



Reamde

Neal Stephenson

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Four decades ago, Richard Forthrast, the black sheep of an Iowa family, fled to a wild and lonely mountainous corner of British Columbia to avoid the draft. Smuggling backpack loads of high-grade marijuana across the border into Northern Idaho, he quickly amassed an enormous and illegal fortune. With plenty of time and money to burn, he became addicted to an online fantasy game in which opposing factions battle for power and treasure in a vast cyber realm. Like many serious gamers, he began routinely purchasing virtual gold pieces and other desirables from Chinese gold farmers—young professional players in Asia who accumulated virtual weapons and armor to sell to busy American and European buyers.

For Richard, the game was the perfect opportunity to launder his aging hundred dollar bills and begin his own high-tech start up—a venture that has morphed into a Fortune 500 computer gaming group, Corporation 9592, with its own super successful online role-playing game, T’Rain. But the line between fantasy and reality becomes dangerously blurred when a young gold farmer accidentally triggers a virtual war for dominance—and Richard is caught at the center.

In this edgy, 21st century tale, Neal Stephenson, one of the most ambitious and prophetic writers of our time, returns to the terrain of his cyberpunk masterpieces *Snow Crash* and *Cryptonomicon*, leading readers through the looking glass and into the dark heart of imagination.

Reamde Details

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From Reader Review Reamde for online ebook

Davis says

By the time I was about three-fourths of the way through, I found myself wondering why Stephenson had bothered to write this book. Aside from *The Big U* I've read all of his other works, and in each of those he used his skills — his knowledge of math and computers, his understanding of how computer engineers and programmers handle information — to build a compelling world and tell a meaningful story (often with social commentary) from a unique perspective. In *Reamde* Stephenson clearly stepped far outside his expertise to tell us a story about... muslim terrorists. And a predictable story at that — the only thing I was surprised by was the clumsiness of the author's reliance on overly convenient coincidences and a *deus ex machina* or two. And while we're discussing the climax, I cannot help but note that this part of the novel would have benefited from editing out about 100 pages of detailed information regarding the trajectory of each of the many bullets that flew through this scene. The intense level of (unnecessary and uninteresting) detail that characterized the long-overdue gun battle suggested not so much rich storytelling as choreography for a generic action film.

This isn't to say that the story was a complete failure. Stephenson spent the first half of the novel setting a compelling scene: the world of T'Rain seemed lovingly crafted, and he spent time developing characters who promised to be compelling (even some of the villains). But somewhere around the midpoint of the novel, the stage-setting seemed to give way to narrative chaos: It became clear that T'Rain was not going to play the central role it could have (it was the most interesting "character" in the book) — rather, it was just a well-drawn plot device to connect the characters. The protagonists quickly lost all sense of individual character once the action really started rolling, until their thought patterns and skill sets were nearly indistinguishable by the end (did *everyone* know how to handle a gun? really?). The main antagonist developed from a seemingly complex character into a cardboard cutout villain. Detail is thin and unconvincing on some topics (such as spycraft), and detailed to the point of tedium on others. And all this in service of a generic story about guns and terrorists. By the end, I found myself finishing this book more out of a sense of duty than out of any curiosity as to how the story was going to wrap up — as if there was even any question on that front.

As a long-time fan, I turn to Stephenson's works because his background allows him to tell stories that few other authors would possess the understanding to craft convincingly — who else could have written *The Baroque Cycle*, *Cryptonomicon*, *Anthem*? But with *Reamde*, he's given us a story that any of a dozen thriller authors probably could have written — and written better.

Will Byrnes says

“Birth and death,” Chet said. “The poles of human existence. We’re like meridians, all beginning and all ending in the same place. We spread out from the beginning and go our separate ways, over seas and mountains and islands and deserts, each telling our own story, as different as they could possibly be. But in the end we all converge and our ends are as much the same as our beginnings

Neal Stephenson has taken the notion of a multi-player, on-line video game as the basis for an action novel and has raised it to the next level. The characters in his story each have dangers and goals and must make use of available resources and allies, while avoiding or killing obstructions or enemies. Unlike their in-game counterparts, the novel's characters only get one life and must struggle to hang onto it against an assortment

of unpleasanties, including Russian gangsters, storms at sea, massive urban explosions, petty criminals, predators of the furry, four-footed variety, booby traps, and a charismatic Welsh terrorist of the Al-Qaeda persuasion. They acquire food, clothing and transportation as they find them and make alliances necessary to survive. Stephenson has a lot of fun paralleling developments in the real world with action in the game world. Don't worry, the former takes up the bulk, and I do mean bulk of this novel. My ARE weighs in at 980 pps. I do not know how vast the final hardcover might be if they change the font size.

