to these audible problems, periodically the audio skips and repeats, as if a needle had reached the “locked groove” at the end of a vinyl record. This suggests that the cassette audio, complete with instructions on when to turn the cassette over, may have been transferred to vinyl records.

At this point I simply have to stop and scratch my head in confusion. Were there really unabridged audiobooks of Gene Wolfe’s novels, recorded for the vision-impaired, and then made available on *vinyl records*, not just cassette? Each book would have required dozens of records. And if an organization went to all the trouble of pressing records, would they really have produced these LPs from a low-quality cassette, complete with instructions to “set the side selector switch” and “turn the cassette over,” rather than from a master tape, without the cassette-specific instructions? The mind boggles, but I suppose stranger things have happened.

Anyway, someone has apparently digitized these audiobooks, and put them on YouTube. The audio quality is, as you’d expect after all these format changes and transfers, including conversion to a low-bit-rate compressed digital audio track, pretty poor. There are a few moments when the audio becomes muffled or even, briefly, drops out completely. Putting these up on YouTube is almost certainly not a legal use of the original recordings made for the blind. But I have enjoyed them a lot anyway, because Roy Avers does a very good job reading them.

His pronunciation of certain unusual words of Wolfe’s sometimes seems off to me, and sometimes is inconsistent from book to book (for example, he pronounces the word “fuligin” in *The Urth of the New Sun* as “full-eye-jin,” stressing the second syllable, but as “full-ih-jin,” stressing the first syllable, in *The Shadow of the Torturer*. He occasionally picks out a particular voice for a character, then forgets how he voiced that character later and gives that character a different voice.

But these are minor nitpicks. Avers really shines in *Citadel*, when he takes on the challenging task of portraying the wounded Ascian prisoner, called Loyal to the Group of Seventeen, who speaks only in stock phrases, as he tells a story that is translated from these stock phrases by the character Foila. These passages are a treat to listen to. He even does a good job keeping his energy up when reading some of Severian’s long, philosophical digressions when, belying his claim that he is a stupid man, Severian shows hidden depths, as he tries to make sense of all the strange events happening around him, and to him.

I have read the whole four-volume novel and the fifth companion book at least three or four times on paper, and so I know it pretty well. It has been a treat to hear it read, and it has helped me to feel less isolated and more alive and engaged these past few weeks. I found that some of the parts of the books I had long considered to be less important, and even boring at times, come alive this way, even Severian's interior monologues — no, *especially* Severian's interior monologues, which reveal more clues and connections; it really is a mistake, in terms of understanding the books, to skim over these parts too quickly.

There are, I think, a few small flaws and inconsistencies in voice and detail here and there, but for the most part, listening to them has really hammered home to me what an amazingly unified structure this work has. My impression of the books just goes up each time I read them. I think there are three true masterpieces of science fiction and fantasy *world-building* to come out of the last century. There are lots of other significant, interesting, and excellent novels, but in terms of works that really build a complete, convincing *world*, or universe, there are these three. They are *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dune*, and *The Book of the New Sun*. There are many, many other world-building books that might reach, or almost reach, this level, and that are certainly worth reading — for example, Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast novels, or E. R. Eddison's Zimiamvian Trilogy, or William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*, but they will most likely always rate below these three books of gold, in my estimation.

I'd like to be able to tell you where you can buy a legitimate, legal copy of these audiobooks, but I can't, because you can't. You'll have to go to YouTube and see if you can find them; search for "gene wolfe audiobook." I can't guarantee you'll find them. It's a shame, because it would be great if Avers' readings could be out there for you to legally obtain, transcribed from the original recording in as high-quality a presentation as possible. They should be the standard by which other readings of this work are compared. But I doubt that the licensing arrangements made for his original recordings will ever allow that.

Which reminds me that I really need to dust off my long essay on *The Book of the New Sun* and try to get it into a state I'm finally happy with; my intention is to include it in one of the book-length essay collections that I'm working on.

***Authority* by Jeff VanderMeer**

I read *Authority*, the second book of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy. While the first book follows an expedition into "Area X," this book takes place almost entirely in and around the Southern Reach offices. The book follows one character, "Control," John Rodriguez, a man appointed as director of the Southern Reach. We learn about his back-story, his history as a secret operative, and his family history (he comes from a line of secret operatives). We read about his difficult interactions with members of his staff, and his attempts to nail down facts about the expeditions. I wanted to enjoy this book as much as I enjoyed the first one, but unfortunately could not. It has the "middle episode

problem” present in many trilogies, in that the plot really can’t do very much except take us from the end of the first part to the beginning of the third part. It is evocative here and there, but it really feels like very little happens until the final dozen pages or so.

