

# The R3F

## Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

**NOVELS**

**LITERARY CRITICISM**

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# Editorial

Welcome to this, the first issue of the N3F Review of Books. The Review would not have been possible without the generous literary support of Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Tamara Wilhite, Robert Runte, and Heath Row. We are entirely open to additional reviewers for future issues.

This journal is the joint project of The N3F Book Review Bureau, the N3F Pro Bureau, and the N3F Writers Exchange Bureau. Our objective is to provide all of fandom with a new and valuable resource: Well-written reviews of scientific novels, science fiction being broadly defined to include science fiction, fantasy, horror, the occult, and fairy tales. Recent books and elderly tomes are in our remit.

As a completely separate section, the Review will cover works of literary criticism that are related to fantasy and science fiction.

Finally, Prose Bono will publish articles on writing, illustrating, and marketing sf books.

What are the features of a good review?

First, a good review is respectably long. A review that covers two or three Review pages is appropriate. Very short reviews will often be better sent to N3F Tightbeam for its consideration.

Second, a good review makes clear which points of the book being reviewed are good or bad, and why readers might or might not like the work in question.

Third, a good review tells the reader something of what the book is about, without being a complete spoiler. Consider as a hypothetical: “This is a novel about superheroes, their personalities and desires. It is not a superhero combat novel, in which megaviolence is continuous from opening to closing. There is combat, on stage, but individual battles do not extend for chapter after chapter.”

*Finally, a good review, nay, an acceptable review, is about the book, not about the author’s political opinions.* Political discussions in these sad times oft become exceedingly heated. We do not want to publish those here. It is sometimes useful to mention the author’s thinking, when that informs the review, e.g. “Dr. Phenackbertian is a champion of Third Amendment Repeal. This volume is in part a political tract espousing the good doctor’s beliefs by showing alleged positive consequences of repeal,” That would be fine. “Phenackbertian is a raving lunatic plotting to ensure the Monagasque conquest of the United States,” is about the good doctor, not about his book, even if the claim is true.



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## Promise of Blood by Brian McClellan

Review by Heath Row

Having read Brandon Sanderson's *The Bands of Mourning* not too long before reading this, I was struck by the similarities between Sanderson's 2016 *Mistborn* spinoff novel (*Mistborn: The Final Empire* was published in 2006) and McClellan's first novel, *Promise of Blood*, published in 2013. There were similarities in terms of substance and style, and I primarily recognized parallels between Sanderson's geomancy—a system of magic involving elements such as earth and wind—and McClellan's powder magic, in which gunpowder is consumed—much like snuff or, say, cocaine—to tap into supernatural powers.

The similarities were, if not by design, a natural outgrowth of the relationship and friendship between both writers. A fan of Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* high fantasy novels, McClellan attended Brigham Young University, where he majored in English focusing on creative writing—and took writing classes with Sanderson. (McClellan also went to Orson Scott Card's *Literary Bootcamp* and earned an honorable mention in the *Writers of the Future* contest.) While at Brigham Young, McClellan took Sanderson's class three times and audited it a fourth time. "He was kind enough to let me sit in and take advantage of the writing groups, and not get annoyed when I missed a lecture," McClellan reminisced in a 2013 guest post on *Rob's Blog o' Stuff*. "He let me tag along at a couple of conventions, where he introduced me to both his editor and his agent."

So what we have here is a novel written by a devotee and mentee of Sanderson—that reads much like a novel written by Sanderson. That's not entirely a bad thing, though there are sections that read more like pastiche than prose, and McClellan clearly wears his authorial fan's heart on his sleeve. This novel might be particularly well suited for Sanderson fans.

The story is as follows: During a brutal coup eliminating a monarchy, Field Marshal Tamas kills every member of the Royal Cabal. He enlists a former police inspector turned private investigator, Adamat, to unravel the secret of each cabalist's dying words—the same mysterious phrase about the return of an absent god—while he struggles to purge the remaining nobility and maintain peace at the verge of civil war. A particularly powerful cabalist escaped death in the coup, and Tamas instructs his son Taniel—a powder mage—to bring them to justice.

Other than the resonant Sanderson influence, my primary criticism is that many of the novel's descriptions and scene-establishing prose read like descriptions of what you would see in a movie. That doesn't necessarily mean that McClellan's work is cinematic in scope, but that, at least to this reader, his portrayals of place focus on the surface rather than a character's sense or interpretation of their surroundings. Many of the descriptions aren't overly functional and therefore seem extraneous. That proves particularly problematic in sections involving events of larger scale and scope, such as... oh, the return of a god. What could have been awe inspiring comes off at human scale at a distance, and is thereby diminished in impact.

Regardless, the mystery Taniel sets out to solve, the unfolding action and adventure that ensues, and the use of black powder as a material component for magic enmesh to work well narratively in the end. I was particularly intrigued by the addictive nature of powder, as well as the lingering physical, mental, and emotional effects of prolonged use by the powder mages. Occasionally, Taniel seems ripe for an intervention, and I hope that future books in the series—there are two more in the trilogy—explore that more fully.

## Wielder: The Betrayal by David Gosnell

Review by Jim McCoy

As a reader I always, always always give a book a hundred and fifty pages to get me hooked, especially if it's the first in the series. Well, except for *Twilight*. That got one hundred and forty and when I started praying for the next ten pages to go quickly, I gave up. True story. At any rate, sometimes I really am happy that I did. Sometimes, I'm not. This time, I'm ecstatic that I did (and it only took about fifty) because it took a minute for David Gosnell's *The Wielder: Betrayal* to really take off but once it did, I was massively impressed. This book was a lot of fun. I'll get into the whys and wherefores in a minute, but I really enjoyed it. Gosnell can write.

The most important part of any book is the characters, and this is where Gosnell really delivers. His main character, Arthur MacInerney goes through a character arc that is unlike anything I've seen before. His constant companions, who are literally demons that he is able to summon using tattoos given him as the result of a chance encounter, are not only believable they are entertaining. I can't quite wrap my head around the way that Gosnell managed to take demons and turn them into people. His demons (or Arthur's depending on how you view them) feel real. I can almost see myself sitting down for dinner with one of them or having Hjuul, the dog-like one, fall asleep at my feet.

Not all of the characters are friendly of course, and Gosnell does a good job of making Arthur's enemies believable. He even manages to straddle the line with some of the enemies actually being the good guys. I don't want to give too much away here but there is definitely a time when Arthur finds out that things are not what they seem and that he needs to trust the people that he thought were out to get him. The fact that this makes sense to the audience is a compliment to Mr Gosnell and his ability to build a three-dimensional universe. When one of the good guys..err... girls spit in Arthur's face I didn't hate her for it. It made sense for the character and Arthur had it coming. Of course, sometimes the bad guys are just bad.

Maldgorath is our main antagonist, pure evil type. This story really is an epic fantasy masquerading as an urban fantasy, and we need that pure evil villain. What makes Maldy work, though, is that he's not just evil for evil's sake. He doesn't kick puppies just because he can. Dude is evil because he is obsessed. He is a collector of beings. He enslaves things not for the work they do, but for the sheer joy of doing so. He really is a sick, twisted sadist. He enjoys toying with the beings he has acquired but what collector doesn't enjoy playing with his toys?

The action sequences in the book are both well done and integral to the plot. I found myself wincing at all of the appropriate moments, cheering when I was supposed to and basically just caring about what happened. It was more than just that though. When Arthur stalks a man through a building, I'm right there along with him. It feels immediate as does the following battle. When a fight erupts in a parking lot I find myself wanting to be in there swinging. Some parts of this book felt almost cinematic because of the way I could see them playing out in my head.

I'm going to guess that Gosnell has done some gaming. Not only does Arthur feel like Warlock from World of Warcraft at times, but some of the demons he uses feel similar to the demons in WoW. A couple of the fight scenes have the feel of a Battleground from WoW too. I don't know if Gosnell plays for sure, but I'd be surprised if he didn't. (And David, if you see this and you do play, hit me up in game. I'm AKA Capellini, Undead Lock on Nesingwary. My guild is Harmonious Death and we're always recruiting.) That's okay though. What he wrote makes sense whether you've played the games or not,

but parts of it added to my enjoyment. Ok, seeing Arthur go from warlock one minute to priest the next was a little weird but it's all good. I enjoyed it and seeing the enemy react in an appropriate manner made me smile.

This book goes through some major twists. It would be easy to get whiplash if they didn't make so much sense. Gosnell does a good job of getting us ready for what's coming without letting us know what's coming. I don't know if I said that quite right, but what I meant is that he foreshadows things well without telegraphing his next move. There were a few times where I just didn't see what was coming but once it happened it made sense to me. This is something I struggle with in my own writing, but Gosnell does it well. I'll have to go back through this book and see if I can break down how he did it.

It's true that this was not a perfect book. The first fifty pages just drag. I mean, I know it's the first book in a series and sometimes things take a minute to set up, but damn. The book starts at a funeral and waltzes in it. Granted, the funeral sets up the rest of the book but things just kind of wander with no real sense of what's going on until something terrible happens and we're off and running. Once things do get moving though they don't let up.

## **WARNING SEMI SPOILERISH CONTENT!!!**

There is also a moment near the end where Gosnell does something I've seen in a lot of games that irks me. It's when you FINALLY get to the big boss and you're beating the bejabbers out of him but he gets away and you have to hunt him down again. In games it's so you'll keep playing. In this book it's so that you'll read the rest of the series. That makes sense. Logical or not though, it's still annoying. That much being said, it was well foreshadowed and it's a cliché because it works.

**Bottom Line:** 4.25 out of 5 Tattoos

[Dragon Nominee for Best SF Novel](#)

[Record of a Spaceborn Few by Becky Chambers](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

Full disclosure: as I gathered the materials for this reviewing project, the title of this book caught my eye, and I found it very difficult to postpone reading it until yesterday. I don't know exactly WHY the title hooked me so significantly; if I understood that, I'd probably start a consulting business writing titles for books. I also found that the thumbnail pic of the author spoke to me, a bit, about a person who had fun writing a book. It seemed such a contrast to a few headshots I'd encountered lately of blustery guys with beetling brows and fierce expressions, and some glam shots of vampires; people I wouldn't ask for a lift to the next service station if I ran out of gas.

This is Book 3 in the Wayfarers series, and it shows. The background work in establishing the world has already been done; we are told exactly where in the story arc this book is found. It's my hope that those who prefer origin stories above all things can find them in the other installments in the series, but I confess that I cannot testify to that of my own experience.

There are a couple of points I found confusing, although I can't really say that they detracted from the presented story in any major way. The primary confusion I had was this: we have a huge exodus of humans from a worn-out planet Earth; they have spent generations in space on their voyage. The depar-

ture from Earth is referenced in a ritual followed by those who live on the ships:

We left the ground behind. We left the oceans. We left the air. We watched these things grow small. We watched them shrink into a point of light.

This, I understand; I've read unknown stories of giant habitat-ships among the stars. What I DON'T understand is the mechanism by which the Exodans (for so they are called) maintain contact with remaining humans on Earth, on Mars, and living in other artificial environments in the Solar system.

The other issues are more trivial. I understand that there are two primary languages spoken by humans, Ensk and Klip, and that Ensk is primarily Terran in origin, while Klip is Galactic, but I wasn't able to determine how the mix began. It's easy to pick up, and is, in fact, a central story point, that humans are significantly limited in their technological prowess. It SEEMS that they gained almost all of the essential technology currently in use as a gift from more advanced species, but the nature of the technology transfer is undefined. And the ability of humans to adapt easily to different gravities (okay, accelerations!) isn't addressed. As I said, though, these are trivial.

There is one respect in which they MIGHT matter, though, and I don't have enough evidence from this single exposure to know whether it applies. With the exception of a tiny area of science fiction literature, that dealing with the intrusion of a new technology on current society, it's accepted that you can violate any ONE aspect of reality with no penalty whatsoever. That's usually some form of hyperspace, but it can vary. However, given that single violation, anything else has to be explained, or at least justified. It's all a matter of acceptable limits. Within the context of "Record of a Spaceborn Few," I don't know how many of the technological marvels have been properly introduced. I'm inclined to give the benefit of the doubt, as technology transfer is a significant part of the storyline. However, if it's ALL handwavium, or even if it's ALIEN handwavium, then: ouch.

This is a mere quibble.

The book delivers EXACTLY what the title promises. These are the personal stories of a few individuals, told over the span of a few years. I'm not really good at paying attention to chapter headings (actually, I'm very bad at it). However, the kind author provided a subtle clue about which character's POV was going to be represented in each section, via the esoteric method of TELLING US THE NAME! (Yes, I am slow to catch on.)

The protagonists are Tessa, a materials handler and young (almost single) mother of two; Isabel, a keeper of the archives of the Exodans, and administrator of rituals; Sawyer, a young adult, orphaned on a planet, who enters life aboard the Fleet; Kip, a ship-board teen who has to fight the coming-of-age crisis in an environment he finds unreasonably limiting; Eyas, a Caretaker, the high-status professional who manages the funeral rites of the ship, including preparing the bodies of the deceased into compost, which is then returned to the soil which grows the oxygen-providing plants. Each one is surrounded by a rich community, and it's in the interaction of these with the primaries that we really understand the tensions experienced by the humans who have fled Earth.

Without exception, the characters presented seemed very real to me, and likable. There was something about each character, other than Caretaker Eyas, that I could relate to, whether encroaching limitations of aging, the perils and joys of parenthood (& grand-parenthood), or the struggles Kip and Sawyer were facing in discovery of their place in the world. As for Eyas, her story was told with such beauty and power that I didn't feel a need to recognize myself in her.

And now we come to the question: is this book a real contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for the Best Science Fiction of the Year?

I've already addressed the issue of whether or not a series novel has the same chance of winning the award as a stand-alone novel. My answer is ALMOST the same as before "I have no clue." However, in this case, the book in question is not the first of a series, it's the third. And, for a mid-series work to qualify for Best Science Fiction Novel of the Year, I think the burden is SIGNIFICANTLY higher; it must tell an ENTIRE story, not just a part of one.

This is just my opinion, and you can take it or leave it: while "Record of A Spaceborn Few" is an excellent read, I just don't think it brings enough innovation to the table to warrant "Best of the Year" status. Too much depends on the other books in the series. This is NOT a criticism of what I found between the covers, because I really enjoyed the book. However, I don't find myself highly motivated to interrupt my sleep to read the other installments in the series, and frankly, I think that's exactly what a mid-series nomination for Best SF of the Year ought to do.

Having said that, it was an excellent read, and I recommend it.

[Dragon Nominee for Best Novel](#)

[Europe at Dawn by Dave Hutchinson](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

I have to talk about a novel in a series, versus a stand-alone, with respect to suitability for a Dragon Award.

In PREVIOUS reviews, I have always found it the case that the author has provided enough background material, that the person just entering the world will find their way, no problem. And, in fact, I just went back and looked at my records. I have now read 14 of the 24 finalists for a Dragon Award, and only THREE are stand-alone novels. An additional FOUR are the first novel in a series. That means that there are SEVEN books I've read that rank anywhere from 2nd to 11th in a series. And every single one of those has been a coherent read. I didn't like every one of them, BUT, they were a coherent read.

Until now.

I began reading "Europe at Dawn" with delight. GREAT characters, GREAT telling of the story (as far as it went), and I was ENGAGED, and delighted to be reading something that wasn't utterly repulsive. The stories for each character caught my attention, and kept it, until the scene changed, and the story took up again with a different character.

What's the relationship between these characters? I'd better take some notes. So I did. And I gradually got a sinking feeling, because:

Nothing was happening. Nothing was being tied together. There was NO resolution, or even direction, in sight. And I looked at the page count, and found I was TWICE as far as I'm accustomed to give a book before realizing there is a defect. I think that's because it was written so WELL.

So, I did something I don't think I've done before: I looked to see what others said. I checked out the reviews on Goodreads, and bless their hearts, some of my fellow reviewers were kind enough to have anticipated my issue. As a part of their rave, 5-star reviews, they (more than ONE reviewer, too!) are careful to point out that this installment won't make any sense unless you read volumes 1-3.

And that's the end of THAT.

According to those who are fans of the entire series (quotes from the Goodreads reviews):

It would be a serious error of judgment to jump in any old how.

...definitely needs the prior three to follow it with any kind of authority

...the focus stays on the grand story Hutchinson's been weaving ever since Europe in Autumn.

Hutchinson dives straight in to a continuation of the previous books with little or no explanation of the people or events which have gone before.

I could go on and on with these quotes; they almost all say something like that.

I'm giving this book three stars, because the 62 pages that I read were very, very nice; I wanted more of those characters. It looks like that isn't possible, without reading Books 1-3. And I simply don't have the time.

As for The Question: Is "Europe At Dawn" a worthy contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Science Fiction?

Nope. No way. One novel, which CANNOT be appreciated on its' own, is not a winner. If you want this to win a Dragon, convince the team to offer a Best Series Award. But until they do, not for this particular book.

[Dragon Nominee for Best Novel](#)

[A Star-Wheeled Sky by Brad Torgerson](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

A comparison with Robert A. Heinlein usually results in a collapsed modern author, but Brad Torgersen does just fine, in my humble opinion. I don't make the comparison lightly; I can point to four separate profound influences on my life from Heinlein's books, from "Have Spacesuit, Will Travel" in 5th or 6th grade, to my discovery of a dog-eared copy of "Starship Troopers" in the day room of Charlie 2 at Ft Sam Houston in 1972. Perhaps, if I were found in the form of an impressionable 12 year-old lad, and someone gave me a copy of "The Chaplain's War," similar life-changing understandings would emerge, because Torgersen did two things in that book I've never seen before.