CEO and creator Richard Forthrast's massively popular on-line game, T'Rain, has been hacked. A group of Chinese *gold-miners* are holding people's personal files hostage until they receive payment, through the game. When they foist this ploy on a petty criminal, who was in the process of selling stolen credit card data to a Russian gangster, things take a bad turn. The gangster, Ivanov, rather than disappoint the even worse people to whom he reports, opts to seek out the evil-doers to redress his grievance. That they happen to be located in the People's Republic of China adds a level of difficulty. Jetting over with his security team, which includes a mercenary, formerly of Russian Special Forces, a few subsidiary thugs, and a Hungarian systems programmer, he insists that those who had disappointed him come along. One of them is the boyfriend of Zula Forthrast, Richard's niece, thus she is taken along as well and the game is afoot.

In short this is certainly the fastest thousand-pager I have read. The action is fast-paced and unrelenting, as Stephenson has chopped up his very large book into hundreds of one, two and three-page sections, alternating among his various teams of characters, and so keeping things crisp and fast.

His characters are nicely drawn, with enough but not too much history, and enough warts to matter without becoming gross about it. You will not lose any sleep thinking about them, but they are fun while you are following their journeys. Yes, there are people you can root for here. And even the big bad guy has some appeal, which tempers his awfulness. Richard and Zula Forthrast in particular are wonderful characters, as is the commando, Sokolov. There are of course a fair number of disposables, there for canon fodder or target practice.

But Reamde is not a *pure* entertainment. You can pick up some new information while enjoying this read. Such as how a multi-player, on-line game, something like *The World of Warcraft*, comes to be, looking at the building blocks, things like an underlying plot, geology, color, sound, architecture, racial mix, biota. I would have liked even more of that. Another is a fascinating treatment of what an in-game economy actual entails. Inside the game, off-script users begin to morph elements of the game to their own purposes, altering the canon color palette and engaging in a whole new sort of color war. There is a rather kind look at the culture of some real-world survivalists who have removed themselves from the world in a different way, in anticipation of the collapse of civilization.

No one will mistake this for nobel-level literature. There is not much here for the literary treasure hunter, although there are a few fun references here and there. One character sees his affection for the girl of his dreams in terms of Don Quixote. There are plenty of nods and winks to some other action products. One character, an MI6 agent, complains about the lack of romance in her job, mentioning specifically that her life is nothing like that of James Bond, as she is on her way to a place called Bourne's Ford. Relating to another sort of literature, one character thinks of himself and those around him as comic-book superheroes, secretly giving every one names from the Marvel universe.

Stephenson has great fun paralleling the experiences of sundry characters, both with each other, and with events in the game, from coping with being chained or handcuffed to the benefits of waving to the locals one passes. I am sure there are many of these but I did not keep track. My limitation here (one of soooo many) is that I am not a gamer. There are undoubtedly scads of insider references for folks who are and I expect many of them will be posting reviews on GR.

Despite its thickness *Reamde* is not a deep book (unless I missed a whole lot more than I think I did), but it is

very enjoyable. So if you are heading to a beach or a cabin or an undisclosed location where you can read for a really long time, this is definitely a book worth lugging along. If you are a gamer, this will certainly be a fun time for you, if, of course, you can drag your sorry ass away from the screen, or maybe the next time your character is terminated with great prejudice by an unexpected exploding or piercing object or a very dark spell. This is a fun read. Play on.

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=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter, Google Plus and FB pages

Labour camp detainees endure hard labour by day, online gold farming by night

My review of Stephenson's 2015 novel, SevenEves

Skott Klebe says

REAMDE reads as though he started to write an interesting novel about massively multiplayer online gaming business and frauds, and inadvertently stumbled into writing an irritatingly conventional thriller novel about Islamic terrorists when the MMPORG novel turned out not to have enough action in it. I wonder, actually, if this is his 9/11 book, delayed somehow by nonliterary circumstance. Cardboard villains seen up close to be mere dark-skinned cartoons of inexplicable evil, heroic northwestern recluses enforcing their own law in heavily armed compounds-- at its worst, REAMDE reads like a cross between Farnham's Freehold and a rightwing warblogger's 2003 fever dream.

At its best, though, it is more than that. The principal characters are fascinating and well-drawn, and the MMPORG context and its driving scam are convincing. Its passages about the business around gaming read like the Neal Stephenson I expected. Those moments are too far apart, though, and don't last long enough. With Snow Crash, Stephenson inspired legions of developers to try to create the virtual worlds that in some cases *became* the games REAMDE discusses; in Diamond Age he so thoroughly exploited the fictional possibilities of nanotech that hardly anyone has dared write about it since. Cryptonomicon deftly interwove dead-on satire of Silicon Valley's intersection with global commerce and the heartfelt desperate survival struggles that color our memories of World War II. The Baroque Cycle is one of the most ambitious attempts to understand the modern world through the lens of the past that I've ever read, yet the travails and triumphs of its characters consistently drive me to tears. Anathem, a mature, deep story and one of the finest extraterrestrial-culture novels ever, was robbed of the Hugo the year it came out. This book isn't worthy of the rest of Stephenson's career.

