Alex Groce (agroce@gmail.com), Northern Arizona University

In every larger-scale endeavor, or at least in *most* larger-scale endeavors, there comes a time to evaluate progress, solicit opinion, ask your public, survey your customers -- in short, to find out if what you are doing is actually worth doing. In some cases, this step may be omitted, or the results ignored: it is possible that if Herman Melville had shown people *Moby Dick* when he was half-done with it, everyone except Nathaniel Hawthorne would have said "Er, we're not sure what this is all about. Where's the nice adventure of *Omoo*? Just what are you up to, Sir?" He should not have therefore ditched the manuscript and gone on to something else; also, Nathaniel Hawthorne gets 50,000 votes. However, in general, you (and I) are not Melville writing *Moby Dick*. Scientific projects tend to publish some papers before they are "complete" and if these are universally derided and rejected, or receive no citations, it is often the case that they are doing nothing of much interest. There are exceptions, but they are rarer, perhaps, than we might think. Most things that are ignored are ignored for a good reason.

This month, *Passages* is taking that time to reflect. This is the 25th *Passages* column, and *Passages* wants your opinion. First, do you read *Passages*? If not, never mind. Second, if you do read *Passages*, which book review was your favorite? Third, which was your least favorite? Finally, do you have a book you would like to nominate for a *Passages* review? Please send your suggestions to agroce@gmail.com with the subject "PASSAGES COLUMN FEEDBACK" and I will review another book (possibly a reader-nominated one) and summarize the results in the next *Passages* column.

With that out of the way, I feel a bit cheap not actually reviewing a book for *Passages*, so as a holiday bonus, here is a very brief review:

The UNIX-Haters Handbook, edited by Simson Garfinkel, Daniel Weise, and Steven Strassman is a rarity in computer science: a book that is funny. For professors dismayed that school is back in session, for developers returning to "burnt out" now that their long winter vacation (if they got one) is becoming a distant memory, for grad students dismayed that their professors returned from holiday break, this book is a welcome amusement. It is also mean, unfair, and out of date. It's a software engineering classic not because you should hate UNIX, but because it is, at heart, a book about design with an eye on usability (the preface is by Donald Norman; the anti-preface is by Dennis Ritchie) that is of interest to people who don't really "do" user interfaces for normal people. The "nuts and bolts" tool developer seldom gets to read a book that is focused on how nuts and bolts can be broken, misleading, badly done, or amusingly cruel. This book lets you read that, and is often almost as enjoyable a way to think about systems programming and the comedic-horror side of software engineering as a James Mickens USENIX column.

The sections of the book are a primer on ways a *system* (not one used by lowly end users, but even only by "experts") can go wrong. The subtitles tell the story, in part: "Like Russian Roulette with Six Bullets Loaded," "What Documentation?," "How to Make a 50-MIPS

Workstation Run Like a 4.77MHz IBM PC," "Power Tools for Power Fools," "The COBOL of the 90s," "Oh, I'm Sorry Sir, Go Ahead, I Didn't Realize You Were Root," and "Sure It Corrupts Your Files, But Look How Fast It Is!" This is a book that is mostly about insulting perhaps, the most successful system design of all time, and the primary purpose, from the modern reader's point of view, will be that a good time was had by all (except these people using UNIX and hating it). But after having laughed at this book, or argued with it in your head if, like me, you actually like UNIX, you will hesitate before making design decisions like expanding wildcards at the shell without the underlying program being able to see the actual inputs, or in fact making a language as horrifying as shell scripts, or making it quite so easy to *rm* away the world.