



## The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer

*Neal Stephenson*

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The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer is a postcyberpunk novel by Neal Stephenson. It is to some extent a science fiction coming-of-age story, focused on a young girl named Nell, and set in a future world in which nanotechnology affects all aspects of life. The novel deals with themes of education, social class, ethnicity, and the nature of artificial intelligence.

## **The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer Details**

Date : Published May 2nd 2000 by Spectra (first published February 1995)

ISBN : 9780553380965

Author : Neal Stephenson

Format : Paperback 499 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Cyberpunk, Steampunk



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## From Reader Review The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer for online ebook

### Jason says

Okay, here's what this Stephenson guy did with his novel. He got together a focus group of 25 unpaid, thirteen year old boys and made them puke out as many buzz words in 10 minutes that they could about science fiction. The buzz words had to be something that would palliate the hyperactive endocrine glands of 13 year old males. Stephenson then roiled together this mess with a rag mop and wrung it into a bucket called *The Diamond Age: Or A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer*.

To give you a thin sample of this overreaching heterogeneous brew, I took from pages 461-487 (2 random consecutive chapters) all the words that would intrigue young science fiction fans in the year 1995. This book nails the pimple-faced, horny, just-starting-to-get-facial-hair demographic. I'll have more to say about this list. In mostly chronological order, and exactly quoted from the text:

#### THINGS

Faery King  
Scriptorium  
Enchanted Armies  
King Coyote  
Princess Nell  
The Book of the Book  
Mermaids  
Djinn  
Khan  
Royal blood  
Carved onyx  
Shock waves  
Tidal waves  
Poison dart  
Rebellion  
Disco  
Lying in a puddle of his own urine  
Revolution Constable  
Hoplite Army  
Torture  
Nightgown  
Nudity  
Girl with a whip  
Matter Compiler  
Aboriginal Shaman  
Sword  
Knife  
Prodigious amount of blood  
Elevator surfing  
Dojo  
Booby traps

Dr. X  
Shinto temples  
Barbarians  
Divine Wind  
Nunchuks  
A mouse army  
Cowboy boots  
Carl Hollywood  
Fire axe  
Zulu warriors  
Skull gun  
Fists of Righteous Harmony  
200-story building  
Radar scope  
Bayonet  
Vomit  
Night vision  
Identical twins

#### PEOPLE/PLACES

Nipponese  
Hindustani  
New Chusan  
New Atlantian  
Celestial Kingdom  
Coastal Republic  
Israel  
Bosnia  
Outer Tribes  
Urban Homeboys  
Neo Victorian  
Boers  
Economic Zone  
Disenchanted Land  
Land Beyond

#### WORDS

mediatronic  
phyles  
memes  
nanoblades  
nanotech

There it is folks. A taste of only 17 pages in *The Diamond Age*. The other 483 pages are almost exactly the same, but with additional pimply-faced and creative buzz words. At some point there is a 'rainbow' and a 'pony' and 'Carmen SanDiego,' and in several places there is a 'unicorn,' and characters named 'Duck, Dinosaur, Peter Rabbit, and Purple' so even young girls may find some traction herein.

I am not an objective critic of science fiction because I don't read enough of it. I know it's not supposed to be

real. I got it. But I want to dabble in the genre to be a more well rounded reader, and this book won the 1996 Hugo & Locus Awards. So, bringing no prejudice into this book except an award winning expectation, I was greatly disappointed. Just by the list above you can see the author was all over the place, like birdshot, with his themes. He's forward in time; he's backwards in time; he's science; he's fantasy; he's grounded in 1995 technology with some small steps to near future, coincident with great leaps into distant future; he's mystery, drama, fable; he references too many cultural items from the late 1980's and 90's, like dreadlocks, and homeboys and "bitchin' dude." He suddenly introduces a whole new technology with no backstory in order to press through a few lines of text. If Stephenson needs to invent a word to impute something that sounds techy, there's numerous prefix + suffix mash-ups he can turn to (nano, micro, mega, giga + blade, gun, saw, tube, villi)--so that it's possible to create "Nanotechagigaswordebladetubule." There's a slow, building progression toward a denouement for the several separate threadlines, but toward the end it's rushed, short, and unfulfilling.

And please, how many times in 100,000 appear the words: anfractuous, ramifying, and fractal? 15. Really? Not buying it. Good words, but way overused.

I wish there was a scatter plot of science fiction genres along an x-y axis, because for my next science fiction book, I'd move a couple values to the right, and up one.

1.5 stars rounded up. I credit the second star merely because Stephenson had a form and stuck to it throughout. He never wavered. The narrative is way too schizoid for me, but it is a distinct style with a very mature--despite being teenybop--vocabulary.

New words: afflatus, lacuna, farrago, cyalume, besprent, sinter, decussate, demesne, fléchette, neap tide.

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### **Apatt says**

This is the second Neal Stephenson book I have read, the previous one being the marvelously entertaining Snow Crash. Unlike Snow Crash this not an easy read, being the impatient sort I almost gave up on it around page 70, fortunately some wiser heads than mine pulled me back (thank you Goodread friends!). The problem for me is the initial inundation of unfamiliar words, some are of the author's invention, the others are just English words not in my vocabulary!

