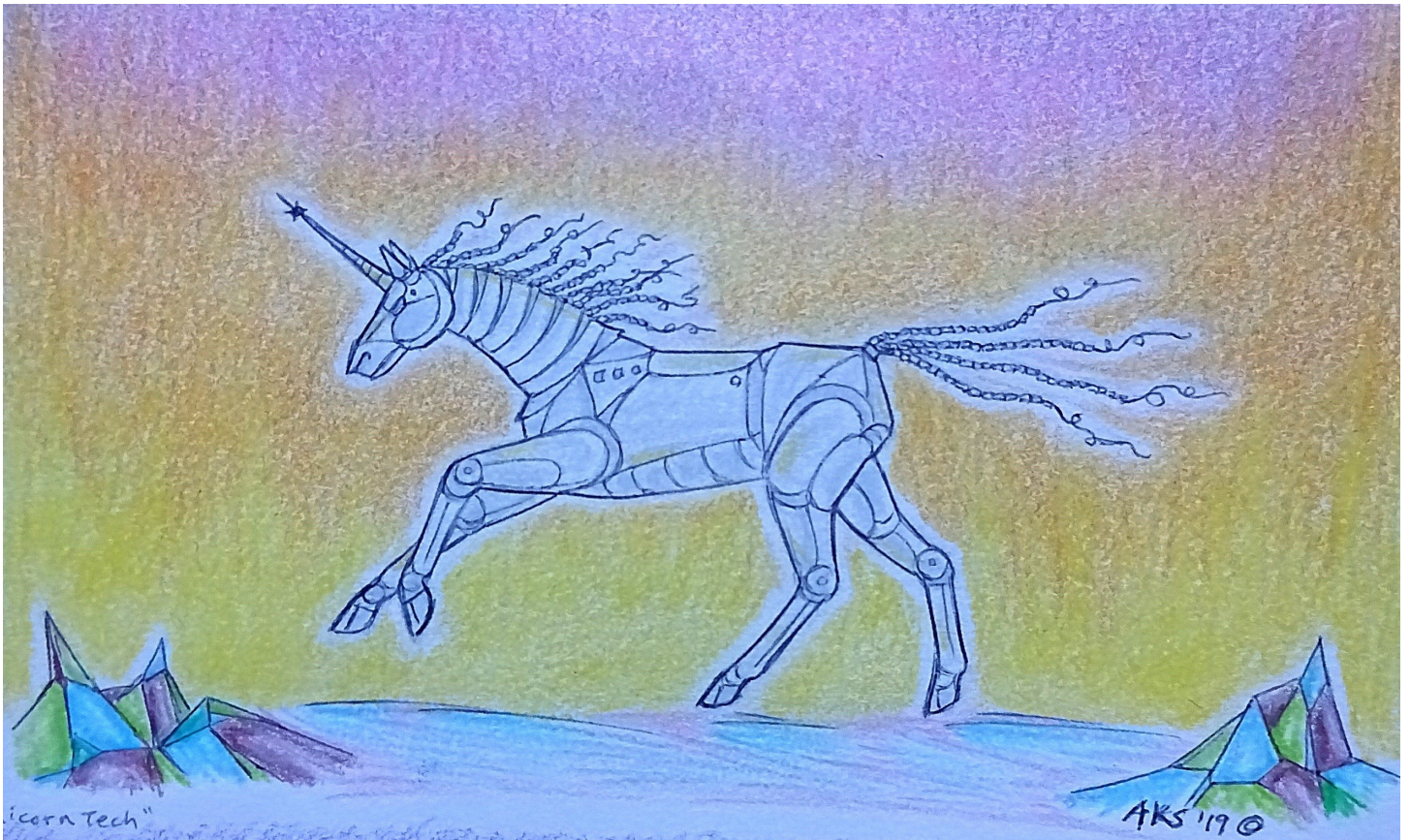


# Tightbeam 300

September 2019



Unicorn Tech by Angela K. Scott

# Tightbeam 299

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Anime Reviews are courtesy Jessi Silver and her site [www.s1e1.com](http://www.s1e1.com). Ms. Silver writes of her site “S1E1 is primarily an outlet for views and reviews on Japanese animated media, and occasionally video games and other entertainment.”