A footnote:

It also makes me sad that Stephenson assumes it to be plausible that there might be innumerable Arab jihadist living in the United States and Canada waiting to be summoned into action at a moment's notice. Innumerable, as in, so many that he doesn't bother to count them, let alone name them or give most of them distinguishing characteristics.

Kim says

I was so excited about this book, but it slowly slipped from a 5 at the beginning to a 3 by the end. This book was over the top...it read like Ian Fleming was alive and forced to write an action movie with Tom Clancy. A 6 hour long action movie. That over the top. Just as with any over-the-top action movie, you have to suspend disbelief to enjoy it, and it was certainly fun. Unfortunately, there was just too much schmaltz for the action alone to carry it. To be fair, I also had high expectations for this book after reading *Anathem*, so that also accounts for my lower rating. I would recommend it to others looking for an crazy action-packed story, but would certainly not recommend it for someone looking to read their first Stephenson book.

Monica says

Great book!! Not my usual fair at all. This was a thriller with online gaming undertones. I actually learned quite a bit about the role playing games. Interesting tangents. Characterization was very good. You understood what was in the minds of everyone (except the jihadists. *How could the author or anyone sane possibly know what goes on in the minds of jihadist.../sarcasm*). This novel had everything I like. Strong characters both male and female, humor and lots of it (particularly around T'Rain), irony; even the ending was somewhat tongue in cheek. The other reviews are very true, Stephenson embraces the info dump...about everything. An around the world tour featuring Russian mobsters, Canadian mines, Chinese hackers, British spies, an African orphan, al Qaeda-esque terrorists, the entire realm of T'Rain, and a pesky computer virus. This was actually an upbeat novel with almost all of the good guys surviving and the bad guys getting their comeuppance. A little too tidy in the end (which is what I attribute to cheekiness or could Stephenson be a hopeless optimist at heart?). I only had two issues with this book. One is that the female characterization in particular is a little weak. Specifically, all three of the main female characters are basically the same person. All are plucky, smart, brave and capable. The only real distinguishing characteristic is their varying levels of sexual permissiveness. But if you are only going to have one type of female character, this is a good one. The other issue is the book is long...very long. It kept my interest and every time I put it down, I wanted to get back to it, but good grief, it took me months to get through. No regrets. All in all, time well spent.

4 stars

Edited to add: *The more I think on this, the more I believe there is much satire between the covers. Stephenson is taking some shots at a lot of genres, even the one he is most famous for, cyberpunk. In this case it's through online gaming. Great book, but definitely an investment of time and energy.*

Mark says

[Note: longer review now in place. Spoilers may be present.]

So: your starter for 10. Is it *Reamde*? *Remade*? *Reamed*? *Read Me*?

Just working out the title can be a complication in itself. But then that's what you should expect with Neal Stephenson's books. It's a well known adage in the genre that if you read Neal Stephenson's books, you're there for a long journey.

And so it goes with this one: over 1000 pages of small text, over 2 inches/6cm thick. (I measured it!)

For what is typical of Neal's work is that when you buy into it, you're there for the immersive experience. Often challenging (Anathem invented new language, for example), it's not usually for the faint hearted.

Reamde is a contemporary novel that harkens back to the much-liked Snow Crash. Like Snow Crash, it's smart, it's nifty, it's hip and it's complex. Just what the fan ordered, then.

But where this one scores is that, unlike some of his earlier work, it's more accessible to the layman and I suspect will be another one of those genre books read by non-genre readers. In other words, I suspect that, in the UK at least, this is where Neal does 'a China Mieville' and achieves mega-status as Neal has already done in the US.

It's also not a book to easily summarise, but basically it's a global techno-thriller about an interactive Internet game called T'Rain, and the consequences of it being used for gold-mining (money in the virtual world being exchangeable in the real.)

Peter is a computer security operative who gets himself into a sticky situation by selling on confidential data to the Russians, who are using Mafia capital to make more money. When the data is hijacked for ransom and taken to the T'Rain domain (anyone following recent events with the Sony Playstation may recognise some of this) by a group of Chinese hackers using a virus named Reamde, Peter and his girlfriend, Zula, (a T'Rain computer programmer), are abducted to Xiamen, China, in order to find the hackers and deal with these issues. They track down the hackers but unwittingly uncover an Al-Qaeda cell living on the apartment floor above the hackers, led by Welsh Muslim, Abdullah Jones. The ensuing destruction of the building leads to the involvement of the British MI6 who were observing the terrorist cell.

Half-way through the book (Day 5) we're on the way back to the US. Zula is held captive by Jones, and kept as a means of entering the US by bargaining with 'Uncle' Richard Forthrast, one of the co-creators of T'Rain.