In the first place, in all the military movies and literature I consumed in my life, there was never anyone like ME, or any of my family. My grandfather took care of the mules in France. My father was a B-17 door gunner during WWII, my uncle was an aircraft mechanic in Korea, and I was a medic in Germany. It wasn't until they send my cannon-cocker son to Afghanistan, and turned him into infantry for the good of the service, that any of us who served did something that looked like what John Wayne did in all those movies. So, who is the hero of Torgersen's book? A chaplain's assistant, later turned into a



chaplain, for the good of the service.

The second thing that Torgersen did in that book was to come up with a brand new take on the Bug Eyed Monster. I can't spoil it for you, but every prior BEM was going to eat your face, OR you THOUGHT it was going to eat your face, but it turned out to be harmless and gentle and helpful. Well, that's not the nature of Torgersen's BEM, and read the book.

Here's another Heinlein tie-in: he wrote a short story called "Goldfish Bowl," in which inscrutable and undetectable aliens create giant structures that humans don't understand. The story has NO resolution, except to equate our relationship to the aliens with the relationship existing between goldfish and humans.

And, in "A Star-Wheeled Sky," inscrutable and undetectable aliens have constructed an interstellar network of passages between star systems that humans can't understand. However, as far as I can tell, there is nothing else that connects the stories in any way: just: two guys, seventy years apart, thinking about things and then writing them down.

"A Star Wheeled Sky" is set in the far future, long centuries after humans boarded arcologies and fled some impending disaster to Earth. So much time has elapsed that only the tiniest fragments of Earth history are known; not even the location of the home planet, nor the reason for the exodus. Surviving humans, separated into five factions, have settled a region of space, which they refer to as the 'Waywork,' linked together by mysterious passageways (Waypoints), which can only be opened by alien artifacts humans call "Keys." The Keys can only be operated by a select few, those with the talent to make psychic contact with them. The drain on the operators is intense, and they have to be closely monitored to prevent burnout.

We discover early on that there is an ongoing war in the Waywork, with the Nautilan faction determined to conquer all. People of the Starstate Constellar provide the primary POV characters' they are the number one enemy of Starstate Nautilan. Minor players include Starstates Yamato, Sultari, and Amethyne. Nautilan has overwhelming military superiority, however, and it seems that their goal of total conquest will be realized.

That path is completely disrupted by the unprecedented appearance of a new Waymark, with unknown resources on the other side. The structure of the book is set by the race of the competing factions of Constellar and Nautilan to secure the Waypoint, and whatever is on the other side of it/

## IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW:

1. This is book one of a new series. No idea how many are planned, but while numerous story plots are resolved, the main issue is only JUST broached.
2. These are not trivial characters, and they aren't treated trivially. Clearly, the Nautilans, with their desire to conquer and tyrannical rule, are the Bad Guys, and the Constellars are the Good Guys, but there is plenty to be ambivalent about with both sides. Some of the Good Guys die, usually heroically; some of the Bad Guys die, and it's a bit sad. One of the primary characters voices the truth that war requires good people to do bad things to other good people.
3. In my mind, this story unfolds like a path in the woods. We go down the path, and then, there is a fork! Okay, Mr. Author, let's see how you handle THIS! And .every.single.time. Torgersen pulls a ptarmigan out of his trilby. He makes this work with technical problems, story-line resolutions, and relationships between the characters.

There are MANY examples of this masterful writing, such as his explanation of why the humans stopped expanding, and a wonderfully played, throw-away few lines about current habitats, but my favorite involves an interaction between what passes for royalty, First Family heiress Garsina Oswight, and her long-time bodyguard, Elvin Axabrast. For Garsina, no image comes to mind, but maybe Natalie Portman would fit. However, for crusty Elvin, I DEFINITELY have the image of some combination of Lee Marvin and Sean Connery (the gray-haired version). They have a heart-to-heart about his past, and his loyalty, and why he has a tattoo on his hand that says, essentially, "I HATE FIRST FAMILIES" and quite frankly, I didn't see HOW Torgersen was going to write his way out of the situation he had set up. And then, he did it, and it was as perfect as we have any right to expect.

"A Star-Wheeled Sky" contains "Death before Dishonor!"; desperate ruses; a tiny, tiny hint at potential romance maybe; "so crazy it just might work"; the demands of service; exploding spaceships; David vs Goliath; and a huge portion of technology-indistinguishable-from-magic. There is even some slight taste of Bug Eyed Monster. No scantily-clad maiden fainting into the arms of a rescuer, though; Torgersen ain't that kind of writer. Other than that, it's got it all that you could want in space opera.

Query: is it a contender to win the Dragon Award?

Here's one factor that I don't know how to evaluate, or even if it's relevant: is a stand-alone novel a more likely winner than a series novel? I know that at one point, back in yawn-take-a-nap, there was some serious discussion about a separate category entirely for books considered as a series. I know this, because I read about it in Isaac Asimov's autobiography; he won the award with "Foundation." But apart from that bit of trivia, I have no clue. Furthermore, this is only my second review of a finalist in the Best Sci Fi Novel category, and I don't know the nature of the other four entries.

With that caveat, I've got to say that Torgersen has lost NONE of his ability to generate compelling story, and what he has produced is NOT some other kind of story, with a thin veneer of science fiction spray-painted over it as a disguise. It's solid, with respect to characters, interaction, setting, technology, and I don't know what else a reasonable person could want. So, for the second time in this review series, I find myself saying: if this wins, I will be neither surprised nor disappointed.

[Dragon Nominee for Best Novel](#)

[A Memory Called Empire by Arkady Martine](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

This is a first novel, and as such, to be a finalist for the Dragon Award for Best Science Fiction Novel is quite an achievement. I believe the author, who writes under the pen name of Arkady Martine, is still a relatively young person, and thus we might be getting a first look at someone who will be winning awards for quite a long time.

Not for this one, though. Oh, please, do not let this book win the Best Science Fiction of the Year award.

The story develops into a perfectly good murder mystery, with intrigue, some small amounts of excitement, very nicely done. Unfortunately, it drags on, and on, until I was hoping for a power failure.

Had I NOT been reading this book as a self-induced assignment to review Dragon Award finalists, I

suspect there is a good chance that I wouldn't have gotten past the Prelude. That runs, according the Kindle software on my laptop, about six pages. There is SOME narrative here, but it is surrounded by so much purpler prose that I found it truly aversive. Still, it was just the Prelude. I soldiered on...

...and came close to a sort of reader-death-coma with the beginning of Chapter One, because the prose was SO purple; but wait, that was just a quote from some historical document. I'll let it pass. The next pre-story chapter heading was refreshing, in that it was the bureaucratic requirements for the kinds of paperwork needed for entry into the main kingdom. (And we are about to meet the POV character, Mahit the Ambassador.)

Pathetic, it is, when I take some ease in reading (fictional) requirements for passport control.

The actual chapter wasn't nearly as nice. Third sentence:

“Thus the first time she saw the City with her own flesh eyes, not in inföfiche or holograph or imago-memory, it was haloed in white fire and shone like an endless glittering sea: an entire planet rendered into an ecumenopolis, palatially urban.” (Martine, Arkady. *A Memory Called Empire* (Teixcalaan) (p. 18). Tom Doherty Associates. Kindle Edition. )

No. I tell you again, NO. NOTHING in a book you want a lot of people to read is “palatially urban” or an “ ecumenopolis,” and if you wish to write about halos of white fire and endless glittering seas...then I have nothing for you. By the way: any large body of water in sunlight is an endless glittering sea. There are no new images being brought here, and it's tedious.

The utter banality of big words run together in endless sentences eases up considerably by the end of the first chapter, but the second starts just as poorly:

“The suite had been aired out before Mahit arrived—or at least she hoped it had, and assumed it had by virtue of the open windows and the antiseptic scent of cleaning fluid that the air coming in through those windows and blowing their draperies back hadn't managed to dispel—but it was nevertheless very much a place someone had lived in, and for a long time.” (Martine, Arkady. *A Memory Called Empire* (Teixcalaan) (p. 39). Tom Doherty Associates. Kindle Edition.)

Yes, that's all one sentence. And according to my Kindle, I'm on page 39. If this isn't something I'm REQUIRING myself to read, the book gets closed and returned. And I'm pretty flabbergasted that NONE of this even crops up in the Amazon reviews, but never mind.

Here's the TRULY tragic bit: somewhere in the vicinity of page 50, I noticed that the style had eased up, a bit, and that some of the dialogue was FUNNY. Yes, there was too much reliance on hidden knowledge of some rare ambassadorial expertise that we don't have, but it wasn't the killer that the purple prose had been. (It also didn't stop; throughout the book, the conversations that Mahit has with EVERYONE are subject to eternal internal: “What does this smile mean, how do I move my eyes,” things of that sort. Just accept it, and drive on.

And drive on YOU MUST if you are to catch some of the brilliantly wicked (or is that wickedly brilliant? ) dialogue that passes between Mahit and her new associates. Some folks complained that their names are stupid, but I find that ridiculous. There's no reason to think that naming conventions we are familiar with will survive into the far future, or alternative universe, or new universe. Actually, I think names like Six Direction (the emperor) and Three Seagrass (her assigned assistant (ish)) are kind of

cute, and didn't interfere with the story at all.

If you bailed early, you would ALSO miss the ability that the author has to faithfully render the chaos we have going on in our heads when we are in a crisis situation. Mahit is meeting with Three Seagrass, and Fifteen Engine, when a bomb explodes near them. She is frantically trying to process the events, her only contact with the society is incapacitated, she has to deal with seemingly cyborg-like police units, and she finds herself thinking about points of grammar, and whether the right forms of language are in use, and of the papers that may be written. In my experience, that is EXACTLY the sort of things our minds do, to give us relief from the nightmare we happen to have fallen into. I think that's an excellent bit of observation, and it's written as close to perfectly as anything we have the right to expect.

Oh, alas, for there is one more bit that doesn't belong: the LENGTH.

If this book was indie published, these would be EXACTLY the sort of first-novel mistakes I would expect. When I encounter these, I usually suggest that the author get into a writers' group, and develop some plain-speaking friends with good language skills. This book, though, is published by a major house. I find it VERY difficult to believe that an editor didn't see the issue with starting the book off with such melodramatic language, and that they didn't take a red pen to the last 300 pages, and SLASH. Take it for what it's worth, and it may not be worth much, but I DON'T think they did the author any favors, at all, with their treatment of her work.

She has a GREAT set-up. While I don't really believe in her space station, and there are some un-addressed science issues (how does a person who lived forever in free-fall, or micro-gravity at best, suddenly adapt to walking around on a planet?) I think the portrayal of the culture shock she experiences is very nicely done. I also thought the single science issue introduced is a great concept. The imago system allows the experiences of past generations to be resident in a new host, and she has an older version herself, with an obsolete personality of the prior ambassador. I ALSO like the fact that it's central to the entire story, and not some jambo-slamb-whizz-bang prop introduced just for flash. Good work, indeed.

As it is, it has a million dollars' worth of potential. For most people, however, I fear that the slow slow dreary painful beginning is going to turn people off, big time, and thus, they won't see the nicely done parts.

YMMV, but in my opinion, if this one wins the award, then it's conclusive proof that the fix is in.

Here's what you will pay for this book on Amazon:

Kindle: \$13.99

Audio-book: \$43.39

Paperback: \$18.99

Hardback: \$15.99

Amazon reviews: 122; 4.5/5.0 stars (except for mine, of course)

Goodreads reviews: 562; 4.24/5.0 stars (and that DOES include mine)

## The Midnight Sun by Tim C. Taylor

Review by Jim McCoy

In just about every war in human history (or at least the wars that I'm aware of, which is not the same thing) there seems to be someone who turns their coat, not just for glory and riches or to better themselves some other way, but because they honestly believe that a win by the other side will benefit not them personally, but society as a whole. Tories (who considered themselves English patriots) against Revolutionaries (who considered themselves to be American patriots) both believed that they were fighting for what was best for the people living in the Thirteen Colonies. During the American Civil War there were people who lived in the North but fought for the South because they didn't think that the federal government should be telling people what to do and southerners who fought for the Union because they believed that preserving the country was important. There were six generals included in the latter group. It happens.

And that, my friends is the principle upon which Tim C. Taylor's *The Midnight Sun* revolves. Both sides of the conflict in the book (and it's a book about mercenaries, so saying that there is a fight involved isn't *really* a spoiler, right?) think that they're doing the right thing, although what each side wants is the complete and utter opposite of what their opponents want. Taylor seems to have a solid grasp of human psychology as it relates to warfare. I'm thinking that he's probably done some reading on the subject at some time. Then again, I haven't so maybe I'm wrong. It's just that, viewed properly, both sides have logic on their side.

Speaking of psychology, Taylor seems to have a solid grasp on the dedication of soldiers/mercs and how far they're willing to go to complete their mission. I find it telling that a big chunk of the story revolves around deprivation and a fight against a better supplied enemy. There are your usual deserters and diehards when things get tough. Again though, it's a difference in psychology and belief that separates the two factions. Taylor really does get it.

Taylor's aliens are a lot of fun, too. I have to admit that when I first started hearing about the Four Horsemen Universe, I hadn't really thought that Tortantulas would be much fun as characters. I had this vision of them as basically just giant killing machines. I was wrong. Betty, the Tortantula in the book, is as real a person as any of the humans in *The Midnight Sun*. Now, she doesn't always "get" humans, but how would she? She's an alien spider being. The fact remains that she relates somewhat and her misinterpretations are the stuff of epic humor. The commander of the Midnight Suns merc unit is also an alien and she is interesting in a different way.

Of course, *The Midnight Sun* isn't a boring treatise on human psychology. It's a novel about a war in space. There's love. There's hate. There's frustration. But, most of all, there are explosions. Seriously. The key to any good war novel is the fighting and there is plenty of it. Let's face it. Fans of Military Science Fiction like it because they love a good dust up. It has to be well written and believable but it has to be there. And Taylor delivers in spades.

Actually, this is the first time we really get to see CASPer versus CASPer combat and I love it. Don't get me wrong. I'm perfectly okay with CASPers going heads up with Oogar or Tortantulas or whatever but in a lot of ways, the CASPer is the most interesting war materiel in the entire series. It's humanity's great equalizer but it's more than that. They're mini-mecha and they're modular and can do all kinds of crazy stuff. It's like watching a young Mike Tyson fight himself. I loved it.

And not all of the combat is ground based. A pretty good chunk of it takes place in space. Not all of it is standard fare either. Taylor takes an angle on space tactics that I've never quite seen before and I love it. I don't want to go too far here and get into spoiler territory but be prepared to see fighting in zero gee in a new and interesting way. I had a lot of fun with that. I like when an author takes a new and interesting look into something we've all seen before and makes it fresh.

Something that often gets left out of war stories is the nature of the deprivation experience by troops fighting in sub-optimal conditions. On an alien planet it would be worse in many ways. Taylor shows that clearly here. *The Midnight Sun* is not Rambo. Things run out. Weapons need to be reloaded. Parasites do their thing. Life sucks on every level. Just when things look like they're going to get better they get worse. People get wounded. Others get killed. Some of what these troops go through would make an Army Ranger want to give up, but they embrace the suck and continue on mission.

Oh, and keep your head on a swivel. You think you know what's coming next but you're probably going to be wrong more than you're right. I'm reminded of the first time I read *Game of Thrones*. I had the whole series figured out in the first fifty pages. By like page one-fifty my pick for the Iron Throne got decapitated. Then I figured it out again. This time it took a couple of books for my pick to get greased. I mean, Taylor is not that ruthless with his main characters but don't take anything for granted. Things can turn on a dime.

This is the first book in the Four Horsemen Universe that isn't about the actual Four Horsemen companies. I'm okay with that because it's a good book and it advances the overall plot of the series as well. I suppose I should get used to it because there are others later in the series. I'm looking forward to them. I'm really looking forward to the book about Bjorn's Berserkers. I'll keep reading. I have to know how this war ends.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Rotten Worms

## The Killing Moon by N. K. Jemisin

Review by Chris Nuttall

“We tell them stories about your kind, you know. ‘Be good, or a Gatherer will get you.’”

His face twisted in disgust. “That’s a perversion of everything we are.”

“You kill, priest. You do it for mercy and a whole host of other reasons that you claim are good, but at the heart of it you sneak into people’s homes in the dead of night and kill them in their sleep. This is why we think you strange—you do this and you see nothing wrong with it.”

NK Jemisin is one of the more prominent voices calling for ‘diversity in science-fiction and fantasy,’ a platform that has always struck me as dangerously misleading. I have no objection to diverse backgrounds or worlds that draw on non-western influences, although they do have their limits (as I have discussed in this series on ‘diverse’ books), but I care nothing for the race, gender, sexual orientation or culture of any given author. I judge an author solely by their work, not by any aspects of their life and times that are utterly irrelevant to me. Indeed, Jemisin deserves credit for putting her money where her mouth is – unlike most social commenters – and actually writing ‘diverse’ books herself.

And *The Killing Moon*, in many ways, showcases both the strengths and weaknesses of ‘diverse’ books.

On one hand, it cannot be denied that *The Killing Moon* takes place in a universe that is refreshingly different from many more mundane fantasy books. The background is largely – although not entirely – unique, drawing from Ancient Egypt and Hinduism rather than Medieval Europe or Native American. And yet, the characters remain understandable and human, even when they are often unsympathetic. But, on the other hand, the basic assumptions of this universe are so different from our own – and the bog-standard fantasy backgrounds we know and understand – that it can be hard, at first, to follow what is going on. The names of people and places – even the curious background mythology – are alien to most readers. *The Killing Moon* rewards a second reading, like most good fantasy novels, but it has problems getting its readers to want a second reading.

The plot is both surprisingly simple and remarkably complex. In the ancient city-state of Gujaareh, the night belongs to the Gatherers, priests of the dream-goddess who harvest the magic of the sleeping mind and use it to heal, soothe ... and kill those judged corrupt. Their word is law, at least within their city. Foremost amongst them is Ehiru, who has recently accepted a new apprentice (Nijiri). Ehiru, however, has problems of his own. After a Gathering – a mission to grant a peaceful death – goes badly wrong, he finds himself questioning both his calling and his order’s innermost secrets.