The book focuses on the trials and tribulations of several protagonists and one central character, a little girl from a poor family called Nell. If the book had been focused on Nell alone it would have been a breeze to read as I like the character and her adventures with her brother in the early parts of the book are relatively straight forward. While I love the setting of this strange future world where nanotechnology pervades every aspect of life, my initial difficulty with the book is that I found one of the protagonists (Hackworth, damn him!) less than endearing and his part of the story hard to follow as he is a genius nanotechnologist and a lot of the technical details Stephenson describes in these chapters go right over my head. Still, the author knows better than I do how his story should proceed and his canvas is too big for just a single protagonist narrative. Anyway, I put the book down for a couple of days to read something much easier (Bujold!) then I was persuaded to get back to The Diamond Age again. By a happy coincidence from the point of my reentry the book switches its focus from the irritating Hackworth to spend a lot of time on Nell and her development with the aid of the high nanotech primer book mentioned in the novel's subtitle. Another high point for me is Stephenson's peculiar sense of humor which is based more on cultural oddities rather than witticism or

slapstick. For example the dialogue in the tea house scene between a judge and a mysterious Chinese character called Dr X is a subtly hilarious comedy of manners.

However, this is clearly a more serious novel than Snow Crash, one of the theme that resonate very much with me is the right of the disenfranchised to education, enlightenment and a chance of good life. I also share the author's sense of outrage against child abuse, some teacher's abuse of authority and general spiritual and intellectual deprivation some kids are subjected to. These serious issues are smoothly integrated into the story without ever becoming preachy. Being an extremely well read individual Stephenson has included bits of Confucius philosophy in the narrative, I can't claim to understand it all but the little that I do may have made me just a teensy weensy bit wiser, a definite bonus.

So an entertaining, thought provoking and worthwhile book, it may even give the reader's intelligence a wee boost. If that doesn't work you can always eat more fish.

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## Evelina | AvalinahsBooks says

Full review on AvalinahsBooks. 3 reasons why you should read this:

### **Reason #1. It's A Utopia For Once**

***How many times have you actually read a Utopia? Huh?***

*(I can hear you silently disappearing into the night, one by one.)*

***Cause you probably have not.*** It's all about dystopia! The last utopia I've heard of? I think it must have been the one written by Thomas More. Because after that, it's been one dystopia after another, and frankly? Sick. And. Tired. Which is why I'm so glad to actually read a contemporary Utopia! ***Okay, so those societies might still be struggling here and there, but it's a world that actually works. So there. Bite it, dystopia.***

### **Reason #2. Neo-Victorians!!**

***Neal Stephenson has crafted an incredible world here.*** It wouldn't be possible for me to delve into the details here because *(that's why the book is 500 pages long, really!)* There are so many cultural groups in this book aside from the Neo-Victorians, but they are focused upon the most *(and let's face it. They need to be there for the cyberpunk to actually happen.)* ***Imagine a society that's more technologically advanced than us, but take their tea seriously and transport themselves on mechanical horses.*** Never forget Victorian costume. I am not sure I would like to live in a society like that, but reading about one? Hell yes please!!

### **Reason #3. The Big Picture**

***You might have noticed that I have lots of love for big picture scifi.*** I love it when an author makes you concentrate on the little things, on particular characters, and then twists and turns the events in a way which suddenly enables them to zoom out quickly and blow your mind with the amazing effect it had on society, the environment, the planet, the universe... I am in awe of books that do that. ***Neal Stephenson? He's a master at it.*** And ***The Diamond Age*** is no exception. This particular story focuses on how small events make big changes come up in societies. And once again, I loved how Stephenson presented this. *\*claps\**

### **However....**

***I liked this book and all, but...*** There's just something it lacks. Maybe that's just good cut-editing. Because

at times I felt like maybe it didn't need to be 500 pages long or present so much detail to keep the story going. At times I didn't know quite where it was headed. The language also reinforced that, because it was really genuine with all of the invented or old-world terminology, but some of that sometimes jarred me. ***And considering the book is already 500 pages long, I don't want to be reading it slower than I have to.*** Despite this, I still believe it's worth a read! I don't regret reading it and I certainly feel like it expanded my horizons. So I will definitely be reading more of Neal Stephenson's books.

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## Chris says

I get the feeling that Stephenson's writing process goes something like this:

*Hey, I found a really cool idea here. I wonder what I can do about it....*

He then writes about 200 pages of really awesome, meticulous world-building, with innovative ideas about, in the case of this book, the possible uses of nanotechnology and its eventual social ramifications, and then goes, Oh, damn, I'm writing a story, and high-tails it to the end of the book, leaving the reader a little wind-blown and confused. It happened in Snow Crash, where he was playing with the origins of language and the fundamental functioning of the human mind. It happened in Cryptonomicon, where he dove into the murky waters of cryptography and brought up brilliant gems, and it happened here, too.

