

Tightbeam 298

July 2019



Angela K. Scott ... Sci-Fi Space Dragon

Tightbeam 298

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Fiction reviews are courtesy Declan Finn, Jim McCoy, and Pat Patterson. Declan Finn’s web page declanfinn.com/ covers his books, reviews, writing, and more. Jim McCoy’s reviews and more appear at [/jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com](http://jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com). Pat Patterson’s reviews appear on his blog habakkuk21.blogspot.com and also on Good Reads and Amazon.com.

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Tightbeam is published approximately monthly by the National Fantasy Fan Federation and distributed electronically to the membership.

The N3F offers four different memberships. Memberships with The National Fantasy Fan (TNFF) via paper mail are \$18; memberships with TNFF via email are \$6. Zines other than TNFF are email only. Additional memberships at the address of a current member are \$4. Public memberships are free. Send payments to N3F, POB 1925, Mountain View CA 94042. Pay online at N3F.org. Our PayPal contact is treasurer@n3f.org .

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Table of Contents

Art

Front Cover...Angela K. Scott...Sci-Fi Space Dragon

Back Cover...Jose Sanchez...Land of the Rising Suns

Editorial

4...Discussion letters are moving to TNFF

Anime

4...Jessi Silver...Planet With

6...Jessi Silver...Revue Starlight

10...Jessi Silver...Aggressive Retsuko (Aggretsuko)

Novels

12...Pat Patterson...A Pillar of Fire by Night by Tom Kratman

14...Jim McCoy...Hell Spawn by Declan Finn

15...Pat Patterson...Dark Moon Arisen by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

17...Declan Finn...Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys

19...Jim McCoy...Come, Seeling Night by Daniel Humphreys

21...Jim McCoy...Radioactive Evolution by Richard Hummel

23...John Thiel...11/22/63 by Stephen King

24...Pat Patterson...Blood Moon Eclipse by Lloyd Behm II

25...Jim McCoy...The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell

27...Pat Patterson...The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell

29...Pat Patterson...Possum Creek Massacre by Cedar Sanderson

30...Pat Patterson...Guardzman by Pam Uphoff

31...Pat Patterson...Lay of the Legionnaire by Chris Sommerkorn

33...Pat Patterson...CASPer Alamo

Comics

35...Jim McCoy...Deadworld: Requiem for the Dead

SerCon

37...Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D....Miriam Allen deFord: Science Fiction-Writing Feminist

41...Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D....The Whitman Penny Books

Food of Famous Authors

44...Cedar Sanderson...Daniel Hoyt's Thai Chicken Satay

45...Cedar Sanderson...44Leo Champion's Cassoulet

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Editorial

Tightbeam has regularly been the N3F's letter zine. Letters surely include letters on club policies, so we started publishing those letters here. However, recently I received a letter entirely justly taking me to task for that policy, for the excellent reason that a modest fraction of our voting members do not use email and therefore never see Tightbeam. Letters on club policies will therefore all be going back to TNFF, including several letters that already appeared here.

Anime

This issue, I've located Jessi Silver's wonderful reviews of some of the Neffy anime nominees.

Planet With Review by Jessi Silver

Souya Kuroi has dreams of people with superpowers fighting a massive dragon in the sky, but his real life is almost as weird. He's had amnesia for about two weeks and been taken in by a maid and an anthropomorphic cat. When a UFO in the shape of a stuffed bear approaches Sori-masaka City and other metros around the world, he's startled to see seven rainbow-sparkling heroes zoom out to confront it – just like in his dream. Even weirder, the maid wants him to leave his shelter to confront these heroes and take the source of their power. – ANN



Episode 1 Summary: Souya Kuroi is living with amnesia, but seems relatively unaffected by it. Though his family might be dead (maybe?) and he doesn't really know who he is, he doesn't have enough of a memory to realize that he should be upset. He was taken in by a maid ("Ginko") and a giant cat ("Sensei") after his accident, so he's got a place to stay and food to eat (though he'd prefer if there were more meat). School is fine, too, though he still has some trouble remembering his class rep's name, and she seems to be pretty invested in his life so that creates lots of opportunity for embarrassment on his part. One day while Souya is just sitting around in math class, there's an announcement about a UFO approaching the mainland; it turns out that it's one of many horrifying bear-shaped aircraft that have appeared all over the planet. The world watches as a troupe of seven "superheroes" arrive out of nowhere to dispatch the "enemy" but Souya is given specific instructions from Ginko to leave the school building and, eventually, fight against those heroes. When he finally confronts one of the seven individuals, he joins with Sensei to become a powerful and strange fighting unit that's bigger and stronger than either of them. When he obtains a pendant from the defeated "hero," Souya's memories begin to come back to him and they suggest some horrifying things.

Impressions: If the summary you just read sounds confusing and full of strange twists, turns, and even perhaps multiple genres, well, you don't know the half of it (unless you've actually watched the episode already!). I think a lot about the traits that define a fascinating first episode of an anime and it's very difficult to nail down many specific qualities; much of the success comes down to how well the elements are managed rather than what they actually are. It's very easy to tell when an episode falls flat, because it's often offensive in some way or aims for flash without substance. It might be obtuse for the sake of cultivating a nonexistent "mystery," or

misleadingly complex due to multiple unaddressed plot threads. I think some of the better opening episodes are those that feature interesting ideas and appear to have a road map in place to best explore them. This episode of Planet With has a lot going on, and the compelling bits aren't necessarily what one might expect, but there seems to be some purpose to its construction and that alone bumps it from disastrous to intriguing.

To be honest, I think what initially fascinated me the most is that Souya is the obvious protagonist of this series (or at least he is so far), but his actions pit him against the people who might fit the more typical heroic framework in other series. There's the sense that the seven tokusatsu-esque fighters who appear seemingly out of nowhere to attack the unidentified objects could be the heroes of their own story, one taking place parallel to the one we're watching. In a typical series, we'd be rooting for the super sentai group, not watching a random amnesiac steal their powers after being swallowed by a giant cat. I do get more than a vague sense that this isn't going to be a typical series, though.

We get a precious few moments of insight into the people Souya is pitted against, and to be honest they don't really come across as adversarial. The character who gets some focus (and who Souya battles at the end of the episode) is a man who, prior to getting involved with this group of magically-armored warriors, became a firefighter. As a child he watched as his mother was unable to escape a house fire, and this inspired him to achieve that goal. Firefighters and other individuals who make their living rescuing others are those who we most frequently look up to as real-life heroes, individuals who put their lives on the line for the good of the general public. Our cultures honor that sort of selflessness without questioning it. This series, however, seems to question it, or at least posits that people with the best, most pure motivations may still become involved in something that is not for the greater good or which works against the goals of someone else whose idea of "good" is drastically different from the perceived norm. It's an interesting puzzler and I do like it when my default beliefs are challenged.



They're weird and they can't spell, either.

The teddy bear UFOs, whose origins and goals are complete unknowns at this point, also don't seem particularly malevolent (though they're absolutely creepy and not something I'd want to see floating in the sky above my town). It saddens but doesn't surprise me that the immediate response from multiple parties is to initiate weaponized attacks against them. First the military intervenes unsuccessfully (it's difficult to launch an attack when the adversary can turn missiles into cotton balls, honestly), and then the aforementioned group of mysterious people arrives. Members of both groups are drawn into illusory world that seem to calm them and make them uninterested in being aggressive any longer. The firefighter is even presented with a scenario in which his mother is rescued from the house fire and he gets a

chance to say goodbye to her. It's not out of the question that the UFO may have produced these illusions to induce docility in its targets and to make a future takeover easier, but of all the bad things it could have done I feel like this was pretty low on the intensity scale. Also, the object visually attempts to indicate that it's peaceful, and while that could be a lie why just assume that it is? It just gives me more reason to suspect that this anime is not aiming to be your typical "good guys against bad guys" sort of story, but instead will likely be as complicated as it is strange.

I had a bunch of trouble writing about this episode, because it's not an episode that allows one

to make very many solid presumptions about what's happening and why. It's a bit disorienting. But at this early stage it also gives the impression that it's prodding the viewer to question their own assumptions about story construction and heroism and perhaps a host of other things that are yet to come. This show wasn't on my radar going into the season, but it's definitely on my "watch more" list now.

Pros: It takes your assumptions and causes you to question them. The protagonist isn't a typical hero and the adversaries might very well just be heroes of a different sort.

Cons: The first episode is disorienting.

Grade: B

Revue Starlight Review by Jessi Silver

"Starlight" is the song and dance revue troupe loved throughout the world. Karen and Hikari make a promise with each other when they're young that one day they'll stand on that stage together. Time passes, and now the girls are 16 years old. Karen is very enthusiastic about the lessons she takes every day, holding her promise close to her heart. Hikari has transferred schools and is now away from Karen. But the cogs of fate turn, and the two are destined to meet again. The girls and other "Stage Girls" will compete in a mysterious audition process to gain acceptance into the revue.



Review: This review contains plot and thematic spoilers for the anime. Heavy spoilers are indicated; the section in question can be skipped.

Do you believe in fate? That once our life is set in motion, its pre-determined pathway is truly an immovable arc of destiny? Anime is filled with stories of prophecies fulfilled and traditions unbroken; it's a theme whose expression allows us to believe in the possibility and comfort of things greater than ourselves. There are also plenty of anime, however, that dare to suggest that we, as human beings, are more responsible for our lives than some of us may be comfortable fully accepting. I tend to like these stories better, because rather than simply implying that our poor state of being is solely the result of our own mistakes, it suggests that we might also have some power to alter the flow of the river and set ourselves on a better course, given the opportunity and support of course.

Revue Starlight is, in its simplest form, a story about a group of girls choosing not to accept an exclusionary story – a fate which does not encompass the happiness of them all. Instead, they attempt to re-write the stage-play of their existence and to reinterpret their story as one which allows room for successful fulfillment of their desires.

The story begins at Seisho Performing Arts Academy, where student Karen Aijo and her friends comprise a particularly talented group of students who held the starring roles in the previous year's production of "Starlight." "Starlight" holds a special place in Karen's heart; she and childhood friend Hikari Kagura, after seeing the play performed, vowed that they would one

day share the stage as stars in a future production. Karen is positive that their dream is about to become a reality when Hikari returns from London and transfers to Seisho. Unfortunately, Hikari behaves coldly to her and seems to have her own very singular ambitions. Karen searches for her friend one evening and happens to find a mysterious elevator that plunges deep into depths below the academy. What she finds is that many of her classmates are embroiled in a series of secret and physically exhausting auditions for the title of “Top Star,” Hikari among them. Against others’ protests, Karen forces her way into these auditions to find a way for her and Hikari’s shared dream to become a reality.

The series appears to be the product of many influences. Takarazuka theater is an obvious one, with its similar stage and actor terminology and school training system. The general makeup of the cast, as well as their wardrobe styling seems to reference various popular idol series. My first gut reaction, however, was to compare the series to Revolutionary Girl Utena; while I wouldn’t necessarily say that this anime has the depth or staying power of Ikuhara and Be-Papas’ powerhouse shoujo series, the way much of the story plays out via duels, the visual eccentricity and sense of scale in many of the scenes, and the way the story provides a vehicle for young women to support one another and seize control of their destiny in the face of a strange (and vaguely threatening) male figurehead definitely feels inspired and somewhat informed by Anthy and Utena’s story. Influences are one thing, though; the end product’s incorporation of those influences and the way in which they’re used to express something different is the more impressive aspect of the show.

Those who haven’t actually seen the series may still be aware of it due to its surreal and lavishly-animated auditions, during which two (or more) of the characters engage in an all-out physical battle while expressing their emotions through song. I think it would be easy to be bombarded by the action grandiosity and miss the forest for the trees so-to-speak; though the theatrical numbers in this series are top-notch and definitely worthy of notice, what I found more powerful were both the moments of character drama and the ways in which the series addresses the central theme of overthrowing fate.

The series is built on the shoulders of its characters’ relationships. Karen and Hikari’s friendship is the beating heart of the story, the one which disrupts the system put in place to declare a single victor in the fight for Top Star. There are also several other couplings between the characters, both platonic and (likely) romantic, which comprise the basis for many of the other duels depicted during the auditions (some of which occur concurrently with others). What impressed me about the series was that it was able to refrain from portraying these conflicts as petty or based on simplistic rivalries, instead wholeheartedly conveying the fact that most of the characters had generally positive feelings towards their competitors and were forced to weigh their own ambitions against the task of maintaining their treasured friendships. This does nothing to deplete the tension of the duels; instead it clearly raises the stakes. Since it’s not entirely apparent whether the songs and sword-fights are actually happening or are instead some shared hallucination between the characters, I found the sense of suspense they generated to be impressive.

Aside from two central characters, there are seven others with relationships and roles of varying significance. I think the one I identified with the most was Nana Daiba (in Japanese name order Daiba Nana or “Banana” as her nickname goes). Nana is portrayed as a helper; she’s supportive to a fault and always bakes banana-themed treats for her fellow stage-girls as they prepare for their performances. Her altruism is somewhat of an illusion, though; her contributions are all

geared towards the end goal of fulfilling her wish as a future top star. What we discover roughly halfway through the series is that the characters have been caught in a time recursion of Nana's making; having won the title of Top Star, the wish she made was to go back and repeat the experience of her first-year performance in "Starlight." In her mind, nothing can possibly top this performance – the feeling of preparing for the play, donning the costumes, and being on stage can never be replicated or surpassed unless all the conditions are exactly the same. Each time she wins the auditions (which she does as, per her wish, the outcomes are all predetermined), the cycle begins anew.



Nana Daiba wishes for her perfect performance.

