11 September 2017

Dear Ms. Barnebey,

In my sister’s words: “I am not a reader, but I am a reader.” I will barely read thirty pages within a month, and then, in an almost obsessive fit, I will read an entire book in a day. I have not yet ascertained the reason for this, and, even in defiance to my efforts to tame and regularize it, my reading schedule remains the epitome of variance. It seems fate has proclaimed it to be eternally a core part of who I am. Approximately sixty-five percent of this past summer ticked by with me slowly sputtering my way through the half physics half ego stroking book *The Black Hole War* by Leonard Susskind; however, upon finishing that, I flew through the latter half of *i, ROBOT* by Isaac Asimov in the span of a couple of days. The first half of *i, ROBOT*, like *The Black Hole War,* occupied up an embarrassingly long time as my current reading book, this time towards the beginning of summer. I recognized it as a book I would enjoy but never managed to enter the trance-like state of reading it for hours on end until after I had put it down for a month or two.

In as such as a large section of my summer was expended without the burning drive to seclude myself in a corner under a blanket and travel to the far-off lands contained in thousands of small marks on a stack of paper, I did not read as much as I would like to claim I have. Only a few full books can proclaim their exclusive place upon my completed list for this summer.

Much of my reading can fall under the umbrella of science, be it science fiction or real science. The book *The Black Hole War* that I mentioned earlier concerns the debate that occurred among physicists about whether black holes destroy information or if the information is somehow preserved. Without going into the physics and thermal-dynamics, if black holes did destroy information, a lot of what we think we know would have to be rethought and the core principles of most of physics would be wrong. Thankfully, it turns out black holes don’t destroy information due to black hole complementary, or at least that’s the currently accepted conjecture: physicists can be a fickle group. Despite non-trivial my interest in the subject, this book was especially hard to read continuously due to the author’s rather prodigious and obvious ego that oozed its way into every chapter. There was only so much personal glorification that I could take at one time.

On the fiction side of science, *i, ROBOT* is, as I am sure you know, a fascinating look at a what the past projected as a possible future and how such a future could develop. It gives insight into how something that is so core to modern society, in this case digital computers, was not an obvious development to the past; but in contrast, the problems computers address were foreseen. A development that we now project and predict could be one of the great advances of the future, such as AI, may be entirely eclipsed by another concept that no one ever dreamed of. The problems a projected development will solve however are much less likely to be nullified by an unforeseen actor.

To be a bit late to the party, I finally set to reading the novel *1984* by George Orwell which I sincerely doubt needs an introduction. Like the latter part of *i, ROBOT*¸ the first 50 pages or so were read over the course of 6 weeks and the remaining within the span of 72 hours. All the while reading it, *1984* constantly reminded me of one of my all-time favorite books, *Brave New World*. While they are based on similar premises and ideas, they are portrayed in dramatically contrasting manners. *1984* is placed in a dystopia and *Brave New World* on the very surface appears to be a utopia, but they carry a lot of the same message about uniformity of society and stability costing individuality. Both of these excellent novels have a character that is slightly outside the social standard that meets another character who is very much outside the social standard resulting in an excision from that society. Tones of suffering due to sought individuality being repressed by society are quite evident and never fail to elicit philosophical thoughts in me.

Another pair of books that had very similar premises, although this time about mathematical thinking, are *How Not to Be Wrong* by Jordan Ellenberg and *Innumeracy* by John Allen Paulos. While I started them both before the summer and skipped parts that were redundant and overlapping, together they held a lot of examples where the majority population’s natural response is wrong and the maths behind it. Unfortunately, neither had a profound thesis or the high probability to cause a paradigm shift among its readers. I wouldn’t recommend them to anyone who is not already interested in mathematical thinking and logic examples.

Despite the limited number of full books, there were many of other types of texts that don’t quite have the legitimacy and length to make the list that I still have read or skimmed. Namely, these fall into two categories: news articles and technical papers or other works. I have been in pursuit of a decent RSS feed for news and, although it is far from satisfactory, I have moved primarily to the default news app that comes with iPhones. The convenience factor is too great to ignore, even if it means limited control over sources and the resultant clickbait and tabloid like articles. Often when I have a few free minutes I will pop open the app and scroll through the headlines briefly skimming or reading interesting articles. Not the full rigorous reading with fact checking and cross-comparison that news and current events deserve to be treated to, but it’s non-zero and I hope to improve upon it moving forward.

The more technical pieces of writing align with my interest in all things computer science and space related along with some of the more interesting expanses of the wide world of maths. While I can’t understand everything (or even most) of the content contained within academic papers and essays, I quite enjoy falling down the rabbit’s hole of the never-ending citations and references that come with such works. Read the abstract, skim the prominent sections, get confused at diagrams, google a couple of aleph nulls of terms, click on a citation with an interesting name, repeat, and it is one-thirty in the morning and you are reading about a tea making bot walking over a baby in a paper on AI safety while nothing that was set to be achieved that evening was given a thought. Although I can’t claim to have anything more than a cursory grasp on most anything that I come across on my journey down to wonderland, I find the exposure to how complex simple ideas can become quite enlightening.

Moving forward in my reading, I have a few goals. The first of which is to go back to reading a physical newspaper every morning as I eat breakfast: a practice I stopped during the summer. Secondly, I hope to somehow find a way to normalize my reading to increase my total throughput, although I may need divine intervention to achieve this goal. Thirdly, I hope to broaden the scope of my readings to include works that will contribute to my own persuasive writing skill. I imagine these may include speeches, memoirs, opinion pieces, and many other types of writing. Persuasive writing, be it a speech to peers, a publicly posted opinion piece, or a message to a future boss, is the form of writing that I am most interested in, no small part due to my last year’s English class with Mr. Zeddies. Never before then had I actually enjoyed an English class instead of merely getting through it, and I believe and hope I will continue to enjoy English throughout high school and college.

Looking forward to a wonderful two years,

Ty Marking

Editing Reflection

The majority of my editing of this letter was my normal practice of reading through and constantly modifying and playing with sentences. I played around with changing the color and background of the text but no combination that I tested seemed to do anything except annoy my eyes. I will often find many grammatical mistakes in this phase, although many fall through my fingers as I sift through the text. As such, I regularly use Grammarly once I am done manually editing my work. Although it may not get everything right, it helps prevent those ever so infuriating mistakes such as having “mush” instead of “much.” I investigated many of the other online grammar checkers and found that almost all of them required a subscription, were just another front end that used Grammarly to do the actual checking, or had a character count limit. Despite all this, I did manage to catch a couple of mistakes; although, they were less of mistakes and more of something that could be done in a slightly better way. Overall, I am mostly happy with my process of editing although I did not print out my work and go over it with a pen as I usually do. I find working on paper is less beneficial for improving every sentence and more suited for constructing the layout of an argument and making sure every piece of the puzzle is on the page and not just in my head. That said, it still would have been helpful, but alas for the fleetingness of time. One thing I do need to work on in my editing is length management. When editing, my work only grows in length; I am rather bad at removing and condensing sentences and ideas.