In the meantime, Ambassador Sunandi – a representative from a nearby country – discovers that Gujaareh is plotting war. She attempts to warn her people, only to alert the hostile factions to her knowledge. Ehiru is told that she has been judged corrupt and ordered to grant her peace (i.e. kill her). Faced with her worst nightmare – a Gatherer in her bedroom – Sunandi manages to convince Ehiru that she has been wrongly named. Reluctantly, realising that there are worse problems at home, Ehiru and Nijiri flee with Sunandi to her homeland in hopes of discovering what they know. However, powerful forces are after them and Ehiru – deprived of the dream-stuff he would normally have harvested from Sunandi – is starting to lose his mind. He warns Nijiri, who has fallen in love with him, that the time may come for his apprentice to kill him. But the war begins before they can act.

Returning to Gujaareh, they discover that the leader of the plot is none other than the Prince himself – Ehiru’s brother. The Prince points out that the Gatherers are little more than drug lords, harvesting dream-stuff and distributing it to addicts. (One of the more interesting aspects of the story is that it is clear the Prince has a point.) Regardless, he has to be stopped; his researches into long-lost magics, and the reason Sunandi and most of her countrymen fear and hate the Gatherers, have offered him the chance to make himself an immortal king. Ehiru stops him, saving the city from one enemy only to hand it over to an invading and occupying army. Nijiri ‘gathers’ Ehiru, then goes back to the temple to begin his career as a full Gatherer.

In many ways, my brief summary has not done full justice to the plot. There are many neat aspects that only revealed themselves during the second reading, from the subtle (and somewhat inconsistent) message of ‘chosen’ – i.e. adopted – families being better than birth families to the obvious comparison between abuse of the dream-stuff and outright drug abuse (and how it can be used to control people). In hindsight, it is clear that ‘corruption’ is present well before it makes itself overt. Indeed, Jemisin definitely deserves a reward for creating a society that is loved by its members and yet regarded with entirely-justified fear and loathing by outsiders. I haven’t seen this done so well since SM Stirling created the Draka, with the added bonus that Ehiru – at least – is brave enough to take a stand against his society.

But then, the book also showcases the flaws in such an approach. Ehiru's stance might have saved millions of lives, but it also opened the gates to allow Gujaareh to be occupied by its enemies. This is, of course, a repulsive (and distressingly common) historical problem. People born into an 'evil' society cannot simply give up without being destroyed by their society's enemies, a problem Nelson Mandela understood and most modern-day SJWs do not. Why take your boot off someone's neck, even if you understand that it is an unpleasant and wrong thing to do, when that person will destroy everything you hold dear? I don't know if Jemisin did this intentionally, but it is definitely a point to ponder.

The characters themselves are a little weaker than one might expect. Ehiru himself is very much a 'lawful good' character, which allows him to be manipulated by both his brother and his superiors in the temple. He has no understanding of compromise and rails against corruption wherever he finds it, without realising that aims and intentions are sometimes more important than actions. It never crosses his mind that his superiors might be evil – or find themselves forced to make evil decisions – and he is rightly horrified when he discovers the truth, nearly having a breakdown (and he must have found death to be a relief). Nijiri, by contrast, comes across as a flatter character with a homoerotic crush on Ehiru. This becomes more than a little edgy at times, although nothing actually happens.

Sunandi, by contrast, is a curious choice for ambassador. Jemisin does an excellent job of making it clear that she's a good character, although she shares the same fear and loathing that other outsiders feel towards the Gatherers and Gujaareh itself. (This is completely justified in-story, a curious choice on Jemisin's part.) She is also brave and resolute when necessary, talking her way out of being assassinated by Ehiru – and yes, this would have been a political assassination – and doing everything in her power to resist the invasion. Jemisin hems and haws a little on Sunandi's role in the counter-invasion, although no one would have blamed her for wanting to crush the beast in its lair.

And the Prince himself is an oddity. He is a devoted family man – in stark contrast to the father he shares with Ehiru – and has a very strong point, but he throws it away as he descends into madness. In a normal book, he'd be the hero. Instead, he is the darkest person in the story. His seeming decency only makes the truth worse.

There are, it should be noted, a series of curious aspects within the text. Jemisin does not, it seems, understand the role of an ambassador, an interesting oversight given that ambassadors were regarded as sacred in ancient times. It is hard to believe that any government, ancient or modern, would tolerate the legalised murder of an ambassador, or even accept that it might happen. (Carter effectively did tolerate it, leading to many of the problems facing the US today.) It's also hard to believe that any halfway responsible host government would tolerate religious factions attacking diplomats – that is, bluntly put, an act of war. And Sunandi allows herself to be seduced by the Prince, which may have been intentional (it let her take a look at his chambers) but the text isn't clear on this point.

The city also has a curious mixture of sexual freedom and repression. On one hand, both homosexual relationships and temple prostitution are treated as normal. No one appears scandalised by Nijiri having a crush on his teacher (although they should be, as Ehiru is Nijiri's mentor). But, on the other, the locals seem to feel that their women should not work; this is treated as a sign of respect, but it should be obvious how this is also a sign of repression. It's also worth noting that the city is racially-diverse, but not particularly culturally--diverse. No one makes an issue of skin colour within the book, a refreshing change, but aspects of the plot are driven by cultural clashes between the city's locals and outsiders.

The text also highlights the problem with religious extremists. Both Ehiru and Nijiri are fanatics, by modern standards; they do things that Sunandi (rightly) finds appalling, because they feel they have di-



vine sanction. In this universe, they may be right; however, it doesn't stop them (and their followers) from being regarded as monsters. You cannot argue with a fanatic because he knows he's right. The text also illustrates the dangers in such an approach. Religious institutions are dangerous because their followers will refuse to question them, even when they are clearly in the wrong. Ehiru is a good man, but what happens when a religious nut is not a good man?

This raises yet another curious issue. At the end of the book, with Gujaareh under enemy occupation, Nijiri tells Sunandi that Gujaareh will not resist ... if she and her customs are treated with respect. But why should they be treated with respect? Why should the civilised man respect barbarian customs? Respect is earned, not given. The deep-seated corruption within the temple – neatly foreshadowed by Jemisin right at the start – has rendered it institutionally guilty. A little more of 'we will respect your right to burn widows if you respect our right to hang murderers' would do wonders for our modern-day problems.

Overall, Jemisin deserves credit for creating a very different magic system that – by and large – hangs together very well. It is nowhere near as detailed as any of Brandon Sanderson's creations – I thought I saw elements from *Mistborn* worked into the system – but it does manage to both look different and provide an understandable and well-foreshadowed ending to the story. In hindsight, both the real nature of the Prince's plan and the resolution are clear to see. Given the challenge facing Jemisin, she rose to it very well.

She could not, however, avoid many of the weaknesses of 'diverse' books. She needed to explain her society to us, but that inevitably slowed down the plot; she needed to make her characters likable, which she did, yet she needed to keep reminding us that Ehiru and Nijiri may be good people, but they serve (by our standards) a monstrous society. Jemisin is a remarkable world-builder, but the sheer alienness of Gujaareh works both for and against the plot. There are aspects that should have been detailed, but were simply glossed over. *The Killing Moon* really should have been a trilogy. The plot was certainly big enough to spread over three books. (There is a sequel, but it isn't a direct sequel.)

*The Killing Moon* has not won any major awards, which is something of a shame. It is – in my less than humble opinion – the greatest work Jemisin has produced. Indeed, unlike *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* or *The Fifth Season*, it is strikingly groundbreaking and should have been nominated for a Hugo. The world is different, but understandable; the characters are not-us, but understandable even though (some) of them would be regarded as villains or monsters in our society. Or even simply too alien to be accepted easily. The most understandable characters, from our point of view, are Sunandi and the Prince.

But, on the whole, *The Killing Moon* is definitely an excellent book that rewards its readers.

## [The Shadowed Sun by N. K. Jemisin](#)

[Review by Chris Nuttall](#)

“But this is not mere rudeness that we speak of, Prince; this is murder and torture. Some things are wrong in the eyes of all peoples—”

“That isn't true.”

One of the most important things I have noted, over the years, is this: a person who demands respect doesn't deserve it. Respect is earned, not given. Those who deserve respect – for ability, for achievement, for success – will have it. Those who demand respect as their due will get resentment instead.

In many ways, *The Shadowed Sun* brings that to mind.

At the climax of *The Killing Moon*, Nijiri – a young man/fanatic – told Ambassador Sunandi that Gujaareh would accept occupation, provided she was treated with respect. It struck me as odd at the time, if only because Gujaareh does not deserve respect. Indeed, most of the nuance of *The Killing Moon* is strikingly lacking from *The Shadowed Sun*. Gujaareh is painted as a deeply corrupt society, one that was turning monstrous even before the invasion and occupation. Sunandi herself is perhaps the only truly decent character in the book. It's hard to feel liking for anyone else, with the possible exception of Hanani.

It is actually quite hard to summarise the book. It is roughly ten years after *The Killing Moon*, ten years since the occupation began. But all is not well. Hanani, the first female Sharer (magical healer), is trying to earn her spurs, while powerful factions plot to overthrow the occupiers ... allying themselves with Wanahomen, the last survivor of the previous Crown Prince's family. Wanahomen himself, in turn, has made allies amongst the barbarian tribesmen of the desert, promising them great rewards if they help him recover his family's throne. If these are meant to be the good guys, something is deeply wrong. Tiaanet, the daughter of one of the plotters, is frequently raped by her own father; indeed, she has been treated so badly that she has simply stopped caring about anything.

The plot is driven by the combined twists of the uprising against the occupation and the spread of a nightmare plague, a curse that spreads from dreamer to dreamer and eventually threatens to bring down the entire city. Matters come to a head as the uprising begins, even as the rebellion itself fragments. In many ways, everyone loses; Sunandi gets kicked out of the city, Hanani loses her chance to practice magic (and her idealism), Tiaanet eventually kills her own father, but at the cost of losing her daughter ... who is revealed to be the source of the nightmare plague.

Like before, the worldbuilding is very good. Gujaareh itself comes to life, a brimming city of wonder slowly falling into darkness. Jemisin does a good job of contrasting the city-folk with the barbarians, refusing to shy away from the simple fact that the barbarians are barbaric; Hanani's horror is our horror. Indeed, in some ways, she succeeds too well. It is hard to feel any sort of liking for Wanahomen and his allies. They're monsters, at least by our standards. Indeed, in some ways, the plot is a deconstruction. The 'noble savage' we might expect to see does not grace the pages of *The Shadowed Sun*.

The magic system is also expanded, in manners both logical and sensible. The refusal to take women into the priesthood actually makes sense, if only because the priests are forbidden to have children (ensuring that the dreaming gift is passed down through the female line alone) while the darker side of the system is clearly visible. There is a great deal of material here for future stories.

The book falls down, however, when it comes to characters. Wanahomen starts life as an ass, not to put too fine a point on it. He doesn't seem to realise that anything is wrong when he is introduced to Tiaanet; indeed, he seems determined to marry her, at least until the real romance begins. There's no acknowledgement of what happens after he learns the truth about Tiaanet.

Hanani, on the other hand, is a far more sympathetic character, if only because we've seen 'first woman in a male sphere' before and we know the tropes. And even she is a deconstruction, because she is used

as a pawn by her (male) superiors and forced to question pretty much everything about her society. She fragments, first recoiling in horror from her new life and then seeking out something new for herself. The romance between Wanahomen and Hanani doesn't read right to me, although it may sort itself out in time. It's also easy to feel sorry for Tiaanet, although she doesn't seem to make any attempt to escape (or report) her father. She's an oddly passive character right up until the end.

Jemisin also deconstructs the city's concept of treating women as queens. Hanani is shocking, to the locals, because she's actually trying to work for a living. (They have some problems getting their heads around Sunandi, rather than her husband, being in charge of the occupation force.) And yet, as Tiaanet shows, there's a fine line between putting women on a pedestal and keeping them under control. Tiaanet is horrifically abused, treated more as an object than a living person; indeed, she acts more like an object than anything else. The city's women have prestige, but not power.

Like I said above, Sunandi herself is perhaps the only truly decent character in the book, although she is torn between the need for peace in Gujaareh and the demands of her superiors, who (being several thousand miles away) think she is too tolerant of local misbehaviour. In some ways, they are right. Sunandi is careful not to push too hard, at least until she is overruled by her superiors, but – at the same time – she is showing weakness. It's never easy to find a balance between tolerance and firmness, as we learnt in both Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, there remains the fundamental point that Gujaareh does not deserve respect. It's notable that the only person, at least before the climax, who expresses horror at Tiaanet's treatment is one of the 'evil occupying soldiers.'

The Shadowed Sun does hit on some of the fundamental truths of the human condition. On a greater level, it considers the problems when one culture – with a concept of what constitutes acceptable behaviour – is forced to interact with another culture, with a very different concept of what is tolerable. Jemisin neatly illustrates the problems with both repression and tolerance, with firmness and political correctness (in this case, a refusal to accept that some cultures are different.) And it considers the legacy of the past, from the isolation of Gujaareh (for good reason, it turns out) to the consequences of the failed war and invasion. The characters cannot get over the past, but neither can we.

And, on a more personal level, it also illustrates how hard it can be to break out of our personal hells. Hanani, like Ehiru before her, is unwilling to admit that the priesthood may be deeply corrupt, to the point where it is willing to break its most sacred laws for power and control. Wanahomen wants to reclaim his family's throne, even though it means allying himself with monsters – both in and out of the city – when he would probably be happier simply walking away. And the city itself, given a chance at a better life, is backsliding rapidly into the morass that nearly destroyed it in the previous book. By the time the book is over, everyone is badly scarred.

Overall, my feelings are pretty mixed. The worldbuilding is great. Jemisin makes the city come alive. There are a lot of great ideas within the text. The characters are very human, but – at the same time – it is hard to see them as likable. And the book is as much a deconstruction as anything else. It is an interesting read, and I would recommend it to anyone who likes epic fantasy, but it has its limits.

## 4HU: Alpha Contracts by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

Review by Pat Patterson

First, a confession. (And yes, I DO seem to be doing a lot of those lately.) When I looked at the cover

art, I thought, "What the heck is going on here? What in the WORLD can the artist have been thinking! That's the worst rendering of a fat Jim Cartwright possible!"

Sigh. I was half-way through Chapter 1 before I realized that, duh, ALPHA CONTRACTS!!!! This is the ORIGINAL Cartwright (also named Jim, though), and NOT the obese-shading-to-merely-rotund Cartwright of Cartwright's Cavaliers and the other mumble mumble books in the 4HU. And the original Cartwright wasn't operating with the same burdens (see what I did there?) that the most-recent Cartwright had to struggle under, hence wasn't a Tub-O-Lard.

The artist is right; I was wrong. On with the review!

The primary focus is on the companies which became the Four Horsemen. However, the writers include small snippets from another company, the Avenging Angels, to remind us that 96 of the contracts ended in the extermination of the humans. It's a very well-done bit, and the method of the telling, which is correspondence with home, makes sure we know that it wasn't companies who died; it was individual people, with hopes, dreams, and families.

Note: because the book deals with the main history of each of the companies separately, there is some repetition of scenes in which more than one company is involved. Feature, not a bug.

**First, Cartwright's Cavaliers.** Jim Cartwright is owner/operator of Cartwright's International, an independent contractor supplying security and transport in parts of the world where booms can ruin a perfectly good trip to the market. He has a number of significant employees, including Nina, a young woman of short stature who is highly proficient at making bad Enemies into good Enemies, with the .50 BMG being her ammo of choice.

We discover that Cartwright combines a love of action with a first-class business mind, and that he has started and sold numerous highly profitable companies, all of them selecting resources that no one else thought existed. He MAY have some sort of built-in early warning system, because he gets uneasy just before the aliens land, and Earth's economy is wrecked. Prior experience serves him well; alone of all the potential mercs, he understands the value of research. Seeking such, and bearing gifts/bribes, he seeks counsel from the only military officer who has a clue about fighting aliens, Col. Kuru Shirazi of the soon-to-be-extinct Iranian Guard.

And I'm not following the story further, because spoilers. Just remember: Jim Cartwright may have some pre-cog, or his genius may be extrapolating from available data, and he is a firm believer in preparedness.

**Next, Asbaran Solutions,** seeking to carry on the tradition of the knights who lead the Sassanid army in the closing days of the Persian Empire. They are mostly drawn from the remaining units of the Iranian military, which has taken a SOUND beating as a result of the suicide bombing of the visiting aliens at the UN vote to adopt a global government. In response, the MinSha had turned most of Iran into slag, then raided much of what was left over for booty. In almost every case, Resistance WAS Futile, but there were a very few notable successes, hence Jim Cartwright's visit. Reading the signs, Col Kuru Shirazi led remnants away from the lethal entanglements of what was left of Iran, and also away from the jackals fighting over the corpse, and established New Persia, under civilian leadership.

This separation from the country now mostly consisting of radioactive glass solved a number of problems for those left alive, but for Shirazi, a principle benefit was that it would support the efforts of the

merc group he established.

From his own experience, significantly clarified by his contact with Cartwright, Shirazi was convinced of the futility of force-on-force conflict with aliens. The few wins (which no one else had accomplished) had been achieved through tactics lumped under the term 'asymmetric warfare.' And that's the specialty Asbaran Solutions picked for their company.

Long enmity with practically the rest of the world, but a few countries in particular, was a difficult obstacle to overcome, but Shirazi found he was able to unify others by their hatred of the MinSha, and by extrapolation, the entire Galactic Union. This was a solution devoutly to be desired by his comrades. Thus, from the beginning, his company was a Solution: to the problem of association with a dying, lethal country, and to the problem of the lost honor, stolen by the MinSha. It also made for a nice front for prospective clients: whatever your problem, we are the Solution.

