

The Best Things I Read, and a Few Things I Watched, in 2016

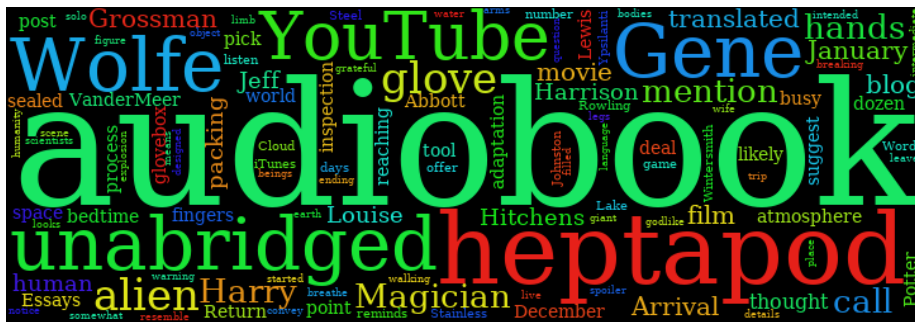


Figure 1: Word Cloud

Today is Thursday, December 22, 2016. We have made it past the shortest day of the year, and the days are getting longer again!

Things are getting busy as the year winds down. We weren't able to make a deal on the house in Grass Lake. But we have an offer in on a house in Ypsilanti, it has been accepted by the seller, and we are in the inspection phase of the home-buying process. Nothing deal-breaking has surfaced yet. If all goes well we should close the deal in January. This means we will have two mortgage payments until we can figure out how to sell our existing house. That will make our financial situation challenging for a while, but I feel good about our prospects in 2017. I am hoping that soon I will actually live full-time with my family again. It has been just over 18 months since I started commuting from Saginaw every week and it has been difficult. I have much to be grateful for, but I also will be grateful to see 2016 pass into history.

This evening I will leave for home, and I won't be back to work until Tuesday, January 3rd. We may be making one or more trips back down to Washtenaw County next week, though — we will be packing, and I might bring more boxes of books down to our storage unit.

The day we drove down to Ypsilanti to look at the house, I managed a quick date with my wife. We had dinner at the Wooden Spoon in Brighton, and went to see

the movie *Arrival*, and so I got the chance to see it a second time. Re-watching it, after viewing the ending, helped me notice a few more details in the way the early scenes set up the ending. There weren't any earth-shattering revelations here, but I'm still going to provide a spoiler warning: you probably shouldn't read this part if you want to be surprised by everything in the film.

Further Comments on *Arrival* (Warning: Contains Possible Spoilers!)

I was able to pay closer attention to the aliens themselves, and this time I couldn't help but notice how much they resemble giant human hands and forearms. Their bodies even show "knuckles." While they are known as "heptapods" in the movie, and they move their seven legs somewhat like tentacles, these legs also sometimes bend very much like fingers. This is especially noticeable during a brief scene where Louise is teaching the aliens the meaning of the word "walk." The heptapods look like giant seven-fingered hands "walking" on their fingers.

The resemblance to hands and fingers was too striking to be accidental. The people who designed the aliens clearly *wanted* to convey this similarity. The question, then, is "what did they intend to convey with this?"

They intended, I believe, to suggest that heptapods may not be as alien as they seem. We learn in the movie that the heptapods are on Earth to offer humanity a weapon, or a tool, the heptapod *language*. They are doing this, they say, because in 3,000 years, humans will help the heptapods. So they are "paying it forwards" — or is it backwards? — ensuring that humanity will have the tool to be *able* to help them. And that tool, the heptapod language, "unlocks" our perception of time.

But what if the heptapods have not really traveled in space at all, but entirely in time? Could they be distant descendants of contemporary humans?

My wife Grace thought the portrayal of the heptapods as hands was intended to suggest a *deus ex machina*, that is, powerful or even godlike beings literally reaching into our world, from "above" the stage, from a godlike perspective freed from linear time. Are the heptapods our future selves, reaching through time to enable their own existence? We see that the heptapods have long, arm-like bodies. What we see of the "heads" at the end of those arms is limited; they appear to just terminate in a featureless rounded end.

Upon further thought I realized that our view of the heptapods in the film is analogous to the view that we might have of the arms of scientists, if we were *inside* a glove box, and I think that view was entirely intentional.

Wikipedia describes a glove box like so:

A glovebox (or glove box) is a sealed container that is designed to allow one to manipulate objects where a separate atmosphere is

desired. Built into the sides of the glovebox are gloves arranged in such a way that the user can place their hands into the gloves and perform tasks inside the box without breaking containment.