Her co-captives, cyberhacker Marlon and Hungarian computer programmer Csongor, now with Chinese guide Yuxia, are in pursuit.

In outline, this sounds bizarre. However, what Stephenson does is give you this in so much detail that it seems both logical and understandable. It takes a while to develop and readers may find the beginning a little slow. The details can be incredibly complicated and diverse, varying from details on guns, terrorist cells, MMPORG computer game development, to even street layouts and shops in Taiwan! This may not engage you straight away, but they are there for a purpose, if a convoluted one.

With such detail, it can take a little while (100 pages or so!) for the plot to get going and for a while, as is often the case in Neal's books, you have to just go along without full understanding.

However after overcoming that initial feeling of being dropped into something complicated, by 300 pages in I was hooked.

700 pages in and we're back on the USA/Canadian border, looking at a jihadist attack on Las Vegas and something fishy going on in the world of T'Rain. The ending is reminiscent of a big movie shootout, with Richard Forthrast and his extended family fighting big for high stakes.

What works best here is that it becomes one of those 'live it, breathe it' books, where you spend every spare moment wanting to know what happens next. It is a book you can wallow in, but most importantly, it's a book full of great ideas. They're not all new to Neal's work but they're used together with great panache.

As ever, Neal's work can polarise opinion. It's not going to suit everyone. I suspect for some it will be too long, too complex, too slow. Personally, though, as someone who has had issues with some of his earlier work, I think it's his most accessible and best yet.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I know, I know. When Stephenson writes really smart, I get annoyed while I force myself to finish the book (Quicksilver). When he writes a (sometimes) action-packed crime novel full of terrorists and international espionage and virtual worlds (Reamde), I get stuck near page 100 or 200 and allow myself to be talked into pushing onward, and start regretting it around page 700, and feel annoyed when I finally finish.

Here's the thing. I like a fun crime novel. I read all the Stieg Larsson books. I like books about virtual worlds. But longer does not make something better. In fact, stretching this story out into twice the length necessary just made half of it skim-worthy and tedious. The ending didn't even really have one of those really great pay-offs that make crime novels worth it.

I'm not sure I can articulate the magic of Stephenson that I know can be experienced (Snow Crash). I just haven't seen it since. This is really more of a two star book using my rating system, but a few things redeemed it slightly such as the female characters.

I blogged an even longer review here.

Andrew Smith says

At over 1000 pages, this book has the scale of epic tomes such as *The Stand* and *IQ84*, though the the story itself seems to bear a much closer relationship to Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*. It has vast geographic spread, featuring action in settings as widely spaced as Idaho USA, the Philippines, China and (very briefly) the UK. But outside of these real life locations there is a good deal going on within the confines of a multiplayer online role-playing game that has much in common with *World of Warcraft*. T'Rain features fantasy figures who spend much of the time travelling through its huge landscape whilst fighting monsters, collecting items and completing various tasks with a view to improving and enriching their own character(s). It's a huge thing and everyone seems to be playing it.

At the start, we view a reunion of the Forthrast family, where we get to meet a number of people who are to play a significant role in this story. Foremost here is Richard Forthrast who has made his fortune by benefit of a dodgy past involving drug smuggling and, latterly, through inventing and marketing T'Rain. His niece Zula is also introduced and it's through these two that much of the story is tracked.

The real action commences when a ransomware virus called REAMDE (a typo of README) begins to affect players by encrypting their computer files. It seems that the aim is to extort in-game gold (which can be exchanged for real money) in exchange for a key to decrypt their files. One gamer who has his files so impacted happens to be in the process of selling stolen credit card details to the Russian mob and they're none to pleased to have been given an unreadable file in exchange for the money they handed over. Things then start to get crazy – very quickly.

I won't go into further detail regarding the plot but I will say that there are a lot of guns (both within the game and outside of it) a large cast of interesting characters and plenty of action. The downside is that the whole thing (were you to think too deeply about the logistics involved) is dependent on a number of huge coincidences and some technology that I'm not sure exists in the real world. That said, I'm sure that many readers won't care a hoot about this and will just lap up the adventure.

It is great fun and even as a non-gamer I really enjoyed the juxtaposition of the ongoing action within T'Rain versus the wild antics kicking off in the outside world. My only real grumbles are that the whole thing just goes on way too long (particularly the final reckoning) and the fact that it's all rather too neatly sewn up at the end. Oh, and the fate of (at least) one of the key characters seems to have been omitted – unless I missed it, which is possible as I was getting very tired of the protracted dénouement by this stage. It's a book that readers will probably either love or hate and, on balance, I'm certainly closer to the former.

David says

I used to really, really like Neal Stephenson. I read all of his earlier books (even *Zodiac* and *The Big U*). But somewhere along about the Baroque Cycle, I fell out of love with him -- not that he stopped being a good storyteller, but man those books were long and took forever to get anywhere.