**The Winged Hussars.** Lawrence Komalski was an information technology genius, and a person with great expectations. Specifically, he expected to inherit control of the family shipping business, while his less-competent cousin was sent out to pasture with some money to play with. Unexpectedly, at the reading of his grandfather's will, he discovered he had been outmaneuvered, and his cousin got the company. The beating his cousin also got, at Lawrence's hands, got him locked up in Warsaw's Rakowiecka Prison. (*Note: this prison is REAL, and HIGHLY worth the time it will take you to google it. In fact, [here's a link](#) I followed.*). His cousin runs the company into the ground, and springs Lawrence from the slammer to fix things. This Lawrence does. One of his earliest changes allowed his merchant ship officers to receive military training, which turned out to be a critical choice.

No amount of beatings could introduce good sense to his cousin, who spent all of the resources on the company buying what he thought was a space-faring cargo ship; it turned out to be a worn-out warship. He then compounded that error by signing a merc contract, to serve as an armed escort for an assault group. If the contract is fulfilled, it will redeem Komalski Shipping; failure will bankrupt it. And, the contract stipulates that Lawrence has to be a part of the crew. The job goes badly.

Look, you KNOW it HAS to work out in the end, right? Because Winged Hussars are part of the Four Horsemen? You MUST read this to find out how Lawrence pulls THAT off.

**The Golden Horde.** If ever I read in prior books in the series that the Golden Horde merc company emerged from a drug-smuggling background, I neglected to store that fact in memory. What I retained is that the leader, Madame Enkh, was ruthless, and that she had prescient dreams, and that the Horde traced their legacy to Mongol origins. And that family ties are very, very important.

Drug trafficking IS a high profit-margin business, but it's also a high-risk business as well. The cops can be bought off, in many cases, but the competition never stops. And the discovery that one of their competitors has access to alien hardware makes current business practices untenable for the Gray Wolves, the precursors to the Horde. Even worse, the casualties they suffer are family members, and it takes a LONG time to turn a zygote into a team member.

It's tough enough to get arms, but the disintegrating corpse of the former Soviet Union provides opportunities for scavengers, willing to take some risks. Where do you get subordinates who will be bonded like family, though? There must be SOME way...

Dragon Nominee for Best Fantasy Novel

House of Assassins by Larry Correia

Review by Pat Patterson

Yesterday was a marathon reading day! I read almost 800 pages, and fortunately “House of Assassins” came first. It's quite the compelling read. Upon reflection, the page count is rather more than 800, because it's been a LONG time since I read the first book in the series, and I had to keep referring back to it to refresh my memory.

“House of Assassins” is the second book in the “Saga of the Forgotten Warrior” series, released three years after “Son of the Black Sword.” It's helpful, but not necessary, to read SOTBS first. There are plenty of storylines which originate in SOTBS and which are advanced or completed in HOA, but the intro material is sufficient to introduce a newcomer into the story without problem. All of my clicking back and forth between the two installments in the story were for satisfaction, and not because of confusion.

The book opens with an emotionally rich flashback into the life of Thera, the Prophet. We see her as a little girl ferociously becoming a warrior, under the guidance of her father, Andaman Vane, respected leader of his house and troops. And we discover what set her apart: a “bolt from heaven pierced her skull.” The injury/intrusion has a broad impact: her father refuses to leave her side, and those in power use this as an excuse to strip him of his position as a leader.

The flashback ends as Thera regains consciousness in the House of the Assassins. They had captured her at the climactic battle at Jharlang, when the magic sword Angruvadal had self-sacrificed to defeat a demon hybrid, according to the terms of the prophecy. Sikasso, the leader of the Assassins, is determined to discover the source of her power and control it. Her protestations that she has no idea of how the power works, or even when it works, only make him determined to rip the secret from her by force.

Ashok has gathered a small army, an outcome not entirely to his liking. He is still under the command of Grand Inquisitor Orman, who ordered him to find and protect the prophet agitating against the rule of the Law, and standing for the protection of the casteless. Having discovered that the prophet is none other than Thera, a person he does not particularly care for, he sets out to find the House of Assassins and rescue her. In his company are Jagdish, a dishonored noble warrior, determined to regain his status by killing the wizards who wiped out his men, and Keta, the former butcher turned (mad) evangelist/priest of the Forgotten.

They are being tracked by the Protectors, Ashok's former companions, lead by Devedas, the closest thing to a friend he has ever had. Also the most formidable foe he will face, Devedas may actually be able to defeat Ashok, now that Andruvadal is destroyed.

Along the road, they pick up Gutch, a former blacksmith turned magic smuggler. He has the ability to detect magic from a distance, and offers his services to help Ashok find the House of Assassins, who are noted for paying top dollar for magic-bearing items.

Meanwhile, back at the city, Grand Inquisitor Orman is preparing his plan to wipe out the casteless, overthrow the ruling first-caste aristocracy, and make himself the supreme authority over all. To accomplish this, he sends out teams to devastate the countryside, and claim to be a part of Ashok's rebellion.

And there are some really, really strange secrets that few know, and no one talks about. Anyone who stumbles upon the truth dies. (But no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.)

There is a particular type of lazy writer who drools out a story in which no rules apply, at all. That, in itself, separates them from the body of science fiction, in which the rules matter. It is perfectly acceptable practice to violate one particular reality (FTL travel is the most common example), but after that, a good writer has to work hard to provide internal consistency. When someone points out to the lazy writer that their mythical beast actually can't DO that, or that instant communication isn't established, or that there was no reason for the guy in the hat to have a yo-yo in their pocket, they offer up the excuse: "It's fantasy!" And, if the story is GOOD enough, a writer can do that, but, the lazy writers aren't that good.

And Larry Correia is the OPPOSITE of the lazy writer. In more ways than one, of course, because his output is...impressive. But here, I speak of the fact that he has an ESTABLISHED fantasy series going, when rules CAN be violated without penalty, and: he works very, very competently to rationalize it. There are science hints throughout, but the emphasis on the storyline is on the irrational, but I THINK that's along the order of "sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

It's not an approach taken often, and even less often is it done well. Handwavium has been around, and been popular, for a long time. It's what provides Superman with an origin story, and why Spiderman had to be bitten by a radioactive spider; those are SCIENCE explanations for fantasy. The best earliest rationalization of fantasy that I am personally familiar with is 1969's "Not Long Before The End," by Larry Niven. That was followed by other short stories and books with the same theme: magic is a natural resource, and it can be depleted.

I do not know where this series is going to conclude. But, I find myself hoping that he woke up one night with a perfect ending in mind, and that everything this far has been in support of that superlative final scene where All Is Revealed.

And now, The Question: Is "House of Assassins" a contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Fantasy Novel?

Elsewhere, I have discussed the matter of series novels winning awards vs. stand-alone works. It's a factor, but the fact that the intro material covers the background well speaks in favor of HOA.

In prior years, I think HOA might have a lock on the award. However, this is the year in which nominations for Dragon Awards have come for books which came from sources which have previously held the Dragons in contempt. That being the case, I'm inclined to say that this is a different game than the game we played last year, and the year before, etc.

Is it worthy of the award? Affirmatively, yes. Will it win the award? I would not bet money on it.

Dragon Nominee for Best Military SF Novel

**The Light Brigade by Kameron Hurley**

Review by Pat Patterson

I hope that no one who reads my reviews has any doubt that mil sf is my FAVORITE genre. True, I have even been compelled to review some romance novels, set in England among the misty moors, in the time of something something something, but for comfort food, I go to mil sf. I'm not acquainted with the author's work, although the name seemed somewhat familiar. Still, it's military sci-fi, and I settled down for an engaging read.

Don't just fight the darkness. Bring the light.

I do not have any idea what the author intended by starting her book with this wise advice. It IS wise advice, by the way, and something that I heartily wish we could find more of in the world. However, if there is any of this sentiment expressed in the book, anywhere, I utterly missed it.

Instead, the reader is immediately exposed to a bitter, cynical outlook in a world populated by mean-spirited people, who themselves are the target of heartless acts by giant organizations. It doesn't seem to matter if the organization is the military, or some manufacturing/distributing/mining concern; all of the people are treated as an expendable, easily replaced resource.

Dietz, the POV character, is a prime example. We never learn the character's first name. I'm not sure that we ever learn ANYTHING about the character, not hair color, eye color, gender, religious affiliation; nothing. We do learn that Dietz was a former quarterback, who was replaced by a more photogenic character, and that at one time, Dietz had a girlfriend. However, in this universe, that's not a reliable clue as to whether we are speaking of Angelica Dietz or Andrew Dietz. It's probable that the ambiguity is by design; she

made the Tiptree Award Honor List "for works of science fiction or fantasy that expand or explore one's understanding of gender." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kameron\\_Hurley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kameron_Hurley)

There is nothing to hold onto here, except that Dietz gets treated like dirt by anyone with more power.

The author goes out of her way to portray squalor. The brief glimpses we are given of Dietz's past life are filled with despair and hopelessness. Now, it is absolutely the case that many, many individuals have joined the military to exit a life of despair, and very often, it makes the difference for them. But for Dietz, it's just an exchange of one abusive situation for another.

My personal experience, and that of every veteran I've ever talked to about the matter, is that bonding takes place under duress. It doesn't have to be foxhole duress, either, with artillery rounds coming down all around. The simple task of surviving basic training is a bonding experience. This is not a book about bonding. This is a book about evil power:

The corps were rich enough to provide for everyone. They chose not to, because the existence of places like the labor camps outside São Paulo ensured there was a life worse than the one they offered. If you gave people mashed protein cakes when their only other option was to eat horseshit, they would call you a hero and happily eat your tasteless mash.



It's hateful wickedness, all the way around, with no escaping.

Here's the science hook: transporter technology has been developed, somewhat along the lines of the transporter in Star Trek. Troops can be transformed into light, and beamed elsewhere. And via hand-wavium, that permits time travel.

And that's all I could stand.

I am so glad to live in a society in which people can publish anything they want to. I don't have to understand their reasons. Based on my reading of "The Light Brigade," I conclude that Hurley hates the military science fiction genre, and wishes to destroy it. Here's what Wikipedia has to say:

Her second trilogy, the Worldbreaker Saga, is grimdark epic fantasy that aims to subvert the genre's tropes such as the hero's journey.

Yes, it is a GOOD thing that people are able to write, and to publish, and to PURCHASE works that are subversive. But that doesn't mean that those works are good reading.

And with respect to The Question: Is "The Light Brigade" a worthy candidate for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction Award?

Absolutely, positively not. I do not understand how this book has readers. I do not understand why this book was nominated. And if this book wins the Dragon Award, then the Dragon Award system is broken enough to be discarded, and replaced with something that will treat the field with respect.

## [Dragon Nominee for Best Military SF](#) [Marine by Joshua Dalzelle](#) [Review by Pat Patterson](#)

Oh, if they could ALL be as easy as today's finalist! This is "Marine," by Joshua Dalzelle, and I started reading it last night after completing some required admin/maintenance duties. Maybe around 8:30, or so. And according to the sleep tracker on my Fitbit, I finished it in the wee hours this morning. Could NOT put it down, and I TRIED, several times, so be warned. It could happen to YOU!

I can't give you a precise timeline, but internal evidence points to a not-too-distant future. Earth has been attacked twice by aliens, and miraculously saved each time. Now Earth is a minor player in a dangerous universe, where almost every other civilization is more powerful. With some assistance from interstellar allies, the humans are trying to build a military and trade presence. The most powerful players set limits on what technology transfer is permitted.

I'm not familiar with the other works of the author, but a SLIGHT use of my Google-fu reveals that (at least) one of his prior series, "Omega Force," provides the background to "Marine." However, I was struck by how well the author lays the necessary foundation without seeming to do so. The only section of the book devoted to backstory is found in the Prologue, and THAT is written in the Protagonist's voice, and it comes across as HIS backstory, not that of the series. There are a LOT of ways I've seen authors bring new readers into the middle of an existing story arc, but I've never seen one I can say is superior to this.

The protagonist is a young man, going by the name of Jacob Brown. Except for the Prologue, when we meet him he is in his early 20's, enduring the rigors of the last months of humanity's premier (only) off-planet military academy. At the precise moment of introduction, he is crawling in the weeds on a recon mission; we later discover it's a field problem set for the assessment of the ability of cadets to lead small units. And it is the course of this exercise that we are SHOWN, and not told, a key bit of information about Jacob Brown:

“Satisfied with his preparations, Jacob stepped off the edge of the outcropping and dropped thirty feet to a ledge below.” (Dalzelle, Joshua. *Marine* (Terran Scout Fleet Book 1) (p. 9). Kindle Edition. )

It's so casually done, that I read right past it at first. Then the tickle in the back of the brain:

“wait... 30 feet...that's the height of a three-story building...”

And it is PRECISELY with that casual, throw-away reference, that the author lets us know that there is Something About Jacob.

And he also lets us know, if we hadn't picked up on it already, that here is a guy who knows how to write. He shows, he doesn't tell.

He also doesn't leave irritating character defects ignored, until you wind up hating the people you are not supposed to hate. I grimace while reading about a character who just can't get over...whatever. While I have never used the therapeutic technique of punching someone in the face as a means of helping them become more mature, I rejoice that the author both SEES that persistent whining is an issue, and that he USES the skill-sets appropriate for the setting. I speak theoretically, of course.

I'm not enough of an academic to know whether it's true that there are only seven plots for all stories, but there IS quite a bit of familiar territory covered here. Young man making his own way, coerced to do something he doesn't want to do out of loyalty, must earn respect of comrades, overcome impossible odds, discover Injun Joe's buried treasure in a cave, slay the dragon, and close with persecutor rolling ball-bearings in hand while mumbling about strawberries. See? That's EASY! Anybody can do THAT, right?

Wrong. Any cook (or anyone with a fork) will tell you that there is a huge difference between the recipe and the cake. Dalzelle has taken the basics, treated them with all the respect they deserved, and served up something that is a delight for anyone who loves military science fiction.

That's been a TOUGH category to compete in every year since the Dragon Awards were started, and this year is no exception. I'm familiar with almost all of the authors in this category, and I'm not sure any of them are capable of mediocrity. I've only read half of the mil sf entries at this point, and I despair at the prospect of making a choice based on quality of the work. “Marine” may very well win the award. It's POSSIBLE that the fact that this is the sole indie work on the ballot will make a difference for some voters. But today, here's the only thing I can say about the eventual winner: they will have earned it.

Here's what you will pay for this book on Amazon:

Kindle: \$4.99

Audio-book: \$19.95

Paperback: \$14.99

Hardback: N/A

Amazon reviews: 277; 4.7/5.0 stars

Goodreads reviews: 81; 4.41/5.0 stars

[Dragon Nominee for Best Military SF Novel](#)

## [Order of the Centurion by Jason Anspach & Nick Cole](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

Right around 8 PM, “Order of the Centurion,” by Jason Anspach and Nick Cole, took over the controls of my iPad, and only allowed me the minimum amount of time needed for family maintenance issues and comfort breaks, until I finished shortly after 1 AM.

It was a glorious time!

“The planet Psydon”

“27 years prior to the Battle of Kublar”

That's how the story opens. At this very moment, I know that the Battle of Kublar figures prominently in the series “Galaxy's Edge” by the Anspach-Cole team, but last night when I started reading, I had not a clue. And my first interpretation of the data was:

“...this is going to tell me about how Lieutenant Washam, the protagonist, goes from a naive butter-bar on this back-water planet to achieve greatness at the Battle of Kubar...”

I knew greatness was in the picture, because the name of the book is “Order of the Centurion.” The preliminary material describe the nature of the award, which only goes to those who display exceptional valor, refusing to yield even unto death, and that 98.4% of all citations are awarded posthumously. This will NOT be a story of a young man who finally learns from a kindly drill sergeant how to put a spit-shine on his boots, and gets to have an extra cookie on graduation day<sup>1</sup>, okay? Greatness is going to happen.

But: what I was expecting was a quick series of episodes, taking Lt. Washam across the galaxy, sort of like Johnny Rico. Oh, my, no! This is the tightly-wrapped story of a single patrol, with appropriate head, tail, and feathers attached to give proper context. And, the closer I got to realizing that was the scope of this book, the more respect I gained for the opening: “27 years prior to the Battle of Kumar.” NEVER, not once, within the pages of this book is Kumar referenced after that opening. It doesn't have to be; the intro is enough to tell me it's enormously significant. And because it's significant, I looked it up, and now, I know how to find out about it.

Well-done, Anspach and Cole!

And on to the story:

Lieutenant “Wash” Washam is stuck in a rear-echelon as a paper-pusher, and he hates it. He's part of a group of political appointees that have been commissioned in the Legion, the elite military force that is responsible for the continued existence of civilization. To a man, they have been rejected as unworthy by the rest of the Legion, who correctly see them as

“The long con everyone saw and couldn't get out of.”

The rest of the 'points,' as the legion contemptuously calls them, accept their status as a method of post-service advancement, and spend their days doing nothing that looks like work. Washam alone went through all of the training required to be a regular member of the Legion, while the other points skipped everything, knowing that there were no consequences.

Except: there are political consequences, and there are consequences that have tissue damage attached to them. Wash has ignored the political, and prepared for the lethal. Unfortunately, the Legion will not give him the opportunity to show what he can do. And so he sits, processing supply requests.

Until his buddy shows up. Almost everybody has a buddy like this; they show up, they have a plan, and you know in advance it's going to be a bad idea. Still, they cajole, and prevail; and, despite the fact that good old buddy Major Berlin's idea is most likely to result in death or court-martial, Wash goes along with it.

And the next day, a helicopter shows up, loaded with a squad of Marines, and Berlin and Wash get aboard so that Berlin can get in some combat time, which will almost certainly guarantee a successful political career upon discharge. The fact that he skipped ALL of the training necessary to lead a small group in combat, the fact that these troops are NOT in his chain of command, the likelihood that they will all die; none of that enters his plan. He blithely assumes that he can do Great Things, despite all evidence to the contrary.

