

Perl for Oracle DBAs
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Publisher: O'Reilly & Associates
ISBN: 0-596-00210-6

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January 2004

The greatest problem when automating the world of Oracle database management and monitoring is finding the time to build the tools. If you're like me, you spend your few idle minutes of the day thinking "Next time I have a spare moment, I'll write a little utility to make this job easier". Well you can stop day dreaming – the reality has arrived.

A wealth of ready-for-use tools are served up for your pleasure in O'Reilly's most recent Oracle tome – Perl for Oracle DBAs. The authors, Andy Duncan and Jared Still, deliver a smorgasboard of tools and utilities developed with and around Perl, providing relief for the distraught DBA – and a good dose of humour to boot!

As is normal with O'Reilly books, the topic is split into digestible parts; in this instance, three in logical sequence. While each part could be read in isolation, the easy flow of the sections will aid Perl novices.

Part one gives the now-ubiquitous but enjoyable biography of Perl, its development by Larry Wall, and the growth and dynamism it has embodied. After a brief synopsis of Perl's merits, a discussion of the main Perl-to-database connectivity layer – the Perl DBI – follows, illustrating how Perl connects to, and works with, Oracle and other databases. The pace quickens, with a thorough step-by-step approach to sourcing and installing Perl as the foundation for the later parts.

Andy and Jared deserve credit for handling this task well. No assumptions are made regarding "preferred" environments, and no shortcuts are taken. Instead, detailed advice is given for obtaining and deploying Perl source and binaries under Unix, Linux, Windows and Cygwin environments. This includes an introduction to the Comprehensive Perl Archive Network – CPAN, and the ppm facility under Windows. Regardless of your chosen platform, you'll find the clear, concise approach to the "download; unzip; make; install" discipline takes any ambiguity out of the process.

It's hard to do justice to the second part of the book in a short review. It provides an introduction to no less than eight fully function Perl suites providing various Oracle management features. These include well-known apps like Senora and Orac, to tools that have wider application than just Oracle database management, like DBD::Chart.

The book then takes a slight tangent that at first sight looks distracting, discussing web extensions for Perl; in particular Apache's mod_perl as the in-process Perl interpreter, and its advantages over CGI. Had I not been so eager to devour the book's content, I would have noted that this was a necessary entree to the joys of Oracle's PL/SQL web toolkit, and the advantages of embedding Perl into web pages for Oracle management using Embperl and Mason – covered in the latter half of Part two. Before moving on to the final part, we are exposed to the relatively new Perl module, Oracle::OCI, which provides a low-level one-to-one wrapping of Oracle's native Oracle Call Interface in Perl.

My only criticism of the book is that I would have liked more detail on some of these tools. That may be a little harsh, as I'm sure the sub-editors were keeping a tight rein on a book that already runs to 600 pages.

Part three is the perfect culmination of the earlier parts' build-up. We are introduced to the Perl DBA toolkit – PDBA – which in the author's own words is

“... a set of Perl scripts and reusable modules that we've developed to help Oracle DBAs perform both routine database administration tasks and more advanced monitoring and tuning.”

As active members of the Oracle DBA community (and in Jared's case, moderator of the influential Oracle-L mailing list), the authors' are at the leading edge of contemporary management ideas for Oracle databases, and they have selflessly donated what amounts to an excellent management framework to their peers in releasing PDBA.

Ever worried at night about the fact cron or at jobs are running important batch and housekeeping work, but with passwords accessible to the wily hacker? Then the PDBA password server is for you. If you've had the the joy of dealing with users questioning why you can't just add 3000 user accounts by the end of the day, you'll love the create_user modules. Plenty of other pet DBA hates are covered: Tablespace free space and extent monitoring; Dead connection detection and clean-up; even a monitor to watch the other monitors! The book is rounded out with a handy collection of appendices covering Perl, the Perl DBI, regular expressions and Perl data munging.

In short, O'Reilly's Perl for Oracle DBAs is a great asset for any DBA looking to get on with the job – both Perl novices and old hands.