Vast Narratives

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Collection Statement

"What is the longest novel?" On the surface, this question seems straightforward, perhaps even precise enough to be scientific. Simply count the words, surely? Yet chasing the elusive longest novel grew from an idle teenage pastime into a serious pursuit that has seen many an hour spent delving in the deepest niches of academic archives, corresponding with art historians, learning French, doing statistics, even pouring over dictionaries of extinct tongues. The vastest exemplars of human creativity enticed me into a wider world than I ever imagined.

As a precocious reader aged thirteen years, I read *War and Peace* as a stunt. Not satisfied with the modest attention this garnered, I began a quest for even longer things to read. This led, of course, to the best-known ones like *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *Infinite Jest*, and *Clarissa*; but I also encountered much self-promotion, hearsay, and conjecture. Apparently, no one ever bothered to conduct a formal study of such an "important" question! I took it upon myself to investigate, and my preconceptions promptly collapsed.

The concept of a "single novel" is too vague to be a useful criterion. Many books written at once are published in parts. Many books written separately are published together. Does *The Lord of the Rings* count as a single novel? What about *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which was written and published somewhat haphazardly and yet holds the Guiness World Record as the "official" longest novel? Are a hundred words of Shakespeare equal to a hundred words of pulp? How are words counted across languages? What about logographic languages like Chinese, where the concept of a word is fuzzier than in English? As an avid reader of high fantasy, it felt unfair to pit a single literary novel against notorious doorstopper series like the Wheel of Time, yet it also felt as though they shared a kinship in their status as outliers in their fields.

Gradually I realized that I was attempting to capture a feeling deeper than finding the single longest novel – it was about finding the stories that people were so devoted to that they committed unusual amounts of effort to them. I came to recognize these works as "vast narratives," a term that

encompasses fictional stories of all media (not just books) with an intentional internal continuity created by any number of storytellers, where some intangible quality leads to dedication beyond the average attention span of either audiences or creators.

My collection's scope has shifted considerably from its naïve origin. Although I've given up hope of ranking apples and oranges according to a single criterion, I still group works roughly into three categories:
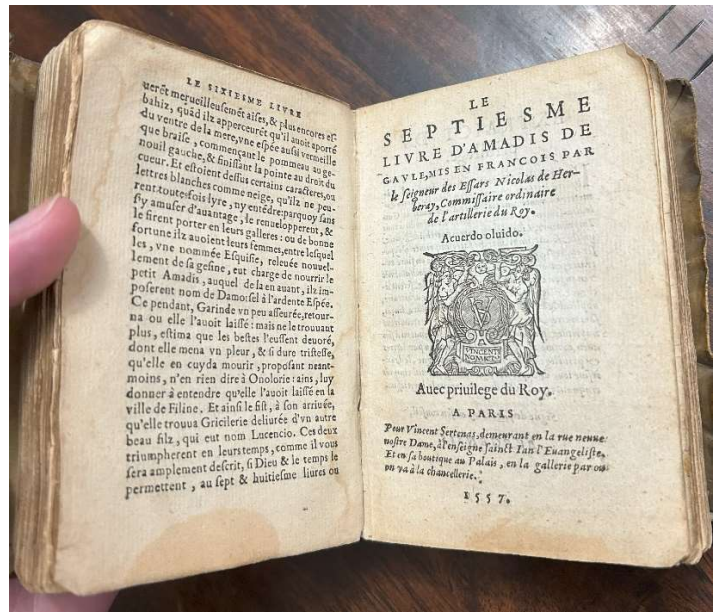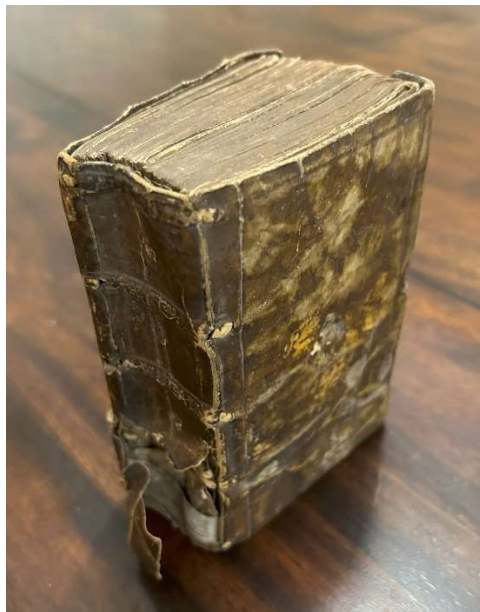
1. A **single novel** I define as a work plotted, executed, and published as a unit. I make exceptions for publication limitations that necessitate several volumes, or for serialized literature where execution and publication are often synonymous. Notably, in this scheme, *The Lord of the Rings* is in fact a single novel.