It's up to Wash to fix things. The first order of business is to keep the Marines, all with some degree of experience in combat, from fragging Berlin as soon as they realize he is a fraud. The second is to accomplish whatever mission he can, and to bring back as many alive as possible.

Once I realized the entire focus was going to be on a single mission, I had a new appreciation for the fact that some of the story arcs might be closed, and that there was no guarantee that ANYONE was going to make it out of the story alive. Everything was on the table, and that adds to the fascination with the story developing before me.

As evidenced that I read this book in one setting, I loved the story, the writing, the characters. And so to the question: is this a viable candidate for the Dragon Award for Best Military Science Fiction Novel?

I joyfully pay for the privilege of reading books of this quality, and I have every reason to believe that FINALLY, I can expect to have offerings on a regular basis. There was a long, long dry spell when this wasn't the case, when any mil sci-fi gem found was clutched close to the chest and fondled; I must have read my copies of Jerry Pournelle's "War World" series 10 times over. I have now read four of the six entries in this category, and reviewed three of them. And based on what I've seen, the winner of this category will NOT be decided on excellence of story. Of the four I've read, every single one of them is a premier work. They aren't carbon copies of each other; even the two books which share a universe are quite different. But, I can't identify any particular discriminating factor that is going to hook a huge subset of the fans of military science fiction. Therefore, based on what I'm seeing: the size of the fan base is going to determine the winner.

But, based ONLY on what is found between the covers, yes. This is a book that could very well bring home the Dragon.

Dragon Nominee for Best Military SF Novel

**A Pale Dawn by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey**

Review by Pat Patterson

Preliminary comments for this book: "A Pale Dawn" is set in the Four Horsemen Universe, abbreviated 4HU. The universe is introduced in a series called "The Revelations Cycle," which consists of 12 books. That's followed by the "Omega War" cycle, also consisting of 12 books; "A Pale Dawn" is book number 8. (Book 11 in this cycle, "Sons of the Lion," is also a nominee in this category.) There are additional collections in the 4HU, and books seem to be added almost weekly, so if you find this book to your liking, you may very well have found something to read for the next six months or so.

Preliminary comments for the story: You don't actually HAVE to know any of this in order to enjoy the book, but you may find it interesting.

About 200 years before the time of "A Pale Dawn," the aliens landed. It seems Voyager 1 had finally left the solar system, which qualified humans as genuine space travelers, thus making them eligible to become members of the Galactic Union. Provisional members, that is; contact was to be limited to certain select species, for purposes of trade. Unfortunately, the Galactics had all the goods, and the humans had nothing except raw materials; and, the Galactics wanted those in massive quantities. Think 'tonnage' and you will have a picture of the exchange rate.

Then, a mistake (sort of) by a poor misguided soul (snicker) revealed the propensity for violence in humans, a trait which seemed to be in remarkably short supply among the rest of the members of the Galactic Union. Vast amounts of credits could be earned by taking on mercenary missions, and 100 human outfits bid for contracts.

Only 4 of those returned. By chance, each of them featured a horse in their insignia, and thus, the name and fame of the Four Horsemen emerged: Cartwright's Cavaliers, Asbaran Solution, Winged Hussars, and the Golden Horde. They formed the core of what became the single income-producing business for the human race, and remained the most prominent of all the companies that followed.

And then, it got weird.

What organization the Galactics had was provided by the various professional guilds; each guild had a near-perfect stranglehold on their area of expertise. And, by the sorts of deals the humans were getting, they discovered that there was some active hostility toward them, even from within their own guild, the Mercenary Guild. Somehow, a lot of that seemed to stem from an ancient galactic conflict, between two races known as the Dusman and the Kahraman. The humans seemed to be subject to accusals that they had betrayed ancient agreements put into place to prevent the galaxy from being destroyed.

Again.

And it seems to be getting worse. In fact, it seems that the entire galaxy has decided to wipe the humans out. No good reason has been offered.

And THAT'S most of the back story. And you can forget most of it, if you like.

Here's something not to forget: alien societies are NOT run in the same way that human societies are. In

fact, they all seem to be run somewhat differently from each other. The most common factor may be that in the case of most societies founded on a race with binary genders, it is the gender which bears the young that seems to dominate, and to supply the warriors. Other races are non-binary, but those tend not to be capable of providing mercenaries. So, leave your male chauvinist pig prejudices at the airlock, neighbor, they don't serve you well here! The big bug facing you may be female, but she will cut you in half before you introduce yourself, and divvy up your carcass into smaller portions for easy storage and later consumption.

Does all this sound too involved? Even overwhelming? Fear not! A wiki exists, and although it's not yet comprehensive enough to answer every question you might have, it will take you a long way. I have found Rob Howell's wikis for his own books to be excellent, the wave of the future, and he's the guy who set it up. Doug Triplett maintains the site. The link can be found on the website, but I hope it will be included in future releases of the e-book itself.

However, for all you military science fiction fans (like me) out there: Even if you have never read a single one of the prequels, you are going to LOVE this book!

High tech weapons and communications, often frustrated by low tech solutions; boomers, bangers, boppers and stompers.

Plenty of exploding spaceships!

SIGNIFICANT military planning, tactics, strategy, and ...

LOGISTICS! From my own time as an army medic, I know a tiny bit about the tail end of the supply chain. How far in advance did they have to package the milk in order to get it in the cooler so it could be served to the troops for breakfast? I don't know that, but I do know that expiration dates matter, and so shipping schedules matter, and the order in which you pack a freight container matters. Don't worry, you will not get bored

All of that is to say: If you SHOULD happen to be stuck in some minor corner of the world, and this one comes into your hands, go ahead and read it. When you return to the world, you can get caught up. Yes. My friends, it is that well done.

HOWEVER, for the vast majority who are pulling down these books as soon as they appear, like a pack of ravenous wolves after bunnies and caribou, this answers questions, asks more, and moves the story along in decidedly lovely ways.

At center stage, we find giant rat-analogue Peepo, the villainous villain who has betrayed the entire universe, but Humans most of all. At times, she almost seems to be on the ropes. The pesky Humans, despite suffering losses, have had the dice roll their way too many times, and may even be starting an end game. Wonder how she will react to all this bad news?

As an illustration of the isolation the humans have come to experience, on the desert rock known as Paradise, Lt Col Walker of the Winged Hussars has to dig in, most literally, with the few troops he has. All of the rest of the troops and equipment had to flee the system in the face of an overwhelming Mercenary Guild force.

Meanwhile, back at the secret base, Taiko Sato is an inquisitive genius who saves lives, and also gets

people killed when his plans go wrong. Well, PLANS may not be the right term; if he sees a new piece of technology, he can't rest until he has taken it apart. And maybe made it do two things it didn't do before. Like, make coffee, and open a door into the heart of a sun. He's quite busy, attempting to get back into the good graces of his commander, by repairing and improving everything he touches. Even so, he is, at first, on close confinement. Later, after showing an unexpected ability to cooperate, he is given permission to move about, but ONLY under the direct guard of two Marines, and close observation by a member of the Geek Squad. Nobody could do anything sneaky under that kind of supervision! Could they?

Let's not forget the bosses. Sansar Enkh of the Golden Horde has visions; Alexis Cromwell, commanding the Winged Hussars, attempts to maintain iron control of herself and her company, despite being all squishy inside at the thought of Nigel Shiraz, owner/operator of Asbaran Solutions; and Jim Cartwright is learning more about his Fae, Splunk, and the gigantic, ancient mecha than he really wanted to know.

And it all leads up to an assault on Earth and confrontation with Peepo, the rat.

This is going to be a tough category. Not only is there another book in this series represented among the nominees, but one of the authors of a third book has won this category two out of three times. Still you could go for years, and not find such a great combination of personal struggles, technical difficulties, and Machiavellian machinations that you'll find in "A Pale Dawn." It's not a shoo-in. However, I won't be either surprised nor disappointed if it takes home the award.

[\Dragon Nominee for Best Alternate History:Novel](#)

[The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

The first book in the series, "Minds of Men," was a finalist for the 2018 Dragon Award for Best Alternate History Novel. (Not only was it the first book in the series, it was also the first novel published by the author! Quite an accomplishment, for the first time at-bat.) Ezell has continued to produce high quality work, as evidenced by the selection of this work for the 2019 Dragon Award in the same category.

The character of Lina Sucherin was introduced in the first novel in a secondary and brief story-line. Portraying a WWII interrogator for the German Secret Police as a sympathetic character HAS to be a tough assignment, but by keeping a tight focus on Sucherin's personal motivations and needs, Ezell made it work. Now we see her story in full, and it's not a pretty one.

The story is set in the Soviet Occupation zone in Berlin, immediately after WWII. Picture every movie or newsreel you've ever seen of bombed out ruins, with dirty-faced, ragged, haggard people pawing through rubble, in search of anything of use, and you will have a good start on the setting. Although things HAVE recovered, somewhat, and there are no bombs or artillery rounds falling, life is all of the bad words, and hardly any of the good.

Sucherin is fortunate to have a job as a typist for the State (which is the only employer), and a little apartment, even if utilities aren't always available. Best of all, she has good friends who live across the hall: husband Rolland, his wife Isa, and their three daughters Ginette, Aleda, and Johanna. They represent all that she values in the world.

Apart from her affection for them, she is numb. Her history is closed off to her, as if it had been removed surgically, and the incision cauterized. Each day is a copy of the one before, without even any variances in the few food items available for purchase.

Focused solely on the need to keep her head down, and survive, her brain turned off for survival, Lina isn't aware of the Cold War escalating in her own city. The Soviets have decided to blockade West Berlin, and starve it into submission. In response, the Western forces initiate the Berlin Airlift, airplane after airplane descending into Templehof, Gatow, and Tegel air fields with loads of coal, food, medicine, and clothing.

It's the sound of the first transports that triggers Lina's fears that the bombing has started again, and shocks her mind into a re-start. She remembers: she has psychic powers; she last used them right after Berlin fell. She had killed a drunken Soviet soldier, to prevent him from raping two little girls in her charge, and murdering them all.

The day after her awakening, Lina comes home after work to find that the state police have taken away Rolland, while Isa and the girls hid. Isa is nearly helpless with shock, and Lina has to do the planning and organizing, with the help of the girls. They make the crossing over the border into the American zone, where Isa has a sister. And there, Lina makes several unpleasant discoveries. First, she finds that Emilia is married to an American intelligence officer, Col. Russel Connor. Second, Connor is interested in Rolland, but not out of altruistic or family reasons; Rolland is on the list of scientists formerly employed by the Nazi government who are sought by the Americans. Third, they will only try to extract Rolland if Lina agrees to help. Fourth, she is to be handed into the care of Major Paul Rutherford, a former aviator, now serving in counter-intelligence.

And worst of all, Rutherford knows all about her psychic abilities, and plans to use them, and her, to accomplish the extraction.

That's the core story set-up, although there is much, much more. I leave the discovery of her adventures, torments, and conflicts as an exercise for the reader. You may anticipate losing sleep over this one.

I will, however, address an extremely important plot device, the device central to the story, which has an unexpected impact on the romantic liaisons formed in the book. Specifically, the speed at which mature/lasting romantic liaisons can be formed.

The PURPOSE of a courting period is to discover the other person. You have to spend time with them in order to distinguish between attraction, which is fast and fairly common, and a determined commitment necessary for a healthy, mature relationship. Usually, that period of getting to know the other person takes months, or longer. And it is ESSENTIAL in Western culture, which doesn't accommodate arranged marriages.

But! Ezell's "Psyche of War" series postulates something closely akin to telepathy. It's not just thought transfers, though; there is a sharing of emotional states, and beliefs; it's a dreadfully intrusive act, if not voluntary. Hence, Lina avoids doing it, even after her powers return, out of respect for the others. However, Paul Rutherford, the American intelligence officer, not only opens his mind to her, he INSISTS that they maintain a continuous link, and as a side effect, they come to know each other, thoroughly.

And, having accomplished that in a very short period of time, they fall in love, and ...not spoiling fur-



ther.

And it's LEGIT!

How do I know it's legit? Because Poul Anderson addressed the Very Same Issue of knowing another via telepathic communication, in his 1957 story, "Journey's End." True, that one has a different ending, but it doesn't matter.

The essence is the same: via the type of communication Ezell describes, two people can come to know each other much faster than is possible with mundane forms of communication. For one thing, there is no hiding secrets, and no possibility of deceit. Each person, even if unwilling, brings nothing but the truth to the communication. For another, the ever-important issue of trust is quickly laid to rest. Lina is instantly able to discern what Paul's intentions are toward her, and will encounter no surprise betrayals.

True, there are other elements necessary to the formation of a mature relationship, but the most important aspect has very little to do with the body; it's almost entirely a decision, a choice. And, while for the mundane world, bad choices can be made, because the proper evidence is hidden or ignored., that's simply not possible with the mind-to-mind connection in this series.

SO: the romance works, and I don't want to hear anyone whining that it isn't realistic. Got that?

This is only the first finalist I've read and reviewed in the Alternate History category. At first glance, my impression is that the field this year doesn't have quite the depth that it had in 2018, and the integrity and brilliance of Ezell's writing might very well result in the prize going to her. There could be some sleepers, though, and I'm surely not going to presume to crystal ball status.

Here's what you will pay for this book on Amazon:

Kindle: \$4.99

Audio-book: N/A

Paperback: \$14.99

Hardback: N/A

Amazon reviews: 37; 5.0/5.0 stars

Goodreads reviews: 9; 4.93/5.0 stars

## **The Known Universe versus the State Universe of Larry Niven**

by Tamara Wilhite

Larry Niven is famous for Ringworld, but he played with the same world-altering concepts in other works. The less-famous example is "A World Out of Time" and other works in his "State" universe like "The Smoke Ring". The man obviously loves coming up with habitable non-planets.

In the State universe, there is the population controlling world government of Gil Hamilton but far, far worse. The government mandated eugenics is similar.

The State universe novel "A World Out of Time" features the deep time found in the Known Space stories "The Ethics of Madness" and "One Face". In "One Face", a crew even returns to a dead Earth and debates restarting the human race.

The planet moving technology of “A World Out of Time” is feasible, though it differs from the methods of the Puppeteers in Fleet of Worlds.

Hibernation to travel the stars was standard in Known Space before aliens gave us faster than light travel. The State universe doesn't have aliens, though humanity's descendants are very different from us. The freezing of the dead in the hope of revival is a facet of both the Known Space and State universes, but the end results are very different. Gil Hamilton at one point has to protect the only two heirs of a rich frozen person, while the poor in stasis are disassembled for spare parts. In the State universe, you can't take it with you. Your memories are transferred via memory RNA into a dead criminal's living body. Your assets went to your heirs or the state, and when you wake up, you lack the rights that citizens have. That matters less than you think.

The transporter booths you see in Known Space are prominent. Longevity definitely shapes human society in “A World without Time”. However, instead of booster spice, a drug that yields immortality, it is achieved via the teleportation booths. I've only seen that option explored several other places such as the Taelon transference technology in “Earth: Final Conflict” and one Star Trek episode. The irony is that the Star Trek universe could implement such technology on a massive scale and chooses not to.

[Dragon Nominee for Best Alternate History Novel](#)

[The Iron Codex by David Mack](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

“The Iron Codex” is a finalist in the “Best Alternate History” category. I don't know who decides on which category is appropriate for the nominations; is it all done by the person nominating? If I turn my head to the side and squint one of my eyes nearly shut, I THINK I can see the justification for this being in the category of Alternate History. It does, after all, tie the story into real-world events, but offers different causes for them. And maybe that's all that is necessary.

However, I don't think that's the MAJOR characteristic of the book. Now, admittedly, I'm going to suggest that it belongs in a category about which I know nearly nothing, so, take my opinion with a grain of salt. But do, please, at last give this some consideration.

I think the book belongs in the Horror section. I have two comments about that classification preference:

1. I do NOT read horror. I don't watch horror movies. I stay as far away from horror as I can. Therefore, I may be just as ignorant about the rules for the horror genre as I have been about the rules for some of the romance books. I was schooled about that several years ago, when I read a book about a person who turned into a jungle cat, and so on, and who encountered a person who turned into a bigger cat, and so on, and they formed an immediate attraction for each other, and so on. My interpretation was that this was soft porn; those with more experience than I pointed out that this sort of thing was EXPECTED in that genre, and so on. Okay, I learned that. And there are surely some things that I would need to learn about requirements for the horror genre, were I to try to obtain expertise in that field. I'm basing my classification just what I know about today, and:

2. The CORE to this book is not about alternate history; it's about demonic possession. And I think that makes it horror. Maybe not. But, until I learn otherwise, having murderous, grotesque minions of the devil summoned via incantations, hemmed in by lines drawn in specific diagrams, or even being controlled and internalized: that's horror. And, had it not been that the book was nominated in another category, and that I feel responsible to follow through with my public commitment to review the entries in the four categories of Best SF, Best Fantasy, Best Military SF, and Best Alternate History, there's no way I read this book past the first half of the first chapter. As it was: I was squeamish. YMMV.

I think the cover is GREAT! In fact, that's how I selected this as the next book to read. It's a dark-haired, black-clad figure with a blade, riding a black motorcycle, so YAY! The cover art is by Larry Rostant, and the cover design was done by Jamie Stafford-Hill; these are people I'm not familiar with, but I do like their work here.

And, the book opens with that scene. It's 1954. The figure on the bike is one Anya Kernova, and she is in hot pursuit of a wicked, wicked NAZI! Whatever else may be going on in the book, the author is good with the details. The bike she is riding is a Vincent Black Shadow, a legendary machine that was clocked in excess of 150 mph at a test run at the Bonneville Salt Flats. The motorcycles are no more, alas; they depended on hand-fitting the parts by master craftsmen, and that just wasn't economically feasible, once assembly line techniques were mastered. At the time, though, this was the fastest production motorcycle in the world.