Anyway, I picked up *Reamde* hoping to get some of the old Stephenson cyber-thriller love again. And *Reamde* is a very good tale, action-packed and filled with a ton of interesting characters in a plot that wends its way through the War on Terror, the War on Drugs, and the World of Warcraft.

Though there are a number of characters who have interweaving threads throughout the novel, the ostensible protagonist is Zula Forthrast, the adopted Eritrean niece of Richard Forthrast, a billionaire gaming tycoon who funded his start-up with money earned by smuggling pot across the US-Canada border. There is also an ex-Spatnaz Russian "security consultant" who starts out as hired muscle for the Russian mob but ends up being one of the good guys, a Chinese-British female MI6 agent who shags like James Bond, a Boston Southie CIA agent, a black Welsh Muslim leader of an international terrorist network, a Hungarian computer hacker who used to provide IT support for the Russian mob, a Chinese hacker who wrote a virus to extort money from American MMORPG addicts, and a Chinese tour guide who gets dragged into the whole thing by accident.

That should tell you why this book is so long - it takes hundreds of pages to set up all the different plot threads that introduce these characters, connect them, and then bring them all to the wilds of Idaho for a big blazing showdown, with much added firepower contributed by the heavily-armed Christian fundamentalists who are as thick in the area as cougars and grizzly bears.

This book should be geek heaven: it's pretty much non-stop hacking + massively gratuitous expenditures of ordnance, with not one, not two, but three highly capable hot chicks.

I liked it a lot. It's a great story. Not a single character was boring. People die messily. There are heroes and villains and lots of things going boom.

But it's no *Cryptonomicon*, and the similarities were great enough that I could not help comparing them, and reading *Reamde* as basically an updated rehash of Stephenson's first great sprawling cyber-thriller.

The thing is, *Cryptonomicon* was not unflawed either, but it was this gonzo uber-geeky techno-thriller back when Linux was something weird that only the cool kids knew about and "cryptography" was black magic

used by hackers, terrorists, and secret agents, and it had Heinleinian women and World War II flashbacks and a hunt for Nazi gold and it was just so magnificently over-the-top with its nerd hero and making fun of dot-commers and soapboxing about post-modernist Hobbits, I freaking *loved* that book.

Reamde seems to recycle a lot of the ingredients (and character archetypes) of *Cryptonomicon*, and if you liked *Cryptonomicon*, you should like this book too, but *Reamde* just seems to lack that *edge* that made *Cryptonomicon* a classic. I can totally see *Cryptonomicon* still being regarded as a classic years from now, even though it's already pretty dated with its long-winded expositions on public key encryption and open source operating systems. I am not sure *Reamde*'s intersection of globalism and organized crime and the far-reaching tentacles of the War on Terror, told via Chinese gold farmers vs. Russian mafia vs. Islamic terrorists vs. American bootstrapping nerds, won't just read as dated years from now. (Well, one can only hope the War on Terror will be dated years from now - probably not, though.) It's all story and Stephenson stills loves his Heinlein-esque characters (while thankfully not being quite as sex-obsessed as old Bob), and in many ways it's a more matured, polished novel than *Cryptonomicon*. **But**, but, but... it just didn't quite hit 5-star awesomeness for me. It's a really good book, but it isn't full of scene-chewing rants and absurdly capable but endearingly messed up characters and audacious ideas that will make you think you're joining the cool kids club by reading it. So, I give *Reamde* a very solid 4 stars. *Reamde* reads like slightly mellowed Neal Stephenson, or one of Michael Crichton's better novels if Michael Crichton had ever not been a hack.

Nick says

I thought, when I started reading this book, that Stephenson had turned in a classic Great American Novel. By that I mean that the introduction to the main character (although actually this is a seriously ensemble piece, so it's probably better to think of him as the spine character – the events in the book could not take place without him, even when – as much of the time – he's out of the room and has no knowledge of what's going on) is a perfect, serious statement of a particular moment of American history – the present one. The prose has a ringing certainty, and a compelling portrait emerges of a man in later years, slightly aloof from his extended family, whose life has followed the major threads of his time. This is Stephenson pulling together the strands of his writing. You get powerful depictions of the heartland of America, dynastic storytelling, and a sense of the US as a fractious, complex, fascinating entity; woven into this, though, is a new world of online gold farming and the economics of MMORPGs as they become more populous than many nations.

So I was all set to read a kind of cross between John Steinbeck and William Gibson, and wondering whether this was going to be Stephenson's "Great Book".

And then the action started.

And did not stop.

For nearly one thousand pages.

