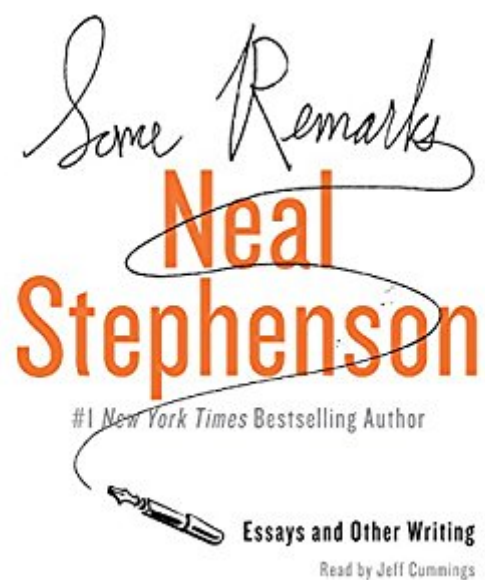


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Some Remarks



Synopsis

One of the most talented and creative authors working today, Neal Stephenson is renowned for his exceptional novels - works colossal in vision and mind-boggling in complexity. Exploring and blending a diversity of topics, including technology, economics, history, science, pop culture, and philosophy, his books are the products of a keen and adventurous intellect. Not surprisingly, Stephenson is regularly asked to contribute articles, lectures, and essays to numerous outlets, from major newspapers and cutting-edge magazines to college symposia. This remarkable collection brings together previously published short writings, both fiction and nonfiction, as well as a new essay (and an extremely short story) created specifically for this volume. Stephenson ponders a wealth of subjects, from movies and politics to David Foster Wallace and the Midwestern American College Town; video games to classics-based sci-fi; how geekdom has become cool and how science fiction has become mainstream (whether people admit it or not); the future of publishing and the origins of his novels. Playful and provocative, *Some Remarks* displays Stephenson's opinions and ideas on The Internet, our dwindling national attention span, and the cultural importance of books and bookishness; Waco, religion, and the cluelessness of secular society; Metaphysics and the battle between Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; The laying of the longest wire on Earth - and why it matters to you; Technology, freedom, commerce, and the Chinese; How Star Wars and 300 mirror who we are today and what that spells for our future; and Modern Jedi knights, a.k.a. scientists and technologists, and why they are admired and feared by both the left and the right. By turns amusing and profound, critical and celebratory, yet always entertaining, *Some Remarks* offers a fascinating look into the prismatic mind of this extraordinary writer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In his quarter-century (by my count) career of professional writing, Neal Stephenson has learned to show off less as his ideas grew stronger, to waste less time as his books grew longer, to write simpler as his plots grew more complex. He knows pearls of wisdom show best against black velvet, rather than, say, set off by Roman sparklers. If you doubt this, read this book. Here Stephenson includes some great and some less than great essays, which can be sorted by their publication dates. The clarity of expression and complexity of thought of the 21st century Stephenson plainly exceed that of his younger self. Comparing 2010's "Metaphysics in the Royal Society" or 2008's "Gresham College Lecture" to 1994's "Spew" or "In the Kingdom of Mao Bell" is like comparing the full moon to fireworks: the latter are flashy but not very illuminating; the former is what it is. The fulcrum, the turning point when it all changed, is Stephenson's indispensable "Mother Earth, Mother Board." The first full flowering of Stephenson's mature style, it appeared in "Wired" one year after "The Diamond Age" and three years before "Cryptonomicon." I always felt that it deserved to have been published as its own book. Now it forms the heart of this one, supplemented by pieces that teach as much about writing as about the technologies and subcultures they explore. By the way, the subject matter of the essays is always important and fascinating, and Stephenson's take is invariably invaluable. He is not just a techno-geek: his social engagement and historical perspective make his work not just commentary but prescription. To read this book is to be educated, entertained, and chastened, reminding one of the Puritans Stephenson both admires and in many ways resembles.