Although I loved the bike, and am always in support of tracking down wicked, wicked Nazis, I do confess to being a bit perplexed by one thing: Anya is possessed by demons. At first, I thought they were speaking figuratively, as in, the demons of your guilty past, etc. Nope. These are nasty, pit-dwelling demons; even if they ARE used as weapon to capture and interrogate wicked, wicked Nazis, how do you tell the good guys from the bad guys if they are all possessed by demons? It's a non-trivial issue.

But here's a take-away: Anya wants to kill Nazis.

On the other side of the world, in a London gentleman's club, dastardly Dragan Dalca hosts manufactures representatives from France, America, and Russia. It's pretty easy to tell that HE is a bad guy, because he accepts bribes from them to sabotage a British de Havilland Comet, an early jetliner.

In Washington DC, Briet Segfrunsdottir starts a new day in the Silo, in the Pentagon, where she summons demons to prepare a defense against nuclear war. On this particular day, she is angered, because she is presented with four new trainees. She has already prepped three prior sets, but they have mysteriously disappeared.

In Rome, Father Luis Rodrigo Perez is horrified by the action of Dalca's demon, as he destroys the airliner and passengers, and is dismayed that the church team observing fails to intervene.

In Laos, British intelligence agent Miles Franklin finds his partner, American ex-pat Cade Martin, in a narcotic stupor, as a demon prepares to devour him. At the last second, Cade rises and kills the demon. Then the pair kills three Russian agents on a hit mission. And Cade seems to be available to go back to work.

Anya tries to swap the journal she took from the body of the wicked, wicked Nazi for assistance from a group of rabbis in translating a peculiar document she owns: the Iron Codex. It is written in an angelic language, that only a few can read. The rabbis aren't interested in helping her. A group in the Catholic Church could help, but they want the Codex for themselves. In fact, the head of the secret magic-

wielding order, Cardinal Lombardi, sends Father Luis to La Paz to get the Codex from Anya.

Briet has her work shut down, in the middle of interviewing a powerful demon. And Dragan blackmails a US senator into transferring title of a facility over to him.

Those are all the pieces we start with; of course, the fate of the world is in the balance. And I'm just guessing that the group that is working against the plans of the evil jetliner-killing Dragan are the good guys, although I can't quite work out the morality of subjugating demonic and angelic beings.

I think your opinion of the book is going to depend on how you feel about working with demons. Me? Don't care for it. Would not read this book, or the prequel, or the sequel. However, I THINK you'll find that the book is well-written. I only found one minor weapons quibble; a flash suppressor on an M3 carbine will NOT muffle the sound, but for sure, wind noise can distort the sound of a gunshot. And other elements are well detailed.

As for The Question: Is "The Iron Codex" a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Alternate History?

My opinion: No, it isn't. In the first place, as I said earlier, this isn't alternate history, it's horror. In the second place, the history itself isn't alternate at all. The REASONS behind some historical events are different, but the events themselves take place in the story just as they do in our timeline.

[Dragon Nominee for Best Alternate History Novel](#)

[The Calculating Stars by Mary Robinette Kowal](#)

[Review by Pat Patterson](#)

"The Calculating Stars" is, if nothing else, a paeon to the courage and strength of the women featured in "Hidden Figures," although Dilly's Girls and the Debs at Bletchley Park in WWII could also accept some of the homage given to those women with amazing math and problem-solving skills. At the time, their contributions to their countries were largely anonymous, a status which has been partially rectified in recent years. Also receiving well-earned recognition are the women who served with the Women Airforce (or Army, or Auxiliary) Service Pilots (WASP), a cadre of over 1000 pilots who flew in various essential non-combat roles in WWII, replacing male pilots who were cleared for combat status. All of these groups are worth the time it would take to research them, and the author includes some additional information in an appendix.

Protagonist Elma Wexler York and her husband Nathaniel are taking a brief semi-honeymoon, prior to returning to jobs with the newly founded National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in Washington, DC. He is an engineer, she a mathematician, although that title is not used for her. Rather, she and her fellows are called computers. Both served during WWII, he as an Army captain, she as a WASP.

Although the catastrophic meteorite ocean strike offshore Washington DC, at 9:53 AM on March 3rd, 1952, is the foundation of the story, this story diverged from our timeline before that event. We are told that Dewey actually did defeat Truman, and also that NACA has launched three satellites. No additional background is provided, but the author explains that she made the changes so that Wernher von Braun and his crew could receive funding from a Dewey Administration.

The couple survive the blast effects from the strike, and are able to reach their private aircraft, parked some distance from the cabin. Along the way, they see wreckage and body parts, but no living humans. Elma pilots the plane to the nearest open airfield, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. There they meet with Air Force colonel Stetson Parker, who suggests that because of the casualties in the DC area, his command may extend well beyond the boundaries of Wright-Patterson. He is delighted to see Nathaniel, as he believes that the catastrophe may be a result of a Russian rocket attack, and wants to use his expertise to prepare a counter-attack. He is far from pleased to see Elma, though, as he believes she reported him for sexual harassment ('conduct unbecoming for an officer') when they happened to be serving in the same area during WWII.

NOTE: Throughout the book, he remains the Bad Guy. While his skills as a pilot are never in question, and his ability as a flight instructor is commended, his character strives to denigrate Elma and block her from advancement.

By virtue of family connections and her own expertise, Elma is able to gather data which predicts global extinction within 50 years. She is able to get the attention of the acting president, the former Secretary of Agriculture. And, what with one thing and another, the nascent American space program is funded to research immediate development of off-planet colonies. NACA is absorbed into the new International Aerospace Coalition, IAC.

Elma recruits a cadre of women to run the calculations necessary to develop the hardware for the space program. Former WASPs are heavily represented, and she is also preparing the women to participate fully in the operational aspects of the program, by the formation of a women's flying club. The woman who was her original hostess when she arrived at Wright-Patterson puts her in touch with some black aviators, and the group incorporates black aviators, as well as a Chinese woman.

Elma's contact with the black women opens her eyes to the segregation in the system. The refusal of the IAC administration to consider women for training as astronauts, as well as the exclusion of non-white candidates, and her efforts to overcome that choice, provides the text for the remainder of the book.

Stories classed as science fiction absolutely get to take liberty with facts. That's NOT a negative. I'm thinking specifically about Heinlein's "Waldo" and "Magic, Incorporated," and how much I've enjoyed re-reading those over the years. Even so, I am permitted to point out points in which the narrative seems stretched.

I doubt seriously that there was a data base available that would have permitted such specificity of climate predictions in 1952, and even if some relevant records were available, the number crunching power of methods available at the time simply couldn't make anything like a reliable prediction. While the author does gain some leeway here, by establishing that early results weren't consistent with the original prediction, that isn't quite the point; the point is not coming up with an accurate forecast; the point is coming up with a forecast that policy-makers will accept. It simply couldn't be done. It's not a deal-breaker, though; this IS, after all, science fiction.

The massive number of innovations needed to achieve a space colonization effort large enough to guarantee the survival of the human race, within the 50-year time limit imposed, is more than unrealistic. It's not a deal-breaker, though; this IS, after all, science fiction.

One of the main supporters of the space program is said, in August of 1956, to have been a vocal supporter of Dr. Martin Luther King. That's not likely to be the case, for several reasons. At that time, King

had essentially NO national reputation; he did not start to gain notice until the Birmingham Bus boycott. In addition, the possibility of the economy recovering enough by August of 1956 for a non-violent sustained civil rights demonstration along the order of the Birmingham action to take place is small, particularly since the headquarters of the NAACP is in Baltimore, which was destroyed. Finally, King was likely dead. When the meteorite hit, King was a doctoral student in Boston, and Boston streets flood during routine weather. With coastal areas being obliterated from the wave surge, it's not likely that anyone in that area survived. It's not a deal-breaker, though; this IS, after all, science fiction.

I think the author is wildly optimistic about implementing race- and gender-free recruiting for military programs in a post-meteor US. In our own timeline, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 AFTER he received his party's nomination for the 1948 election, and even so, the last military segregated unit wasn't eliminated until late 1954. In the chaos following the decapitation of the military in 1952, the military would revert to tradition, not accept innovation. It's not a deal-breaker, though; this IS, after all, science fiction; bit it's CLOSE.

There are two items, which taken together, DO amount to a deal-breaker for me, and they are related, via one particular scene.

Three of the Lady Astronaut trainees participate in an exercise which simulates an aircraft crashing in water. The "Dilbert Dunker" is a real device used in training, but in this scene, the women are given bikinis to wear, instead of a flight suit, and are photographed by a horde of reporters as they go through the process.

This is absolutely implausible. At the time, the bikini was a new and risqué item of swimwear, banned from many public beaches. A conversation with a retired NASA scientist affirmed that the intensely conservative space administration would NEVER have exposed trainees to what amounts to a wet T-shirt contest. They might have suicided before permitting women to participate in the training program, but they would NEVER have permitted such a violation of standard dress codes in such fashion.

Besides being implausible, it was the scene that convinced me that the book was less about science fiction and alternate history, than it was about polemics. We are given many examples, prior to this, of the wicked treatment the women are subject to, without any negative consequences to those who block their advancement, or even actively persecute them. There is no disputing the historic fact of systematic segregation and discrimination based on gender and race, which are the two factors presented in the book. However, the author made the point a LONG time before this scene. I found the bikini scene to be clownish and grotesque, and it utterly took me out of the narrative.

And then we come to the question: Is this book a likely candidate to win the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Alternate History Novel?

The answer to THAT question is largely going to depend on who you ask. The Science Fiction Writers Association gave it the 2019 Award for Best Novel. It also won the 2019 Locus Award, which is determined by an online vote, with votes from subscribers to the magazine given twice the weight of non-subscribers. It also won the 2019 Hugo for Best Novel; those are determined by WorldCon members voting. And so on. So, there is plenty of support for the win.

However.

There are just too many impossible things for me to believe, and I truly was disturbed by the bikini scene.

Dragon Nominee for Best Alternate History Novel  
**Machines Like Me** by Ian McEwan  
Review by Pat Patterson

Alternate history. As soon as I started reading this book, I had to do a LOT of thinking about the field, and the most hopeful thing I came up with is: maybe it's not even science fiction, and everyone will realize that, and thus I will never have to read something like this again.

Yeah, that WAS the most hopeful thing I came up with, and the hope lasted maybe 30 seconds. It was at that point that I remembered some of the EXCELLENT alternate history I've read in the past, and hope to read more of in the future. In fact, prior to reading THIS work, the only BAD alternate history I've encountered was written by Harry Turtledove about the Civil War. It was bad, because I found NO creativity in the writing; all he did was flip North and South, turn black slaves into blond slaves, and assign slightly modified names to the principal characters, like Avram for Abraham Lincoln. That's a book your word processor can write, if you know how to use the search-and-replace function.

Still, I'd much rather read THREE works like that, than one like "Machines Like Me."

This is, clearly, alternate history, and thus qualifies for the category. It's hard to say exactly what the point of divergence could be; Alan Turing is the most prominent secondary character, and one source said the divergence was that Turing refused chemical castration, and took a year in prison instead. That doesn't fly, though, because Turing was arrested in 1952, and died in 1954, while the book also mentions that the US did NOT drop the atomic bomb on Japan, which would have been a divergence in 1945. Whatever the divergence point, in the setting of the book, England in the 1980s, there are numerous technological advances that vary from our timeline, and that leads to a British loss to Argentina in the Falklands War.

So, yes. Alternate history.

But that hardly seems the point. Although a chief plot device is the ability to purchase a human-appearing robot, which then acts more-or-less like a human, almost all the action takes place in the mind of the protagonist. And his mind is a terrible thing to waste your time on. He's a boring drone; although not born to wealth, he has inherited a great deal of money due to the sale of his family home. He then proceeds to squander it, mostly on the purchase of a robot, but on a smaller, more constant scale by online trading. He is really a zero, going nowhere, and the purchase of a robot human mostly serves to give him the opportunity to whine about how pathetic he is.

He's right, you know. He IS pathetic. He has a wretched love affair with his neighbor, which he is afraid to invest in. They appear to have some sexual chemistry, the details of which transpire behind a closed bedroom door, thankfully, but otherwise, don't really seem to like each other.

There are plot developments. They transform the story from a dull monotonous tale of a drone who owns an android to a dull monotonous tale of a drone who owns an android and has a couple of things happen to him. However, none of the things which happen to him seem to result in any change at all.

It is entirely possible that this is a brilliant, scathing satire on middle class British life. If so, it went over my head entirely, and makes me ever so grateful that my ancestors fled the island for America.

It took me the better part of a day to read this. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, I would rather have done just about anything else.

Is this a legitimate contender for the 2019 Dragon Award for Best Alternate History? If it wins, the fix is in, and the people who are responsible for the fix wish to kill enjoyable science fiction.

## Ryn Lilley's *Underground Episode One: Lost Beginnings*

Review by Jim McCoy

Sometimes I read a story and think that the author must have spent a lot of time watching television and/or movies. Often, this is for a bad reason, but it doesn't have to be. I watch a lot of television too and if I tell the story about *Return of the Jedi* being the first movie I ever saw at the theater one more time I may be murdered. I've loved going to movies ever since and now I've got Netflix. I mention this because *Underground Episode One: Lost Beginnings* has a television style feel to it. I really did feel more like I was watching this on television than reading it at times. It has similar pacing and dramatic draws as a full hour episode of something fun minus the commercials. Come to think about it, Ryn Lilley seems to be encouraging my Netflix addiction without trying to. That's okay because I enjoyed the book.

The first three books in the series are known as Season One, so I'm thinking that this is intentional. As a matter of fact, I actually went looking to see if there was a television series of the same name. I couldn't find one on the American version of Amazon, but this book was sent in by Dave Freer. He lives in Australia so maybe it is a show there. Then again, maybe not too. I've never been to Australia so I'm not going to claim to know anything about their television shows.

Part of the reason I say that this feels like a TV show is because of the way it starts. In a way it feels almost like an episode of *Doogie Howser*. Seriously. The book starts with a series of emails going back and forth to set the scene. We get to know the characters a bit and then it all drops in the pot and things go from scary to bad to worse in something like two minutes of camera time. The acceleration curve is steep.

This book, like many others admittedly, has a tendency to flash back and forth between point of view characters rather quickly. I'm a big fan of this kind of thing. George RR Martin and Harry Turtledove both come to mind. Lilley uses the technique effectively, yet I can't quite get over the fact that it feels like there is a director outside switching scenes and soundstages. I kept waiting for jump cuts. It was a lot of fun and kind of took me back to a class I took called *Intro to Film*. I kept trying to picture the camera angles.

The main character is a teenage boy who owns a computer/Artificial Intelligence with a nagging problem. He needs to get his homework done and the thing will not leave him alone. It's just as he gets it done and decides to head off to the other side of the asteroid that he lives on that things get interesting... and he ends up waking up somewhere he'd rather not be. The inhabitants of his new planet aren't human and their medical technology is not up to snuff and it just gets crazier from there. I really started to feel for the kid.

At one point the book cuts to either another planet or another part of the same planet. Things got a little hazy for me here. Here we meet a gladiator, imprisoned for a crime and forced to fight for his life.



Things don't work out for his captors as he fights better than he is supposed to. He eventually manages to get himself freed but only because there is a war coming and his descendants will prove useful to the war effort. Apparently he has strong genes and is therefore useful as breeding stock. He is given a leadership position and then... the book ends. Left unclear is whether the war will be against humanity, or the planet where our heroes are, or somewhere else. Also unclear is how the humans in the book relate to this whole thing.

This is where the sensation of watching a TV show gets even stronger. *Lost Beginnings* has a lot of similarities to the first episode of *Farscape*, including the part where nothing is resolved and we're left with more questions than answers. There is a sequel out so I guess we'll get some there. Of course, that has the potential to lead to more questions, which will lead to another sequel... Yeah, that seems to be the way good SF is trending right now. I won't complain.

*Lost Beginnings* could have been longer. Things move really quickly and it would have been beneficial to see some more details added. I didn't count the words in this one, but I read it on my phone and I went through it in no time. It wasn't very long at all. What was there was definitely enjoyable, but I really wish there was more. Answering a few more of the questions brought up by the story would have been helpful as well.

It did take a little longer for this book to really get started than I wanted it to. The emails, the typical disagreements with parents were useful as lead in material, but I prefer an opening that just explodes from the page. We've all seen the opening to Episode IV right? The one where the Star Destroyer comes out of nowhere and starts firing on the Rebel ship? That type of opening is missing here and I would have preferred to see something in that vein rather than dragging the beginning out. Those are minor things though and other than that the book was really good. I would seriously like to see this on my TV at some point. I think it has that kind of potential.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 alien artifacts.

## Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi

Review by Chris Nuttall

I should note, at the start, that *Children of Blood and Bone* is written in a curious style. The author has used first-person, immediate tense ("I walk down the street") and – for some reason – used three separate POV characters. I'm not sure why she did it, because – while it does lend the text a certain degree of immediacy – it also makes the first few characters harder to follow. Things smooth out as the book progresses, I concede, but there were a couple of times I nearly put the book aside and gave up. Thankfully, I kept reading. I'm glad I did, because *Children of Blood and Bone* is a very good read.

There was magic once, in a land called Orisha. The magicians – the maji clans – were divided into a number of different subgroups, each one possessing a different magic. But, one terrible day, the magic went away ... and King Saran struck, slaughtering the magicians as they reeled from the loss of their powers. The only survivors were the children, the ones too young to come into their powers. They were allowed to live, but kept under close supervision. All hope of rebuilding, and destroying the king's tyranny, seems lost.

However, when a mysterious scroll with the power to reawaken magic surfaces – and hints of other ar-

artefacts come into view – all this may change. A trio of characters – Zélie, the daughter of a former maji; Tzain, her brother; Princess Amari, who runs away and joins Zélie after King Saran killed one of Amari's friends for possessing magic – set out to recover the other artefacts and perform a ritual that will bring magic back. They are pursued by Crown Prince Inan, who is himself secretly a maji. They go through hell – and a great deal of personal development – before they finally perform the ritual, although it is clear that the story is far from over (and a sequel is due out later this year).