As much as we can see that this is harmful, it's also very understandable; who among us hasn't wanted to re-live some rose-colored past glory? Nana's desire plays to her self-perceived strength as "background support" – she's the "helper" who makes sure that all the gears are turning and that the show goes as planned. It's just that her hand in it is heavier than the other characters realize. In a strange juxtaposition, Nana's acts of repeatedly allowing her version of the "correct" fate to play out are predicated on her ability to retain control and manipulate her world via the system as-is.

Hikari's arrival is the wrench that stops the cogs from turning, or perhaps it may be more accurate to say that her entrance is what finally causes the timeline to jump tracks and make forward progress again. Eight actors become nine, their roles in the play are shaken and redistributed, and fate is no longer so certain. Karen, who was not originally a powerhouse player, is driven to succeed by Hikari's presence, and now the group begins to question a system that gives all the glory to one while the others walk away with nothing.

Setting this story in the world of live theater was not just an aesthetic choice and relating it to the allegorical tale of lost friendship in "Starlight" was no offhand decision, in my opinion. Much of the series is spent lamenting the fact that the heroines in "Starlight" are never able to achieve the ultimate unity that they seek. The story is tragic and ends with the two characters being separated for all eternity. The ultimate end of the secret auditions will choose a Top Star, and as we learn later on the consequences for coming in second place are dire – the runner-up's love for the stage and performing upon it are stolen for good. Neither of these are fated to be stories with happy endings; the words in the storybook that Hikari has and the lines of the play that the girls perform are locked into that tragic form by tradition and the permanence of the written word.

Or are they? It's lonely at the top.

Some of my favorite anime series (and my favorite characters) are those which question the need to rely on tradition and which refuse to accept the inevitability of fate. Karen Aijo is Revue Starlight's squeaky wheel, the person who holds her promise with Hikari in much higher regard than lines or stage direction or rules. She's convinced throughout the series that there must be a way for Hikari and herself to achieve stardom together, though the way to achieve that goal isn't apparent. A powerful example of Karen's stubbornness occurs within the last couple of episodes, when she takes the copy of the storybook on which "Starlight" is based and creates her own translation of the text. This montage might seem extraneous at first, perhaps a

last ditch effort to glean some meaning in order to rescue her friend. However, I think it conveys something much more meaningful.

We think of literature, especially “classic” literature, as monumental and unchanging, but so much of a story’s meaning can be based on the way one person interprets it for themselves. Stories like *The Tale of Genji* with its complicated relationships and characters with ever-changing social ranks, or even something more familiar to Western audiences like *The Little Mermaid*, which was at one time a tragic allegory for the author’s sexuality, can be given new meaning by people with new perspectives, insights, and, yes, even agendas. Sometimes a story is remade for the society that exists at that point in time. Sometimes a reminder of life’s many tragic outcomes is less valuable than a story which rejects that tragedy for something that lifts up its participants. The value of a sad story versus a happy one is always up to the person doing the reading – personally, I believe that stories which present negative outcomes and emotions have as much purpose and power as light-hearted ones, but not everyone agrees. Sometimes it pays to question if and why a well-regarded, famous, or traditional story or play still has value; throwing up one’s hands and saying “it’s an important part of literary canon” (whose canon?) or “it’s always been performed that way” is often a way of shirking responsibility when we are in the position to question the status-quo.

“Starlight,” which at first seems allegorical not only for the opinion that women must forever compete with one-another, but also that relationships between women (and especially very close and/or romantic ones) are doomed to end in tragedy. Karen chooses to reject that by wholly rejecting all the arbitrary rules of their competitive stage system and choosing to rewrite and refine the story that she and her friend love. I find that to be an incredibly powerful act of creation and rebirth.



Hikari and Karen hope to achieve their shared will.

My understanding is that this series’ production had problems almost from the get-go, the product of an ambitious concept and the expectation of lavishly-animated and unique revue battles for all the characters. While I hate to sound as though I’m encouraging a production system that overlooks the health of its workers, it’s also difficult for me not to admire the sheer force of will it took to bring this story to life. Smooth, expressive animation, unique storyboarding, convincing compositing... these aren’t the sorts of things that I require when I’m watching anime. Though it’s a visual medium I’m generally satisfied if the story itself is interesting. But there’s just something exhilarating about full animation when it’s put to good use. Along with

the massive sense of scale present in many of the later scenes, including depictions of enormous towers and nearly-endless staircases, this series leaves an impression visually and emotionally.

My one minor criticism of the series is that, like so many other anime, its final episode doesn’t allow enough time to resolve all the latent feelings that it generates. As much as I love a good climax, especially ones so emotionally powerful, I feel that huge, grandiose moments of catharsis are only enhanced when coupled with similar moments of reflection.

Speaking generally, I think the ultimate message this series has to share is that both theater and life aren’t doomed to be static. It may feel as though a situation is plunging towards an inevita-

ble conclusion – that our fate is truly unavoidable. This anime presents a full-on rejection of the systems that serve to hamper our relationships – the ones that keep us in endless competition with others for some ill-defined, amorphous “prize” that benefits the few and harms the many. Society pits us, women especially, against one-another in many facets of our lives. Rather than manipulating the system to survive or throwing one-another under the bus to gain a leg-up, sometimes the best answer to this conundrum is to reject the flawed system entirely and relieve it of its power.

I don't know that *Revue Starlight* is an anime series for the ages; I suspect that my connection to it is very personal and that may not translate to anything broader. Occasionally, though, I believe that we receive messages at coincidentally relevant times, and for me this series echoes a lot of my feelings about our society which often encloses us in boxes and pressures us to fulfill roles which don't quite fit. Rather than suffer throughout this dissonance, perhaps the better answer is to, when the option is available, aim to re-make society in a way that is less focused on strict roles, titles, winners and losers. One which honors our diverse goals and supports the relationships that we have built with one-another. A new start, from position zero.

Pros: Lavish animation production throughout. Emphasizes character relationships. Thematically rich.

Cons: Could have used another episode for some falling action.

Grade: A

Aggressive Retsuko (Aggretsuko) Review by Jessi Silver

Retsuko is a 25-year old red panda who works in her dream company's accounting department. But it turns out that she is forced to keep doing more and more impossible tasks by her superiors and co-workers. She doesn't talk back to them, but she still has to let off steam, so she ends up going to karaoke by herself and singing death metal.

Review: About two years ago I caught wind of *Aggressive Retsuko*, a new Sanrio property debuting in two minute chunks on YouTube. The concept really tickled me – a twenty-something OL who puts up with typical office politics during her day job, lets out her many frustrations in the evening by growling death metal into a microphone at her local Karaoke parlor. A bit of a one-note joke to be sure, but one that hit me the right way and provided some decent belly laughs. I never watched much of it because it wasn't that easily available, but I definitely indulged in some of the merchandise when it started popping up in my local Hot Topic and other Asian pop-culture shops. When this sequel appeared it actually took my by surprise; I only caught wind of it after reading Jacob Chapman's preview of the first couple of episodes in the most recent Spring Preview Guide over at ANN, and initially questioned the choice to make the episodes longer than their original two minute format. I doubted that one gag, even a pretty good one, could sustain a longer episode, much less make it entertaining.

As they say, boy was I wrong. While *Aggretsuko* is still primarily what I would call a comedy, it's also a fairly robust critique of some Japan-specific (but still widely-relatable) office issues,

especially as they affect women in a workplace setting.

One of the series' many successes is how Retsuko is presented as a character, because despite her cutesy, merch-ready appearance her situation feels so genuine. She's a cute, earnest person who feels lucky to be working at one of her dream companies, but her accounting job is anything but satisfying and her situation is greatly complicated by the fact that she doesn't interact well with some of her coworkers and doesn't have the personality that helps her to play games and suck up to the right people. She tries to lay low and get through the day, but this only turns her into a dumping ground for others' work and, unsurprisingly, she's unwilling to tell anyone "no" and spoil the office harmony. While my work situation is leaps and bounds better than depicted in this series, I'm fully sympathetic to the idea that it's just easier to become a "yes man" and take on more and more work than to speak up and potentially make someone else's life more difficult. Maybe it's due to my problems with social anxiety or my poor handle on how to maintain human relationships, but I can see how the idea of "harmony over all else" can be desirable while also ultimately harmful.

Retsuko is also exposed to some of the most blatantly awful chauvinism I've seen depicted in media in a long, long time. Every interaction with her boss, Mr. Ton, is a tension-filled exercise in suffering through off-color comments about women's place in the office and what jobs



Mr. Ton is a literal chauvinist pig.

they're meant to perform. Each time Retsuko got caught in the cross-hairs I could feel myself welling up with frustration. I've luckily never been in her exact position or had a boss so profoundly terrible, but I have been made to feel like an outsider and I've heard my share of casual sexism, so subtle and insidious that it doesn't register even with people who otherwise have a handle on those sorts of things. It's exhausting and defeating, and even several days later I have to marvel at the ability of this series to capture that and bottle it for consumption. I'm reminded a bit of Hataraki Man, another workplace series that follows the trials of

several women working for a magazine publisher and examines their specific hurdles and ways of coping with unjust and unequal treatment and expectations. In that case, the protagonist is hyper-competent and admired for her ability to "work like a man," when the men around her don't put in half the amount of work that she does. Both series are very telling about what we expect of men and women in the same setting, and those concerned with workplace equality will likely be similarly frustrated by both.

This is supposed to be a comedy anime, right?

If the series were nothing more than a string of upsetting circumstances for Retsuko to deal with via death metal therapy, it's likely that it wouldn't be upbeat enough to maintain its own sense of humor. What helps immensely is that the show allows Retsuko to get by with a little help from her friends, as well as with some personal mentorship from a couple of high-powered working women in her company who have seen it all and lived to tell the tale. Retsuko is by no means a loner and often gets support in one form or another from Fenneko, a snarky fennec fox who survives each workday through pure cynicism, and Haida, a hyena who's an everyday normal guy nursing a crush on our heroine. There's a good sense that these three have been in the trenches together for a while and the others do a decent, if flawed, job of talking Retsuko out of some situations. Fenneko in particular was a real source of entertainment for me just because of her deadpan delivery and ability to see right through the world's fakery. She's not a character

who would work well as a protagonist, but in small doses she was hilarious. As Retsuko connects with Washimi and Gori, two women who she has only admired from afar prior to their meeting in a yoga class, she learns that there are opportunities to get things done even when the system seems rigged and unfair. There is a lot of depth in these interactions, especially when Washimi and Gori attempt to help Retsuko directly with her management or try to guide her towards making good life decisions, and I think they really elevate the show.

My one complaint, and it's a relatively minor one, is that the series attempts to insert a sub-plot of sorts near the end and isn't able to devote enough time to it for it to fully mature. In her desperation, Retsuko starts to believe that her only "out" from her job is to find a partner and get married so that she can live as a housewife. She ends up falling for a guy with zero personality whose only real distinguishing quality is his low-key lack of consideration for her. She grins and bears it for a while until she's forced to face reality. The lesson, of course, is that we tend to tolerate so many things when we feel that our lives are hopeless, and in doing so give up our chance at happiness and dignity. I really loved that message, and only wish that the show had been a couple more episodes long to allow it to unfold more gradually. As a sentiment, it was absolutely right on the money and just another way in which the series surprised me.

In the couple of weeks that the series has been available I've seen the amount of fanwork for it blow up completely, so I doubt that my giving it a glowing review is somehow going to inform anyone who isn't already aware and interested. But in case someone does randomly stumble across this article (or, more likely, discover the show while adding dozens of things to their Netflix queue), I hope maybe my words or their own curiosity will give them the push that they need to give it a try. And then, maybe we can continue to try to dispel the myth that cutesy-looking cartoons are only for kids.

Pros: The protagonist is very sympathetic. Portrays Retsuko's tough situations in a way that feels real and relatable. The character relationships and interactions add a lot of depth.

Cons: The late-game romantic subplot could have used a couple more episodes of exploration.

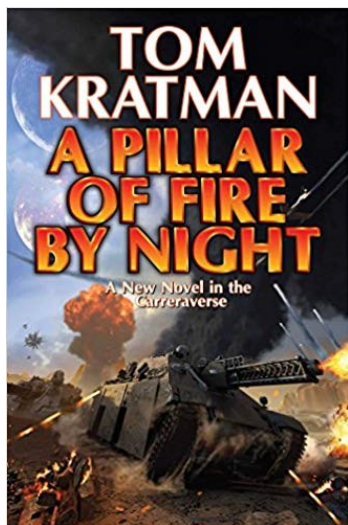
Grade: A-

Novels

A Pillar of Fire by Night by Tom Kratman Review by Pat Patterson

Carrera's held off his enemies coming by sea from the north, in the process dealing the naval and amphibious forces of the Zhong Empire a stinging defeat. The Zhong won't soon forget the blood-stained waters and the heaped up bodies on the shores of Balboa's Isla Real.

Now, though, his adopted country of Balboa is under assault from the east, from the south, from the west, from the air, and from space. The Zhong, smarting from the butchery around the island, have bounced back and forced a lodgment east of the capital. Their lodgment is still a-building but when it is done Carrera can expect several hundred thousand brave and determined Zhong to show up on his barely defended flank.



The Taurans, remembering their military roots, have assaulted Balboa from the south, taking half the area of, and cutting, the Transitway that joins Terra Nova's Mar Fusioso and her Shimmering Sea. In the process, they've cut off and besieged the second city of the country, Cristobal, trapping inside the city Carrera's Fourth Corps, and overrunning and capturing a large portion of Carrera's artillery train.

West of Cristobal, the Taurans have created, almost from scratch, a series of small ports and airfields to support their siege.