*The Diamond Age* is, fundamentally, about what would happen, or what might happen, if we really got nanotechnology working properly. How would society adapt if, suddenly, government became obsolete? With the Feed and the Matter Compilers able to create anything out of nothing, the entire economic and political underpinnings of the planet came undone, and people banded together into phyles. Like-minded individuals bonded with each other through shared values and morality, united only by a commonly upheld treaty which, in turn, rested on the new economy that nanotechnology allowed.

Within one of the phyles, the Neo-Victorians, one of the more highly-placed Lords realized what was wrong with the world. The problem wasn't the corruption of values of which the old always accuse the young - indeed it was that those values were passed on too well. Children did not elect to join their phyles, they were indoctrinated into them from birth, which made them, well, boring.

And so Lord Finkle-McGraw commissioned a great work - The Young Lady's Illustrated Primer to guide his granddaughter to a more interesting life. And had that been all that happened, the story would have been short. But two other copies of the Primer were made - one for the daughter of the book's designer, and another that fell into the hands of Nell, a young girl born into poverty and otherwise destined to lead a life of misery and sorrow.

The Primer is a smart book, fully interactive, able to teach reading, science, history and martial arts, among other things. And what it teaches little Nell is how to be great.

All of this is quite awesome - there's a great hunt for the Primer, plans within plans and all that. And then, suddenly, a new plot about a technology to supplant the Feed and some kind of Chinese revolution and the whole book runs off the rails.

I know a lot of people love Neal Stephenson, and I can understand why. He's an incomparably imaginative man, who is able to find ways to express ideas that some of us couldn't even imagine. He's an heir to the world of that William Gibson and his contemporaries pioneered. He creates captivating worlds and characters and problems without simple solutions.

He just keeps bollixing up the endings. Seriously, it's like a whole different story kicks in around page 250. I'm willing to read more of his works, though, in the hope that he's getting his act together....

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### **Phrynne says**

There is so much that is good about this book. The initial world building, the idea behind the Primer, the main characters, these are all done brilliantly and the story proceeds really well for the first half. But then other stories come into play and confusion sets in - at least in my head it did! - and it is like a roller coaster coming off the rails and crashing very, very suddenly on the last page.

One thing about Mr Stephenson though is that he really has a way with words. He uses real words which no one else has used for decades and he also makes up his own some of which are just brilliant! I like words so I enjoyed all this even though it made reading a slower process than usual.

So I did enjoy much of the book, only getting really lost with the advent of the Drummers, finding my feet again for a while and then becoming totally unable to get my head around the Mouse Army. But that's Neal Stephenson for you. I think he just likes to make your head hurt.

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### **Otis Chandler says**

I first read this ~10 years ago and just re-read it as someone reminded me that it predicts the future of reading. And it does - what I love about Stephenson is his high level of prescient-ness. In fact I think it also predicts a lot of the future of nanotechnology and entertainment.

The Young Ladies Illustrated Primer is a dynamic book with an AI in it. Imagine Alexa or Siri in 5-10 years, smart enough to make up stories on the fly and answer questions about or even redirect the storyline. The YLIP is designed in the book for a 4 year old girl, Fiona, but Nell and a few other girls end up with them also. Maybe this resonated with me as I have a 4 year old girl and wish this existed for her. What's particularly powerful about this, is the story was able to be adaptive to the problems in Nell's life, and give her strength and confidence at moments when she needed it. Some cool trivia: Project Fiona was the codename for the Kindle. There is now a building at Amazon in Seattle named Fiona.

One of the pieces of magic of the Young Ladies Illustrated Primer was that for Nell and Fiona's editions, there were live actors ("ractors") on the other end, reading all the lines 1 on 1. This put a level of personalization and human connection into the story for the girls that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. Learning about the marketplace of ractors was particularly interesting and it's hard to think such a thing won't exist in 2-5 years as VR takes off. Would you rather watch the movie Harry Potter or live act out the scenes with 2 friends as Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and have professional actors play the other characters? You can imagine this being a big form of entertainment of the future.

The nanotechnology described in the book was also fascinating. Describing a world of robots and drones too small for the human eye to see, doing tasks and even fighting each other. Massive wars we perceive as "particularly dusty days". Poisoning or taking control of another person is as easy as getting them to inhale or inject some nanobots. The drummers were a particularly interesting notion of hive-mind, connecting multiple humans together through nanobots attached to their synapses on their brain. And then of course you have nanobots creating other bots, which led to this great quote:

"The Victorian system used Darwinian techniques to create killers adapted to their prey, which was elegant and effective but led to the creation of killers that were simply too bizarre to have been thought up by humans, just as humans designing a world never would have thought up the naked mole rat."

But of course the biggest implication of nanotechnology is the ability to manipulate molecules and thus - given The Feed (which I somehow provides a stream of molecules & energy for manipulation) - you can make anything in a Matter Compiler (MC). This is kind of like what they had in Star Trek, and what 3D printing gives us .0001% of today.