Reviews are courtesy Declan Finn, Jim McCoy, Pat Patterson, Tamara Wilhite, Tom Feller, and Heath Row. Declan Finn’s web page [declanfinn.com/](http://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](http://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](http://N3F.org). Our PayPal contact is [treasurer@n3f.org](mailto:treasurer@n3f.org). If you join, please use the membership form, at least for your name and whichever address you use.

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## Editorial

Greetings once again from Worcester, Massachusetts.

In this issue, we do something a bit different, namely we do a review of a potentially controversial book of fan history, namely *The Last Closet* by Moira Greyland Peat.

Perhaps the book or its review will inspire some of you to write letters to the editor. There are editors who thrive on their letters. I am happy to receive letters but not upset if I do not. Letters to the editor may be emailed to George Phillies at [phillies@4liberty.net](mailto:phillies@4liberty.net).

How are we drawing the line between Tightbeam and the N3F Review? Tightbeam reviews everything: anime, books, short fiction, sf/fnal history, sf/fnal creators, films, comics, and food of famous authors. The N3F Review of books reviews books. Books of fiction. Books of literary criticism. Prose Bono—writing, illustrating, and marketing books. And soon, Previews, opening chapters of books by Neffers. Tightbeam has covers and fair numbers of illustrations. The N3F Review is all text, complete with the test loge on the front page. Last but hardly least, for better or worse Tightbeam limits itself to 30 pages. The N3F Review of Books is all the reviews we can get. Future issues may be longer rather than shorter than the opening issue.

In other sf/fnal news, the last and next issues of The N3F Review of Books will be running a more or less complete set of reviews of several categories of books nominated for the Dragon Awards. In this issue of Tightbeam, we have an extensive review of the Hugo printed fiction awards, all categories from novel to short story.

## Anime

### Stage! Dream Days Review by Jessi Silver

The story centers around the first-year student Mana Shikimiya as she pursue her dreams of winning at the Prism Stage, the competition that determines the top middle-school idol.

Streaming: Hidive  
Episodes: 12  
Source: Mobile Game



Episode Summary: It's unusual for students to transfer schools right away in the Springtime, but that's first-year student Mana Shikimiya's situation. Despite being an oddity, Mana would really like to lay low and not call attention to herself. Unfortunately there's a school-wide rule that all students must belong to a club or other extra-curricular activity, and so she resigns herself to that reality. After a member of the student council gives her a tour of the campus and its clubs, Mana feels overwhelmed by all the potential choices. By chance, however, she ends up passing a basement room in which the Lyrical Tradition Dance Club holds their meetings.

The president of the club is not-so-subtly looking for new members, and nearly dupes Mana into signing up despite the point of the club being a complete mystery. When Sayu, the only other club member, arrives for the daily meeting Mana learns the truth; despite its traditional trappings, the club is focused around the thoroughly modern art

of singing and dancing to pop music. Mana turns out to be a natural, but suddenly insists that she can't join. It seems she may have some kind of related trauma in her past, and though the club members are sure she'd be a great addition to the team, getting past that trauma may end up being too high a hurdle.

Impressions: Video games can be a fruitful source of storytelling, and with so many mobile games these days it's no wonder that they've started to inspire several anime series per season. From my measure, idol-building games seem to be one of the more popular genres (right up there with historical-revisionist bishounen narratives). I've never played one of these games, and so I can't quite speak to their appeal, but I suspect there's an element of building something successful from the ground up, which can be kind of fun.

Mana's talents are a bit more niche. Screenshot from *Hidive*.

I play a lot of *Minecraft*, and in fact, if you've been wondering where I've been the past few weeks, I've actually been spending a lot of time playing that particular sandbox game as I work through some tough real-life emotions I've been having. What I like about that game is that it accepts so many different styles of play. I like resource collection and a minor amount of challenge, so I usually play survival-mode on easy or normal difficulty. If I wanted to build something ridiculous, I could switch into creative mode and have at it. Sometimes I just feel like exploring, so I create a map and head out from my home base. In any case, there's a strange sort of freedom to be found in starting from square one and achieving some self-chosen goals in a situation that doesn't ask very much of the player.



Considering that idol games probably have pre-established characters and something of a finite story arc (at least judging from their related media properties), I doubt the appeal is exactly the same. But I can imagine that taking pre-populated characters and helping them to achieve the game's goals after starting from a low-level starting point provides its own specific sort of satisfaction (I also play *Animal Crossing Pocket Camp*, which I suppose might be a bit closer to this type of game).