Grace noted that when Louise takes her solo trip into the interior of the alien object, we learn that apparently she can breathe the atmosphere in there without harm. It somehow looks denser than air, though, as though she were breathing liquid, and the camera shows us that she is walking on a substance that seems to resemble snow. This suggests that, again, perhaps the “aliens” aren’t as alien as we imagine; the heptapods don’t seem to breathe methane, or something else that is toxic to Louise. Perhaps the sealed window and atmospheric cycling mentioned in the movie are there to protect the heptapods from contaminants in *our* atmosphere. Perhaps the heptapods are the hands in the “gloves,” and their sealed compartment in the alien artifact is the “glove box,” the intermediate space where they can interact with us, filled with a safe atmosphere under a positive pressure, acting as an intermediate “buffer zone” between their world and ours.

The only argument against this interpretation that I can think of involves Abbott. When Louise makes her solo return to the ship after the explosion, the single surviving heptapod, “Costello,” tells her that “Abbott is death process.” If Abbott is only a sort of “limb” of a being outside our place and time, why did the explosion kill him? Or, if these “limbs” can live and die independently of the beings reaching into the glove box, what sort of larger “body” are they part of?

I don’t think these questions are likely to have definitive answers. I think this was a somewhat subtle, and very beautiful, choice to make the film *evoke* an experiment carried out by mostly-unseen scientists using a glove box, in a mysterious way, without fully explaining the details.

The Best Things I Read in 2016

I could write more about the home inspection process, about lead paint tests and septic tank inspections and attic insulation and ground fault circuit interrupters, but frankly I’d be boring even myself. Suffice it to say that my head has been filled with spreadsheets and forms and easements, water softeners, shingles, sump pumps, and all the dull but very necessary stuff that goes into careful consideration of a home.

At the end of last year, I tallied up all the 54 books I read in 2015, and then on January first, published a blog post listing the dozen best. This year I’m going to plan to be busy packing in the days leading up to the new year, so I’ll list everything I read now, and also just list my favorites, and call it a year.

To the best of my recollection, and referring to my blog posts to refresh my memory, I completed the following books in 2016. This list likely isn’t complete, but it’s the best I can do:

1. *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* by D. T. Max
2. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (re-read; bedtime story reading)
3. *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman (re-read)
4. *The Magician King* by Lev Grossman (re-read)
5. *The Magician's Land* by Lev Grossman (re-read)
6. *The Dark Forest* by Cixin Liu, translated by Joel Martinsen
7. *Arguably: Essays* by Christopher Hitchens (unabridged audiobook on CD)
8. *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke
9. *My Struggle, Book 2* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, translated by Don Bartlett
10. *The Last Dark* by Stephen R. Donaldson
11. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick (re-read)
12. *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* by Douglas Adams (re-read; bedtime story reading)
13. *Light* by M. John Harrison
14. *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer
15. *Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn
16. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* by J. K. Rowling (re-read; bedtime story reading)
17. *The Nightmare Stacks* by Charles Stross
18. *The Shadow of the Torturer* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
19. *The Claw of the Conciliator* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
20. *The Sword of the Lictor* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
21. *The Citadel of the Autarch* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
22. *Authority* by Jeff VanderMeer
23. *Attempting Normal* by Marc Maron
24. *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Bill Johnston (unabridged audiobook from Audible; I've read the older English translation by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox; unfortunately, Johnston's translation is available only via Audible or as an Amazon Kindle e-book)
25. *Lovecraft Country* by Matt Ruff
26. *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker
27. *The Urth of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
28. *Acceptance* by Jeff VanderMeer
29. *The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge* by Harry Harrison
30. *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World* by Harry Harrison
31. *The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You* by Harry Harrison
32. *On Blue's Waters* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
33. *On Green's Jungles* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from

YouTube)

34. *Solar Labyrinth* by Robert Borski (re-read)
35. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J. K. Rowling (re-read; bedtime story reading)
36. *Nightside the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
37. *Lake of the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
38. *Caldé of the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (re-read; unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
39. *Return to the Whorl* by Gene Wolfe
40. *Revelation Space* by Alastair Reynolds (re-read)
41. *A Hat Full of Sky* by Terry Pratchett
42. *Exodus from the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (re-read)
43. *Out of the Silent Planet* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)
44. *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)
45. *That Hideous Strength* by C. S. Lewis (unabridged audiobook from iTunes)

Now that I count them up, that's not a bad number. I feared that I had done very badly compared to last year, but in fact my total count is only down by 8. I will try not to feel too badly about that, especially given that a number of them, such as *Return to the Whorl*, were challenging, and some, such as *The Last Dark* and *The Dark Forest*, were unusually long. I also started receiving the *New Yorker* magazine again in the fall of 2016, and so some of my reading time has been spent reading magazines instead of books.