The book is largely about what would happen to society if MC's were invented and much of the need for farming, manufacturing, etc was eliminated. Poverty would become even more prevalent, as would crime, governments would collapse, and of course, a class divide would emerge as never before, driven by those who have technology and those who don't. And of course, badass engineers like Hackworth will rule the day (kind of). I suppose in a way the book is about the fear of what will happen if technology progresses too far and leaves masses of humans without a purpose in life. Parking lots and chaos.

"These were rice paddies before they were parking lots. Rice was the basis for our society. Peasants planted the seeds and had highest status in the Confucian hierarchy. As the Master said, "Let the producers be many and the consumers few.' When the Feed came in from Atlantis, from Nippon, we no longer had to plant, because the rice now came from the matter compiler. It was the destruction of our society. When our society was based upon planting, it could truly be said, as the Master did, "Virtue is the root; wealth is the result.' But under the Western ti, wealth comes not from virtue but from cleverness. So the filial relationships became deranged. Chaos," Dr. X said regretfully, then looked up from his tea and nodded out the window. "Parking lots and chaos."

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### **Louise says**

Is it possible to feel nostalgia for a place in the future? The crowded, multi-factioned, multi-leveled city of Shanghai and nearby Pudong made me miss my hometown terribly. Stephenson's descriptions of brightly lit Nanjing Road and small, dim, alleys of hawkers was so spot on. The mix of high technology, the sophisticated neo-Victorians, and the Confucians made a confusing but ultimately satisfying story.

I came to The Diamond Age with a vague idea of what the book was about. Like previous steampunk books I read, there was a combination of neo-Victorian sensibilities, technologies different than what we're used to, and a huge disparity between classes. While that may be what gets the book labeled as 'steampunk' by some people ,it surpasses that label and has so much more.

It has cyber-punk technologies. It has dystopian characteristics. It's part adventure story, part riddle, part allegory, part detective story, and best of all, it feels epic without losing its main characters in too wide of a scope.

Reading Stephenson is always hard for me but I always enjoy it. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that his books are not easy to skim through. Go too quickly in *The Diamond Age* and you end up in an underwater rave wondering what the heck just happened.

The book was definitely worth reading for any fan of the author. It certainly is my favorite book of his so far. My only complaint was that Nell was too perfect. While it could be said that if the Primer had something to do with that, if I take a step back and look at the character, her lack of faults is unbelievable.

Other than that one little complaint, I loved every part of the book from the heart-wrenching stories in the Primer to the action-packed lead up to the Mouse Army. I also liked all the mentions of tea.

Protip: Fountain pens were mentioned at least nine times in this book!

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## Stephen says

6.0 stars. Among the best books I have ever read (although slightly behind *Snow Crash* as my favorite Neal Stephenson novel). Neal's books are just loaded with great dialogue, mind-stretching ideas and a world as complex as our own. **HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!**

Nominee: Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Nominee: John W. Campbell Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Nominee: Prometheus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Winner: Hugo Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

Winner: Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel

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## Tfitoby says

**If *Snow Crash* was so good that cyberpunk went in to a coma, *The Diamond Age* effectively pulled the plug.**

Much like seemingly everyone else I loved the first part of this book and felt that the second part didn't quite live up to the same extremely high standard.

Aside from the literary death of cyberpunk when Bud (a character that I'm sure we've all read about many times before but still want to know his story in this instance) is the victim of Confucian capital punishment and the data transfer implications of sexual activity this novel is really quite incomparable to *Snow Crash*.

Stephenson creates an incredibly believable world filled with interesting little details and intriguing characters (most of whom do not make it through a few pages in the entire novel) and tells a story of social change using the orphan Nell as the basis and catalyst. The mention of Nell is very important here as it is her intertwined narratives that leave you flipping page after page, breathlessly devouring a pretty hefty book.

It is only as you enter part the second that things start to slow down, make less sense, have a tendency to confuse and most irritatingly take huge jumps forward in time. This last aspect has the combined effect of a Rocky montage sequence or even more disconcertingly the final episode of an unexpectedly cancelled tv

series trying to answer all of the questions from their mythology that they initially thought they'd have 5 years to dripfeed you. In an ideal world the Baroque Cycle has allowed Stephenson to tell his stories in a better (if long winded) style and potentially amazing novels will no longer be ruined by trying to squeeze them in to a paltry 500 pages.

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### **Vass says**

I gulped down the 500 pages in four days, and it was not an easy read. I admit ruefully that Stephenson's vocabulary is better than mine. I feel like this book demands analysis, and I don't know enough to provide it. All I could do is count heads and make remarks about the colour and gender and fate of each major character. Which, OK, is worth doing, but it's 3:42am and I've been reading since about 8pm, so forgive me if I don't open it up again just now.

I want a primer.

I also want more about Dr X and Lord Finkle-McGraw. And I want to know more about what happened to Judge Fang and his assistants, although I'll admit that this (unlike Dr X and Lord Finkle-McGraw?) is outside the scope of the story. Unless I'm being stupid and this is something I'm meant to figure out for myself.