This is not a measured, dynastic thriller stepped in draft-dodging, marijuana, and Warcraft. It is an epic, exhausting, non-stop action flick in book form. It makes Heat and Kill Bill look short, tame, and dull. It has, yes, an ongoing allegiance to history and culture. It does not suddenly abandon the slightly melancholic sense of ageing, or the awareness that what happens now depends in great part on then. But it surely isn't the book I expected on page 20. Instead, it's a superbly exciting, cross-cultural adventure with a cast of thousands (well, no, all right, but certainly about ten main characters who are in different parts of the world and rushing towards a final confrontation).

I loved it.

There are niggles, of course. Stephenson's Brits are real people when you get to know them, but they have a kind of veneer of showcase tweediness. Although maybe that's just how the rest of the world experiences Brits. But then there's a gang of jihadists caught between extremism and sexual violence all the time, and while there's a vague nod to the notion that the majority of American muslims would consider them insane

and nightmarish, it has to be acknowledged that we never meet a muslim character in the course of the action who isn't a total bastard. That was a bit disappointing, because it's something I'd really like to see Stephenson do: the journey of an immigrant into the US tapestry is a thing he understands. On the other hand, maybe there was a storyline like that and it had to be cut. There certainly wasn't room for another two hundred pages in this book – as it is, the thing's printed on Bible stock.

So: this is a blinding book. Expect a movie. But it's not the showstopper I imagined it might be when I began – it's a completely different showstopper. It won't be the one which is bound in leather and kept on the shelf alongside your original print of *Magnificent Ambersons*. But you will not be bored, and you will laugh, and you will stay up late to find out what happens next.

Kemper says

Damn, but this book exhausted me. It wasn't just having to hold up it's 127 lbs. of bulk while trying to read that wore me out either.

Stephenson hasn't made it easy on his fans since *Cryptonomicon* in 1999 with it and every book since being about 27,000 pages long while spanning the late 1600s in Europe to World War II to another world complete with it's own languages and customs, and each book was also crammed with detailed information about topics like finance and code breaking. When I saw that this was going to be a modern day thriller that had something to do with a MMORPG, I thought Neal was finally taking pity on us poor readers of only average intelligence and attention span and giving us an easier book.

Wrong.

At over 1000 pages with a plot that races around the world and includes multiple characters in wildly different circumstances, *Reamde* is not a thriller you just breeze through, but like most things Stephenson, I found that the effort I put into it was rewarded with a wild and unique story and top notch writing.

Richard Forthrust fled the US for Canada to avoid the draft during Vietnam and once the war was over he made a small fortune as a marijuana smuggler. Years later, Richard put his pot money into the development of a MMORPG called T'Rain and is now enormously wealthy and successful as the game is one of the most popular of its type around the world.

Richard's relationship with his family in Iowa is strained, but he loves his niece, Zula. An African refugee, Zula was adopted by Richard's brother and grew up as an Iowa farm girl and recently graduated college with a computer degree. Richard offers her a job and is thrilled that he'll get to spend more time with her. However, hackers have put a virus called Reamde in the T'Rain game and this inadvertently begins a chain of events with deadly consequences.

The story roams from the US to the Isle of Man to Canada and China as well as various other locales and a huge cast of characters is involved. Russian gangsters, fantasy novelists, British spies, on-line gamers, a Hungarian money launderer, Chinese hackers, American survivalist nut jobs and Islamic terrorists all get mixed up in the plot, and the book culminates in an epic way with 100+ tense pages that stressed me out and left me needing a nap afterwards.

While Stephenson still never met an info dump he didn't like, he keeps the focus here mainly on the characters without taking long detours to explore concepts like he has in some of his other books although he does spend a fair amount of time explaining the nature of the T'Rain game while working in some pretty funny observations about the fantasy genre and gaming. Fans of his earlier work who grumble about the

length and pace of his later stuff will still find plenty to bitch about here, and there are some dead sub-plots that could be trimmed with no damage done to the overall story.

But to me, that's what makes a Neal Stephenson book special. Yes, he probably could have written a 300 to 400 page book that got most of the same plot into it, but without the backstories and the time spent in the mind of each character as they think through their respective situations, it'd be just another book with a bunch of people running around with guns and laptops. Part of the charm for me is Stephenson's quirky way of telling a story, and he's delivered another great book here.

Julio Genao says

Remind me never to read reviews written by my most ardent "fans."

This book is great, but it appears #TeamStephenson was expecting the opening of the Ark of the fucking Covenant.

If you want a smart, contemporary, geeky, international action thriller written by someone who just spent 10 years writing an epic about the connections between the tech of the 17th century and the tech of the 21st—in longhand, on, like, *parchment*, with a *fountain pen*, the showboating bastard—then read this.

It's fun. And funny. And damned good.

If you want something else, put this down, walk away, and go *on* with a bad self. Never you worry—there's bound to be a new Patterson out by Tuesday.

That is all.