Mana feels a bit duped after the club president takes advantage of her indecisiveness. Screenshot from *Hidive*.

This episode, unfortunately, doesn't really serve as a good advertisement for the game to which it's attached. The primary issue is that the first episode, which I usually believe should pull out all the stops, feels haphazard. The character introductions are silly and cliché, Mana's "accidental" introduction to the club is as predictable as it comes, and the quality of the animation is middling at best. The production feels like an afterthought or an obligation to its source material, and doesn't do very much to present an argument for its own appeal. There's nothing saying that tie-ins are by design inferior to their source, but the basic story does not seem to have been all that inspiring as piece of source material in this case.

The episode drums up a bit of intrigue by the end by suggesting that Mana has some familial trauma stemming from the idol contest central to the series. Despite being kind of an obvious and ham-fisted dramatic ploy I'm always at least vaguely interested in these kinds of portrayals of anxiety; I relate to them because I've been there (though obviously not in the same context). I know what it feels like to go through a life situation that causes one to lose confidence and stop doing things that were previously enjoyable, so at least in that sense I can sympathize with Mana's situation (despite not knowing all the details – it's pretty easy to extrapolate). It's not really the most graceful character conflict I've seen, but at least it adds some flavor to the first episode.

While writing this impression, my brain's been flitting back to my *Minecraft* game almost constantly. Part of that is likely due to other outside forces (including a desire for escapism from my escapism), but

I think there's an element of disappointment in play, too. I didn't have expectations for this series and I assumed it wasn't going to appeal directly to me. But I made the conscious decision to tear myself away from my coping mechanisms in order to try to finish off this season's offerings in the near future, and I feel like the episode I chose to watch only proved that I could have spent my time more effectively (or at least more enjoyably). This episode's not bad, but it's definitely not compelling.

Pros: Suggests a bit of drama with Mana's backstory.

Cons: The production is mediocre in almost all respects. It feels like an afterthought to source material that's already lost in a sea of similar properties.

Content Warning: Depiction of some model (airsoft-style) firearms in the episode and promo video.

Grade: C

## First Impressions – Fire Force Review by Jessi Silver

In the year 198 of the Age of the Sun, Tokyo is a crowded cosmopolis. But the world's most populous city is threatened by devils that cause people to burst into flame at random. The only ones who can stop it are the Pyrofighters, a team of specialized firefighters. The young Shinra, blessed with the ability to ignite his feet and travel at the speed of a rocket, wants nothing more than to be a hero, and knows that this is the place for him. But he's not the best at following orders. – ANN

Streaming: Crunchyroll and Funimation

Episodes: 24

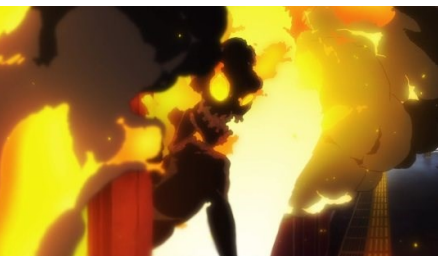
Source: Manga



Episode Summary: As a child, Shinra witnessed the death of his mother and younger brother in a horrible fire. As one with pyrokinetic abilities, he was blamed for the accident, but Shinra remembers having seen something terrifying within the billowing flames. Now, his talents with fire have lead him to join the Fire Force, a group of firefighters who help put to rest the souls of infernals, those inexplicably consumed by flames.

No one knows what caused the appearance of the infernals in the first place, though one of the duties of the Fire Force is to attempt to deduce the cause of these seemingly random fiery transformations. As Shinra goes on his first mission, he begins to experience the parallels between his own experience and the situation at hand. It's this understanding that allows Shinra to draw upon his pyrokinetic power and put the infernal to rest.

Screenshot from Crunchyroll.



Impressions: I was never a huge fan of Soul Eater, but one positive thing that I remember about it was that it had a definite, strong sense of visual style. With its Tim Burton inspired environments, it definitely differentiated itself from other action anime series. Being based on source material by the same author, Fire Force re-imagines a roughly modern Japan with a lived-in, 1960's-ish vibe, and populates this environment with characters that have very creatively-managed abilities. The first episode managed to build a fairly interesting world in a short amount of time, but though the setting is intriguing enough, there were actually other parts of the episode I found more compelling.

An infernal destroys a train car. Screenshot from Crunchyroll.