2. **Novel cycles** (sometimes called "romans-fleuves" or "river-novels") are plotted as a unit but executed and published in installments that generally do not stand alone. Jules Romains's *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* is my quintessential novel cycle. By this criterion, *À la recherche du temps perdu* also fits best in this category.

3. In a **novel series**, each installment is plotted, executed, and published as a standalone item. Long-term plans may be incidental.

Further, within each category I account for collaborations by roughly estimating the contribution of the "average" author. To count words, I rely on my own statistical method of collecting page samples until a 99% confidence interval on the population total spans no more than a thousand words.
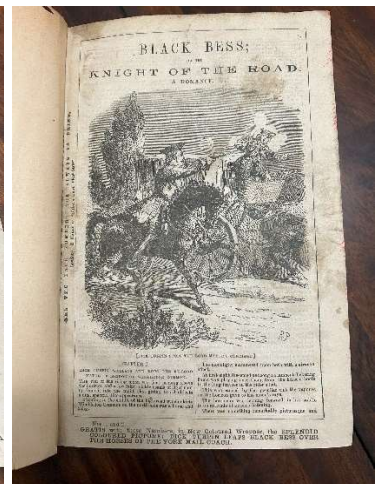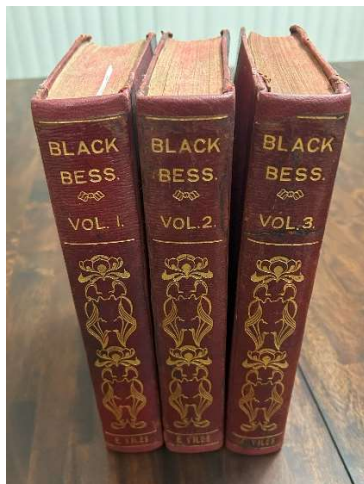
When selecting additions to the collection, I prioritize versions in their original language, ideally bilingual editions when they exist; academic and critical editions; and antique editions. Additionally, I have made a deliberate effort to identify vast narratives from around the world, some of which have never been translated to English. National epics often fall into this category, and many of them rank among my favorite books.

My oldest volume is also my most prized item: published in 1557, the sixth and seventh French installments of the Amadis of Gaul series, bound together. Although it lacks a few pages, owning such a pivotal work in the development of European literature has been a great privilege. Amadis qualifies as a novel series in my collection. At its height of popularity, Amadis of Gaul prompted over forty sequels, prequels, interquels, and even "aggiunte" or additions to existing volumes as audiences

clamored to sate their Amadis fervor. Today, Amadis is mainly remembered as Don Quixote's favorite book that drove him to madness and immortality.

I was extremely lucky to acquire a complete set of the Victorian "penny dreadful" *Black Bess, or, The Knight of the Road* attributed to Edward Viles, a bound reissue in three volumes with an original poster inserted. As with much serialized literature from that period, *Black Bess* is likely a collaboration of several authors under the direction of a single "executive" author, but in comparison to other penny dreadfuls, the quality and continuity are quite striking over 254 weekly issues. For the purposes of the collection, *Black Bess* is cohesive enough to qualify as a single novel. Reading *Black Bess* has been genuinely enjoyable even beyond its value in the collection of vast narratives.