Inside the town, a sense of desperation is growing among the men and women of the Fourth Corps: Has their leader forgotten about or abandoned them?

Meanwhile another Tauran Expeditionary force secures Balboa's eastern neighbor, Santa Josefina, as a base against them.

In space, the United Earth Peace Fleet, under the Command of High Admiral Marguerite Walenstein, keeps as low a profile as possible, all the time spying and feeding intelligence to both Zhong and Tauran.

It's beginning to look like the game is up for Balboa and Patricio Carrera.

But Carrera's been planning this war for fifteen years. He certainly hopes his enemies think they're winning.

At the publisher's request, this title is sold without DRM (Digital Rights Management).

Carrera Series:

A Desert Called Peace

Carnifex

The Lotus Eaters

The Amazon Legion

Come and Take Them

The Rods and the Axe

In 1974, at age seventeen, Tom Kratman became a political refugee and defector from the PRM (People's Republic of Massachusetts) by virtue of joining the Regular Army. He stayed a Regular Army infantryman most of his adult life, returning to Massachusetts as an unofficial dissident while attending Boston College after his first hitch. Back in the Army, he managed to do just about everything there was to do, at one time or another. After the Gulf War, and with the bottom dropping completely out of the anti-communist market, Tom decided to become a lawyer. Every now and again, when the frustrations of legal life and having to deal with other lawyers got to be too much, Tom would rejoin the Army (or a somewhat similar group, say) for fun and frolic in other climes. His family muttering darkly, put up with this for years. He no longer practices law, instead writing full time for Baen. His novels for Baen include A State of Disobedience, Caliphate, and the series consisting of A Desert Called Peace, Carnifex, The Lotus Eaters, The Amazon Legion, Come and Take Them, and The Rods and the Axe, as well as three collaborations with John Ringo, Watch on the Rhine, Yellow Eyes, and The Tuloriad. For Baen, he has written the first three volumes of the modern day military fiction Countdown series.

Hell Spawn by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy



Did you ever stop to look around you and wonder what the Hell just happened? Yeah, so has Detective Thomas Nolan. In his case though, he meant it literally. I have to hand it to Declan Finn. I really didn't think you could do much to make a homicide detective's day worse. In Hell Spawn Finn decided to throw a demon at one. He owns it and when a demon comes out to play, it gets ugly. Like, double plus ungood ugly. Like, this thing is eviller than evil ugly. Like, I'm cackling evilly remembering how evil this thing was ugly. It's a good time.

I'd be careful with Hell Spawn though. It almost caused me to stay home from work because I couldn't put it down. Oh, and I was reading it while eating solo at a local diner and the waitress was looking at me funny because I wouldn't leave after eating my meal and paying my bill. She was a bit confused. I just wanted to know what happened next. Chick obviously doesn't have a reading problem. Her bad.

Seriously though, don't start this one twenty minutes before you need to be somewhere. Hell Spawn starts off fast and accelerates continuously. Finn has redefined the term "page turner" here. It almost felt like the pages were turning themselves and I was just watching. Sometimes as a reviewer I find myself reading something because it's my job to. This is a book that made me want to read it.

Now, Declan Finn has always considered himself to be a fantasy author. He has stated this on his blog, but I'm too lazy to go find a link. Hell Spawn is a damn good book, but this isn't fantasy. Finn has a much better sense of how to write a plot than most Eighties slasher movie writers, but he's got them beat for gore as well. A lot of what happens in the tome is sick, twisted, disturbing and awesome.

Myself and Mr. Finn don't necessarily agree on all of the finer points of theology (the whole Catholic vs. Protestant thing) but something we do agree on is the power of prayer. There is a lot of it in Hell Spawn. As a matter of fact, there are an awful lot of times when Christian attitudes are shown. I approve. Actually, I'd like to see more of this kind of stuff. Hell Spawn is a Catholic writer telling a story about a saint in the making. It fits. The fact remains that Finn/Tommy's takes on a number of controversial topics, including abortion, are on display for all to see. They're pretty stinkin' close to what I heard from my pastor a few weeks ago. If you're the special snowflake uber liberal type and just can't stand the thought that someone might disagree with you, this might be a good time to go buy a biography of Che Guevara that conveniently omits his stances towards homosexuals and black people. I hate to say it, but Hell Spawn may not be for you. Finn pulls no punches. I love it.

Finn's view of the police is somewhat nuanced as is - surprisingly- his view of saints, but make no mistake about it: Hell Spawn is about a battle between good and evil. Saint Tommy versus the demon (and no, I'm not telling you which demon. That would be spoiling.) is an epic throw-down between the darkness and the light. That much is made clear.

Somewhat missing though, and this may be intentionally, is a clear view of where Tommy v.

Demon fits in the framework of the grand battle of God and Satan. It's treated as a personal battle, albeit one fought with allies. We're not really given much of a sense of the more colossal grand battle. That's the view I became accustomed to a long time ago as a fan of fantasy fiction. Then again, this is horror. It works differently. And Hell Spawn is book one in a series, so maybe I'll get to see where this fits in later. Maybe not too. The book was freaking awesome without it and it's Earthbound, so personal appearances by God and Satan might not work.

Finn lives in New York. The book takes place in New York. I've never been to New York (I know, I'm working on it) but having read Hell Spawn I almost feel like I have been. Finn's relationship with New York is in some ways analogous to Anne Rice's relationship with New Orleans. Both have stories that take place outside of their respective hometowns but both continuously return to the city they love in their fiction. It shows in the work. Both authors lay things out in their work that make you love their cities too. I'm really impressed by this. It's almost like you could make the car trips that take place in the story using the directions in the book. Oh, and do you know how I could tell the book was written by a native New Yorker? There were no references to the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street or Broadway. There is not a single scene in Times Square. It's almost like Tommy had lived all his life in the city and had no desire to comment on things that he took for granted. It made him feel more real and human.

I can't say much more about the plot without giving the whole book away, but it moves. It's logical. The entire thing works within the rules of the work itself. There is no massive, gaping plot hole that you could float an aircraft carrier through sideways. That's always a fear when reading a work like this. It's pretty epic and it's easy for an author to get excited and forget about something. That doesn't seem to have happened here and that's good.

That's not to say that Finn tied up all the loose strings. Hell Spawn is the first in a series, not the last. There are some very obvious plot threads still dangling but there need to be. I am, after all, looking forward to the next book. How could there be one if Tommy solved everything the first time?

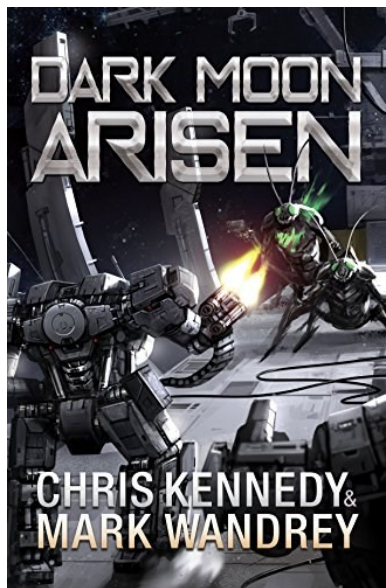
Oh, and if you're wondering: Hell Spawn is the current front runner for my Dragon Award nomination for Best Horror Novel next year. That is, unless Finn beats himself with the sequel to this masterpiece which is due out in Mid-December, just in time for my birthday.

Dark Moon Arisen
by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson

It was amazing

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program. Yes, I am a year late getting it read and reviewed. I have no excuse.

As I was sorting through the appropriate windows to write the review (Amazon, Goodreads, word processor) I found an opportunity to be grateful that the chosen title for this installment was "Dark Moon Arisen," and not "Bad Moon On The Rise." I spent decades associating that with a plumbing facility on the eastern side of a northbound hallway, and didn't need the ear-worm.



Perhaps others will find meaning in other aspects of this story, of which there are several. However, probably because I have so DRASTICALLY read these books out of series, my attention was riveted on the actions of the stupendous genius with all of the lively curiosity of a three-year-old, while possessing not one-fifth of the self-restraint, Taiki Sato.

I am currently Papa to two, no, wait, that's THREE three-year-olds, so I know whereof I speak. If anyone needed to be placed in stasis when not under the direct supervision of a competent adult with spanking privileges, it's Sato. Yes, surely it's the case that he will produce some marvelous technological break-throughs for you; however, that ONLY serves as a reason not to administer a lethal solution to him post-haste. It is not, repeat NOT, an excuse for allowing him unsupervised access to a playroom. Do you want to have banana squished into the bottom cavities of all the Legos? Do you want to have the entire ship converted into plasma? Because this is how you get banana-stuffed Lego plasma ships. And not in a nice way.

Somewhat along those same lines, but not as lethal, and far more amusing, are the SalSha. Is there ANYONE who doesn't love the SalSha? Give me the names! Bring them here, right now! True, you cannot have a universe composed of nothing but SalSha, but a universe without them would be a sadder place. Admittedly, the space analogue of the motor pool sergeant would have a vastly different experience. They do have a propensity for bending and scraping the craft they are given to pilot, but MOST of the time, that will buff out just fine. Most of the time. And they are always sorry, afterward. However, their own experiences with the voracious grasp on their homeworld have instilled in them a respect for danger, and an understanding of what it means to be a part of the team, that transforms them from clowns in a demolition derby to precisely the sort of people you want with you in tight spots.

I just read that an editorial decision was made at DC comics that none of the main characters were to be permitted to have happy lives at home, so no marriages, etc. This was to preserve an 'edgy' feel to the characters. Well, poot on that! I think it's a GOOD thing that folks get to have some romantic satisfaction, even if it DOES bring complications. What of it? There are going to be complications in the life of the calmest person, living in the calmest town imaginable. Winged Hussar leader Alexis Cromwell has enough responsibility; I applaud her personal alliance, especially since she isn't violating the rules by taking advantage of someone in her chain of command.

Lots of lovely scenes of exploding space-ships, lots of other aspects of the best of space opera, and plenty of combat scenes which combine super-duper techno whizz-bangs, with the good old fashioned knuckle sandwich to the nose. If you are looking for characters to inspire you, you will find them here.

A final word: I find the names of the four recently acquired battlecruisers to be a bit off-putting. I have no problem with 'Arion,' a mythical horse with unmatched speed, nor with 'Shadowfax,' the horse Gandalf took from King Whatsis in the 'Lord of the Rings.' But 'Phaeton' wasn't a horse; he was a guy who couldn't manage the horses that drew the sun chariot through the sky, which necessitated a lightning bolt from Zeus. And Nuckelavee? Horrid, horrid sea monster horse that ate people and destroyed crops, and NO ONE (well, one little old lady-thing) could control it.

Daniel Humphreys' "Night's Black Agents" Review by Declan Finn



Dan Humphreys' first Paxton Locke novel was *Fade*. It was a fun variant of everything you love about Harry Dresden: Magic used in inventive ways. Much snark. Solid fight scenes.

And now, we have the sequel, *Night's Black Agents*. It came out last year. Though I genuinely waited for book three to be near completion before I reviewed it.

Why? We'll get to that.

As the flap copy says....

Paxton got the crap kicked out of him foiling his mother's plans.

Even that isn't enough to keep him in one place. Mother is still on the loose after all, and there's no telling what that evil witch is up to. With his new partner (don't call her a sidekick!) Cassie, Paxton heads to Arizona to help an old police friend with a supernatural murder problem.

But Mother isn't content to lay low now that she's out of jail. She's got a brand new coven, and she wants her grimoire back. Now. Nothing will stop her from getting her spellbook back, not even her son. Or the ancient stirring in its sleep in the Valley of the Sun.

Paxton's faced witches, ghosts, and shadow demons, but can he handle an ancient god? With the lives of two young boys hanging in the balance, he can't back down.

The book has two arcs. One is a subplot detailing the travails of Mother Dearest after her escape from supermax in the last novel -- as well as the hunt by Humphreys own version of Correia's Monster Control Bureau -- only with a different mission.

Our main plot follows Paxton hot on the trail of a magical murderer. The book opens only a week after the end of *Fade*. (Even Harry Dresden gets more time to rest.) And it begins with "I was halfway through a stack of pancakes when the dead guy walked in the door." Probably the best opening line since "The building was on fire, but it wasn't my fault." (Yes, I hate to open with comparing it to a line from *The Dresden Files*, but really, it's one of the few works I can compare it to. One of the lines in the novel is literally "With the exception of magic, the only real talent I had was taking a beating." -- tell me that doesn't sound like Jim Butcher.)

We open with a random encounter ... which will become less random over time. Because this random encounter sees Paxton for what he is, and sees him as a snack.

And this is just the opening.

There are a lot of "oh crap" moments like this scattered throughout my notes. Looking at notes I made on the kindle, many of my comments even at the start of the book are "Oy." "Oh crap," "Aw f****", and "What do you mean she has groupies!?" et al. (By the way, a line for Larry Correia fans: "Forensic accounting, it seemed, was a class of sorcery all its own.")

It's even worse when Mother Dearest turns into Kilgrave from Jessica Jones, only creepier.

And all these comments are from Chapter 1. It just gets better from there.

Of course, Dan has great lines to put a backspin on tropes. As Paxton describes his world: "Sheer moments of terror followed by hours of law enforcement shouting." And there are a bunch of ... re-purposed lines from classic Star Wars (as opposed to EU novel Star Wars, as we all know, there were no other films). And all of the one-liners are fun: "an orphaned teenager with sudden-onset wizard syndrome was a fertile field for the corrupting possibility of power," or even the casual "Buddy, you're about the ninth worst thing I've seen this week."