There are things in here that you won't get unless you know stuff about science, about computer science (the entire Handbook subplot from Castle Turing to the end is a potted history of computing,) about linguistics, for that matter. This is not a book for someone who can't figure out that 'ractive' is etymologically derived from 'interactive'. And it's driving me a little crazy that I can't work out the root of 'thete'. I only got 'phyle' = phylum right this second.

And I want a chevaline. Like, even more than I want a pony, though not as much as I want a primer.

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### **Felicia says**

This has been on my shelf a while, I think a friend sent it to me. I have to admit, this is a dense read sometimes in the way that hard sci-fi can be: Glazing over at "tech speak tech speak tech speak." If you fall off the tech-speak train you start to glaze over a bit and get confused, or at least I do. I'm sure all the technology is masterfully crafted and is visionary, I just couldn't 100% follow it. It's like sometimes authors TRY to be obscure in their writing in order to be "highbrow" to rise about the genre or something.

That said, something about this book REALLY gripped me, I definitely was drawn into the character of Nell, and even though the society and tech confused me a bit, I just skimmed forward a bit and got right on track. Her character was beautifully realized and very emotional. I can't say why it was so riveting, it just was.

The end of the book felt a bit rushed to me, considering the pace of the book previous, but this is certainly a deeply realized and profound book. I feel that one day I'll read it again and "get" more of the nanotechnology parts. I would love to read another book in this universe and about Nell considering how much work I put into absorbing it all! Highly recommended.

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## **Sam Julian says**

### **Visionary but flawed**

The end felt rushed, and the notion of ethnic phyles frustratingly backward from our present perspective. Worth reading for his vision of the nanotech future.

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## **Carol. says**

Initially, I wasn't tempted by "The Diamond Age," but the subtitle drew me in. A book advising young women? Interesting. However, given a choice between this book and the classic young women's story, Little Women, I think I'll go with *Little Women*. At least none of the girls are raped.

*The Diamond Age, Or a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* was an interesting, convoluted, frustrating book packed with ideas, characters and too little plot. I suspect Stephenson of being in love with his ideas and would suggest a firmer hand on the editorial wheel. Far too many details on nanobots, too few details on characters. Hard to put down when I was reading, and equally hard to pick up later. It was eligible for a re-read--or at least a re-listen, as I'm told the narrated version is quite enjoyable--until the rape and the narrative mish-mash at the end.

The story revolves around Nell, a young girl living with an older brother, her mother and her mother's series of boyfriends, and John Percival Hackworth, creator of The Young Lady's Illustrated Primer. There's a story-within-a-story plot of Nell reading the interactive Primer and experiencing the fairy-tale like story within. A host of other characters are involved, including a minor thug who briefly dates Nell's mom; her brother Harv; Hackworth's patron, Lord Finkle-McGraw; Miranda, the actress who reads the Primer; Constable Moore, war veteran and her guardian of sorts; Dr. X, a mysterious character who wants the Primer for unknown reasons; Miranda's boss, Carl Hollywood; Hackworth's daughter and a few others. It's also worth noting that despite being A Young Lady's Primer, it almost completely fails the Bechdel test. Because, you know: it is not just about the Young Lady; it is also about the creator of the book and Stephenson's technology.

When it comes to characters, Stephenson quickly creates a feeling of depth in some. One of my favorites was Judge Fang, with his New York accent, his adherence to Confucius principles, and his willingness to follow the path of ethics over the path of law. It reminded me very strongly of Master Li in Bridge of Birds. Sadly, we lose track of the Judge. Likewise, while the Miranda story was engaging and we get a glimpse of her emotions at a particular time of life, she disappears for the last third of the book. While both characters tied in quite nicely with the story of the Primer and Nell, the story of other parts of the Primer took precedence.

### **Spoilers below, naturally, because how else can I talk about this mess?**

Narrative. Sigh, what can I say? The story-within-story technique is interesting and often enjoyable for me. In this case, it gives insight into just how special this book is and how it interacts with the child and the environment to shape response. However, as Nell ages, it could have done a better job with parallels to her real life, particularly in the last half when it was teaching her about the '12 keys,' which I think meant learning coding techniques. I found myself raising an eyebrow once or twice. Would a Victorian primer really have encouraged a child to stab someone? Sure, it may have been a sign of the book not quite working--or it may have been a sign of Stephenson taking the story where he needed it to go. I'm betting the

latter.

It was a relatively coherent story up until about page 250 when the plot loses any sense of caring about characterization and moves characters around to get to where Stephenson needs them to make his ultimate thematic point. Hackforth ends up in a Drummer society, where much like entering Fairyland, he has aged ten years when he emerges around page 293... and then things really turn bizarre and dreamlike. Miranda decides to look for Nell and disappears from the narrative after accepting an engagement with two shady characters. Hackforth's daughter appears for a bizarre live-action ractive performed on a ship. Nell suddenly decides to leave the Victorian society and set off for China, although we aren't sure why, and ends up in a sado-maochism brothel. It was a mess and only sheer stubbornness kept me reading. When Nell is captured and raped by the Fists of Righteous Harmony it catapulted me out of bored confusion into rage. What. The. Hell. Unacceptable, but *thanks*, Stephenson, for making sure the *A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* reinforces women as rape targets, because we wouldn't want to think we've moved beyond it as a plot device. Oh--and then he provided a capstone with a potential rape, saved for the last two pages.