As I will describe in my bibliography, pursuing this collection has taken me down roads that I could never have imagined. Going forward, I hope to find ways to amplify many forgotten works, bringing them back into availability for casual readers to appreciate. My skills as a software engineer will come in handy – I have professional experience in language processing and machine translation. Emerging technologies such as Large Language Models may reduce the language barriers that make many works inaccessible to English-speakers.

Bibliography

1. **Harrigan, Pat, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, editors. *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*. The MIT Press, 2017.**

    This volume of essays clarified my vague motivations and provided the term "vast narratives." *Third Person* contains analyses of themes such as continuity, canonicity, shared authorship, intertextuality, open narratives, generative fiction, and storytelling with emerging technologies. In addition, its consideration of diverse media forms convinced me to expand my collection of vast narratives into media such as film and music.

2. **De Silva, Feliciano. *Le Sixiesme Livre d'Amadis de Gaule* [Lisuarte de Grecia] and *Le Septiesme Livre d'Amadis de Gaule* [Amadis de Grecia vol. 1]. Translated by Nicolas de Herberay. Vincent Sertenas, 1557.**

    Novel series, multiple authors. French translation from Spanish. No current word count estimate.
    Perhaps one of the earliest "fandoms," the Amadis series of chivalric romances produced more than forty sequels during its vogue. This volume collects the sixth and seventh French installments (corresponding to the seventh and ninth of the original Spanish versions – the eighth was skipped and later rebranded as an entirely different installment).

3. **Viles, Edward. *Black Bess, or, The Knight of the Road: A Tale of the Good Old Times*. E. Harrison, 1868.**

    Single novel, single author (?) English language. Best current estimate: 2.4 million words.
    The longest continuous penny dreadful, the Victorian equivalent of a soap opera issued in 254 weekly installments, this complete set is a reissue probably published after the conclusion of the original run. It includes one of the promotional posters offered with an individual issue. *Black Bess* was directly continued in a sequel series, *The Black Highwayman* in 86 issues, which is so rare that I've accepted the likelihood of never owning an original.

4. **MacGregor, John M. *Henry Darger: In the Realms of the Unreal.* Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002.**

    Special item. English language. No current estimate.
    This item is the foundational study of outsider artist Henry Darger, and it stands in for Darger's own unpublished writings. Today Darger is known for his massive collage-watercolor paintings. These paintings are infrequently acknowledged as illustrations of Darger's 15,000-page novel *In the Realms of the Unreal*, a vast narrative in its own right.

Studying Darger has become for me a strange obsession, and professional art historians have occasionally consulted me to better understand Darger's writings.

5. **Schmidt, Arno. *Bottom's Dream*. Translated by John E. Woods. Dalkey Archive Press, 2016.**

    Single novel, single author. English translation from German. Best current estimate: 1.1 million words.
    Nominally a stream-of-consciousness narrative about a group of translators attempting to reproduce the nuances of Edgar Allan Poe in German, *Bottom's Dream* is physically my largest book. It is infamous for its three interleaving columns of text, endless puns, and inscrutable punctuation.

6. **Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady*. J. F. and C. Rivington, 1785. 8 vols.**

    Single novel, single author. English language. Best current estimate: 1 million words.
    When I was a teenager, these eight volumes were the first formal addition to my vast narrative collection. They are in abysmal condition, but it was worth the opportunity to own an antique edition of a famous long novel at a price I could afford. This epistolary novel is perhaps the longest single novel to retain some level of currency, at least in college-level literature classes (passing over Proust, whose work I consider to be a novel cycle).

7. ***The Mahabharata*. Translated by Bibek Debroy. Penguin Books, 2010–2014. 10 vols.**

    Special item. English translation from Sanskrit. Best current estimate: 1.8 million words.
    This translation of India's national epic poem follows the core text of the critical edition. The expanded text, including all regional recensions, is longer by hundreds of thousands of words. I have spent many hours poring over the Sanskrit of the expanded text to better understand the regional versions and how they underwent expansion over many centuries.