In some ways, *Children of Blood and Bone* reminds me of *The Age of Misrule*. The main characters have to search the land for a handful of artefacts, all the while avoiding attention from the bad guys. This isn't easy, of course, and there are a lot of similarities between the two books. However, there is more than enough to *Children of Blood and Bone* for it to stand on its own.

The author's worldbuilding is very good. It captures the flavour of an alternate Africa very well, resting comfortably – as it does – in African myth. The book shifts from place to place, each one strikingly different ... from each other as well as the world we know. This is not – thankfully – Wakanda. The country is presented to us as a very human land, with glories as well as horrors. Some of these are deeply personal, from the curse of growing up under a tyrant's rule to the pleasure of indulging in minor rebellion. There is much to like – and admire – here.

She also manages to give her three main characters life, crafting them as three-dimensional flawed people rather than archetypes or one-dimensional Mary Sues. Zélie is both an action girl and a deconstruction of an action girl, with a headstrong nature that tends to get her into trouble as much as it saves her life. (The book is aware of this, as is Zélie herself.) Amari, by contrast, starts life as a passive character who grows into a heroine. The two girls have a tendency to clash at first, a moment of realism in a genre where most questing parties trust each other from the start.

Crown Prince Inan is a far more conflicted character, one who constantly – and confusingly – changes his mind. He's trying to catch the heroes – no, he's trying to join them – no, he's trying to catch them again ... his viewpoint keeps shifting as he gets new information, driven by both self-loathing – he's a magician, which in his mind makes him a monster – and a growing love for Zélie. It is sometimes hard to follow him, at least in part because the character himself is unsure of what he wants to do. He spends the entire book torn between his father and his own nature, unclear on what the truth actually is.

I'm not sure, to be honest, if that was the writer's intention. On the surface, King Saran is a monster. There is ample evidence of his monstrosity. It cannot be denied. But, at the same time, he charges that the maji were monsters themselves, beings of supernatural powers that destroyed country after country before he found out how to break their powers and crush them. It's curious that he didn't slaughter their children as well as the adults. And when we see flickers of the once-great magic, it's easy to see why muggles might have been scared of them. Zélie sees her dead mother as a heroine; others, perhaps with reason, might think otherwise. And even if they were, what about their children? The kids have grown up powerless and abused. What will they do when they get their powers back?

There's no good answer to these questions. We – our society – hasn't found any good answers either.

The book touches – very lightly – on racism, although barely more than enough to remind us that all of the characters are black. Amari's mother tries to lighten her skin, apparently out of fear that Amari's dark skin is a hint that her mother cheated on her father, but she's the only one who seems to care. (Amari's father may be displeased with her, even before she runs away, but there's no hint it's because of her skin.) Inan doesn't seem to feel any loathing or disgust at his attraction to Zélie, something that

would be odd for a dyed-in-the-wool racist.

Children of Blood and Bone is on firmer ground as an indictment of classism. The contrast between the lives of Zélie and Tzain, who grew up poor and powerless, and the royal family is striking – and Zélie doesn't hesitate to rub Amari's nose in it. There are all sorts of little moments that illustrate how hard it can be to climb up the social ladder – and how such a society breeds prejudices of its own. Tzain refuses to believe that Inan might genuinely be falling in love with his sister, charging that all Inan wants is to have sex with her. We know he's wrong, because we see Inan's point of view, but he isn't being unreasonable. It's difficult for the characters to work together because they are blinded by their own fears.

The author herself draws a line between Children of Blood and Bone and police brutality in the United States. In some ways, this weakens the book. (Thankfully, she put it in the afterword.) The blunt truth is that the book's society is nothing like America, at least as far as I can tell from my vantage point on the far side of the pond, and – as I noted above – it raises the question of who is genuinely in the right? (Or, more likely, who is unable to take their boot off the underclass's neck for fear that the underclass will spring up and tear their former oppressors apart? The problem with defusing a ticking time bomb is that even trying might set off the explosion.)

That said, the only real problem lies with the narrative style. It is sometimes hard to keep track of the POV character, which leads to some odd moments; one character's observations on a given event are different to another character's observations. I'm not a great fan of mixing and matching first-person POVs, although – as the book picks up speed – the problems tend to smooth themselves out. By the time the book reaches the conclusion, things are moving along nicely.

Overall, I enjoyed the book. It has good – and nicely-flawed – characters, an interesting background that is both different and understandable, a definite hint that things are a little more nuanced than either side would care to admit and, perhaps most importantly of all, a complete story that leaves plenty of room for a sequel. I await this author's next book with interest.

## Jacob by David Gerrold

Review by Jim McCoy

As someone who was involved in a small way in the recent Hugo controversy, I have been looking for an opportunity to read something by the other side. I wanted to get a look at what they considered to be award worthy. Imagine my sense of surprise when I found out from an anonymous source that David "You Should Never Campaign for Awards" Gerrold had sent out a letter promoting his book *Jacob*. "Awesome" I thought to myself, "I can finally get a look at what the other side considers to be award winning. Maybe I can learn a little more about how things are supposed to look." Yeah, I was sadly disappointed.

Honestly, if this is what good Science Fiction is, I'll just read drek. I've never been so bored in my life. Nothing happens in this story. It is a conversation that takes place over years between two men. There is no action. There is no hint that action is coming. The vampire in the series spends his time describing things that happened in his life before he was turned. I love a good story in flashback but that's not what this is. It is a conversation in written form. Some would call this artsy I'm sure, but I just call it boring.

The best part about this book was the beginning of the prologue. It had me intrigued. It's told in first

person from the part of the vampire and specifically mentions *Twilight* and *The Vampire Chronicles*. That's hardly surprising. Combine Bella's whining with Anne Rice's homoerotic touch with her vamps and you get *Jacob*. You just have to do it badly. And that is probably the most annoying part of the entire work.

I'm not a *Twilight* fan. I read about the first hundred-forty pages of the first book and gave it to my niece. She and her mother both enjoyed it. I saw the first three movies because my then-wife loved the series. Fortunately I divorced her before I got dragged off to the last two. My attitude toward *The Vampire Chronicles* is completely and utterly different. I was introduced to them via the *Interview With the Vampire*. I didn't find out until I bought the VHS that was even a book that went with the movie because Anne Rice's work isn't shelved with the SF/F stuff and I don't usually venture into any other part of the bookstore, but I loved it. I loved all of the books. And so, when somebody does this poor of an imitation of one of my favorite stories it pisses me off. Anne Rice's vampires did things. They went places. They partied in New Orleans and robbed ancient tombs of their inhabitants. They fought. They cried. They fought some more. They made up. The Talamasca showed up. One of them got turned. Etc.

Gerrold's vampires kind of do all of that but it happens offscreen and the details are left out. It's all talked about later in a "well, there was a war, but I don't want to go through it all." type attitude. There's a bunch of emotional whining, a lot of "Oh, I want to be a vampire and they're all being mean to me by not turning me" and a lot of "Oh noes, the vampire just left. I may never see him again," but again, no action. Not all action has to be violence. There were a few sexual encounters described but for the most part only in vague terms. Honestly, if Gerrold was going to go into the sex he should have done it. Barring that, he could have left it at the bedroom door. Instead, he decided to half-ass things and it sucked.

Honestly though, the title that comes to mind while reading *Jacob* is not *Interview With the Vampire* and it's not *Twilight*, it's *Axolotl Roadkill*. For those that don't remember that was a story, written by Helene Hegemann which led to a controversy about plagiarism. She admits to having mixed two other stories together using a technique called "blending." Others said she committed plagiarism. Apparently, Hegemann won the argument because her book is still available on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites. Gerrold seems to have taken lessons from her because he used the same techniques. Granted, all Science Fiction and Fantasy stories are derivative in one form or another

*Jacob* is a book with no internal consistency. I'm sorry, but a character can have a background as a male prostitute who got paid to have sex with other men or he can have sex afterward with a boy he is supposedly in love with and not know how things work, but he can't do both. Likewise, his lover can either be a clueless newbie who doesn't know how things work or he can be experienced with a string of former lovers. It doesn't work both ways. I'm not offended by sex whether straight, gay or some other kind. It doesn't bother me. Being treated like an idiot does. If an author expects me to suspend disbelief, plausibility is key. I simply cannot bring myself to believe that someone who got paid to have sex doesn't know how to have sex. A little bit of continuity editing may have gone a long way here.

Once upon a time, Leonard Nimoy refused to do *Star Trek Generations* because he added nothing to the plot and was there simply as some type of exclamation point. Nimoy talks about it in his memoir *I am Spock*. I wish he could have had a conversation with Gerrold before Gerrold wrote the majority of his prologue. After the aforementioned good part, he goes into his writers' group. He lovingly details a bunch of characters (including one transgender person who was doubtlessly thrown in simply for box checking or, if you prefer, "the purposes of inclusion.") who never appear again and have nothing to do with anything. It's a simple exercise in boredom and possibly revenge on people who were in a writing group with Dear Author at one point. It adds nothing to the story and should never have been included.

Then we're treated our lecture for the day: All writing must be not merely to entertain but to enlighten. That's a fascinating theory but one that falls apart in practice, especially since there is nothing enlightening about *Jacob* at all. That's alright though, because there's nothing entertaining about it either. *Jacob* is, put simply, a complete and utter waste of time. There is no reason to read it and my advice would be to save your time and money and spend it on something less painful. A root canal comes to mind.

Bottom Line: 0.25 out of 5 toothpicks (to hold your eyes open while you're reading this.)

## Year's Best Military and Adventure SF, Volume 5

Edited by David Afsharirad

Review by Pat Patterson

PREFACE by David Afsharirad. Read this for two reasons: first, Afsharirad discusses his rationale for the selections, which is nice background, but SECOND! The amount of effort put into harvesting out a 'best of' collection is something I simply cannot comprehend. Anybody who does that deserves the trivial amount of effort the reader expends to read his comments.

LOVE IN THE TIME OF INTERSELLAR WAR by Brendan DuBois. It's a grim future postulated, with alien monsters in control of space, and thus in control of the surface of the planet. If you think that a fatal disease, amputation, and alien domination will prevent love, then you have never spent time in the company of a teenage boy.

GOING DARK by Richard Fox. Again, a grim future, because the aliens have landed, and with superior technology are making a mess for the humans. Part of the human solution: develop cyborgs/golems. These are large, not-very-smart, powerful and intensely loyal soldiers, bonded to their team leader. Loyalty runs both ways, though, as anyone who has led a team under stressful circumstances can attest.

THE SCRAPYARD SHIP by Felix R. Savage. This one is FUNNY! Yes, the technology is there, and the aliens, and the carnivorous bushes, but the deep joke is found elsewhere. It ALWAYS comes down to the little guy making the big guy look stupid. Even when the little guy is a shape-shifter. I'm not quite sure how the beautiful human girl and the strange alien guy work through their relationship, though. Sigh. Love is beautiful.

BROKEN WINGS by William Ledbetter. A beautiful story. The most SCIENCE-y part of the science fiction is an artifact found floating in space, but we don't need to know ANYTHING about it for the story to be wonderful. It's really a story about what happens when you do as much good as you can with what you've got, and don't allow what you DON'T have to rule.

A SONG OF HOME, THE ORGAN GRINDS by James Beamon. I believe all steampunk is supposed to be creepy. Maybe not. But, in this alternative universe, an organ grinder has more than one function, and more than one meaning. Yes, there are monkeys involved. And I recommend you get a music source that allows you to hear the songs mentioned in the story.

ONCE ON THE BLUE MOON by Kristine Kathryn Rusch. Sigh. Kristine Kathryn Rusch. It is astounding to me that a person this young could be this talented and this accomplished. It wouldn't sur-

prise me to discover that she also knows how to repair televisions. In this story, however, she takes elements from adventure, family pathos, space treachery, hacking, and cruise ships, and gives us a heroine to admire, and one who, if she moves next door to you, makes you move to Alabama.

CRASH-SITE by Brian Trent. Creepy, convoluted, and with enough intrigue and betrayal for anyone interested in that sort of thing. Although all of the action doesn't take place in a swamp, it feels like one has soaked your underwear as you read it, and there is sand in your shoes, and no dry towels, anywhere.

THIRTY-THREE PERCENT JOE by Suzanne Palmer. Black humor, nicely done. When a guy who wants to be a baker is thrust into a combat role because his psycho mom wants that, it's hard to imagine a good outcome. And, to help us understand the story a bit better, he has various prosthetic replacements of battle wounds that talk to each other. And to him.

HATE IN THE DARKNESS by Michael Z. Williamson. Mad Mike has so constructed a universe that we MUST root for the people who are devastating Earth. Is that not strange? In this case, there are additional ethical dilemmas, centering on the core issue of who it is that has to pay the price for policy decisions. It's all couched in an edge-of-the-seat, long distance pursuit. Yes, something can be boring and terrifying at the same time.

HOMUNCULUS by Stephen Lawson. I believe that civilization has one primary purpose: to provide for the special needs of the replacements. To be less obtuse: pregnant women and children. This story is consistent with that; in a highly toxic environment, people go to extreme lengths to rescue a small child who has escaped the safe quarters provided for him.

NOT MADE FOR US by Christopher Ruocchio. The United States is CONSTRUCTED around the concept of the citizen soldier. With all of the hoopla about the Second Amendment, you'd think that would be a bit more well-known, but it's not. But, the decisions made at the time of the writing of the Constitution, and carried out since then, is that if we go to war, we pull in a bunch of civilians, arm and otherwise equip and train them, let them do the fighting, and then go back home. It's worked...okay. It's a better system than relying on a large standing professional military. But, what if you had the technology to put your soldiers on ice? Just bring them out when there was fighting to do? This isn't a novel concept explored here, but it IS something worth thinking about, over and over again. Where will their loyalty be placed? That's just one of the first questions.

THE ERKENNEN JOB by Chris Pourteau. Ah, loyalty. The topic arises again, and it will KEEP on coming up as long as the possibility exists for there to be conflicts. Tough guys with .38s walk the mean streets of the Moon, because the game isn't EVER money; the game is POWER, and money is just how you keep score. Industrial espionage, control of narcotics, and dames.

Now, in my review of Volume 3, I designated which of the stories I felt were worthy of being included in Year's Best, and which were marginal, and which flabbergasted. This time, not gonna do that. Last year, I took on the task of reviewing as many of the Dragon Award nominees as possible, and I found that with a few exceptions, they were ALL worth a win. And this year, I have read some AMAZINGLY good short stories, mostly in the military & sci-fi category. I don't trust my ability to make a recommendation about which is 'the best.' I can tell you that there are some that I ENJOYED more than others, but I must disclose that there are some stories that I HATE that are stark raving excellent. But the bottom line is this: David Afsharirad made the call to include these, and his expertise surpasses mine. That's all I have to say about that.

## Howl's Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones

Review by Heath Row

I haven't seen Hayao Miyazaki's anime adaptation of this 1986 young adult—or younger reader—novel by departed English writer Diana Wynne Jones, who was a particular favorite of Neil Gaiman. (His 2011 appreciation of Jones, “Being Alive. Mostly About Diana,” is worth tracking down.) And I'm glad. By not having seen the anime first, I didn't have any preconceived notions of what the characters in Howl's Moving Castle looked like—though the scarecrow, for some reason, always made me think of the magic brooms in *Fantasia*. And perhaps more importantly, the characters had no pre-existing voice... just the voices in my head.

It took me awhile to warm up to the book, and I really only finished it because my workplace fantasy novel reading group planned to discuss it last June. (Yes, we have one. You can have one, too!) I don't read a lot of YA fiction and found the novel to be somewhat nonsensical in its linearity, although I did appreciate the fairy tale tropes that underlay the book's setting and storytelling, as well as the delightful vagueness and sheer assumptions (the gumption!) of the magic system.

One of the most intriguing themes I picked up on while reading Howl was the danger of preconceived notions and misconceptions. Nothing in the book is really as it first seems. Not Howl, not his Moving Castle, not Sophie Hatter and her sisters, not even the Witch of the Waste. In fact, the theme is bolstered by the book's handling of reputation and reputation management, as well. The stories we tell about ourselves, the stories we tell about others, and the stories others tell about us play a large role in our collective creation of reality. Even Sophie's self-talk and off-hand comments to others come into play in interesting ways.

## Literary Criticism

### The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein by Farah Mendlesohn

Review by Chris Nuttall

It may surprise a few of my readers to learn that I don't place much credence in literary criticism, although I have written a piece of lit-crit myself. Critics have a tendency, in my view, to miss the forest for the trees, to indulge in ‘presentism’ and view the author through a very modern-day lens. This can be infuriating, at times; it is difficult to understand certain works of prose – *Romeo and Juliet*, for example – without some understanding of the realities of life in Shakespeare's time. And critics also have the habit of over-thinking matters, declaring that the author's decision tell us that the curtains were blue was a reflection of deep-seated depression when, in fact, the author meant to tell us that the curtains were blue!

Farah Mendlesohn, thankfully, has managed to avoid most of those errors.

By any reasonable standard, Robert A. Heinlein has had a massive impact on the science-fiction field, but his works have rarely been given any substantial analysis. Indeed, most modern-day critics have judged Heinlein by our standards and declared him to be sexist, racist, bigoted, etc. Others, in the meantime, have been completely uncritical of Heinlein and his works. He was one of, perhaps the, founding father of our genre and attacking him (particularly as the wokescolds try to drag his name

through the mud), feels like treason.