Now, I really must compliment Dan on making an interesting federal agency to hunt black magic. These are obviously fictional feds, as the characters are colorful, interesting and entertaining. Also, to add to the humor, they're attached to ATF (or BATFE, if you want to be picky). I guess black magic is a sort of firearm. They have their own R and D section, complete with the sort of mad tinkers you'd expect to be working in Q's lab.

Hell, to be perfectly honest, while I tend to skip the sections on the villains (which is a mistake I made for the Honor Harrington series... oops) Humphreys manages to make these sections readable and tolerable, but more importantly, relevant to the plot as a whole. This is the point where Humphreys fits in magical mechanics in a way that doesn't make your eyes bleed. Hell, who am I kidding, he actually takes the time and effort to MAKE MAGIC MAKE SENSE. (I'm not naming names, JK). Mother turns into a little bit of a Final Fantasy villain, but it makes more sense in book 3.

Not to mention that the Mother subplot is put to great effect when the villain of the week is enough to make her nervous.

And the feds hunting Mother actually serves to tie the main arc plot very neatly back to the primary plot for the individual novel. Overall, it's a great balance of series arc and book plot.

(If the author is reading this review, I just got to this exchange
 "So, what, you think this is the end of the world?"
 "Maybe. Dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria. Fire and brimstone."
 Ahem.... smartass).

And Humphreys does a great job of slow world building. Just casual references to gremlins on satellites, or magical abilities of X or Y person.

Now here comes the boom.

So, why did I wait so long to review this? I read it months ago. It came out last year. Why the wait?

Because this ends on a cliffhanger.

Imagine the first time you ever saw The Empire Strikes Back. Now imagine if it stopped with Luke dangling in mid-air in Cloud city, Han still frozen in carbonite, and the last we saw of the Millennium Falcon, it was being chased by TIE-fighters into the clouds.

That's what the end of this book felt like. My last note on the book is two words, and they are often favored by Samuel L. Jackson.

Don't worry. Book three, *Come, Seeling Night*, is around the corner. It's coming out the last weekend in June. So if you haven't read *Night's Black Agents* yet, you needn't worry, you won't have to wait a year for the awesome conclusion. And yes, I've read the ARC for the novel already, and I have notes for that review as well.

Some days, it's good to be a writer. Free books happen.

Come, Seeling Night by Daniel Humphreys Review by Jim McCoy



Have you even been hardcore convinced of something in a series of books and had the author break your assumption into little bits and then feed it to you? Okay, right. That happens a lot. But have you ever been HAPPY about it? Yeah. That's me on reading the latest by Daniel Humphreys: *Come, Seeling Night*. I found out that I was not anywhere near as knowledgeable about this series as I thought I was. I love it.

See, *Come Seeling Night* opens up a much wider universe. I had assumed that this would be a series of stories about Paxton Locke versus his mother. Don't get me wrong. She is a major villain in the book. I'm just saying that by the time it's over you get the feeling that there is much more out there. This is not just a story about one dude and one enemy. Paxton Locke, our hero, finds himself surprised as well.

That's good. As he discovers things so do we. It's been that way this whole series but I had thought that most of the world building surprises were over. Apparently, so did Paxton. His eyes are much more open now and he knows that more is coming. It's kind of ironic. As the world opens further, I find myself expecting it to get even bigger. I'm excited to see where this goes.

Something else I like about *Come, Seeling Night* is the question it asks. (I'm not vouching that Humphreys actually had this in mind when he wrote it, but work with me here.) When is it too late to seek redemption? One of Paxton's major allies this time around is someone you wouldn't expect in a situation you wouldn't expect and, while they don't seem to be focused on redemption as a goal, they go a long way toward improving themselves at a point where you'd think they'd be done trying. I don't want to go any further than that, but I found that fascinating.

The other conundrum presented by *Come, Seeling Night* is this: How far is too far? If you thought you could save the entire world, what would you be willing to sacrifice? How far would you go? Is it okay to go that far? Is it NOT okay to go that far if it's the entire world in the balance? Do right and wrong even apply in that type of situation? This is complicated and it's probably a question that should be answered by someone with a much more philosophical bent than I have but it's a valid question.

Please do no misunderstand my intentions here: This is not a philosophical treatise. I haven't had the chance to talk Platonic perfection with Paxton Locke, but I have a feeling that he'd

probably kick me in the pickle if I did. Dude is a man of action who is not afraid to take risks or a beating. If you haven't read the first two then trust me. Locke takes a bigger beating than anyone this side of Harry Dresden. I mean, I haven't seen Paxton cut a deal with a faerie queen yet, as a matter of fact I'm not even sure if the Fae even exist in the world of Paxton Locke, but I could see him doing it.

At the end of the day though, Paxton isn't the only character in the book who matters. His supporting cast is back, especially his girlfriend Cassie. There is a lot going on at multiple locations and we find ourselves hopping back and forth a bit. I like this technique because it brings things together in a way that forcing the story to go through one point of view character would not.

As an interesting (hopefully) aside, I hadn't heard of ley lines or nexuses until I got into the Rifts RPG as a teenager. I had always thought that the team at Palladium had invented the concept (they also used it in their Beyond the Supernatural RPG) but I'm seeing more and more stuff related to the concept and I'm guessing that not all of it came from one small RPG company. I've got some reading to do. *HORRORS* (Or sumfin')

I will say that Humphreys does a good job of introducing the concept and leading his characters to the appropriate conclusions. I'm not going to tell you what those are, but they make sense in the context of the universe and the books and add a lot to the story. I had a lot of fun with this.

As a matter of fact, Humphreys has a working knowledge of a lot of tropes, including another one he used in a manner that I hadn't seen before. And, if he mentioned a theory that has always driven me crazy and then gave it short shrift then good for him! I've always thought that one particular theory was a bit nutty anyway given that the square root of Pi divided by zero...

Ah, nevermind...

At any rate, it worked.

Oh, and kudos to Humphreys for not falling prey to J.K. Rowling Disease. I don't want to take this too far because I'm a HUGE Harry Potter fan, but it kind of bothers me sometimes when you get the whole "hidden world" fiction and the author forgets the implications of magic existing in the twenty-first century, or when the characters in the book who have been raised outside of the magical society...

HARRY *COUGH* HERMIONE *COUGH*

I gotta get that looked at.

... seem to forget that not every tool is a magical tool and that sometimes you can solve problems without using cheap parlor tricks. Humphreys and Locke BOTH get that. I mean, I guess I'd be all right with flying someplace on a broom or in a Ford Anglia, but there are perfectly mundane ways to get things done as well and they, quite frankly, work better in a setting where the characters are trying to keep the hidden world hidden. It just makes sense.

Anyway, I gotta run. Duty calls. But buy the book. Read the book. Then come back and tell me I'm right.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Lost Companions

Radioactive Evolution by Richard Hummel
Review by Jim McCoy



I like mashups. They make me happy. So, say, if someone were to cross some LitRPG with a bit of Post Apocalyptic Fiction and maybe toss in a medical technology angle, I think I'd probably enjoy that. Uhh..

Wait...

Richard Hummel already did that.

Radioactive Evolution is a successful mix of all of the above. I really enjoyed this one. And for more than one reason.

I'm a fan of zombie fiction (and I've got a review coming as part of my Memorial Day event that is exactly that) but sometimes I think that modern day authors have forgotten that it's possible to do PA Fic without zombies. I'm glad to note that Richard Hummel remembers.

The Earth of Radioactive Evolution is not a friendly place, even if Jared, our main character, is a pretty friendly dude when he can be.

The fact remains that most of humanity lives in the ruins of what went before. Radiation is so pervasive that humans that live on the surface have to have regular boosters of nanites in order to protect themselves from the radiation. The good news here is that the energy provided by the nanites powers their bodies and they have no need for food as long as they're someplace with a high radiation count. I'd hate to be an unaugmented human there, but as long as a person gets the nanites they need, they're okay. Of course, it's not always easy to get the boosters...

So yeah, conflict happens and the people on the surface suffer. They people of the Cities, which are in the sky, appear to be much better off. People on the ground resent them, even though they're the ones who make the boosters. So far, we don't know much about the people of the Cities and they're kind of cardboard cutouts, but this is the first book in a series and I'm thinking that Hummel didn't want to give up all of his secrets in the initial volume. That makes sense. Keeping some things to reveal later is how an author keeps his readers interested. I approve.

Part of what really kept me in this book is the LitRPG angle. Players of just about any MMORPG will recognize the process of improving a character and gradually becoming immune to what were once deadly threats. It doesn't matter if we're talking about a Young Kodiak in the West Commons or a Gorilla in Stranglethorn Vale, at some point the deadly threat becomes chump change. That happens here. Radioactive Evolution is a story of survival. It is a story of character progression and accepting responsibility.

It is also, however, a story of RPG style progression and building a character through fighting and gaining experience. The book refers to the process as absorbing and assigning nanites, but that's basically how it works. I like the method of progression too.

If you played World of Warcraft during Vanilla or Burning Crusade and can read Radioactive

Evolution and not scream "OH MY GOD TALENT TREE" at least once you're either superhuman or not paying attention. New abilities get added as Jared and Scarlet level up. And get this: It's not an artifact that gets taken away at the end of the expansion either.

SIGH

Nope. Not bitter. Why are you asking?

I don't really like to do spoilers, but if I don't mention that Jared finds himself a dragon to bond with early in the story then I'm not doing my job here. Scarlet is just too much a part of the story to leave out of a review. She's more intelligent than a human. She can evolve using nanites as well and she does... a lot. She has this weird function, where she's the carrier of ancient lore, but also doesn't know much about humanity. She's Spock mixed with Kess, with a side of Worf and maybe just a touch of Odo. (If you're not a Star Trek fan you don't get that. I feel bad for you.)

Fans of the Post Apocalyptic genre will be familiar with the Mad Max type thing where what's left of the world consists of only one type of environment. I'm happy to say that's not the case here. We see cityscapes, wilderness, military compounds, flight and even underground tunnels. There's a lot of variety in places and things. Jared and Scarlet are constantly moving and experiencing different things and different threats. The threats are great, but so are the rewards.

And there are most definitely threats. If you feel safe at just about any point in this story, you're not paying attention. Even some of the things that shouldn't be dangerous are. Jared and Scarlet can run. They can hide. They can fight.

The one thing it never makes sense to do is relax. Something is always out there. Something is always watching. In the world of Radioactive Evolution, getting lazy means taking unnecessary risks.

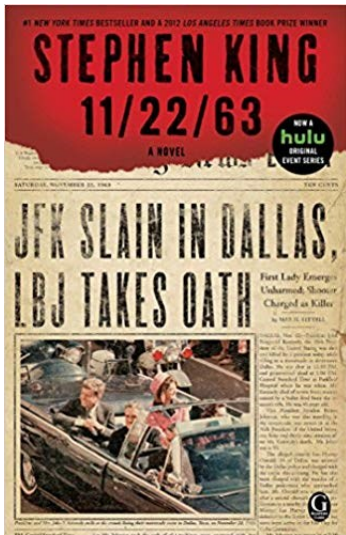
It's fun to watch the two grow together too. They start off not knowing much about each other. They start off not knowing much about each others' species. By the end of the book, they're very much friends and, while they still don't understand each other perfectly, they're figuring things out between them. They're learning to relate to others better as well. I can't wait to see how close they get in the future.

And there will be a future. Or, maybe it's closer to the truth to say there already IS a future. The next book is already out and, while I'm not real sure if I like the fact that the titles are so close together (I recently received a link to the book. It's called Radioactive Revolution and when I first looked at it, I thought it was the same book) I really am excited to read it. There is a lot of story left to be told. I'm guessing there will be more than one sequel, but I haven't read the new one yet so I can't say for sure.

Seriously folks, this one is worth your time and money (Although Kindle Unlimited users can get it for free as part of your subscription). I'd definitely encourage you all to check it out.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Nanite Boosters

11/22/63 by Stephen King Review by John Thiel



Somewhat like Eugene Burdick's *FAIL-SAFE*, *11/22/63* is a novel set so close to actual crucial matters that the book carries a terrifying aura with it, not of the usual kind associated with Stephen King, but of top secrecy and forbidden considerations. In what seems the most ambitious of his novels, King describes a trip through time whose purpose is to undo the Kennedy Assassination and change history back to where it was going before that history-making (or history unmaking) negative event occurred. The story pits its chief character against Lee Harvey Oswald, two men with different and opposite intentions.

The proposition of the novel is that the man will succeed in his purpose. The reader knows otherwise, but if the proposition is fulfilled the reader will cease knowing otherwise and the book will disappear. (It is told in first person by the character.)

That the book has this vitality with the reader is demonstrated by the dust jacket of the edition which shows a newspaper story including photographs of the occurrence on the front of the volume and a new story showing the assassination being thwarted on the back cover. Both look like actual newspaper editions. An impression comes from this premise that reality and existence are frail matters caused by the workings of unknown forces to which the author sometimes alludes, and which he has his character contemplate.

The attempt is made by two characters who are commonplace enough, a school teacher and a restaurateur; the man with the diner is the discoverer of the gateway through time and he has experimented with it, and turns his project over to the teacher, having himself aged in the process of using it. These two would seem, from the perspective taken by the novel, to be the only ones aware of the possibility of travel through time, although there are shadowy figures in the novel who seem also aware of it, but our knowledge doesn't proceed past what the teacher is able to surmise.

The effect upon the reader may be to acquire the notion that events are constantly being changed by people going through time, but this is limited by the implausibility of time travel, unless one accepts the notion suggested by King that primal forces beyond our understanding are possessors of reality which stage events upon reality's plane, subject to revisions.