I have an entire ranty post about the use of rape in stories and believe it was completely unnecessary here. To then call this book "*A Young Lady's Primer*" is insulting and makes any empowerment themes hollow. You know what else I realized? Nell has very few interactions with women in this book. With the exception of Nell, women are pawns or dependents. Except for the Vicky classroom, there no scenes of females interacting with females. Because apparently the message of "*A Young Lady's Primer*" is it's a man's world and women get to live in it.

You know what this book most reminded me of? That mildly drunk guy at a party who seems kind of interesting and charismatic, even though he can't keep his chain of thought straight, but who turns out to be a total asshole after he realizes he's not getting laid.

Three and a half stars for the first 250 pages, two stars for the rest and negative forty stars for the end. Stick with *Little Women*.

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### **Dave says**

First half of the book gets 4 stars; the second half gets 2 stars. Average = 3 stars.

I really liked the first half of the book. His description of technology is wonderful, and the relationship between Nell and the Primer are quite captivating. Much to my dismay, the book fell apart at the end. Characters are disposed quite expediently, conflict is introduced with little or no explanation, very illogical events occur, and then the book stops. If I could give different ratings to both half of the books, I would.

The whole book is laced with tangents which I found to be rather dull. I cared very little for Hackworth's mission after he created the Primer. I cared very little for what Dr. X was attempting to do with the Primer. In the first half of the book, Nell captures most of the focus, which makes these other aspects simply minor annoyances.

In the end, I found the book to be enjoyable. Although, if I knew then what I know now, I would have stopped reading as soon as the book started to go downhill. My opinion of Stephenson would have been much higher, and I would have saved myself some time and effort of finishing.

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## Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

3.5 stars. Review originally posted at [www.fantasyliterature.com](http://www.fantasyliterature.com).

Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* is set in a near future that is unrecognizable in some ways and disturbingly familiar in other ways. Nations have dissolved and people now tend to congregate in tribes or "phyles" based upon their culture, race, beliefs or skills. Nanotechnology has upended society, and even the poorest people have access to matter compilers that create clothing, food and other items from a feed of molecules. Still, the lack of education and opportunities for the underclass has created a wide division between them and a wealthy phyle like the Neo-Victorians, who have adopted the manners and society of the British Victorian age.

John Hackworth is a brilliant nanotechnologist who lives with and works for the neo-Victorians. He is approached by one of the leaders of the clan, Lord Finkle-McGraw, to secretly create an interactive smart book for Finkle-McGraw's young granddaughter. Lord Finkle-McGraw fears that the neo-Victorian society is too hidebound and commissions Hackworth to use his skills to create a children's book that will develop a more educated and inquiring mind. Hackworth develops this book, the "Young Lady's Illustrated Primer," but can't resist the temptation to (illegally) create a copy of it for his own young daughter.

Unfortunately for Hackworth, Dr. X, the Chinese black market engineer whose compiler Hackworth used to create the copy of the Primer, wants a copy of the book for his own purposes as well. Hackworth is mugged on his way home with the Primer by a gang under Dr. X's direction, but the young thug who grabs the book gives it to his 4-year-old sister Nell rather than to Dr. X. The education Nell gets from the interactive Primer ends up changing her life drastically. While Nell's life is benefited immeasurably by the Primer, Hackworth runs into serious trouble, caught between the pressures exerted by both Lord Finkle-McGraw and Dr. X, both of whom are aware of his crime and both of whom are using Hackworth for their own interests and goals.

The first half of *The Diamond Age* was fascinating, alternating between Hackworth's adventures and Nell's, interspersed with stories told to Nell by the Primer that pull from Nell's own life (her stuffed animals and toys play a major teaching role in the stories) and encourage her to think in new ways. Stephenson has created an intricate and marvelous future world, with both amazing achievements and alarming pitfalls. Stephenson's writing doesn't coddle the reader, but he writes so well that even when his future world is confusing, it's still entrancing.

At about the halfway mark, the plot weakens as it digresses to some new, less appealing plot lines (the Drummers, who create a subconscious hive mind through sexual orgies) and abandons some interesting characters and plots, such as the humorous but ruthless Judge Fang and his assistants, and the mysterious, powerful CryptNet organization.

The ending of *The Diamond Age* was even weaker, as yet another group, the Chinese Fists of Righteous Harmony, takes center stage and reenacts the Boxer Rebellion, putting Nell and other characters in grave danger. Then the novel abruptly ends, answering a few questions but leaving most of the threads hanging and the fate of the characters unclear. It's an inconclusive and disappointing ending.

Overall, despite its weaknesses, *The Diamond Age* is still a worthwhile read for those who appreciate brain-challenging science fiction.