After a brief assessment of Heinlein's life and career, Mendlesohn starts to assess the themes running through Heinlein's works. Heinlein was very focused on the family, but the family one chooses rather than the biological family one has. This spans a range between the happy – and very 50s-typical – Stone Family to the family Lazarus Long built for himself towards the end of Heinlein's career. As Heinlein grew older, he grew more cynical; the Stones are an ideal family, in many ways, but the Farnham Family is an utter disgrace. Curiously, although he is often branded an individualist, Heinlein talks often about the need for social support structures – familial, rather than governmental. Heinlein's heroes are never true loners. They have support from their families and friends.

Mendlesohn is quite adept at recognising the concealed racial markers encoded into Heinlein's text (she spotted several I missed during my own overview), although Heinlein was often quite limited in what he could come out and say. This is a point that Mendlesohn doesn't discuss openly – it is quite possible that Heinlein's early books would have been rejected, outright, if he'd feature openly black heroes and black men in positions of power. But he gave himself enough room to deny it, if necessary. One may argue that this was contemptible, but it was a fact of life. Later, Heinlein made it clear that he had created a series of multiracial worlds.

She does, however, point out that most of Heinlein's coloured heroes were still, culturally speaking, Americans. Heinlein's heroes might have been multiracial, but not multicultural. One might accuse Heinlein of a lack of cultural diversity here, particularly in the juveniles, but it should be noted that different cultures are not always better and it can be hard to empathise with someone from a culture so different to our own that their actions made no sense to us or come across as outright evil. I would not like someone who married a child-bride, for example, and I think most people would feel the same way. Heinlein's early heroes are Americans because Heinlein saw the American ethos as the best in the world.

Mendlesohn also raises a number of interesting points regarding Heinlein's female characters, both lead characters (Podkayne and Maureen Smith) and secondary characters (Betsy of *The Star Beast*, *Wyoming of Moon*). Some of them – Maureen and Betsy – start their careers as second fiddles, held back – directly or indirectly – by social conventions. They grow and develop as their stories develop – Mendlesohn points out that Maureen was a daughter, then a wife and mother and finally an independent woman ... Maureen couldn't go back to motherhood, when her estranged children re-entered her life. She had outgrown the parental urge. Podkayne, by contrast, was the victim of failed parenting. Her parents were unable to give her the tool she needed for adulthood; nor, for that matter, was she surrounded by women who would aid her. (Duke Farnham, too, was a similar victim.) Indeed, Mendlesohn makes it clear that women within the novels played a major role in restricting other women.

In some ways, however, Mendlesohn is guilty of 'interrogating the text from the wrong perspective'. Heinlein's juveniles were written, first and foremost, for teenage boys – and teenage boys, by and large, are not interested in feminine issues. Heinlein glossed over them because he knew his audience would find it a turn-off. Successful female heroes – women, written by women – who appeal to men do it, in a sense, by turning away from traditional femininity. They are either surrounded by men (Hermione Granger) or exist in male-shaped universes (Paksenarrion). They are rarely involved with female social groups – the only real exception, as far as I can tell, is Mildred Hubble. But her books are written in a manner that allows boys to pretend that she isn't classically feminine. Heinlein did not set out to be all things to all readers – a good thing too, as it is impossible.

This explains, I think, some of the weaker moments in his earlier juveniles. The main character of Red



Planet shows signs of sexism, as Mendlesohn points out, but his sentiments would not be out of place for a teenage boy (particularly of Heinlein's youth). Heinlein clearly evolved, as similar sentiments expressed within *Tunnel in the Sky* lead to an embarrassing case of foot-in-mouth syndrome. Indeed, Heinlein would intentionally start writing his juveniles for girls as well as boys, but he kept boys as the core audience – a wise move, as girls will often read boy-books but not vice versa.

This has other effects on his writing. Mendlesohn points to problematic moments within the text – the failure of a father to admit, for example, that his daughter is more than just his daughter – but this is caused by the male mindset. Maureen argues, at one point, that men assume that a woman is subordinate until she proves otherwise. It would be more accurate to say that people (men as well as women) are pigeonholed very quickly and, once pigeonholed, have the greatest difficulty in climbing out of the pigeonhole. The male mindset leads to the same problems as female intuition; when it's right, it cannot explain why it is right, when it's wrong, it finds it hard to truly believe it's wrong. Heinlein depicted this process quite accurately – and, in other books, argued that the only true way to counter it is to give the wrong person room to retreat. This does, of course, require a sensitivity that few people are encouraged to develop.

Her comments on racism within Heinlein's works, including *Sixth Column* and *Farnham's Freehold*, are interesting. Heinlein did not depict the Pan-Asians of *Sixth Column* very kindly, it is true, but the atrocities they committed are very pitiful shadows of the atrocities committed by Imperial Japan. To challenge Heinlein on this requires a certain willingness to ignore real-life atrocities (by 1941, it was clear that the Japanese were not being 'decent' in China) and Mendlesohn, to her credit, largely avoids it. She does point out that the 'killing rays' of the Sixth Column kill Asian-Americans as well as Pan-Asians, but this is an unfortunate – and logical – effect. The ray could not tell the difference between two different groups of Asians.

Mendlesohn also raises a number of points concerning *Farnham's Freehold* – and concludes that the book is racist. This is a commonly-held belief, but it isn't one I share. Mendlesohn suggests that *Farnham's Freehold* is an 'if this goes on ...' book; I see it, instead, as a 'flipping' book. Hugh Farnham and his family – a deeply-flawed group of people, as becomes clear on the second read – start in a position of 'white supremacy.' They then go through a short period of 'equality,' followed by 'black supremacy' and ending with the 'aftermath.' In doing so, they are shown – time and time again – what it is like to be on the opposite end of the scale. The book pulls no punches – every time Hugh starts to think that maybe life as a slave won't be so bad, it pulls a rejoinder of 'OH YES IT WILL!'

There is room for an entire essay here – In Defence of *Farnham's Freehold*, perhaps – so I'll content myself with a handful of points. Heinlein, throughout his work, identified two different kinds of slave-owner – the thug, who treats his slaves as mere possessions, and the paternalist who tells himself that slavery is for the slave's own good. When *Farnham's Freehold* opens, it becomes clear that Hugh is a paternalist-type, while Duke – his son – is a thug. Their roles are so embedded within their personalities that neither of them really adapts to the period of equality. Worse, when they enter the period of black supremacy, they find themselves at the mercy of another paternalist-thug duo. They are to be denied everything, from freedom itself to the slight comfort of getting away with a little defiance. They may even be eaten alive – the slaveholders of Dixie did not practice cannibalism, as far as I know, but the slaves were certainly metaphorically cannibalised. They were certainly denied any hope for a better future. By the time the book comes to an end, Hugh has come to realise – perhaps – just what it is like to have a taste of his own medicine. He had all the answers ... he could argue and browbeat his son into submission ... and so could his 'master.'

Farnham's Freehold raised points that needed to be raised. And if it made people a little uncomfortable, that might not be a bad thing. Mendlesohn assesses that it was an overall failure, but I disagree. It came as close as it could for a book of its time.

Mendlesohn's assessment of Heinlein's 'male' and 'female' selves is interesting and well worth a read, although it may be pushing things a little too far. She notes that many of Heinlein's main characters are less interesting than their supporting characters, although – again – this isn't always a bad thing. Max Jones and John Thomas are bland, compared to Sam and Betsy, but that doesn't mean they're not heroes. Indeed, their simplicity may be part of the lesson. Max surpasses Sam and comes to safe harbour, at least in part, because he's honest enough to admit to the deception they've pulled; John Thomas defends a friend because it's the right thing to do, while Betsy, who over-thinks everything, makes things more complicated (and, at worst, worse). There is little to quibble with here.

Her assessment of the underlying social structures Heinlein depicts is quite accurate – and, unlike some others, she refrains from blaming Heinlein for depicting them. Poddy's lack of support from other women has already been noted – Maureen's financial dependency on her husband, in addition, was quite serious in a world where men held the purse strings. (It's really quite terrifying how something 'normal' can be weaponised if things go sour.) She also assesses the interaction between the 'public' and 'private' lives of his characters, noting how they interact (and how things can go wrong.) She does, however, overlook a handful of contextual points – she notes that Lazarus treats Estrellita as property, denying her agency, but one can reasonably argue that this was for Estrellita's (and Joe's) own good. He regards them both as kids in adult bodies – a dangerous combination. Of course, this is also the argument that slaveholders made (which Mendlesohn notes) and, even though it is reasonably justified in this case, it does leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Overall, it is difficult to assess this book.

Mendlesohn makes a number of very good points, although some are influenced by modern-day thinking and perceptions that Heinlein would have found very alien. She demonstrates that Heinlein seemed to have grown and evolved as he grew more confident, ranging from seemingly-trite adventures to pieces of literary merit. This may have been due to the influence of his second wife, who was a screenwriter and editor. She also makes it clear that Heinlein was very 'woke' for his era – he detested slavery, regarded rape as a great evil, created coloured and female characters in an era when no one would have batted an eyelid if he hadn't. And she raises some interesting points about Heinlein's relationship with guns, although I don't agree with all of her conclusions. Heinlein did not fetishise guns, unlike some modern authors; he seems to have regarded them as tools, something to be used if necessary. It's a valid point.

It's assessment of how Heinlein was influenced – and later, uninfluenced – by his life is also very good. Mendlesohn draws lines between his naval service and his wartime work and shows how it might have influenced his writing – Heinlein put female characters forward, at least in part, because he worked closely with women during the war. (He wasn't blind, either, to the issues raised by women entering a formerly masculine sphere.) The influence of both his second and third wives on his career are also discussed, raising the issue of just how many of his issues Heinlein was working out on paper. She also notes that, in his later years, Heinlein lost (at least some) touch with the world around him. It is hard to know how seriously to take this, but it is an interesting point.

The book also reads very well. It is an academic text, rather than a novel, but it avoids many of the boredom-inducing pitfalls common to textbooks. I enjoyed reading it and never felt the urge to skip

pages or chapters.

The book also has weaknesses. It does not focus on each of the books, separately; it is easy to see how Heinlein evolved, but harder to place his words in context. In this, it is very like Heinlein in *Dimension* (free, online); it runs the risk of assuming that his characters speak for him, rather than accepting that Heinlein preferred to show us their weaknesses rather than beat us over the head with them. (That's part of the reason I feel that Farnham's *Freehold* rewards a second read, once the reader knows where the story ends and can follow the themes running through the story.) It also notes Heinlein's weaknesses – the moments we would call 'problematic' – without always acknowledging that many of them would not have seemed problematic to Heinlein. He would have snorted, I think, at the idea that disguising Wyoh would be seen as 'minstrelsy' (or Blackface, a comparison Mendlesohn doesn't draw, but one that occurred to me).

Heinlein was not fond of critics, not entirely without reason. Even in his day, a good critic could be a wonder – and a bad one a nightmare. But I think he might have liked this book – and, as Heinlein remains popular, we should ask ourselves why. You may not agree with everything in this book, but it will make you think. Mendlesohn treats Heinlein as what he was, a man. Not an angel, or a demon, but a man. An influential man, but a man nonetheless.

## Prose Bono

### Getting Started.

Robert Runté

Prose Bono is a column about writing SF&F. As someone who spent 25 years as a professor, ten as Senior Editor for Five Rivers Publishing, and now five as Senior Editor at EssentialEdits.ca, I have a lot to say about writing. In fact, I have so much to say that when I sat down to write this first column I wasn't sure where to start. So let me start by talking about starting.

#### Starting from Scratch

SF&F authors are used to being asked "where do you get your ideas". (Candas Jane Dorsey was asked so often she started answering by given the address of a mythical post office box in rural Saskatchewan, and that became the default answer for every Canadian author for the next decade.) I usually have more ideas banging around in my head than I can get down on paper, but anyone can run into a dry spell or become blocked on whatever project they're working on. So, where do you go for ideas when you're out?

One way to break through writer's block is to step away from whatever project or deadline you're blocked on and to write on some completely different topic. My favorite source of random prompts are *The First Line Magazine* (<https://www.thefirstline.com/>), Typishly's Wednesday's Creative Challenge, (<https://typishly.submittable.com/submit>) or any of a dozen prompted-based flash fiction markets. But any themed anthology will do. Check out the latest open calls for anthologies, close your eyes, and stab a finger at the listings to discover what your next story is about. Or look around for an editor you admire, and see what they are asking for, and write that. Several times now, I'll start writing a story to some specific call, and even if I don't make it into that anthology (usually because my regular cast of characters breaks in and takes over, hijacking the story so it no longer meets the original target market criteria) it's still a story I can sell somewhere else that I never would have thought of otherwise.

Similarly, science news is a good source to generate SF ideas; medieval research, fantasy ideas. The problem I've encountered in my own writing is that if I see some science breakthrough, figure out a story concept based on that and send it off, the editor often sends it back with a note that they received 19 identical stories that month, presumably because all twenty of us saw the same clipping. But you get the idea. The important principle there is that one cannot have output without input. If you're running out of ideas, go read something relevant, or something completely irrelevant. Or go to the café and eavesdrop on the folks at the next table: how would that conversation change on a space station or in a castle courtyard or between alien hive minds? And so on...one has to prime the pump to get anything out. (Just don't write about an author with writer's block...it's been done.)

Once you have an idea, maybe an outline or maybe not for pansters and some dialog down on paper, how do you pick where to start the story?

### **Starting The Story**

The most common beginner error that comes across my desk is starting the story too early. One needs to start with the 'initiating incident', the thing that makes today different from yesterday for the characters. Starting with the 'before' picture does NOT work, because 'before' was just ordinary and readers—especially SF&F readers—do not want ordinary. We are already have ordinary lives, thanks, and bought your story to take us away to where the action is.

Starting before the story starts is a common mistake because, in order to develop the world and the characters in it, a writer has to know how everything works and what makes their characters tick. Having put in all that time and effort, the temptation to show that all to the reader in the opening paragraphs is almost overwhelming. But it doesn't work. Taking us on a tour of the spaceship or the castle to show off the world and introduce the characters feels necessary because the writer is trying to recreate their process for the reader, but the reader is here for the story, not the set or the casting. The world has always been there for the viewpoint character and therefore isn't a story any more than my having breakfast and going into the office is a story. The story starts when something different happens, something that takes the viewpoint character out of their ordinary.

You can tell if it's the start of the story with this simple test: is the current action something the viewpoint character would consider noteworthy to tell someone else in their world? If they are just having breakfast and doing their regular activities, then there is nothing for our protagonist to relate to a listener later, even if it's an alien world to us. "I had the beans for breakfast " isn't a story, even if the beans are sentient and resentful, if that's routine where our protagonist lives. Your story starts when *their* story starts, and their story starts when telling it in a bar will get them free drinks. Simple!

### **Starting with a Prologue**

In all the manuscripts I've read and edited over the years, there was only one where I didn't edit out the prologue. (And that exception was Dave Duncan's *Eye of Strife*, which I believe was his 56<sup>th</sup> published novel or there about—so don't try a prologue until at least book ten.)

Prologues are almost always wrong, because by definition they're not part of the current story. Instead, prologues represent the novelist not being able to decide where to start their story and trying to *cheat* by starting it twice. Nope. Never works.

If you feel the prologue is vital to the story, include it as Chapter One or as a flashback in Chapter Eighteen if that's when it's relevant. But nine times out of ten it's not part of this story at all, it's another story entirely. Feel free to write that story as a prequel or put it up on your website to promote your

book without giving too much of the current story away, but get it out of *this* book. It's just a distraction and risks losing your reader before your book even starts.

When I challenge writers, "What's with the prologue" they say things like: "Well, Chapter One is kinda slow, so I thought I needed a prologue with more of a hook." So, you're saying Chapter One wasn't working, so you threw in a different story to trick them into buying the book? Yeah, no, cheating the reader that way may sell a few copies, but then they'll stop reading at Chapter One and instead write a review warning everyone else off. If there is a reason you can't start with Chapter One, fix Chapter One, even if that means actually starting with Chapter Three. Or they'll tell me: "I needed to set up the world/political situation/history before starting the book". Nope, see above "Starting the Story". Or they'll say, "Well, I wrote both scenes and couldn't chose." Right, that's why you have beta readers; let them choose for you. But you can't have two starts because by definition one of them is a false start.

### **Starting Live Action Slush**

I'm so convinced that prologues are hopeless, that whenever I'm on a Live Action Slush panel and I hear the Reader start with "Prologue" I put up my hand.

Oh, wait, you may not be familiar with Live Action Slush. I haven't been to many cons outside of Canada, so I'm not sure how widely LAS has spread, but they are the single most popular feature at the ones I go to. Basically, writers anonymously submit the first page of their story or novel to a panel of five acquisition editors and/or famous writers. A Reader then reads the page aloud while the panelist listen and raise their hand when they hear something that would be a red flag if that story had been in their slush pile. When three hands go up, the Reader stops reading and the panelist (in the order that they put up their hands) explain what was bugging them about what they heard, and the editors who *hadn't* put their hands up explained why they were still willing to read further. If the Reader gets through to the end of the page without being stopped, the panelists give their positive comments and the anonymous author is invited to stand and take credit for their credible submission.

Live Action Slush is fabulous for authors because we normally can't watch the slush readers reaction as they read our submissions, can't see where they got tripped up, or hear what they thought. And it's a great learning experience for the audience as well. My experience over the nine years that Calgary's When Words Collide convention has run LAS panels is that the quality of stories submitted has continuously improved, such that the number of beginner errors has gone down so now half the stories make it through the gauntlet without any hands going up. (I like to think it's because they've learned what not to do, and not that they've been scared off by how brutal some comments can be—like, that ass putting his hand up after only the first word, "Prologue".) And perhaps the most important take away from Live Action Slush is how all five panelist almost never agree: if one editor rejects your manuscript, send it to the next market, because one editor's poison is another's award-winner.

I therefore highly recommend your taking in one or more Live Action Slush panels at your local convention, or if they don't have that yet, your proposing starting one up. All you need is a room with five editors or authors and some brave souls to volunteer their anonymous submissions. I can't think of any better way to teach about openings.



