Much of the novel describes life in our own time and life in that previous time, furnishing an existential view that expresses what King wants to say about the world in which he has been living—as in his other novels, a view which is on the whole a morbid one. The character acquires another life during his stay in the earlier time, and it's one he somewhat prefers to the life he has had, which shows the influence had upon him by the world of the past. He is almost deterred by this influence, but in the end he proceeds toward the carrying out of his purpose. Not to spoil the reading for those who may yet read it, this climax and conclusion won't be revealed in this review. It is a book worth purchasing, reading, talking about and considering.

Blood Moon Eclipse by Lloyd Behm II
Review by Pat Patterson



I reviewed the first book in the series, “Shadow Lands,” five months ago. I noted at that time that I had a good moment and a bad moment with the book. The bad moment came when, after 12 pages, I was enjoying myself so much that I couldn't imagine that Behm could maintain the quality of story-telling throughout the book. I was wrong. The good moment came when I thought I was arriving at the end of the book, only to discover that there was another 20% to go.

I really didn't have the same experience this time. Reason: once I started reading, I never stopped long enough to evaluate progress. In fact, the ONLY time I can remember taking a break was to groan about the AWFUL pun-ishment name one of the characters has.

Most of the main good-guy characters are back for this installment, and Father Jesse Salazar remains the primary POV character. There are some new additions to his allies, notably, a crew of tougher-than-nails dwarves. He also gets a replacement, a Sikh, who can capture monsters with his bare hands, even when that's a bad idea, and who appears to love nothing

more than launching into a swarm of nasty unearthly creatures with two bladed weapons. I can't talk much about the bad guys, because spoilers, but you won't be disappointed.

You won't be disappointed in the banter, either, particularly if you are a fan of Monty Python, the Princess Bride, and a few other cultural icons, including Scooby Doo. And if there are references to certain popular items that came along after I dropped out, there is also a running gag about Elvis of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. You'll also find Hitchhiker's Guide references as well.

In addition to the usual intrusions into human society by undisciplined were-beasts, a new thing is happening. In some yet-undetermined fashion, people-gobblers in fur suits appear to be able to break out of the most powerful ensorcelled restraints. That definitely falls into the category of Not Good. The usual and customary methods for turning recalcitrant Bad Weres into Good Weres are no longer reliable, and it's up to Jesse and the teams of QMG to find out why and how.

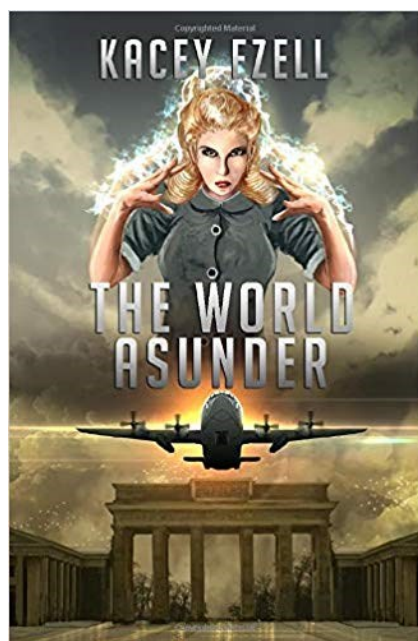
This entails their departure from their home turf of Austin, a weird place, it seems, and to go to even stranger and stranger places. Fortunately, they have friends in low places. Actually, they don't get to the REALLY low places at first, because they are SECRET low places, but when the need arises, back-up plans go into effect.

I keep encountering plot points that I Just Can't Share Because Spoilers, and it's aggravating. Can we leave it at this? Lots of unearthly critters with a plan, plenty of ingenuity in coming up with methods to counter them, and the occasional intervention by superior beings who are on the side of the good guys.

And it ends too soon.

I guess we will just have to wait for the next volume.

The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell
Review by Jim McCoy



Dammit Kacey Ezell! I didn't want to like this chick. I mean I really, really, didn't want to like this chick. They thought she was dead in the first book. I thought she was dead in the first book. I was HAPPY about that fact. But not only did Adalina Sucherin survive in *Minds of Men*, she is the main character of Ezell's newest work, *The World Asunder*. I knew that going in and it almost made me not buy the book. Why? BECAUSE I HATED THAT BITCH! Of course, I'm a member of the CKP Facebook Group, and I mentioned this there and was reassured by none other than the factory boss himself.

Apparently, I'm even more forgiving than even I thought I was because I honestly did end up liking this chick. Of course, it helps that the only thing worse than a Nazi is a Communist and chick starts out the story being oppressed by Communists. Enemy of my enemy and all that. Oh, and she's helping to take care of a family of innocents caught in the aftermath of World War II. I guess that makes up for a lot, especially since there were a bunch of daughters. I have daughters, so I therefore have a soft spot FOR daughters.

Okay, so maybe there was more to Lina than I saw the first time around. Maybe, just possibly, she wasn't the ginormous [redacted] I thought she was. I mean, I could have missed something. Things happen and sometimes I don't reach my normal heights of absolute brilliance. I guess.

I'll say this much though: Having read her story, which starts in East Berlin during the Berlin Airlift, I am actually a big fan of one Miss Sucherin. It took her a bit to win me over, but that's not surprising. I wasn't ready to give this character the benefit of the doubt. What I'm going on about here is that Mrs. Ezell has done one hell of a job building a very flawed and believable character and making her believable. Seriously. Lord knows if she were my girlfriend I'd never allow her around a body of water bigger than a Dixie cup.

Lina is also a woman who has been through a lot. That makes sense. If anyone knows what the Soviet troops did in Berlin after they conquered it that makes sense. Any conquered city is going to suffer, but Berlin had one of the worst fates of any city in modern warfare and its women suffered worse than its men. Russians raped every woman they could get their hands on and were perfectly happy to rape young girls if they couldn't find a woman. (Seriously, if you don't believe me, read *A Woman in Berlin*.)

Of course, Sucherin is not the only character in the book. This is a good thing. Characters grow a lot more when they have other characters to interact with. A lot changes for Lina throughout *The World Asunder*. It's actually pretty amazing how much she remains herself after all of the changes. Lina is a strong woman and that hits home for me. When my daughters were little, I used to ask them what kind of person they were. I made them tell me that they were Proud, Strong, Smart, Tough, and Brave. I wouldn't leave them alone until they did. Lina is all of the above and that makes her the kind of woman I really respect.

I want to be careful here. There is a family that Lina is staying with at the beginning of *The World Asunder*. They are totally believable. There are a lot of other characters too, but I don't want to go too far into them because the way this thing is laid out, I'd have to reveal the plot to show where everyone fits in. Suffice it to say that they all make sense in context. Even when someone did something I didn't want them to do, I knew why they did it. I like characters whose actions make sense according to their own motivations. Ezell apparently gets human nature. And actually, the girls in that family have all of the traits I taught my girls to have too. Maybe that's why I liked them so much.

Speaking as a historian with a fancy sheepskin, I'd like to compliment the author on her historical research. The backdrop of this story is about as perfect as you're going to get from a work of fiction. There were many things that went on after the Second World War that the average American doesn't know much about. Many of them are things that I find regrettable. In *The World Asunder*, Ezell features some of them. The United States really did bring people into the country who were complicit in some of the Nazi atrocities perpetrated during the war. It wasn't pretty. It wasn't right. It happened though, because it was necessary. Ezell gives about as balanced a portrayal of these actions as I've ever read. Kudos to her.

I will, however, stress that you should not go into a novel like *The World Asunder* thinking you already know what's going to happen. As a matter of fact, a smart reader will keep their head on a swivel because you never know what's coming next. I'm not saying that the book takes a lot of weird jumps. It's written in a logical manner, but there are surprises aplenty if you're paying attention.

Paying attention....

Hmm...

Not going to spoil anything.

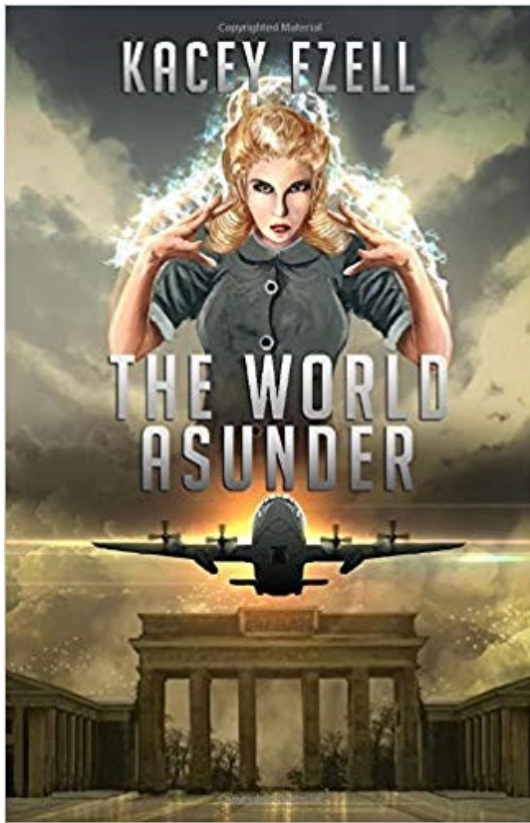
It's possible that I missed something somewhere though. This is actually a good thing for the author. It's good for *The World Asunder* as a work of literature. I'm just saying that it might be possible that one of the surprises would have been a little bit less surprising if I hadn't had my cranium inserted into my third point of contact. Then again, since I am a member of the Facebook group, I've seen other people post vaguely, and have reason to believe that they missed the same things. It was a lot of fun once I figured it out, and someone out there is the note-taking type who is going to figure it out early, but if you're not that one percent of all nerds supernerd, it will come as a shock and it's more fun that way.

So, I enjoyed *The World Asunder* so much that I'm afraid I'm going to be forced to nominate it for the Dragon Award for Alternate History. I'm afraid that I have not consulted Mrs. Ezell to find out if she has room for one on her mantle, but that is quite frankly not my problem. If she doesn't have room, I guess I'll just store it for her. Or sumfin.

Seriously. Buy it. Read it. Nominate it. Thank me later.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Boiling Beakers

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 Awards. The headlines in the Atlanta Journal/Constitution read “First time novelist hits it out of the park!” Well, they WOULD have read that, if I had owned/operated the paper, but regardless, it was still a significant achievement. (If this one doesn't make Dragon, I'll be surprised. BADLY surprised.)

It's also confirmation of something I've been saying for some time, which is that the DCL (Dear Chopper Lady) is a great writer, and a great story-teller. And those two aren't the same!

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

She's living in the Soviet Occupation zone in Berlin, and things are bad, and getting worse. She is fortunate to have a job as a typist for the State (all jobs were for the State), 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, wife Isa, and their three daughters Ginette, Aleda, and Johanna. They represent all that she values in the world.

At the start of the book (in 1948), Lina is shocked into a rediscovery of her abilities to communicate through her mind, by a sound that she originally interprets as a return of the American bombers that took so much from her. It throws her back into a time when she regularly used her psychic abilities. A gradual reveal shows us how she closed the door on her powers, after she used them to kill someone during the sacking of Berlin at the close of the War.

Her journey is triggered when she gets home to find that the StaPo, or their predecessors, have taken away Rolland, while Isa and the girls hide. She agrees to help them get to safety, by crossing the border into the American zone, where Isa has a sister. And there, she meets an American intelligence officer, but only if Lina helps him rescue Rolland for extraction to America, where his (secret) background will be exploited.

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 found it to be an AWFULLY absorbing read. I was in the middle of a bout of insomnia when I started reading, with about 75 hours or so since I last slept. Usually, by that time, I am not able to concentrate well enough to read, but I had no problem staying with “The World Asunder.” I do not recommend that you wait until your next bout with insomnia; get the book, and read it NOW.

And we come to the entire point of this review: an examination of the degree of intimacy experienced between couples in popular fiction. I think I started paying attention to this several years ago, with one particular Mel Gibson film, *Lethal Weapon 2*. In that delightful romance (NOT!), Gibson and the girl meet, share attraction, share a bed, then share a murder attempt which the girl does not survive – all in one day. Ummm...nope. It takes longer than that.

Usually.

There ARE exceptions though, and Ezell has found one.

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 further.

And it's LEGIT!

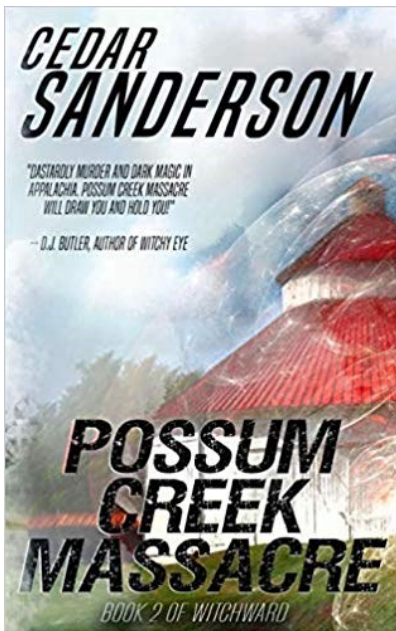
How do I know it's legit? Because Poul Anderson addressed the Very Same Issue of knowing another via telepathic communication, in his 1957 story, "Journey's End." True, that one has a different ending, but it doesn't matter.

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?

Possum Creek Massacre by Cedar Sanderson
Review by Pat Patterson



The author also did the cover art, and it's magnificent, particularly when the story shows you the relevance of the details.

Two sections in this review: the author's craft, and the characters.

I saw a snippet of this posted online a few months ago, and I really can't improve on my treatment of her craft, so here is what I said then (minor edits):

ALL of her work is first class. but sometimes, as you sift through the gold dust in her work, you encounter a diamond the size of your fist. Check this out:

"The idea had been to keep warm in the winter and cooler in the summer, but it didn't work so well in the summer. It was cooler to sleep on the porch, even if the mosquitoes were a torment. She'd been sleeping there since May, and had planned to continue until September, but she didn't have that long."