To put it bluntly, this episode has some of the best animation I've seen recently. While animators definitely have their specialties, I feel like one of the more difficult things to animate (at least in a realistic way) are organic "special-effects" sorts of things like smoke and fire. I think as anime fans we're somewhat immune to mediocre, wonky character animation, because almost every series has an episode or two (or ten) with those kinds of problems. But billowing smoke, crackling flames, explosions, and other complimentary animation effects can really establish an episode's look and feel, for good or ill. With a title like *Fire Force*, one would hope that the fire in question would look good, and it absolutely does; the smoke flows thick and the flames lick at the sky in a way that feels both natural and supernatural.

I was surprised to learn that this series is being produced by David Production. While in most cases I don't think the specific studio is necessarily a determiner of quality, a lot of their output has been of the quirkier, less animation-focused variety. Even their (until now) flagship series *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* hasn't always necessarily looked the cleanest (though that's rarely a detriment to a series with so much personality). I would have pegged this episode as Studio Bones or something similar, just due to the overall quality and visual style. Yes, it looks that good.

Shinra is sort of a standard shounen protagonist, though his backstory is a bit more interesting than he is, if that makes sense. Lately I've been interested in the way that media handles stories about trauma,



because I find that, more often than not, those stories are told in ways that don't do justice to the reality of those experiences. Shinra's past of having been blamed for his family's fiery death speaks to the ways in which we search for people and things to blame in cases of random, completely nonsensical crimes; when situations are out-of-control, being able to point a finger at someone or something (even if incorrect) allows us to feel as though we've taken some of that control back. Unfortunately, those who become scapegoats end up suffering, and that piece of Shinra's story that's told via several flashbacks does a good job of demonstrating that kind of deep harm.

Shinra's past is a tragic one. Screencap from Crunchyroll.

The interesting counterpart to Shinra's story is the religion that seems to have sprung up in conjunction with the appearance of the infernals, which appears in its belief system to resign itself to the fact of the randomness by which people are afflicted by their fiery transformations. Again, this is a disease which appears to have no discernible cause; the fact that the *Fire Force* itself is accompanied by a nun with no abilities beyond prayer for the souls of the fallen, speaks to a desire to take action and attempt to make sense of something that's terrifyingly unpredictable. Shinra's fire-wielding powers seem just as random as the people bursting into flames (though his abilities seem to be genetic), so why not afford him the same grace as others? The answer, I suppose, is that he exists somewhere in between humanity and infernal, and that kind of power is often as reviled as it is heralded for its usefulness. I think that interplay of ideas is very intriguing.



The group battles against an infernal in a factory. Screencap from Crunchyroll.

The only real issue I had with this episode unfortunately has to do with its women. I admittedly have a bit of foreknowledge here via a friend of mine who's familiar with the manga (and hopefully the anime series tones things down a bit), but it's clear even from this episode that the "attitude" the story has toward the couple of women who are introduced is somewhat different from the men. They're featured in a shower scene during the episode (having a conversation that could have taken place anywhere else), and there's kind of a leery shot of one character's chest. This isn't the type of material I usually find worth getting up-in-arms about, but I do think that when a new episode of

anime is as impressive as this one is otherwise, that kind of material has the effect of pulling me back down to Earth and reminding me that I'm not considered the target audience for the material. I don't need an invitation to every party, but it would be nice to at least feel welcome – especially since fanservice doesn't appear to be the main draw. I will say that I appreciate the fact that Maki has the type of muscular physique that I'd expect of someone working in a physically-intense job.

By the time I watched this episode, the heaviness of the Kyoto Animation situation was already weighing on me. Even so, I think this episode sheds many of the uncomfortable parallels it may otherwise have had to begin an intriguing narrative. In an otherwise strong season, this episode still manages to stand out.

Pros: The episode does a good job of illustrating the protagonist's trauma. the animation is impressive.

Cons: There's fanservice that distracts and detracts.

Content Warnings: Fire-related violence (spontaneous human combustion, people trapped in fires, etc.).

Grade: B

## Written Works

### The Hugo Finalists Short Reviews from Tom Feller

Each year I try to read as many of the finalists as I can. This year I succeeded in reading all of the finalists in the fiction categories. The ballot is preferential ballot in that you rank the finalists in the order of your preference. “No Award” is an option, but I did not exercise it this year.