I have started reading the third part with low expectations. I haven’t finished it yet. Already, it is more engaging than the second one. But I think my final verdict will likely be that readers should read the first book, which I reviewed in May, and stop there. If that’s the case, I’ll probably keep *Annihilation* in my permanent collection and send the other two off to the Goodwill. It isn’t actually the case that *Authority* is a bad book *per se*, but it certainly suffers in comparison to *Annihilation*.

***The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker**

I have been picking at this book for a while. The author’s personal story of domestic violence is compelling. He is “our Nation’s best-known expert on the prediction and management of violence,” according to his web site. His book seems dated, in that he talks about stalking and assassination incidents from the nineties, but the basic messages are not dated. It contains a lot of recommendations that seem, after reading them, like common sense — but a lot of good work is like that, because “common sense” isn’t.

It is reassuring, in the sense that the author tells us that our human instincts and intuition are actually very good at warning us about actual threats from other people. So part of the book’s message is “trust your instincts.” He describes many incidents in which otherwise smart people literally talked themselves out of listening to their intuition, which in many cases is just another name for our ability to pay attention to clues in voice, body language, and behavior. So he makes it seem that much of what he does, when consulting with clients about potential threats, is just to repeat back to them the clues that they have convinced themselves aren’t significant.

He also describes many incidents in which institutions were unable to correctly assess threats, which is also troubling. He comes up with some checklists and guidelines for this sort of thing, and I felt that these were less valuable, at least to me, than the anecdotes.

I strongly agree with his recommendation to trust our intuition about threats, and I think his advice about assessing threats in the workplace is excellent, especially when he talks about not knocking down a troubled person’s “dignity domino.” I also really appreciate his attitude towards guns in the homes, which is fact-based, not propaganda-based.

There’s another recommendation he makes, and I’ve followed it often. He points out the ways in which the television news cycle confuses and misleads us about threats because “if it bleeds, it leads.” I find that this is very true, and I feel like I’ve developed far more insight about news, and politics, and all sorts of

current events, by no longer obtaining any information from television coverage, and little from radio. You can get a taste of his writing on the subject here: http://gavindebecker.com/resources/article/media_fear_tactics/.

I recommend this book, but not strongly. I think some people probably don't need to read it, as they already trust their instincts about threats and they don't indulge in television news. It didn't "change my life," as they say. It's a little disjointed, with chapters that jump around in time and style and which don't do a great job forming a single coherent book.

However, despite these flaws, I think there are a lot of people out there whose life it *could* change. Many of them are women, who, I think, are generally taught to fear more than men are, and who may have been taught bad strategies — that is, not fact-based — for assessing risks and deciding what to fear. If you are living in fear of domestic violence, stalking, street crime, or incidents like that, you should read it. It may help you rearrange your priorities, in a positive, helpful way. I think his stories about what we should actually fear might, as he hopes, help many people live with considerably *less* fear.

A Few Non-Books

The Dark Knight Trilogy

I've seen a few movies. I watched Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy*, made up of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*. Now, I've got a long-standing beef about watching big movies on a small screen; the small screen (and small speakers) can rob them of all their potency. In particular it has a tendency to turn very exciting action sequences into boring sequences in which toy vehicles chase each other or blow up and produce toy explosions. So my preference is always to see movies like this in theaters if I can.

But I can't often do that these days, and so we watched them at home on a completely unremarkable, very beat-up LG Flatron E2350V computer monitor, and a pair of Roland MA-8BK powered "micro-monitors" that have also seen better days. In fact, one of them has been dropped so many times, by our kids, that the 10cm "woofer" (a speaker hardly worthy of that name) is rattling around loose inside the enclosure (and they are only twenty years old!) We have been taught repeatedly that we can't really have better audio-visual gear until the kids get older, so that situation isn't likely to change, at least for a few years.

Anyway, on to the movies. I felt that the first was overly long, and I didn't really appreciate the "League of Shadows" back-story, Ra's al Ghul in Bhutan and all that "mysterious wisdom of the ancients" orientalist nonsense. And so while it had its moments, the first film bored me, and not just because I saw it on a small screen.