You don't HAVE to know the details of 'the idea' to understand what's going on, particularly if you live in an area of the country when one (or more) seasons are not particularly friendly to man.

The first two sentences, and the first two thirds of the last sentence, give you a BEAUTIFUL set-up.

It's a nice, homey description, and although the unidentified protagonist of the chapter seems to have perhaps a little bit of the hoarder in her, she is quite sympathetic. And then...

"...but she didn't have that long."

The knife slips in so skillfully, it doesn't even hurt, at first. And the following paragraphs play off that beautifully, slowly. Each has an intro that tells you, up front, that the Bad Thing is coming, and then resumes, depicting the surroundings as if they were slowly unraveling. And there is a bit of dread mixed in.

Nope, I really can't improve on that.

Now, a (brief) word on her characters:

Amaya "Call me Amy" Lombard is a police detective who has the ability to perceive magical forces. She was introduced in Witchward Book 1, "Snow in Her Eyes," in which wonderful, delightful, UNEXPLAINED items are introduced (such as her prosthetic hand). As far as she knows, she is the ONLY police detective who has any sort of ability to see magic. (She has a partner, but he is only mentioned in this installment.)

Captain Sean McCune, her boss. He surfed until he needed to make money, then became a cop. It leaves him with a bit of a laid-back attitude, but he is a good boss.

Sheriff Constant "Connie" Lilburne. I'm sort of seeing Andy Griffith here, friendly, country, tough-minded when needful. He knows he is up against something he just can't handle, and he isn't afraid to ask for help.

Deputy Mark White. Good-looking guy with a bit of a limp. He picks Amy up at the airport, and provides her with a bit of a briefing that raises more questions than it answers. Hint 1: good looking guy. Hint 2: with a bit of a limp.

Merlin/Marilyn: If she had cats, she MIGHT be a crazy cat lady, but she has flowers, instead. I had a grandmother a lot like this, except Merlin does more of God's work in the form of magic, while my grandmother limited herself to taking food to sick people and letting entire families move into her small brick house on the dirt road.

I better stop there. If I go further, I'm gonna hit spoiler territory for real, and I DON'T want to spoil this one for you.

Guardsman by Pam Uphoff Review by Pat Patterson



When I began reviewing on a regular basis about five years ago, I discovered the beginnings of the series "Wine of the Gods." At the time, writers in the Human Wave had been subjected to some INTENSE attacks by ...another segment, let us say. I was getting rather tired of the name-calling, and I decided to use my review of "Outcasts and Gods" as a platform to express my discontent with the way words were being used. So, I crafted a review which totally missed the point, to which I gave the title "Crypto-rapist writers' ideological basis exposed!" It was my attempt to poke fun at the critics (formal and otherwise) who persisted in drawing their own, bizarre conclusions about Human Wave writers, who were, in another context, wrongfans having wrongfun.

Even with that feeble intro, I soon devoured everything I could get by Pam Uphoff, and to this day, I do not know how many of her excellent works I have read and reviewed. However, I DO know that at some point, I lapsed into a momentary loss of concentration regarding the series. Not intentional! And it was only for a minute!

Here's what I discovered: a character called Lucky Dave has emerged from stasis/healing into the far future, and he has to figure out what is going on from context alone. For reasons best explained by others, he is NOT able to get a full brief on what has changed from his timeline. Actually, I found this plot point helpful, as I also had no clue about the world into which he had emerged.

Fortunately for both of us, the clues came slowly and regularly.

This was my introduction to the character, and so I discovered that he was given the name

'Lucky Dave' because he had shown that by 'chance,' he would make choices that resulted in a favorable outcome for the people under his protection. He gets an uneasy feeling, and steps off the sidewalk just as a piano crashes down from the penthouse. After that sort of that happened a number of times, the people around him recognized that somehow, Lucky Dave had a type of precognition that put him in the right place to prevent a Bad Thing from happening. He has some other skills as well, which are shared by other defenders and warriors, but the 'Lucky' part seems to be his alone.

Dave is not the only person who is living time in interrupted stages. By virtue of time-retardant (or accelerated) bubble dimensions, all sorts of modifications to the life cycle are permitted. In at least one case, parents are using the tech to raise children closer to the same age. It's also used to stash criminals to get them out of the way.

It's not without problems, though. In one case, a married couple have been separated for so long, that the wife believes her husband dead, and remarries. Then he emerges. In another case, with slightly creepy overtones, the little girl he once knew has instantly grown up to be Pulchritude Personified, and his attraction is evident and reciprocated.

An election is proceeding, and there is duggery among the skulls. Good guys, bad guys, confused guys, and a pacifist woman named "Beautiful Flower" who breaks a microphone over the head of her opponent. (That's the MILDEST form of violence, BTW).

I do NOT recommend that you start with book 43! However, even if you DO miss a couple of dozen installments, there is sufficient story that is self-contained that you can read happily. (Hate those four-letter names, though. I have enough difficulty remembering Juan and Owen and Faith and Kendra. But Wqrl? Is that a radio station, or what?)

Oh, and be sure you add 'convoluted' to your dictionary. One of the things Robert A Heinlein was famous for was drawing a timeline for his stories (with that eerie block labeled 'The Crazy Years'). I imagine the story line for Uphoff's stories as a three-dimensional hologram, with colorful lines, glowing in space, making all sorts of connections at the level of up, down, strange, charmed, beauty, and truth.

It's a lovely place to visit; would NOT want to live here, but I WILL be back for more, and hopefully, more frequently.

Lay of the Legionnaire by Chris Sommerkorn
Why Superman needs Kryptonite, and the Best and Worst of Indie
Review by Pat Patterson

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program. If you are a serious, devoted reader, and you do not HAVE the Kindle Unlimited program, then you are making a mistake: the payment of a mere \$10 per month allows you access to some WONDERFUL writing, and also allows you to take some risks.

This book is an example: getting it was a risk. It did NOT come recommended. The author appears as a red shirt in several books in the Four Horsemen franchise. His name was just TOO



SPECIFIC for a throw-away character, and his depredations too intense, for me to rest without exploring further. That lead me to this book.

I think this book represents the BEST and the WORST of indie publishing, particularly on the model we have discovered with Amazon.

Here's the best: an average guy, one without rich parents, or uncles in the publishing industry, gets to put his book out there for a reaction. I think that's GREAT! There are a LOT of great ideas, and great products, that are available, and having a marketplace that is open to anyone who can afford the minimal costs required for access is the VERY BEST way to go.

Here's the worst: The cover art is lovely, done skillfully by a person unknown to me by the name of Kevin Heptinstall. I do not know who the person on the cover is. Admittedly, I QUIT READING HALFWAY

THROUGH THE BOOK. So, maybe at, say, 51% of the way through the book, it will become clear that the person depicted on the cover is the primary Point Of View character for all that follows. Could very well be the case.

But I'll never know that, because I'm not reading any more. And THAT is a failure of the indie publishing model: there is no one experienced enough to demand that the cover have a close relationship with the content.

I did NOT stop reading because of the disparity between the cover and the content. That's just an illustration. I stopped reading because the protagonist, one Marcus Muller, gives every sign of being Superman without Kryptonite, and that just doesn't work. Superman without Kryptonite may be desirable, but there is no story. No matter how many Lex Luthors you put in his path, he always wins. And while the BEGINNING of the book IS compelling - Muller racing against the explosions on his spaceship, worrying about his comrades, great start- we all too soon discover that he is not only a super soldier, he is an elite super soldier, and before we can get accustomed to that, he turns out to be something very much like a god. There is no tension in that role.

True, he gets stomped on in training, but always to the refrain of "you are doing no newbie should be able to do!" And I found that I no longer cared for the character.

It's a major problem with indie: there is no one to tell you you can't take your product to market. Further, there is no one to get you lots of publicity. I don't know if people who have never tried to market something have any idea how difficult it is to get the eye of the consumer. I do; I've had to market higher education, mainframe computer peripherals, vacuum cleaners, and bullet keychains. So, I have an appreciation for the difficulties in the path of the person who sets out alone. I don't write books; I review them. And, it often makes me sad that some of the most excellent works aren't getting the attention they deserve, especially after I've read some popular drivel that is on the best-seller list.

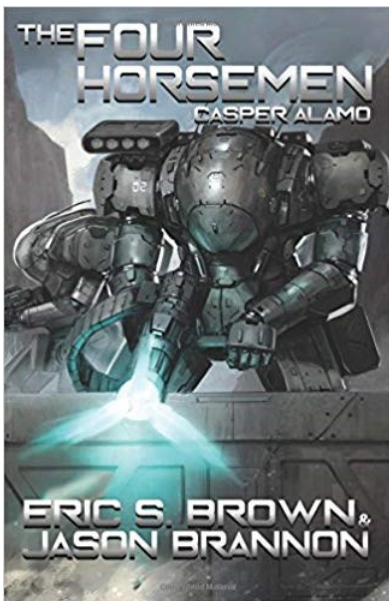
This book is NOT a total loss. I read the (four) prior reviews, and they all mention formatting errors. I didn't detect any of those, so I guess attention was given where it was needed. The action scenes were well-written, and I BELIEVE that's a strength that turned out to be a weakness;

it was after the last (training) action scene that I gave up. I don't know, and will not find out, how the rest of the book develops, but I'd take a very sharp red pencil to the first half, cut out every scene that makes a point the second time, and make CERTAIN that every scene remaining moves the story along.

Three stars does NOT mean the book is horrid; it means: it's okay. This book MIGHT be exactly the ticket if you were stuck in a hotel room for too many days with no other entertainment. But it really needs a better hero, one who ISN'T a Superman without Kryptonite.

Just my opinion.

CASPer Alamo
by Eric S. Brown and Jason Brannon
Review by Pat Patterson



Recently, I became aware of just how far behind I was on this series, so I've been obtaining a LOT of these books via KU. And that contributes, perhaps, to a small bit of confusion I have as to where these two stories fall in the timeline. That may not make any difference, in terms of the story arc. This IS, after all, Book 9 of the Revelations Cycle, which makes it relatively recent. The subject matter, however, makes me associate this with the Alpha Contracts. But I think it's more recent.

A WORD ABOUT SPOILERS: First of all, the book is given the TITLE "CASPer Alamo." Secondly, the blurb states that the stories re-create the Battles of the Alamo and Isandlwana. Therefore, I'm not sure that 'spoilers' really exist for this book. Maybe for a particular character? I'm not gonna beat this to death. I just don't want anyone pretesting that I gave too much away.

With respect to those particular battles: I recently watched John Wayne's 1960 budget buster "The Alamo," comparing it to my memories of earlier views. I started school in San Antonio in 1959, so the Alamo was a part of my childhood. As a result of that recent viewing, I found myself comparing the behavior of the characters in the first story, and was pleased to discover that there is no significant carry-over. However, a different movie led me astray for the second story, as I had the Battle of Rorke's Drift in mind from a somewhat recent viewing of 1964's "Zulu" with Michael Caine. Well, that's NOT the right battle; The Battle of Isandlwana, which immediately preceded Rorke's Drift, was very different, and had a very different outcome. O, brave new world, in which we live, where I can switch between my book and unleash my google-fu, without leaving the comfort of my chair!

The first story, "CASPer Alamo," is the story of mercenary unit, Bowie's Marauders, under the command of cigar-chomping Colonel Travis, aided by Major Bowie, and yes, Bowie DOES have a big honken knife he keeps close by and sharpens when he needs to think. His company has a contract to defend the colonists of Durin II, a religious commune who intended to support themselves by mining. However, something has been eating the miners, and for safety, everyone has withdrawn to the fortress-compound known as the Sanctuary.

The local security force, under the leadership of Commander Neill, is not equipped to deal with the threat, and are significantly undermanned as well. Although Neill was delighted to have the Marauders hired, the high-handed manner in which Col. Travis treats him brings them into conflict.

Legendary fighter/trader David Crockett is on the scene, and not likely to be leaving, either, his ship having broken a critical part.

Everybody is on their last chance. Bowie's Marauders are about to be seized by creditors. The colonists have no hope of survival, much less prosperity. Crockett either gets the part he needs, or his traveling days are over.

And so they all hunker down to wait on the attack, hoping they have enough to keep the monsters at bay.

The second story, "Devils," is also a 'mining-enterprise-gone-bad' story. That's a reasonably inevitable outcome, as the story is based on the first battle in the war between the Zulu and the British, and the reason behind the British (and the other European nations) colonization of Africa was primarily driven by the mineral wealth found there.

The main merc group is the Hellhounds, lead by Colonel Hendershot, appear to be a rough-and-ready group; the primary POV character is Lt. Rai, a highly competent CASPer pilot. Robert's Guard, on the other hand, is a spit-and-polish unit with shiny CASPers and strict discipline. They are led by Colonel Robert, who appears to have a stick inserted in places sticks shouldn't come near, and infantry commander Drake, a nasty, highly efficient killer.

Their opponents seem to be pitiful. True, they have overcome previous expeditions, but they aren't taken seriously by the CASPer-equipped units, since they don't appear to have progressed beyond stone-tipped spears and arrows. There ARE some reports that they possess unusual strength, but the prospect of facing pre-industrial warriors with the modern weapons and defenses of the CASPer units seems laughable.