#### Best Novel

**The Calculating Stars** by Mary Robinette Kowal—In the alternate history genre, the two most popular scenarios are the South winning the American Civil War and Germany and Italy winning World War II. Another popular scenario is for an election to turn out differently. In the alternate 1948 of this novel, Thomas Dewey defeated Harry S Truman. Although this struck me as rather dubious, Dewey and the Republicans then funded the efforts of Werner von Braun and his team of rocket scientists, who put three satellites into space by March 3, 1952. On that day, a large meteorite fell into the Atlantic just east of Maryland, destroying Washington, D.C., Baltimore, much of Maryland and Virginia, and all of Delaware. The resulting tidal waves wiped out many of the cities on both sides of the Atlantic. However, it was the long term damage that was even more important. After a mini-ice age because of the dust, the increased water vapor in the atmosphere is predicted to cause global warming to the point where the Earth may become uninhabitable in about 50 years. The re-organized U.S. government in Kansas City (the former Secretary of Agriculture is now President) and other countries decide to colonize outer space so the human race has a better chance to survive. (The Soviet Union has collapsed because of famine, but Communist China has survived and started its own space program.)

The narrator is Elma York, a former Women's Air Service Pilot (WASP) during World War II and a mathematician on the day of the meteorite strike. She was a child prodigy, entering Stanford at the age of fourteen, and holds doctorates in both math and physics. Her husband Nathaniel is a rocket scientist, and both are Jewish, living in D.C. and working for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA, the predecessor of NASA). Fortunately for them, they were vacationing in the Poconos when



the meteorite hit, so they survived. His parents were already deceased, but her parents, who lived in D.C., and almost all of her relatives in Charleston, South Carolina perished. Both of them go to work for the International Aerospace Coalition (IAC), he as chief engineer and she as a computer. It took me a while to get used to the original meaning of “computer”, which referred to female mathematicians who performed calculations for male scientists and engineers. There are a few electro-mechanical computers manufactured by IBM mentioned, but they tend to be unreliable because of overheating. Unlike the computer staff in *Hidden Figures*, the one in this novel is integrated and includes an Algerian, a Taiwanese, and an African-American. Nonetheless, both sexism and racism are prevalent, especially the misogyny of the head astronaut with whom Elma has some history from her World War II service. Much of the plot is driven by Elma’s efforts to become an astronaut, despite her susceptibility to anxiety attacks and her fear of public speaking. This is the first of a series of *Lady Astronaut* novels and a prequel to her Hugo-winning “*Lady Astronaut of Mars*” novelette which featured York near the end of her life. It is highly readable, although Elma and Nathaniel are a little too perfect to be plausible and it tries a little too hard to be inclusive of other races, religions, disabilities, etc. to the point of distraction. It won both the Nebula and the Hugo this year, but I ranked it number four.

**Record of a Spaceborn Few** by Becky Chambers—There are so few examples of character-driven space opera that many readers might consider the term to be an oxymoron. Yet this author has written three novels that I would classify as such, the books of her *Wayfarers* series, which won the Hugo in the Best Series category. Hundreds of years before the events described in these novels, humanity left the Earth because it could no longer sustain life. Some colonized Mars, the asteroids, and the moons of the gas giants in our solar system. Another group formed what they called the Exodus Fleet, which consisted of 32 generation ships, and set out for the stars. They found a galactic civilization called the Galactic Commons who classified them as a charity case, and they were eventually granted a star that no one else wanted because it contains no planetary sized objects. In other words, a good portion of humanity lives on a reservation. As a whole, the series is a subtle metaphor for our current refugee crisis. This novel, the third in the series, is set mostly on the *Asteria*, one of the ships from the Exodus Fleet now orbiting that star.

There are six point-of-view characters, and their paths cross from time to time. Tessa is a cargo processing supervisor who lives with her two children and her elderly father. Her husband is an asteroid miner, so he is gone a lot, and her brother Ashby was a character in the first book in the series, *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet*. Isabel is an elderly archivist who lives with her wife. Besides keeping records, she also functions as a kind of justice of the peace, presiding over weddings, christenings, and funerals. Eyas is a caretaker, which is a combination funeral director, grief counselor, and, when necessary, medical examiner. There are no burials, because all bodies, like everything else in the fleet, are recycled, as in Heinlein’s *Orphans of the Sky*. Kip is a sixteen-year old boy who seems to be rebelling against everything, frequently gets into trouble, and has yet to find his niche in life. He can’t wait to leave the Exodus Fleet and go out into the galaxy. Sawyer, on the other hand, wants to immigrate to the Exodus Fleet. He was born and raised on the planet, *Mushtullo*, where humans are a minority. Then there is Ghuh-loloan, an alien ethnologist who is visiting the Exodus Fleet and staying with Isabel. The overall story arc, what there is of it, is driven by the aftermath of the destruction of the *Oxomoco*, one of the other ships in the fleet.