The second one was more promising; I finally saw Heath Ledger as the Joker, a portrayal that may very well give you nightmares. But it also felt as if it ran too long, and in fact I couldn't bring myself to stay up the last fifteen minutes

or so. (I really should go back and watch it again just to watch all of Ledger's work as the Joker. It's amazing).

The third one, surprisingly, I liked much better, and my wife Grace liked it better too. Although it reprises some of the orientalist back-story, and it is also too long, and the whole fusion reactor core thing is more than a little risible, I appreciated Bane and the story twists a lot more than I thought I would. So in fact the whole trilogy ends in a satisfying way.

The *Star Trek* Fan Collective DVD Collections

I'm going to write about *Star Trek* a bit now, so wander off and read something else if that topic bores you.

I should explain that I watched *Star Trek* (the original series) a lot in re-runs as a kid. I saw all the original cast movies in the theater. I watched the premiere of *The Next Generation*, which launched while I was in college, but as a busy student without a television of my own, I saw episodes of the show only sporadically over the years. I saw the premiere of *Voyager*, at a premiere party, but missed large chunks of *Voyager*. I saw the premiere of *Deep Space Nine*, but again, missed large chunks of the show. In fact there are probably whole seasons of *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine* that I missed in their entirety. Of *Enterprise*, I've seen only a handful of episodes on DVD.

So I think it would be fair to say that I'm not truly a hard-core *Star Trek* fan.

Of the shows I've seen, I thought (at least at one time) that *Deep Space Nine* was the most consistent in presentation and screenwriting quality. Specifically, it seemed to have the most well-developed story arc, across multiple seasons, which I appreciated (and still appreciate) in any TV show.

I picked up some of the "Star Trek Fan Collective" boxed sets, for just a few dollars per set. These are sets of episodes taken from the whole history of the series, organized by theme. The collections I brought home are called *Borg*, *Klingon*, *Q*, and *Captain's Log*.

I've learned a few things, watching these old Star Trek episodes (or, in a few cases, re-watching them).

The first thing should be obvious, but it is this: most *Star Trek* is not very good, and does not hold up very well as the viewer gets older and (at least hopefully) develops more refined tastes. Sturgeon's law applies:

90% of everything is crud.

See <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SturgeonsLaw>.

The second is that, as Sturgeon's Law would suggest, about ten percent of *Star Trek* is good. Sometimes, quite good. A few episodes hold up very well. Often, they are stand-alone episodes that are not part of a larger story arc. See for example "Darmok" (*The Next Generation*, season 2).

The third is that it really is not that much fun to watch “story arc” episodes out of order, unless perhaps you are such a hardcore fan that you’ve repeatedly watched all of the episodes of all of the shows, and so you can jump back in and remember what is going on. I’m not one of those fans.

Anyway, we watched part of the *Q* collection, which starts out with “Encounter at Farpoint” from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

See <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/NostalgiaFilter>:

...tastes can refine or limit as one ages; what may have seemed brilliant to a child or teen would seem crude or laughable to most adults, but the memories of how great something from one’s youth seemed linger long afterward, making the familiar examples seem better than more or less equivalent modern ones in comparison.

Wow, was that first episode ever bad. Bad lighting, weird set-dressing, badly edited, dragging dialogue, poor pacing, dumb sets, and too many info-dumps.

I remember watching it when it came out, and thinking even back then that it wasn’t as good as I hoped — but I don’t remember it as *this* bad. That’s the nostalgia filter in action.

We watched a few *Q* episodes from *The Next Generation* and those were a little better, but we decided to skip ahead and watch some of the *Q* episodes of *Star Trek: Voyager*.

Wow, was *Voyager* ever bad.

So we decided to watch some of the *Borg* collection’s episodes. That started out with an episode from *Enterprise* called “Regeneration.”

Wow, *Enterprise* was... pretty bad. Maybe a little less bad, in terms of acting and production and set dressing and techno-babble and info-dumps and other bugaboos of screenwriting, but still pretty bad.

But we pressed on, and watched some of the *Borg* episodes from *The Next Generation* and... well... some of them were, maybe, still *bad*, but had moments that were a little *less* bad. They have at least some good things to offer. In particular “I Borg” is, if you squint, slightly moving at times. This is often true in episodes that have guest stars, who can bring in fresh acting chops.