So much so, that at least one of the troops is suffering a crisis of conscience about the ethics of this mission. Unlike prior contracts, in which she could at least see her role as defeating an armed, hostile ruler, oppressing his people, she clearly sees that this mission is nothing more than a blunt grab for resources, and that the lives of the natives aren't a factor, since they are so primitive. To her credit, she rejects that appraisal. But she goes along with the mission, anyway, with the intention of quitting when this one is over. She has a special reason for this course of action, and I'm not going to tell you what it is.

There are several nice sources of conflict in the story: the friction between the leadership of the teams, the personal animosity felt for Drake by Hellhounds Lt. Rai, and the tension between Rai and Kylie, when Kylie reveals her doubts.

All of that pretty much is forgotten, as soon as they encounter the natives of the planet, the devils of the title. I shall close the door on further consideration; saying only that emergency evacuation from a contested landing zone presents one of the most suspenseful scenes you'll read.

Comics

Deadworld: Requiem for the Dead Review by Jim McCoy

Oh my God.

Oh my God.

OH MY GAWD!!!

I'm reviewing a reboot. I can't believe I'm reviewing a reboot. This is Jimbo's and I'M REVIEWING A REBOOT!!!!

I feel like Jim Carrey right now because "Somebody stop me!"

But I'm not REALLY reviewing a reboot. I mean, I didn't even know the original existed until I was holding a copy of the reboot in my hand. So, it doesn't count.

STOP TELLING ME IT COUNTS! I SAID IT DOESN'T!!!

I mean, could we please say it doesn't count? I'll make this a really good review and toss in a link for all of you who want to get one. I mean, if I do a REALLLY good job will you please say it doesn't count as a reboot?

cry

I don't want it to be a reboot.

takes long pull from Mountain Dew bottle

I can't believe it. It's a reboot and it's on my blog. I've failed at life!!!

SIGH

Ok, I've come to terms with what I'm doing. It's a reboot and I'm not shying away from that. I'm a big boy. I'm going to put on my man pants and do this thing right.

So, for those of you who missed the pic at the top of the page and/or have forgotten what it looked like today's review will cover the topic of Deadworld: Requiem for the World and all foolishness aside, it is indeed a reboot. It's a good story even if I can't comment on how well it translates the original because I haven't read the original. Seriously, I met a rep for the Caliber Comics company at ConFusion and picked up two of the books there. I read the reboot first because reasons.

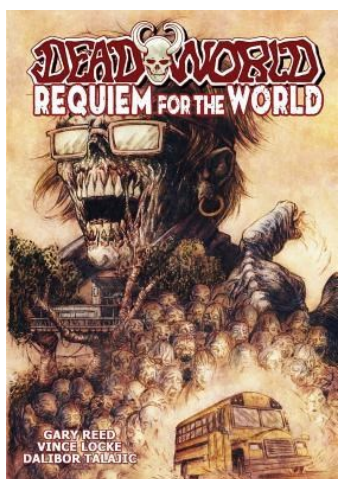
It was actually a really good comic. It's fast paced, has some good art and left me very well entertained. Rumors that I may have gotten chocolate stains on the pages because I couldn't stop reading it for long enough to eat a Ho-Ho are greatly exaggerated. (Ho-Hos are Hostess. It was

a Little Debbie Swiss Cake Roll which is totes different.)

Requiem for the World is a zombie comic. I get the fact that zombies are really popular and not all that cool with the hipster set because those goofballs hate everything that anyone else likes, but I'm telling you that this is a good one. Why? Because it has a twist. This isn't just your average zombie comic. Then again, I'm a fan of The Walking Dead, so what do I know?

I know I've never seen a comic where the zombies have a leader. They're not real bright, because zombies, but they can follow simple instructions. I'm not sure what the zombie leader guy's name even is but he's something new that I sure haven't seen before. The thought of armies of the dead working together in a coordinated manner is some scary shit and let's face it: This is a zombie comic. It's supposed to be scary.

SPOILERS NEXT PARAGRAPH
YOU'VE BEEN WARNED
I'M NOT KIDDING!!!!



I know that in cases where the cause of the zombie outbreak is not based on something sciency-sounding it's usually never given. Requiem for the Dead never quite gets to the point that it gives us all the answers but I get the feeling that later comics in the stream actually will. There are some fairly obvious hints that an answer is coming, but not exactly what it is and now I'm intrigued. I'm not sure if the answer was given in the original series or if they'll be giving the same one this time around anyway (the intro to the TPB states that a lot is changed early and I'll take their word for it. It's their product.) but they're definitely leading into something and it sounds cool.

I know that zombies are usually the only monsters in zombie fiction. I'm not sure but I have reason to believe that there are a couple of things in the book that are not exactly zombies and aren't the type of thing we would see in the real world ever. I like them. I like the fact that they're there even more. This is something that you just don't see. I'm starting to wonder how they tie in with the rest of it.

I know that the fact that I want to see more is the first sign of a good continuing anything. (Nobody tell any of my English teachers you saw that sentence. It's a mess and I can't figure out how to fix it.) Seriously, if they give you all the answers you have no reason to buy the next one. Whoever scripted this (The cover credits Gary Reed, Vince Locke and Dalivor Talajic, but

doesn't say who did what and I don't know the company well enough to be sure) did a damn fine job of not just writing a good story for this book, but of creating a story that will cause interest in future books. I mean, this has the potential to cost me bunches of money and they're basically sucking all the cash out of my wallet but I'll get over it because I honestly believe I'm going to enjoy it.

I know that I love good art and this is good art. It's black and white, but I think it almost has to be. Zombie comics are not superhero comics. They're not meant to be bright, shiny and uplifting. Zombie comics are horror comics. They are dark and brooding because that's what they're supposed to be. They are tales of the scraps of humanity barely surviving. The black and white medium really helps drive that point across. It's a mood thing.

Listen, I'm not really a super-educated comics critic who can take apart a page and tell you exactly what technique was used to do what and lead to that other thing. I just know that it looks good and helped the story make sense. At the end of the day that's all I really care about. They delivered with what mattered and that's a good looking, entertaining story. Now I'm stuck with the question of whether or not to get the next one in Dead Tree Format or in e-format. I read a lot of e-books but with comics... I dunno. Then again, for what it's worth, I will be picking up the next one in some format.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Rotten Corpses

SerCon

Miriam Allen deFord:
Science Fiction-Writing Feminist
by
Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.
N3F Historian

Miriam Allen deFord (1888 - 1975) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She attended Wellesley College, Temple University, and the University of Pennsylvania, from which she received an A. B. degree in 1911.

She began writing when she was twelve years old and was recognized by a local newspaper for her work. After high school, she received a scholarship to Wellesley College, which only paid for her tuition. Her parents were unable to make up the difference, so her father sent her to a business college instead. She then went to work for the Sunday department of one of the largest newspapers in the city, where she typed letters and did some writing. When she returned to this newspaper later in her life, she did feature writing and for a time ran a health and beauty column.

In 1918 she moved to Hollywood and appeared in a few films. She then moved to San Francisco where she worked as a labor journalist and staff writer for newspapers. In the early 1900s she disseminated birth control information to women. She spent most of her time writing mysteries and science fiction (SF), and she also edited several anthologies in the mystery genre. She had an interest in historical crime, and 1968 saw the publication of her book *The Real Bon-*

nie and Clyde. She also wrote *The Overbury Affair*, which involves events during the reign of James I of Britain surrounding the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury; for this book she received a 1961 Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime Book. At one time she worked for the *Humanist*, the magazine of the American Humanist Association. Early in her writing career she wrote several of the Little Blue Books for Haldeman-Julius.

In 1949 *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (F&SF) began with Anthony Boucher as one of the editors. Boucher wrote SF and fantasy, but he also was a writer/critic in the mystery field. This gave his magazine some cross-over appeal to mystery writers like deFord. Hence, much of her SF first appeared in F&SF. Her stories in F&SF dealt with themes such as nuclear devastation, alienation, and sexual roles. Her two collections of SF stories are *Xenogenesis* and *Elsewhere, Elsewhen, Elsehow*. She also edited an anthology of stories that mixed SF with mystery: *Space, Time, and Crime*.

DeFord was a passionate Fortean, a follower of Charles Fort and even did fieldwork for him. She is mentioned in Fort's book *Lo!* Shortly before her death in 1975, Fortean writer Loren Coleman visited deFord and interviewed her about her earlier interactions with Fort -- including her trips to California to investigate the case of a poltergeist rock-thrower.

In 2008 the Library of America selected deFord's story of the Leopold and Loeb trial for inclusion in its two-century retrospective, *American True Crime*.

DeFord died February 22, 1975, at her longtime home, The Ambassador Hotel in San Francisco. She was married twice, but had no children. She wrote a book about the life of her second husband, science fact writer and lecturer Maynard Shipley.

Shipley was born in Baltimore and educated at Stanford University. In 1898 he founded the Academy of Science in Seattle, Washington, and later was its president. He wrote *The War on Modern Science* (1927), *The Key to Evolution* (1929), and was the author of thirty-three Little Blue Books on scientific subjects, including *Are the Planets Inhabited?* and *Is the Moon a Dead World?* He and deFord married in 1921. Shipley died in 1934.

Selected Miriam Allen deFord Books

Up-Hill All the Way: The Life of Maynard Shipley (1956)

The Overbury Affair (1960)

Space, Time & Crime (1964) [editor]

Xenogenesis: Tales of Space and Time (1969) [16 of her SF short stories, mostly from F&SF -- but with one or two each from *Galaxy*, *If*, *Fantastic Universe*, *Startling Stories*, and *Venture*]

Elsewhere, Elsewhen, Elsehow (1971) [18 of her SF short stories, mostly from F&SF -- but with three from *Fantastic Universe*, two from *Galaxy*, and two from *If*]

Genre Stories (see Note at end of entries)

"The Akkra Case" in *Amazing* (1/62)

"Henry Martindale, Great Dane" in *Beyond Fantasy Fiction* (3/54)

"The Dreaming Eyes" in *Fantastic* (1/61)

"Absolutely Perfect Murder" in F&SF (2/65)

"Against Authority" in F&SF (2/66)

"The Ajeri Diary" in F&SF (3/68)

“All in Good Time” in F&SF (7/60)
“The Apotheosis of Ki” in F&SF (12/56)
“The Cage” in F&SF (6/61)
“The Colony” in F&SF (5/66)
“The Crib Circuit” in F&SF (11/69)
“The Daughter of the Tree” in F&SF (8/51)
“The Expendables” in F&SF (7/65)
“First Dig” in F&SF (5/59)
“Fun-nee” in F&SF (3/70)
“Gathi” in F&SF (6/58)
“The Green Snow” in F&SF (12/66)
“Jimmy” in F&SF (1/72)
“The Last Generation?” in F&SF (Winter-Spring/50)
“Martie and I” in F&SF (2/56)
“Mary Celestial” in F&SF (5/55)
“The Monster” in F&SF (3/60)
“Mrs. Hinck” in F&SF (3/54)
“Murder in the Transcontinental Tunnel” in F&SF (5/73)
“The Old Bunch and Dusty Stiggins” in F&SF (10/70)
“Old Man Morgan's Grave” in F&SF (10/52)
“Rope's End” in F&SF (12/60)
“Slips Take Over” in F&SF (9/64)
“The Superior Sex” in F&SF (4/68)
“Time Quake” in F&SF (12/58)
“Time Trammel” in F&SF (11/56)
“Transit of Venus” in F&SF (6/62)
“The Treyans Are Coming” in F&SF (6/74)
“Voyage of the 'Deborah Pratt’” in F&SF (4/63)
“Freak Show” in Fantastic Universe (2/58)
“The Old Woman” in Fantastic Universe (10/57)
“Season of the Babies” in Fantastic Universe (12/59)
“Do It Yourself” in Future (4/60)
“The 1980 President” in Galaxy (10/64)
“The Eel” in Galaxy (4/58)
“The Great Stupids” in Galaxy (8/67)
“Keep Moving” in Galaxy (11/68)
“Oh, Rats!” in Galaxy (12/61)
“One Way” in Galaxy (3/55)
“Inside Story” in Gamma 3 (1964)
“The Margenes” in If (2/56)
“Not Snow Nor Rain” in If (11/59)
“The Smiling Future” in If (10/65)
“Laughing Moths” in Shock (7/60)
“The Whatsits” in Space Stories (10/52)
“The Children” in Startling Stories (12/52)
“Mr. Circe” in Startling Stories (7/52)
“Throwback” in Startling Stories (10/52)
“Time Out for Redheads” in Startling Stories (Summer 1955)
“Ghostly Hands” in Tales of Magic and Mystery (1/28)

- “Featherbed On Chlyntha” in Venture (11/57)
- “Never Stop to Pet a Kitten” in Weird Tales (July 1954)
- “The Cats of Rome” in Weird Tales (Winter 1973)
- “Ghostly Hands” reprinted in Weird Tales (Winter 1973)
- “The Apprentice God” in Worlds of Tomorrow (4/64)
- “Where the Phph Pebbles Go” in Worlds of Tomorrow (4/64) [with Boucher]

Note: Stories listed alphabetically by title of the magazine in which they appeared.

Stories in Genre Anthologies (see Note at end of entries)

- “Throwback” in Future Tense (1952)
- “The Margenes” in The First World of If (1957)
- “The Eel” in The Fifth Galaxy Reader (1958)
- “The Long Echo” in Star Science Fiction Stories #4 (1958)
- “Press Conference” in Star Science Fiction #6 (1959)
- “Rope's End” in Space, Crime, and Time (1964)
- “Prison Beak” in Rulers of Men (1965)
- “The Malley System” in Dangerous Visions (1967)
- “Freak Show” in Gentle Invaders (1969)
- “The Apotheosis of Ki” in Special Wonder (1970)
- “Slips Take Over” in Worlds of Maybe (1970)
- “The Tiger” in Infinity #1 (1970)
- “Vooremp: Spy” in Infinity #3 (1972)
- “Time Trammel” in Quickie Thrillers (1975)
- “The Voyage of the Deborah Pratt” in Terrors, Torments, and Traumas (1978)
- “A Way Out” in Sex in the 21st Century (1979)
- “The Peak Lords” in Against Tomorrow (1979)

Note: Stories listed by date of appearance, 1952 to 1979.