I would not recommend this or the other two books in this series for someone who requires space battles or any kind of combat in their science fiction, but for someone who wants to see what life for an ordinary person in such a universe would be like, I highly recommend them. My ranking was number one, but the other voters ranked it number three.

**Revenant Gun** by Yoon Ha Lee--The three books of the *Wayfarers* do not have to be read in any order, although I would recommend reading them in the order of publication. They each stand alone, but are set in the same universe. However, the three books of Lee’s *Machineries of Empire* trilogy MUST be read in order of publication. Otherwise, they would be incomprehensible. Even then, they are very de-

manding on the reader and the most intellectually rigorous of any of the Hugo finalists. I had to read the first book twice and even now I do not think I grasp everything that is going on. Another difference is that the people in the Wayfarers books still remember the humans of the 21st Century, although negatively because they believe we wrecked the Earth's environment. The people in this trilogy live so far in the future that they do not remember us. The dominant religion is based on mathematics and calendar mechanics, so they also think differently than we do, and the persecution of heretics drives much of the plot.

The latest novel, like much of the series, is dominated by Shuos Jedao. Several centuries earlier, he was a military genius whose body was executed because he committed a mass murder. Because the governing body called the Hexarchate decided he could still be useful, they transferred his personality and memories into a device called the Black Cradle. In times of crisis, his personality and memories are transferred to a host. This happened in *Ninefox Gambit*, the first novel of this series, but the transfer back from the host, Kel Cheri, to the Black Cradle never occurred. In the latest novel, which takes place nine years after the events of the second one, *Raven Strategem*, his personality and memories at the age of seventeen have been recovered and are transferred into a custom-grown body that seems impossible to kill.

Kel Cheri is back, although she is now known as Ajewen Cheri and one of a number of point-of-view characters. She is working to destroy the remnants of the Hexarchate and still possesses Jedao's memories but not his personality. Her actions in the second novel led to a civil war and split the Hexarchate into what they call the Protectorate and the Compact. Kel Brezan, a staff officer rapidly promoted to general, possibly to the level of his incompetence, is the official leader of the Compact, and Kel Inessar, one of the leaders of the Protectorate, breaks away and joins the other side. A new character is Hemiola, a robotic servitor who is self-aware and addicted to serial video dramas. Hemiola originally worked for the Protectorate but eventually joins the Compact. Although it is not a human, it represents all the ordinary people caught up in the war. Although they are never point-of-view characters, the last two surviving members of the Hexarchate, Nirai Kujen and Shuos Mikodez, are critical to the story, and they are on opposite sides of the conflict. As I mentioned earlier, all of these books demand a great deal from the reader, but they are worth the effort. My ranking was 2, but the other voters ranked it number five.

**Space Opera** by Catherynne M. Valente—After the Sentience Wars about 3400 Earth years ago, the surviving worlds in the galaxy began the tradition of the Metagalactic Grand Prix, a singing contest. All space-faring worlds are required to send a band. However, if a world competing for the first time finishes last, the inhabitants are completely annihilated and their world's biosphere reseeded. The Earth is the newbie this time around, and our representative is the band Decibel Jones and the Absolute Zeros, so the fate of the human race is in the hands of a rock band. This novel was inspired by the Eurovision song contest and David Bowie, and it is in the tradition of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