8. **The Perry Rhodan series. Ace Books and Master Publications, 1969–1979. 145 vols.**

    Novel series, many authors. English translation from German. Best current estimate: 3.6 million words.
    This German science fiction series, although written by dozens of authors in weekly novellas over a span of sixty years, is the undisputed longest continuous narrative by such a wide margin that I personally doubt it will ever be challenged. This entry encompasses only the English translation, of which I have a complete run. (See the Desiderata for a description of the German series.)

9. **Balzac, Honoré de. *La Comédie humaine*. Gallimard, 1976–1981. 12 vols.**

    Novel series, single author. French language. No current estimate.

This Bibliothèque de la Pléiade edition is not only beautiful, but also annotated and text critical, preserving all surviving revisions of Balzac's series of interwoven short stories and novels. Although I learned French to read Proust, Balzac is who I keep coming back to. *La Comédie humaine* attempts to be a systematic treatment of all aspects of French life in the early 19th century.

10. **Reynolds, George W. M. *The Mysteries of London*. John Dicks, 1844–1847. 4 vols.**

Novel series, single author (?) English language. Best current estimate: 3 million words.

The Mysteries of London was by far the most popular penny dreadful. Unlike *Black Bess*, the two 104-issue series of *The Mysteries of London* and the four 104-issue series of *The Mysteries of the Court of London* (see Desiderata) are not a single continuous narrative. However, each series by itself would qualify as one of the longest single novels. Reynolds was a champion of workers' rights, and his works display a social compassion to rival Dickens.

11. **The Four Classic Chinese Novels. Foreign Language Press, 1993–1995. 16 vols.**

Single novels, single authors. English translations from Chinese. Each roughly 800,000 words.

This set comprises four works: Luo Guanzhong (tr. Moss Roberts), *Three Kingdoms*, 1995; Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong (tr. Sidney Shapiro), *Outlaws of the Marsh*, 1993; Wu Cheng'en (tr. W. J. F. Jenner), *Journey to the West*, 1994; and Cao Xueqin and Gao E (tr. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang), *A Dream of Red Mansions*, 1994. These editions present slightly shorter recensions of works with extremely complicated histories. They are frequently cited as the pinnacle of Chinese literature, and, considering that *Three Kingdoms* is one of my favorite books, I would suggest they may be among the greatest novels of all time.

12. **Cooper, Madison. *Sironia, Texas*. Houghton Mifflin, 1952. 2 vols.**

Single novel, single author. English language. Best current estimate: 1 million words.

This novel is a roman-à-clef for Waco, Texas at the turn of the 20th century. Its minute portrayal of a simpler era opened my eyes to common social dynamics that persist even into the age of the Internet. When people ask what vast narrative I consider a hidden gem, I recommend *Sironia, Texas*.

13. **Romains, Jules. *Men of Good Will*. Translated by Warre B. Wells and Gerard Hopkins. Alfred A. Knopf, 1933–1946. 14 vols.**

Novel cycle, single author. English translation from French. Best current estimate: 2 million words.

Well respected at the time of its publication, yet nearly entirely forgotten today, this work treats Paris culture as a "character" by portraying it through dozens of interwoven stories

that actually make up the plot. Romains used it as a vehicle for his philosophy of "unanimism," exploring the collective behaviors of groups rather than individuals.

14. **Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and Andreas Mayor, revised by D. J. Enright. The Modern Library, 2003. 6 vols.**

    Novel cycle, single author. English translation from French. Best current estimate: 1.2 million words.
    Guiness World Records considers this to be the longest novel. Although I think that's indefensible when it gets down to brass tacks, from the perspective of readers who aren't inherently interested in vast narratives I can see the justification for treating Proust's work as most deserving of the title. It's surely the most famous vast narrative, and its literary reputation is well deserved.