I didn't realize when I bought this book that in addition to the dozen plus essays, there are several short stories. I don't think of short stories as Neal Stephenson territory, so I was pleased to get them. They turn out to be pretty good stories, too, quite enjoyable and for once not overly long. The heart of this collection, though, is the essays, which range from a couple of pages long to over a hundred pages, novella-length in its own right. Stephenson covers many subjects here, from introducing other writer's works to metaphysics at the Royal Society, to describing the laying of trans-oceanic telecommunications cable to discussing the state of science fiction today. As one would expect from Stephenson, he writes intelligently and with humor about all these subjects and many more. I never would have thought that an essay on laying telecom cable would be interesting,

but I was sucked into this article and read it in a single sitting, over a hundred pages of it. I really liked the fact that these pieces covered such a broad range of subjects and were of such varied lengths. I didn't know Stephenson could write anything under 300 pages long, so the shorter pieces were a pleasant surprise. Sometimes I wished he would expound more on the shorter bits, such as his discussion of "Anathem", and the interviews with Slashdot and Salon were also pretty interesting and easily could have been longer. Overall, this is a thoughtful collection that should please and reward you with chuckles and the occasional, "Huh, I didn't know that." I was particularly interested in Stephenson's take on the state of science fiction today, which he brings up in several of these pieces. I wanted to hear him talk more about his own books, though, which doesn't much occur herein, and I could have used a couple more short stories. This book is a strong work that doesn't disappoint, and it should give you a dozen hours of reading enjoyment.

It's fascinating to read Neal Stephenson's nonfiction. Having read a good deal of his fiction--and enjoyed the complete worlds that he creates--it's a treat to read his take on the "real" world. Elements of humor, wisdom learned along the way, and even some of his political and social views become evident in this work. Readers who enjoy his fictional works may be surprised by this side of the author but won't be disappointed.

I first became a fan of Neal Stephenson's writing when I discovered his brilliant fiction: "Cryptonomicon," "Reamde" and his Baroque Cycle novels. I was delighted to learn that he had pulled together a collection of previous published essays and other non-fiction pieces in "Some Remarks." Mr. Stephenson is the rare writer who combines deep technical domain knowledge with a literary style that is both erudite and refreshing. Understanding and enjoying his level of communication takes a bit of work, but it is well worth it - like savoring a delicious steak that requires some savory chewing. In this far-ranging collection, the author tackles The Internet, Metaphysics and the battle between Sir Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz, scientists as modern Jedi knights, a deconstruction of the movies Star Wars and 300 - and a whole lot more. I always get to the last page of a Stephenson book, and then jump on to order something else by him to read.

Without a doubt, Neal Stephenson may be the most pensive, most expansive, writer of my generation, and these are traits he shows abundantly in his recent essay collection, "Some Remarks", that also include several terse short stories he has written over the years. Stephenson's writing is expansive in the sense that it covers many topics at once, which is why, for example, his

"Baroque Cycle" trilogy is a compelling fictional exploration of the emerging science and personal rivalry of Leibniz and Newton during this period, as well as a most memorable action-adventure yarn whose main protagonists are the ancestors of those in his earlier post-cyberpunk novel "Cryptonomicon". In "Some Remarks" his essay on the construction of FLAG (Fiber Optic Link Around the Globe) "Mother Earth, Mother Board" compares and contrasts its construction with the successful laying of the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable in the 1860s, but is also discusses the life of William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, especially with regards to his design of the first successful undersea cable, as well as series of travel guide vignettes aimed at the "hacker tourist". His early cyberpunk short story "Spew" anticipates much of the same literary style Stephenson would use in "Cryptonomicon" and the "Baroque Cycle". Other writings discuss the relevance of the films "300" and "Star Wars" to contemporary culture, the still uneasy relationship between science fiction and fantasy with mainstream literary fiction, why scientists are distrusted by those in the far Left and the far Right, and discussing the life and literary career of David Foster Wallace. "Some Remarks" may be the finest collection of short writing by a notable contemporary writer writing in English that I have read in years, not only recently. For those who are long-time admirers of his writing as well as those who are unfamiliar with it, "Some Remarks" should be viewed as essential reading, simply as a guide to a most memorable polymath, one Neal Stephenson.

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