Graham Crawford says

I love Neil Stephenson (most of the time), and I loved this book - most of the time. When He's good he's brilliant, but when he's bad he's mind numbingly dull. This is probably his most commercial/mainstream book yet - It screams please make me into to a Hollywood action movie, or big budget miniseries. For my taste it screams this too loudly.

The best parts of the novel are about the Chinese hacking and Gold Farming scene, the REAMDE virus- all classic slick Stephenson. Once we are back in America, it degenerates into a B grade Bruce Willis Flick. The shoot out with terrorists at the end had every cliché in the book - and why did it need to be sooooo long winded - bullet by bullet. Gun porn. Not very smart - airport stuff. And the cringe worthy romance epilogue where everyone gets hitched and attends Thanksgiving dinnerexcuse me while I throw up!!

I was quite concerned by the politics. Stephenson normally is quite insightful, but choosing to write about a Moslem terrorist threat in this manner demonstrates a middle American naivety he hasn't shown before. Is this what he really thinks, or is it just what he thinks will get him a movie deal? If he wanted to play the terrorism card it needed to be a LOT smarter than prayer rugs and gaff tape.

The entire terrorism thread hinges on the deus ex machina of a wrong room number. Of course the book would have been much shorter without this silly complication, but it would have been a far better one if he

had stuck with the Chinese hackers - and explored the "great firewall of China" themes more thoroughly.

Dan says

The fact that this book came out 2 days before I take a 12 hour flight to china is proof that god loves me and wants me to be happy.

Bill says

i have absolutely no interest whatsoever in video games. i have never played a video game on my tv, on my computer, or on my phone. the last time i played a video game was when pac-man was the cutting edge.

so karen sends me a signed copy of this book (she's so awesome), and i was really looking forward to getting it, having read stephenson before, so even though it's a very big book, i started reading it the day it arrived at my place.

so i start reading it, and initially, much to my disappointment, it turns out that the main premise of the story revolves around a video game, and large parts of the plot are about the specifics of the video game, how it is played, how it was designed and by whom, viruses that are present etc. etc. in fact, most of the first 300 pages or so are all based on this theme. much to my surprise however, i wasn't finding this boring at all. in fact, the opposite was true, i was compelled to keep reading and reading...anyway you get the idea...so i ended up reading all 1042 pages of a book largely based on a subject that doesn't interest me, and there wasn't one boring page to be found.

in fact, in addition to the gaming stuff, there is a tremendous amount of action in this book, and a very satisfying number of baddies get killed, some in spectacular fashion. and stephenson has an amazing knack, at least in this book, of leaving tremendous cliffhangers at the end of every chapter, and even at the end of sections of chapters, so i was constantly feeling compelled to read just a few more pages, and then a few more etc. etc. until i just had to go to sleep (most annoying, this having to sleep business).

so, in summary, this book is 1042 pages of sheer writing brilliance, so please don't let the length of the book scare you off. it's well worth the time put in...every single page of it. it's a truly great book. enuff said.

Thomas Frank says

[on the terrorist plot (hide spoiler)]

Jenne says

Me: la la la I'm sure this will be edifying and weird.

Book: Yes this will be a book about math and philosophy and like, historical dudes **J/K actually I am like 14 Die Hards all squished together!**

Me: SHut up, I have to stop reading this and actually make a living!

Book: no YOU shut up!!

Me: Seriously, they say people need to sleep occasionally.

Book: Bitch, I am NOT DONE. I will TELL YOU when you can sleep.

RandomAnthony says

Neal Stephenson's *Reamde* is over a thousand pages long. ONE THOUSAND PAGES. In the same way that I avoid movies over 130 minutes (especially if they're historical costume drama, egads) my self-diagnosed ADD usually keeps me away from books over, say, 500 pages. Exceptions exist, of course, and this novel caught my eye because 1) I had read and liked/loved Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, *Snow Crash*, and *Cryptomicon*, and 2) I was experiencing one of those uncomfortable "I don't know what to read" stretches. After wandering the library shelves for a disheartening twenty minutes, waiting for a title to click, I spotted *Reamde*, which I had already passed on a few circuits, and went for it. I'm glad I did.

Reamde, like the other Stephenson books I've read, defies easy explanation. If someone asked me what this book was about, I'd say, in no particular order:

This World of Warcraft-like game called T'rain

Iowa

Islamic Terrorists

Survivalists along the Canadian border

Chinese kids who make money playing video games

Russian criminals

More that I'm omitting for space purposes. I also don't want to take up too much of your time.

My friend Paul says this novel is lighter (metaphorically) than Stephenson's intimidating Baroque Trilogy. *Reamde* reads like a James Bond novel written by a very smart, detailed-oriented OCD writer who gets bugged when the minutia doesn't mesh perfectly and, in turns, adds seventeen pages about Chinese fishing boats lest he bonk the specifics. But *Reamde* is nerdy fun for readers who care tolerate obtuse threads about different types of gold included in a video game and the implications these types of gold might have on real

world economies.