5 stars for the first half. 2 to 2 1/2 stars for the second half. 3.5 stars overall.

Content advisory: rape and near-rape. Some rough language in parts, including F-bombs. Brief but explicit description of an orgy.

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### **Ken-ichi says**

Welcome to Stephensonland! Wait, sir? Sir? Yes you. I'm afraid you'll have to check your need for believable characters with me. Here's a numerical token you can use to reclaim it at the end of the day. Oh, and hold on. Is that an expectation of coherent plotting in your back pocket? I'm afraid those are also disallowed in Stephensonland. It'll be perfectly safe here behind the counter. Now, here's your complementary CS patch. That's right, it's very similar, except instead of nicotine, this will imbue you with knowledge equivalent to a bachelor's degree in computer science. Certain parts of your experience will be much funnier if you wear it, while others will be unspeakably boring if you don't. Ok, you're all set. You're going to have a great time.

Sometimes I feel like part of the joy of reading Neal Stephenson is the point at which you realize all the characters are a bit robotic and the absurdly numerous plot lines will never be resolved and the book occasionally reads like a particularly entertaining text book and that none of these things are stopping you from loving every word. This book ties together a pretty conventional cyberpunk-ish near-future street world with a Victorian world of manners and concomitant awkwardness with Confucianism with fairy tales with crazy underwater tube-dwelling hypnotized sex fiends in ways that seem almost plausible! Also, mechanical horses and Stetson hats! Yes!

It amuses me that in addition to being a CS nerd Stephenson likes a bit of a mysticism. Human brains can magically find patterns in data that computers cannot? Really, Neal? I seem to recall Anathem was a bit like this as well, and that book was even dorkier

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### **Lyn says**

If Charles Dickens climbed in an H.G. Wells time machine and went forward in time and he decided to create a post cyber-punk, progressively dystopian bildungsroman novel with a strong female lead and with a fascinating glimpse of a future that expands on the world begun in Snow Crash, he would have written this novel.

This is Great Expectations with nanotechnology.

The Diamond Age by Neal Stephenson is to post-modernist science fiction thought as what Dickens was to his era: a smart, entertaining and groundbreaking new literature. In this work I also see the inspiration for such books as Ernest Cline's Ready Player One and Paolo Bacigalupi's The Windup Girl. In fact I think a study could be made to determine how many works Stephenson may have influenced from this remarkable 1995 publication that won both the Hugo and Locus award for best novel.

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## Clouds says

**Christmas 2010: I realised that I had got stuck in a rut. I was re-reading old favourites again and again, waiting for a few trusted authors to release new works. Something had to be done.**

**On the spur of the moment I set myself a challenge, to read every book to have won the Locus Sci-Fi award. That's 35 books, 6 of which I'd previously read, leaving 29 titles by 14 authors who were new to me.**

**While working through this reading list I got married, went on my honeymoon, switched career and became a father. As such these stories became imprinted on my memory as the soundtrack to the happiest period in my life (so far).**

Not long after starting my Locus Quest, I crossed paths with a fascinating purple brick of a book, by the name of *Anathem* . We hit it off – spent many happy hours together – and I sealed our love affair by naming a kitten after *Anathem* 's protagonist, Erasmus.

Then along came *Cryptonomicon* – a different kind of beast. Initially, I was less convinced; where is the sci-fi element? But that fat historical war novel grew on me slowly (and as it was so long it had plenty of time to work its magic) so I found myself a fan by the end.

Third (but by no means final) Stephenson to step up to the plate is the steampunk-nanotech extraordinaire, *The Diamond Age* . Weighing in at a dinky 500 pages compared to its heavyweight kin, *The Diamond Age* hits the ground running and had me grinning from the get-go.

There's no point bushing-around-the-beat, it's time to put-my-table-on-the-cards and wear-my-sleeve-on-my-heart: I *loved* this book! As with *Anathem* , this book deserves a sixth star from me. It makes me want to downgrade other books to 4-star just to make it stand out further.

*Anathem* is a book with substance – the kind of girl your grandmother calls a ‘keeper’.

*The Diamond Age* is a book with flair – the kind of girl your grandmother calls a ‘bad influence’.

What your Grandmother isn't telling you, is that sometimes ‘bad influences’ grow up to be ‘keepers’. The same soul runs through these books, but *Anathem* is just a little older and wiser – *The Diamond Age* more naive and impulsive.

You can easily find a list of major characters in this book – Nell, the Hackworths, the Finkle-McGraws, Judge Fang, Miranda – but odds-on they won't mention the star of the show: The Primer. Oh, the Primer! Oh, sweet bejesus, the Primer! I wish I had a Primer as a child. I wish I had a Primer now, to give to my son. The Primer is perfect. It's like a fully formed idea you were already aware of, that hadn't been articulated yet. It was on the tip of my tongue – now I know what it's called: the Primer! The Primer is perfect. It is what everyone who's banged their head on the desk through educational software wishes it was, and then some.