I failed to note that I finished listening to the unabridged audiobook version of *Arguably: Essays* by Christopher Hitchens. Maybe I'll listen to the 107 essays again in 2017; most of them struck me as worth re-reading. Hitchens also mentions a number of books that inspire me to try reading them myself, such as *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel. Thinking about Hitchens again now reminds me that I should get more essays from Hitchens in audiobook form.

Update 1: Undated

In the version of this post that I published before Christmas, I included *Wintersmith* by Terry Pratchett and *Last Call* by Tim Powers in the list above, with annotations indicating that I had not actually finished them yet, but was confident I would finish them before the end of the calendar year. Well, I got pretty busy (with book packing, mostly) over my vacation, and did not finish them. I'm nearly done with *Wintersmith*, but I'm only about halfway through *Last Call*, and I've lost some of my enthusiasm for finishing it. So I don't doubt that I'll finish *Wintersmith*, but I'm not sure about *Last Call*. We shall see.

Update 2: January 5th, 2018

When I went to complete, in early 2018, the list of books I finished reading in 2017, I put *Great Expectations* on it, based on my blogging in 2017. It looks like I may not have actually finished listening to the end of the audiobook by the end of December 31st, 2016. I don't really know for certain. These blog posts are pretty much all the notes I keep about my reading. In any case, I have moved it from the list above to the list of books I completed in 2017, even though I have it listed below as one of my top picks of the year. I note also that I'm not sure if we ever did finish *The Turnip Princess*. It's probably in a box and at some point I should pull it out and try to figure out if we finished it already, or go ahead and do so.

Of the books listed above, my top picks are:

1. *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman
2. *The Magician King* by Lev Grossman
3. *The Magician's Land* by Lev Grossman
4. *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer
5. *My Struggle, Book 2* by Karl Ove Knausgaard, translated by Don Bartlett
6. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick
7. *Eifelheim* by Michael Flynn
8. *The Shadow of the Torturer* by Gene Wolfe
9. *The Claw of the Conciliator* by Gene Wolfe
10. *The Sword of the Lictor* by Gene Wolfe
11. *The Citadel of the Autarch* by Gene Wolfe
12. *Solaris* by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Bill Johnston
13. *Out of the Silent Planet* by C. S. Lewis
14. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens*

**I think I just missed finishing this book in calendar year 2016, but I enjoyed it a lot, so it is still one of my top picks.*

That's a baker's dozen, not a dozen, but I just couldn't leave out any more.

Honorable Mentions

While I'm at it, I want to mention a few non-books that I thought were worthy of special note in 2016.

I really enjoyed playing the computer game *Human Resource Machine*. Since I play so few of them, I don't feel that I can call it the best computer game, but it must be up there somewhere, specifically in the category of educational games.

I didn't watch very many TV shows, but my favorite was the BBC adaptation of *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*. I also re-read the novel at some point in the last few years, although I don't seem to have a note in my blog about exactly when I did, so it was probably before 2014.

I want to mention the first season of *The Magicians* because I think it represents some of the best adaptation work, I've ever seen — but *also* some of the worst. I wrote about this more extensively on my blog, especially in early May.

I am still talking about the movie *Arrival*, so I think it would only be fair to call *Arrival* my favorite film of 2016. I have not yet seen *Rogue One*. I will probably see it this weekend**. I have no doubt that I will enjoy it, but I don't think it is likely to haunt my thoughts the way *Arrival* did.

**Note: as of January 2022, I still haven't seen this film, and it's a very low priority at this point; based on the reviews that I've read, it doesn't seem like I missed much.

Dishonorable Mentions

I want to give a few special dishonorable mentions. The television adaptation of *Childhood's End* gets my special award for “worst adaptation.” M. John Harrison is the only author whose book I completely regret reading. If I can get through any more of *Viriconium* maybe I'll re-evaluate him, but for now I think of him as, essentially, a fraud, somehow convincing some readers and reviewers that he is a good writer when in fact he is merely an imaginative sadist.

That reminds me — I think this means it's time to re-read Jeff Noon's *Vurt* in 2017, and re-evaluate that book as well, since *Light* reminds me a bit of *Vurt*.

I should mention the “Most Interesting Book I Totally Failed to Finish Reading and at This Point Don't Really Care to Try Reading Again” — *S* by Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams.

And finally, my favorite album to listen to this year was *Hamilton*, the musical, original cast recording, although strictly speaking it was released in 2015. I should pick up a copy of *The Hamilton Mixtape* to listen to while I'm packing next week.

Have a great Christmas! And may 2017 be a damned sight better than 2016!

Ann Arbor, Michigan
December 22nd, 2016

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