The last two hundred pages, in which the characters descend on a survivalist compound, is action-movie exciting and kept me up late two nights running. I would love to see this novel become a film but I don't know that a film version is possible. You'd have to get Terry Gilliam (Is he still alive?) or those brothers who did the Matrix, or someone equally insane, and you'd probably have to commit to three films (like *Twilight!*) or maybe do an HBO mini-series. Or cut a slew of characters. And that would suck. So check out *Reamde* at your leisure, if this is your type of party, and it's not, read the first few pages before you commit to a grand-plus. Great book, loads of fun, but not for everybody.

Jeffrey Keeten says

I took the week off between Christmas and New Years and decided the perfect book to end the year with was the new woolly MAMMOTH sized Neal Stephenson book. Because we were traveling down to the in-laws house, a 12 hour trip to the ship channel in Texas, I checked out a library copy. With this size of book it is easy to break the spine while reading it and this is a book that actually forces the reader to abuse it to actually read the book. In retrospect, though I was glad I didn't have to torture my own copy of the book, it would be a wise investment to purchase this book on your kindle, iPad, nook etc. This is a book made to be read digitally.

My mother-in-law who was diligently marking my progress in the book would come in at different times of the day to find me slouched in a chair with this book perched in various positions to relieve my hands, arms and back.(I still have a stubborn knot in the muscle under my scapula.) She would say, "You really aren't making much progress in that book." I would blearily pull myself away from China, Canada or the latest wonderfully tense moment in the plot and bluster, "Of course I'm making progress it is a 1,000 page book."

She was right though. I'd get to the end of a day of power reading and find my bookmark still on the South side of the center of the book. It did not seem I was really making any progress and what made it all the more interesting was I didn't care. I was willing to spend as much time as Stephenson would give me with Richard Forthrast the founder of the online game T'Rain and self proclaimed black sheep of the Forthrast clan; Zula Forthrast, the niece of Richard and the main catalyst for the plot of the novel; Sokolov, the Russian Spetsnaz trained mercenary; Csonger, the Hungarian computer hacker; Marlon, the Chinese hacker that hatched a brilliant plan to steal millions of dollars from T'Rain; Olivia, the British MI6 agent; Yuxia, the Chinese facilitator that gets caught up in much more than she expected when she offered to help; Seamus, the American CIA operative; and our ultimate bad guy, Abdallah Jones, international terrorist.

Except for Richard and Zula none of these characters knew each other before the beginning of this international endeavor to find a terrorist. In the course of the book Stephenson weaves the plot around these people and draws them all into the same goal of stopping Abdallah Jones. I was right there with them, totally taken up with the plot, feeling my body tense with each burst of gunfire, sometimes despairing that the band of international gypsies could ever catch up with Jones in time. I was glad that I had the time to read 200 pages at a go. I think reading this book 20 pages a day might have driven me crazy.

This is a brilliantly composed thriller, smart, compelling, overwhelming, and ultimately satisfying. Time well spent. Highly recommended!!!

Ryan says

It's important for writers to recognize their strengths. With *Reamde*, it's clear that Neal Stephenson has embraced his: the infodump.

Reamde operates in two gears: infodump and action, which makes for a potent combination. This fusion works because Stephenson has written a thriller. At first, I was surprised, but then I realized that "The Baroque Cycle" was also a thriller, just one set in an unusual period for the genre. Regardless, the infodump and the plot are what the thriller's all about.

With *Reamde*, Stephenson returns to contemporary America, discussing things like the setting of wind shield wipers on cars in Seattle, bears roaming the Rockies, and Walmart. However, it doesn't take long (just 300/1000 pages) for him to get restless with America. Before we know it, his hero's niece, Zula, is kidnapped and flown to China, where we are given infodumps related to Xiamen's architecture, the culture of the Russian mafia, and even international terrorism.

And don't forget about the spies. There are three of them, and all of them come with their own highly detailed back story. Still, if anyone can make a digression into spy school, begun in the middle of a fire fight, interesting enough that readers will stay tuned for thirty pages rather than skipping ahead to see what happens in the firefight, it's Neal Stephenson.

When we consider that we live in an age where we must be "concise" and "focused" in our writing, I find Stephenson's digressions especially striking. For example, Stephenson quite comfortably explains how a MMORPG was marketed. Does it have anything to do with the plot? Perhaps. Could it be skipped? Almost certainly. Nevertheless, for Stephenson's fans, these digressions are the hook that keeps readers turning pages, rather than the plot.

And it is this reversal that makes *Reamde* a standout amongst thrillers. Stephenson's achievement here is that he so easily demonstrates that a great thriller can be measured by the depth of its infodumps, rather than the just pace of its plot.