Concluding Remarks

Today, deFord is thought of primarily as a mystery writer, even though she wrote quite a lot of SF, as detailed above. Although her SF was written primarily from the male viewpoint, she saw herself as a feminist -- as well as a secularist (“lacking in grace but never vigor”).

The California Historical Society has her papers, described as follows: “Consists of personal papers and documents, correspondence with Maynard Shipley, correspondence from publishers, newspaper clippings, ephemera, and manuscripts and typescripts of deFord's plays, articles, stories, poems, biographies, and other writings. Includes typescripts of They Were San Franciscans, Penultimates, and other works. Includes material related to deFord's husbands, including a will for each, as well as letters and published writings by Maynard Shipley.”

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Tuck, Donald H. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume 1: Who's Who, A-L*. Chicago, Advent: 1978.

Tymn, Marshall B. & Mike Ashley (eds.). *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Weird Fiction Magazines*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

Yntema, Sharon K. (ed.). *More Than 100 Woman Science Fiction Writers*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1988.

Note: In addition to the above sources, several Internet sites were consulted.

The Whitman Penny Books
by
Jon D. Swartz, Ph. D.
N3F Historian

The Whitman Publishing Company of Racine, Wisconsin -- publishers of the original Big Little Books -- copyrighted the term "Penny Book" and used it to describe several types of small, soft-cover books they also published, some of which were science fiction (SF) or fantasy (F), or had SF/F elements in them. All of Whitman's Penny Books were issued from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. A few of them took their content from already published big little books, but most of them had original content.

The concept of a "penny" book was enhanced when the J. C. Penny Company put its name on the back covers of a few of the Penny Books. For a while, some people thought that these little books were called Penny Books because of the J. C. Penny Company ads on the back covers.

The Penny Books were 2½ by 3½ by ⅛ inches in size, 32 pages in length, and stapled on the side, either with one or two staples. The front covers were in color; and, of course, they sold for a penny – although only one actually had 1¢ printed on the cover. Most were simply given away, usually as part of promotions for other products.

Famous Comic Strip Series

The first series of Penny Books, published in 1938-1939, consisted of popular comic strip characters of the time. These included Alley Oop, Dan Dunn, Dick Tracy, Don Winslow, Freckles, G-Men, Ken Maynard, Little Orphan Annie, Smilin' Jack, Smokey Stover, Terry and the Pirates, and the Texas Ranger. These books were also called miniature books, and each book in this set of 18 had five distinct printings, plus three variations. All were at the time described as being "authorized."

Fun Book Series

This series, issued in 1940, consisted of 18 books on such topics as magic, dreams, jokes, hobbies, puzzles, riddles, and tricks.

The books were the same size as in the previous series, and each book had four distinctive printings, plus one variation.

Cowboy and Detective Book Series

This series, published in 1943, also consisted of 18 books that were about equally divided between cowboy and detective titles: Buck Jones, The Fighting Cowboy, Gangbusters, George O'Brien, Ghost Gun Gang, Gunmen of Rustlers' Gulch, Jim King, Jim Brant, Jim Doyle, Junior G-Men, King of the Royal Mounted, Lightning Jim Whipple, Red Ryder, Federal Agent, Tom Beatty, Tom Mix, and Two Gun Montana.

These books are harder to find today than the titles in the first series. Either fewer were printed, or, equally likely, fewer were saved to survive until today.

Fairy Tale and Story Book Series

This series, released in 1939, consisted of 20 titles that were slightly larger in size than the other Penny Books: $2\frac{3}{4}$ by 3 by $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. The covers were made of heavy paper and were in full color.

The content of the books consisted of fairy tales and other popular fantastic children's stories such as Beauty and the Beast, Puss-in-Boots, The Gingerbread Boy, and The Ugly Duckling.

Walt Disney Picture Story Book Series

A series of 10 Penny Books derived from Disney movie cartoons was released in 1939. Much larger than the other Penny Books, these titles were $4\frac{3}{4}$ by $4\frac{1}{4}$ by $\frac{1}{8}$ inches in size. Some of the titles were Donald's Better Self, Mickey's Gold Rush, and Pluto at the Society Dog Show.

Foreign Penny-Type Books

A few of the Whitman Penny Books were translated into Portuguese and sold in Brazil in the 1940s. In addition, numerous penny-type books were published and sold in Great Britain during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Some were even published during the 1950s.

The early Mighty Midget Books in Great Britain were often called "air raid books" or "blitz books" because they were given to children in air raid shelters to keep them occupied during German bombings in World War II. These books covered a wide range of subjects, including SF and fantasy (e. g., The Thought Reader, Moon Monster, Runaway Robot).

Other British penny-type books published during World War II were Tuck's Better Little Books. Some of these were "how to" books, but most were classic fairy tales or biographies of famous people in history. A later Tuck series was for very young children. Tuck books continued to be published well into the 1950s, long after World War II had ended.

Another British series was the Pocket Wonder Library of books, also published during the 1940s. Usually these were sold in boxed sets, and consisted mostly of fairy tales and adventure stories.

Finally, there were 50 titles in The Little Marvel Fairy Tales and Thrilling Adventure series, 16 titles in The Plane Tree series, and 29 titles in the Gulliver series. These books were very similar in content to the other small books for children published in Great Britain during the 1940s, but also with a few fantasy (Alice in Wonderland, Gulliver's Travels, The Imp in the Bus, The Ghost Ship, Aesop's Fables) and SF titles (The Super Explosive, The Mechanical Whale).

Some Conclusions

As stated above, only one of the Penny Books actually had 1¢ printed on the cover, an early 1938 Ken Maynard book, Six-Gun Law. The reason the others did not was because Penny Books often had ads on the back covers and were given away by the companies using them as advertising devices.

In general, the 3-color printings are more valuable today than the 2-color printings, and the one-staple books are more valuable than the two-staple ones. Also, first printings are more valuable than subsequent ones.

Penny Books are very collectible today. The best source for detailed information on these little books is Lowery's Collector's Guide to Penny Books and Similar Books, listed below.

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Price Guide to Big Little Books & Better Little, Jumbo, Tiny Tales, A Fast-Action Story Etc. Gas City, IN: L-W Book Sales, 1995.

Note: In addition to the above sources, Internet sites and several issues of The Big Little Times were consulted.

Food of Famous Writers

As revealed by Cedar Sanderson

Daniel Hoyt's Thai Chicken Satay



I was privileged to read Dan's debut novel, *Ninth Euclid's Prince*, in the beta stage, and it's a fun romp into Space Opera – almost literally, with a setting that is as dramatic as any Italian stage. One of the things you will find in the book (along with Byzantine intrigue, high fashion, and a sly romance) is food. So I knew I'd get something interesting when I talked to his wife, Sarah Hoyt, about food. Dan doesn't cook, and had a moment of what? and then sent me to Sarah when I asked for a recipe. Sarah informed me that if it has peanut butter in it, Dan will eat it. He loves that Thai peanut chicken, she told me.

It is as quirky and enjoyable as the title promises.

Aha! so do I! And I have made Satay in the past, it's a great meat-on-a-stick option for the grill in summer, and to give the kids a thrill at any time of the year. Put it on a stick, and they will eat it. Peanut satay can be very easy – buy a jar – or slightly more difficult to make from scratch. But it is always tasty. So pick up a copy of the book, you'll have plenty of time to kick back in your lounge and read while you relax after this light summer meal.

Chicken Satay

Ingredients

For the chicken:

A jar of Thai peanut sauce

Boneless skinless chicken breast cut into thin strips

For the Peanut Dipping Sauce

3-4 tbsp creamy peanut butter

3 tbsp soy sauce

2 tbsp rice vinegar

1 tbsp honey

1-2 tsp minced garlic

red chili paste (to taste)

1/3 c water

chopped toasted peanuts (for garnish)

Instructions

The day before you plan to have this meal, put the chicken strips and jarred sauce into a ziploc to marinate. You can use the homemade sauce, but I find it a bit too thick for this purpose.

To make the sauce, stir in a saucepan over medium heat all of the sauce ingredients. Keep stirring as you bring it to just about a boil, until it begins to thicken. Remove from heat and set aside.

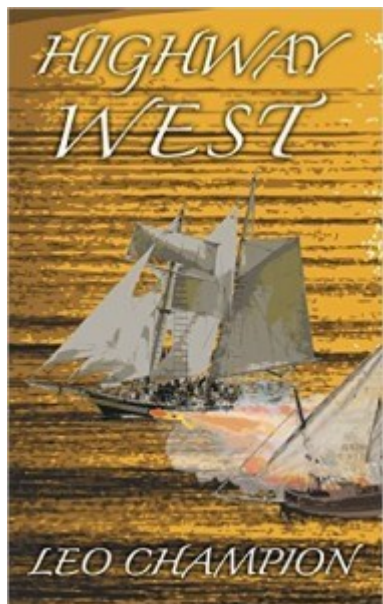
Start your grill, and then start threading the chicken onto skewers. You want to make sure the strips are securely on the skewers so you don't lose any bits on the grill.

Grill the chicken for about 3-4 minutes, with the lid closed. Turn, and finish for another 3-4 minutes. You can also do this on a broiling pan in the oven under the broiler, but keep a close eye on them - the sauce does have sugar and will burn in a heartbeat.



Peanut dipping sauce, chicken satay, and cucumber salad.

Leo Champion's Cassoulet



I was kidding around with Leo when I asked him for a dish to write up for ETWYRT. I don't even have to ask, I typed, I can just make pizza and serve it with Mountain Dew. Hey! He came back, I'm eating a lot healthier now! After some time to think, he told me he wanted me to make something he hadn't ever had, but had always wanted to try: cassoulet.

I'd never had it, either, and didn't even know what it was. Off to google... and there I learned that it's French (which I'd assumed) peasant food (oh, that's promising) and it's basically a bean soup (hmm...). While I was doing my usual research to create a recipe variation, I hit a bunch of different sites, not merely looking at what's in the dish, but why. Why was this made this way? What's the history behind it? I discovered a wonderful explanation here, and I highly recommend you read it if you're interested in food history, and preparing more than a recipe, but a method.

Cassoulet is slow food. While there are methods to speed it up, I think you will find that you lose a lot of the magic if you take the shortcuts. Not that they aren't valid if you're in a hurry, but this dish is worth the wait. While you're waiting, check out Leo's latest book, *Highway West*. The post-apocalyptic world might not be conducive to creature-comforts, but at least we'll have the time to really cook.

I took three days on this, but you really only need two. One to pre-soak the beans (which can be done overnight) and one to cook it. And I do mean all day. The flavors in this meal take their time to reach their peak.

This is why you need the skin: it's not attractive without it!

Cassoulet

Ingredients

1 lb beans (I used Great Northern, but plan to try it again with Tarbais Beans)
6-8 oz salt pork or bacon
2 sausages (raw, garlicky, not breakfast sausage)
4-6 chicken legs or thighs
1 qt chicken broth or homemade stock

Note: if not using homemade stock, add 1 tbsp of unflavored gelatin.

Handful of tarragon or parsley
2 carrots, cut in half
2 celery stalks, cut in half
1 large onion, finely chopped

Instructions

The night before, put the dry beans in more water than you think you need, with some salt dissolved into it. Let them soak for at least 6-8 hours.

In a heavy pot or dutch oven, fry up the bacon or salt pork (in small cubes) until crispy and the fat rendered out.

Remove the rendered meat to a bowl. Put the chicken in the hot fat and brown it, keeping the heat at med-low to allow browning without burning. Once browned, remove to the bowl.

Brown the sausages, and put in the bowl.

Slowly cook the onion in the fats until it is translucent and almost caramelized. Drain the beans while this is cooking. Put the carrot, celery, and herbs into the pot, then the beans, and finally the stock. Cover and simmer for about 45 minutes.

Uncover the pot and remove the large pieces of carrot and celery. Discard.

Mix the pieces of pork/bacon into the beans.

Carefully nestle the meat pieces on top of the beans, making sure there is enough liquid to fully cover the beans. Add water if necessary.

Place the pot into the oven at 300 deg f. Check every 30-40 minutes, and either add enough water to keep the liquid just over the beans, or simply break the crust and gently ladle the liquid over the meat. After two to three hours, let the dish bake for another two hours without disturbing - if you need to add more water, do so carefully at the edge of the pot.

The finished product. Yummy caramelized skin on the top.

The result was... Well, let me put it this way. I tasted it, put the spoon down, and called the First Reader into the kitchen. He took a bite. His eyebrows went up. He took another bite, and then another, and then picked up the portion I'd served out and cradled it possessively to his chest. "You didn't need this, right?"



Broth, beans, meat cooked into velvety doneness...

I've eaten a lot of dry beans, canned beans, beans are cheap and filling and provide protein when meat is too expensive to indulge in. This is probably – no – certainly the best bean dish I have ever eaten. The complexity and depth of flavor is phenomenal, the beans are creamy rather than gritty, and the richness satisfies without feeling greasy.

I froze the leftovers (yes, there were some) and plan to make this again very soon. Should be interesting to see what variations on the meat and beans will do to it. Infinite variables... just like books. You can take the same plot ingredients and come out with something amazing and different almost every time.



Jose Sanchez — Land of the Rising Suns