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Review of Quicksilver by Neal Stephenson (London: Heinemann, 2003)

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Book Review

Quicksilver by Neal Stephenson (London: Heinemann, 2003), ISBN 0434008176

My first impression of *Quicksilver* was that the style is pretentious, trying to impress. This is a historical novel that deals with seventeenth-century scientists. Their names – particularly Newton, Hooke and Boyle – were part of my professional inheritance as a mechanical engineer through the science I had learned. Huygens and Leibnitz were also familiar names. I was curious to know their circumstances. At the end of 916 pages, ‘pretentious’ was not an appropriate adjective for the totality.

Boston Common, 1713, feels surreal, and the interactions between Enoch Root, an alchemist, and those he met are somewhat implausible. Benjamin Franklin, the boy, makes a guest appearance. Details relating to the historical context abounded and fascinated and provoked reflection, as was also true of the etymology of words throughout the novel. Harvard College and the Massachusetts Bay Colony Institute of Technologikal Arts (a ‘could-have-been’ that was perhaps an allusion to MIT, which was founded much later in 1861) feature. Are all natural scientists as mechanical in their thought processes and language as the protagonists? (Is that a resounding ‘yes’ I hear from those of my friends who are non-technical?)

Time slicing within the novel is peculiar and I was not comfortable with it (see Figure 1). The volume contains three books: *Quicksilver*, *King of the Vagabonds*, and *Odalisque*. Book Two is so unconnected, *prima facie*, with Book One that it requires the reader to suspend and forget any expectations of linkages until the eventual reappearance of Enoch Root (briefly) and Gottfried Leibnitz. Book Three provides more connections, but in the end seems not to fully repay what had been borrowed from the reader.

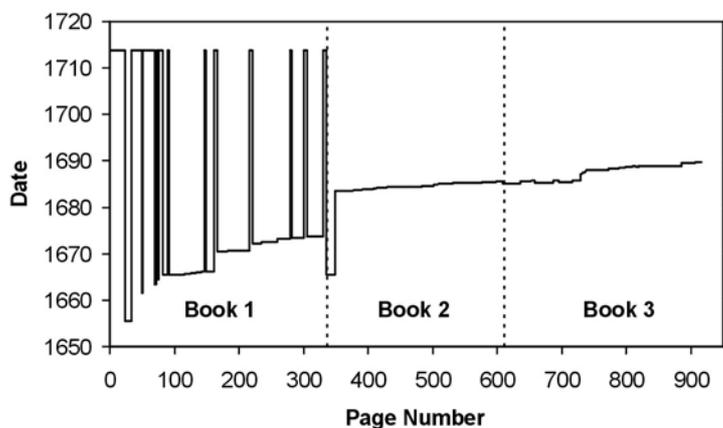


Figure 1

'Enoch in England' is the first flashback. Here Enoch Root is like a ghost who observes the life of young Isaac Newton without interfering: a case of *non-assistance to a person in danger*, twice. The next insight into Isaac Newton is from the period in the early 1660s when he shared a room with Daniel Waterhouse, the hero (or antihero) of Books One and Three, at Trinity College, Cambridge, England. In the mind of either Daniel Waterhouse or the narrator, Newton was 'the rashest and cruellest judge who ever lived'. In fact the novel does not enter into the thought processes of Isaac Newton: he remained very enigmatic, but situational context abounded.

As Daniel Waterhouse departed from Boston, and from his family, aboard a boat rowed by slaves to catch the ship *Minerva*, there is a poignant moment as his weeping causes the slaves to break into a sad song evoking their own abductions. That was on 12 October 1713, and it was well into November before *Minerva* got out of Cape Cod Bay into blue water. The hazards of crossing the Atlantic at the time are persuasively demonstrated in the narrative. *Minerva* fought off successive waves of pirate attacks under the capable and, it would seem, necessarily ruthless captaincy of van Hoek. Daniel Waterhouse performs some Newtonian relativistic calculations, to decisive effect.

The eyeball scene at Trinity in 1663 is momentous. It shocks in preparation for the *point* it would drive home. Newton, in sticking a needle into his eye, had launched a new age. The artificial breath episode, which involved a dog, demonstrates the rationalised single-mindedness of some supposed early anatomical experiments at the Royal Society. The depicted sense of revulsion felt by the protagonists at the end of that experiment could well have been the dawning of what is now termed 'research ethics'. Yet vivisection, before the advent of anaesthesia, and the infliction of vivid pain are situated in the novel in a broad context of far deeper contemporaneous cruelty by man to its own kind. Early in the twenty-first century I cannot persuade myself that either human cruelty or human capacity for selective insensitivity to cruelty is any nearer to being extinct. At the end of the novel there is an echo of the vivisection incident, but this time involving a human being and a lack of consent.

Jack Shaftoe, a vagabond, is the wonderful antihero of Book Two. He is almost plausible. However, some aspects such as his escape from witches in the Harz Mountains in 1684 pushed credibility too far in a historical novel – it seemed a little too much like a Harry Potter adventure; but, then again, fiction is for entertainment. Jack is reluctantly moral, inhibited also by a physical characteristic that limited his capacity to be unchaste, and he didn't lack the courage of the convictions and dreams that possessed him. A dramatic account of a fight between the sloop *God's Wounds* and some Barbary corsairs mark the end of Book Two. Even into Book Three I felt some lingering impatience, suspense or frustration: *waiting for Shaftoe*. The author has a way with anticlimax.

Sex features here and there, mostly somewhat technically, for instance with information on the use of animal gut as a sheath. Promiscuity was rife amongst royalty, nobility, the elite and the downcast, it seems, and the consequences were plainly presented for these cases. Somehow I felt that the author projected current perceptions and insights onto past events and attitudes. I felt this too in relation to technical matters, and that the author at times seemed to credit the scientists with somewhat more foresight than was probably their due, for instance when Leibnitz described the future applications of his mathematical technique. In 1665 Wilkins casually experimented with a clockwork flying device, but to what extent might he have invented a flying machine? Some two centuries later Otto Lillienthal, who successfully *glided* and died as a result of trying actively to fly, stated that to invent a flying machine was nothing, to build one was something, but to fly was everything.

Eliza, the heroine of books Two and Three, is formidable and, in fiction at least, manages to enter into and influence the lives of some of the major personages of the time, including Gottfried Leibnitz, Christiaan Huygens, William III of Orange and Louis XIV. Eliza's story and other parts of the novel highlighted for me the absurdity of monarchical succession. Eliza, whose superior intelligence could not have featured in history, was a victim of the tyranny of men against women. Therefore, perhaps, the novel was dedicated to 'the woman upstairs'.

But beyond the narrative, there are some linguistic peculiarities. Why does the author use the expression 'or something' at various points in the narrative? ('Daniel ... took him for a head butler or something') Why does the narrator, as distinct from the characters, use the vulgar verb for a sexual violent act committed by a pirate? I also noticed just a few obvious typographical errors, but felt that an editor could have recommended cuts in places where the text was tedious.

And yet, I found this book enlightening, at times almost astonishing. To an engineer, steeped in mechanics and the scientific approach, Newton's and Hooke's legacy was revealed at source in a glory that rivalled the splendour (under a microscope) of the jewels found at the bottom of a jar of the urine of the Reverend John Wilkins, one of the founders of the Royal Society, who had 'the stone'. Background information relating to Newtonian and Leibnitzian calculus was interesting for me and prompted me to seek out further details or confirmation, conscious that fiction is not history. To me the dispute between Newton and Leibnitz about who *<i>invented</i>* calculus is largely immaterial: I am grateful to both for their contributions to it.