15. **Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. Black Bay Books, 2006.**

    Single novel, single author. English language. Best current estimate: 577,608 words.
    The *other* notorious long novel (after Proust), pretending to have read it has become a literary joke. *Infinite Jest* is famous for its erudition, non-linear style, and copious footnotes. Reducing it to a synopsis would be difficult and would probably betray the sad fact that I haven't read it (all of it, at least).

16. **Jordan, Robert, and Brandon Sanderson. The Wheel of Time series. Tor Fantasy, 1990– 2013. 15 vols.**

    Novel series, multiple authors. English language. Best current estimate: 4.4 million words.
    Interestingly, in the category of novel series, high fantasy contributes more than one entry. As such, what I refer to as my "crappy fantasy" (tongue-in-cheek) sub-collection accounts for a significant bulk of material. However, as is the case with the penny dreadfuls (or even epic poems in a way), it is important never to underestimate popular literature. The Wheel of Time may be the most likely entry in this list to have been read by an American picked at random.

17. **Modesitt, L. E. The Saga of Recluce series. Tor Fantasy, 1991–present. 23 vols.**

    Novel series, single author. English language. Best current estimate: 4.2 million words.
    Another vast fantasy series, Modesitt's Saga of Recluce covers the history of a magical world in a non-linear fashion over thousands of years, allowing each story room to stand on its own. It is unique as the work of a single author who has been publishing numerous other series simultaneously.

18. **Erickson, Steven, and Ian C. Esslemont. The Malazan series. Tor Fantasy, 1999–present. 16 vols.**

> *Novel series, multiple authors. English language. Best current estimate: 4.3 million words.*
> The sword-and-sorcery Malazan books are known for their worldbuilding, including thousands of named characters, millennia of history, a unique magic system, and detailed military campaigns and international politics. Notably, my word count includes only the volumes I own, sixteen out of twenty-four installments.

Desiderata

1. **De Scudéry, Madeleine. *Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus*. Courbé, 1649–1653. 10 vols.**

> *Single novel, single author. French language. Best current estimate: 2.1 million words.*
> A 17th-century French roman-à-clef, *Artamène* thinly veils the dramas of de Scudéry's salon regulars beneath a pastoral romance on the life of Cyrus II of Persia. It is sometimes unofficially touted by Internet lists as the absolute longest novel. Although I have digital copies of *Artamène* and other vast 16th-18th century romances and serials (de Scudéry contributes more than one extreme outlier), a physical copy of this work has always been my white whale.

2. **Reynolds, George W. M. *The Mysteries of the Court of London*. John Dicks, 1849–1855. 8 vols.**

> *Novel series, single author (?) English language. Best current estimate: 6 million words.*
> In addition to the two series of *The Mysteries of London* that I own, George Reynolds wrote four more sequels under a new title. Across the six series in weekly installments over a total of twelve years, this could easily be the greatest output of a single author, and it outstrips even many collaborative works. However, given that Victorian serialized literature was often a collaboration of ghostwriters under one primary author's direction, I consider the attribution solely to Reynolds as hypothetical at best.

3. **The Perry Rhodan series. Pabel-Moewig Verlag, 1961–present.**

> *Novel series, many authors. German language. Best current estimate: 80 million words.*
> As described above, I own the complete run of English translations (145 items) and scattered German issues, but a complete set (currently ~3200 volumes) would be ideal. The sheer physical mass of material makes it difficult to buy and import. It would also be immediately

out of date unless supplemented with a subscription, unavailable in the United States without costly forwarding services. If we count more than 1200 spin-off titles as well, the total word count of the Perry Rhodan universe may exceed 120 million words.

4. **The Epic of King Gesar.**

   Special item, many authors. Tibetan language. No current estimate.

   Preserved primarily orally for over a millennium and consisting of many regional recensions, this cycle of narratives forms an integral part of Tibetan culture. Long in danger of extinction, scholarly interest is increasing, and the Gesar epic tradition has been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity to help ensure its preservation.