I could read a whole encyclopaedia about Nell's lessons with the Primer – then go back in time, finish my AI design degree and devote my life to making the Primer a reality. Everything else in this book is window dressing (fascinating, imaginative, playful, funny, adventurous and evocative window dressing, for sure).

A lot of people get frustrated by the second half of the book and the ending. I am apparently in the minority. When Nell's (view spoiler) her I wanted to jump up and down on the bed. I told my wife about it in rushed, excited, babbling sentences which made her stare at me funny and pat me on the head.

And the drummers? Yes – the drummers are silly. But so was Bud's skull gun back at the start. Remember how I said this book was playful and funny in places? Yeah – the drummers are part of that. Drummer orgy?! It's a nice counterpoint to the Vicky ethos.

Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buuzzzzzzzz!

What's that noise?

*The Diamond Age* pushing my buttons.

Locus Sci-Fi and Hugo joint winner from '96.

BUZZZZZZZZ!

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## Gabrielle says

“A book is not just a material possession but the pathway to an enlightened mind, and thence to a well-ordered society.”

After an underwhelming experience with « Snow Crash » (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), I decided to give Neal Stephenson a second (and possibly final) chance with “The Diamond Age”. I have come to accept that some sci-fi writers are idea guys (or gals), and that amazing ideas don't necessarily yield amazing books, and that's OK. And the idea of what is basically a Dickens story-line in a cyberpunk universe is nothing if not interesting! I was also curious to see what Stephenson would do with a female lead, because his female characters in “Snow Crash” were kind of awful...

Nell's life begins like something you'd expect from a character in “David Copperfield”: her father is a petty criminal convicted and executed for assault, so she is raised by her neglectful mother Tequila and older brother Harv. They live in the Neo-Victorian society, near a Shanghai that belongs to the British Commonwealth. She accidentally gets her hand on a unique book, the “Young Lady's Illustrated Primer”. This book was created by this society's very best engineer, as a secret project commissioned by a high-ranking lord, who meant it for his grand-daughter so that she could lead what he describes as an “interesting life” – meaning a life lived on one's own term and not on those dictated by one's society. Naturally, this work was never meant to fall into the hands of a poor young girl from the slums... In parallel, we have the story of Mr. Hackworth, the creator of the “Young Lady's Illustrated Primer”, who wants a better life for his own daughter: he understands that the class struggle is a very real problem that few people can hope to transcend, and he finds it his duty as a father to equip his daughter as best as he can, even if that means doing something not-quite-legal... The smaller story-lines of Judge Fang, the magistrate who gets tangled in Hackworth's case, and Miranda, the voice of the Primer, make the book a rich and multifaceted story.

I really enjoyed the format, but then I am an absolute sucker for Victoriana – with or without nanobots! The prose also had an elegance that simply wasn't there in “Snow Crash”; maybe Stephenson was trying to emulate the stylistic touches of 19th century literature, but whatever he was trying to do, it worked! The world building is vivid and complex, the globalization, social and cultural structures are fascinating - and while the technological aspects can sometimes feel confusing and under-explained (I could understand a decent amount of techno-babble, but some things definitely went over my head), the story and good pacing

were strong enough to carry me through those frustrating bits.

As someone who has no greater treasure (and has never known a greater refuge) than my pile of beloved books, the concept of a pseudo-intelligent book being Nell's best friend definitely resonated deeply. The Primer is every bookworm's dream; a story that takes care of the reader, teaches them, nurtures them and helps them grow. With its help, Nell learns how to deal with bullies, her mother's violent boyfriends and learns many skills that will come in very handy in the real world; the Primer become the parent she never had... Perhaps "Snow Crash" struck a stronger chord with gamers, while "The Diamond Age" does a better job of reaching the readers? In any case, I found myself eager to get back to the book at every chance I got!

I read somewhere that Stephenson meant this book as reflection on the effects of technology on child development: it was originally published in 1995, so Heaven knows if that can still have the same meaning as intended back then... My interpretation is more that this is a story about how books can shape someone's character, turn them into resourceful, critical thinking and unique individuals, but I'm obviously biased.

So congratulations Neal: you have redeemed yourself in my eyes with this great book! Even if Hackworth's story-line and the ending get kind of weird, I enjoyed this book so much I can't give it less than 4 and a half stars rounded up!

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### **J. says**

Up to about halfway through, I was in love with this book, but then Hackworth goes to the Drummers and we skip 10 years, and my thoughts are like this: if you as a writer didn't care about those 10 years enough to write about them, why do I care enough to read them? Worse, science fiction is already more concerned with the ideas than the characters, but when the writer is consciously trying to mimic the further-removed-from-reality discourses of Victorian-era writing, we wind up so distanced from character that honestly? I powered through the last 100 pages more out of feeling of obligation than honest interest in the novel. Then there's the ending. The last 50 pages or so make zero sense given the rest of the novel, and the ending itself seems more like just a stop rather than an ending.

So, if you're considering this novel because you loved "Snow Crash" (which was mindblowingly good), skip it, instead. The last 250 pages don't deliver on the fantastic promise that the first 250 showed.

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