We also watched a few episodes from the *Captain’s Log* collective, including a few episodes of *Deep Space Nine*. “Far Beyond the Stars” (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Far_Beyond_the_Stars) is one of those 10%-or-better good episodes, a standalone story that is quite moving. But the next two “fan picks” on the *Captain’s Log* collection are the two parts of the show finale, “What You Leave Behind.” Because I have not recently watched (or indeed ever watched) the whole story arc, the finale was pretty incoherent to me. I don’t remember very much about the plot lines they were wrapping up. So don’t watch them like I did.

Can I recommend these? Not strongly. I think they have a built-in problem, which is that it isn't at all clear exactly what audience they are intended for. The people who might enjoy these "story arc" episodes the most have probably seen them multiple times, and those who have not seen them may not be able to enjoy them all that much, because of Sturgeon's Law. If you are a hardcore *Star Trek* fan, you probably have these episodes already, in the form of per-season or complete show DVD collections (*Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager* seem to be out of print, but you can find used boxed sets for sale).

If you aren't a hard-core fan, you probably want to watch the best *standalone* episodes of each show, that aren't part of an important story arc and which don't require a lot of context to understand. The *Fan Collective* sets are not all sets of the best standalone episodes, because a set like the *Borg* set does not contain the highlights of the Borg episodes, but *all* of them. And overall, the Borg episodes aren't inherently better than other episodes.

But some of the *Fan Collective* sets mostly *do* seem to contain standalone episodes. I didn't find them for sale but the *Alternate Realities* collection and *Time Travel* collection are collections of standalone episodes or two-parters organized by theme rather than over-arching storyline. Maybe these two sets are more fun for a casual fan, because they represent "best-of" collections of standalone episodes.

Or maybe they aren't; I can't really rate them since I haven't seen them. To a casual fan some of those episodes may not be truly standalone; they might present the same "I have no idea what's going on!" problem as some of the episodes in the *Captain's Log* collection. But I suspect they are more fun for a casual viewer than sets like the *Borg* set.

Which may explain, now that I think about it, why *these* particular collections were heavily discounted at my local FYE store, and *those* two collections weren't there...

And finally,

Generalissimo Francisco Franco is Still Dead

In my hopeless quest to re-live my childhood, or at least destroy my own illusions about my childhood, I have long wanted to watch some of the earliest few seasons of *Saturday Night Live* and *Fridays*. I've been able to satisfy some of that longing by watching clips on YouTube, but there is a *lot* of material that is not on YouTube.

I was eight years old when the first season of *Saturday Night Live* started, in 1975. I don't remember seeing much of it live on the original air dates; I may have seen some bits and pieces, but probably was in bed for most of those shows. But I know that by 1978 (when I was eleven to twelve), I was watching some of it live. There are clips and short films I remember very vividly, and I haven't been able to track them down on YouTube. So I have decided I'm going to try

to watch the first three seasons or so, to find some of those moments I so vividly remember, including *The Mr. Bill Show*.

I came across seasons 1 and 3 for sale at my local music store, for not a lot of money; I think they were \$8.00 each or so. I have ordered season 2 from an eBay seller.

In fact I've been watching the first season this weekend. I've found that it isn't really necessary to *watch*, as such; I can put it on and listen, while I do other things. Most of the humor, to me, is in the dialogue, rather than the visuals. There are a few exceptions. In the December 20, 1975 episode, with Candice Bergen as guest host, there's a very funny and touching wordless sketch featuring Gilda Radner and John Belushi. It's set in a laundromat, where the two of them share a washer, since all the others are in use. It's absolutely hilarious, and even romantic, but not a word is spoken.

Sadly, Gilda Radner and John Belushi are both still dead. When I was just a young kid, watching the show, I don't think I ever appreciated Radner, but watching her on SNL now, I think her work on the show is wonderful.

Good Night, and Have a Pleasant Tomorrow

So, as best as I can remember, here are the books I've completed since I last wrote:

- Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer* (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator* (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- Gene Wolfe, *The Sword of the Lictor* (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- Gene Wolfe, *The Citadel of the Autarch* (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority*
- Gavin de Becker, *The Gift of Fear*

I'll soon be finishing these:

- Gene Wolfe, *The Urth of the New Sun* (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance*

Onward!

Saginaw, Michigan
August 6th, 2016

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