

## ByteNoise

### Cryptonomicon

"This is how it's done. You pile one thing on top of the next and you keep it up and keep it up -- sometimes the galleon sinks in a typhoon, you don't get your slab of granite that year -- but you stick with it and eventually you end up with something sooo big."

*Cryptonomicon* enjoys an almost mythical reputation as an epic novel about cryptography, set in both World War II and the present day. Almost everyone who's managed to finish it (no mean feat considering it weighs in at over four hundred thousand words) seems to have given it a glowing review.

As much as I hate to admit it, I'm not one of those people. I'm pretty disappointed, even frustrated, with this book.

Considering *Cryptonomicon* is about cryptography, its author Neal Stephenson seems to focus on other people's adventures during the war as a consequence of the codes that have been broken more than on the actual codebreaking itself, and more on the business politics surrounding the present-day data haven than any actual data storage and encryption itself.

Not that I particularly want to read about people working, but if I did, I'd want to read about the main work itself, not all the other work that surrounds it. I'd rather read about cryptography than deep sea diving and tunnel digging, and if I did want to read about deep sea diving, I'd want to read about the bit of diving

that actually involves diving, not the bit that involves reading up on the bends and then deciding not to dive after all.

I gather this is the kind of literary fiction enjoyed by people who snub their noses at pulpy, trashy novels like [Snow Crash](#). I am definitely *not* one of these people, believing literary theory to essentially be mental masturbation and fully siding with one of *Cryptonomicon's* protagonists as he took some students spouting relativism down a peg or two in one particular scene.

Not much seems to happen in this novel, which is quite a statement given its length. In lieu of a single, concise story, Stephenson writes in minute detail about seemingly trivial things, and often digresses with stories that are related to, but are not essential to, the main plot, as if mistaking quantity for quality, or perhaps compelled to write without end.

Exposition is given in painstaking detail that puts *Snow Crash's* librarian to shame, as if Stephenson is practically copying and pasting his research notes into the finished book. On many occasions, I felt like I was reading a textbook. Stephenson is good at using a clever analogy to explain something such as modular arithmetic in much more detail than is really necessary, then promptly failing to use this painstakingly explained knowledge in anything that might be construed as a dramatic scene. In this sense, it's the exact same trick he pulled with Turing machines in [The Diamond Age](#). Yes, it's nice to learn about these things, but only if that knowledge will actually come in useful during the course of reading the rest of the story.

Given the seemingly autistic nature of some of the characters, I wonder if an autistic reader might enjoy this novel more, but considering that people who interpret things literally also get flat out insulted in the course of the book's many rants, I somehow

doubt it.

Basically, *Cryptonomicon* is part textbook, part collection of rants, part loosely knit novel that meanders a lot and has no real point.

I find myself preferring the exact opposite approach to writing a novel about cryptography, namely [Dan Brown's](#) *Digital Fortress*. Knowing how to write a gripping, dramatic story -- and being inclined to -- is much more important than researching the subject matter and actually knowing what you're talking about. *Cryptonomicon* is well researched but unnecessarily long and ungrIPPING.

If you did like *Snow Crash* but didn't like *The Diamond Age*, you probably won't like this either. The converse is presumably also true. In short, it's literary, not dramatic.

I get the impression that the parable of piling one thing on top of the next is a personal motto of Stephenson. I'm not convinced of the virtue of this at all, preferring a minimalist approach -- every part being necessary for the whole. Then again, I'm a vi user, whereas Stephenson's an Emacs user. Maybe it's just a cultural difference.