The news is delivered by a blue seven foot tall member of the Esca species that look like a cross between a fish and a flamingo. Its name is unpronounceable, so the main characters just call it The Roadrunner. They are the newest species to be admitted to the galactic civilization, known as the High Octave, so they are given the job of contacting the latest applicant. A holographic avatar of The Roadrunner visits every human on Earth and speaks to them in their own language, explaining the situation in a familiar voice. They have been monitoring human radio transmissions for decades and have compiled a list of possible representatives. Unfortunately, they are all dead except for Jones (real name: Danesh Jalo, a bisexual Englishman of Pakistani, Nigerian, Welsh, and Swedish descent) and his mate Oort St. Ultraviolet (real name: Omar Caliskan, son of a Turkish refugee with a wife and two children). The third member of the band, Mira Wonderful Star, is deceased. Danesh and Omar have been estranged for 15 years, and neither has had a hit song in the meantime. The two and Capo, Omar's cat, are transported to the contest on a starship named "Cake in the Rain" piloted by an alien who looks like a red panda. The Esca give Capo the ability to speak, although from Capo's point-of-view, she has always had the ability to

speak. By her lights, the Esca granted the humans the privilege of being able to understand her. When the Earthlings arrive on the contest planet, they attend a cocktail party filled with aliens that would make the Mos Eisley cantina scene from Star Wars look mundane.

The prose is highly stylized and takes some getting used to. The descriptions are very detailed (some readers may find them overwritten) and disguise a rather thin plot, although the plot is not the story. There are many references to human pop culture that I found amusing. A previous winning song was called “I Can’t Get No Liquefaction”, for instance. I did find the book longer than I thought necessary, however, and never made an emotional connection with the characters. My ranking was 6, but the other voters ranked it 4.

**Spinning Silver** by Naomi Novik—When I started this novel, I had the feeling that I had read it before. I must have read the portion that was published in 2016 in *The Starlit Wood* anthology, but I have no memory of it. In any case, it is set centuries ago in a fictional Slavic country called Lithvas and is loosely based on “Rumpelstiltskin”, “Beauty and the Beast”, and other fairy tales as well as the Hades and Persephone story from Greek mythology. It features the Stryk, fey creatures who rule the winter and in recent years have been working to lengthen it with the goal of making winter permanent as in Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and Chernobog, an elemental fire demon.

The first point-of-view (POV) character is Miryem, the daughter and granddaughter of Jewish money lenders. Her father is too soft hearted for his work, and their family live in poverty out in the boon-docks. However, when 16 year old Miryem takes over the family business, they prosper. Two more POV characters are Wanda, whom Miryem allows to work off her alcoholic father’s debt to Miryem’s father, and her youngest brother Stepon. Miryem is so successful at lending money that she boasts to her mother that she can turn silver into gold. Somehow the unnamed king of the Stryk overhears this and takes her literally. He brings her fairy silver which he demands she turn into gold or else he will kill her. In desperation, Miryem takes the silver to Vysnia, the closest city and the home of her grandfather. She persuades Isaac, a jeweller who just happens to be courting her cousin, to make the silver into jewels. They then sell them to the local Duke, who plans to use the jewels as a dowry to marry his daughter Irina off to Tsar Mirnatius, whom Irina knows to be a cruel man. Irina, her handmaid Magreta, and Mirnatius are also POV characters, and Mirnatius has a dark secret. Irina is eventually revealed to have Stryk blood, presumably the result of a Stryk man raping a human woman, and can use the magic in the jewels.

This is an excellent novel about three strong women, Miryem, Irina, and Wanda, although I do not think the author really needed the other POV characters. It is also good to read a fantasy novel in which Judaism plays an important role. Either I have never read one or it has been so long that I’ve forgotten. My ranking was 3, but the other voters thought even more highly of it and ranked it number 2.

**Trail of Lightning** by Rebecca Roanhorse—One trend I have noticed in recent years is the blurring of the line between science fiction and fantasy. This novel is definitely set in a science fiction future in what is currently the Navajo reservation, but a lot of reviewers have been classifying it as urban fantasy, although it mostly takes place in the desert. A better description would be that it is a post-apocalyptic fantasy based on Navajo mythology. There is no longer a United States, or, if there is, it is of no consequence. It was destroyed by events referred to as the Energy Wars, the Big Water, and a series of earthquakes centered on the New Madrid fault about ten years before this novel starts. St. Louis was destroyed, and San Antonio, Texas and Sioux Falls, South Dakota are now coastal cities. Albuquerque and presumably other cities as well have become feudal kingdoms. At some point, the Navajos (they refer to themselves as the Dine) used magic to build a 50 foot wall around their land (parts of present day New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona) to keep out refugees. (Where these magicians were when the Navajos were conquered by the Spanish and then the European-Americans is never explained.) This land, which they call Dinetah, is populated by towns and villages inhabited by some very interesting people, some good, some bad. The two main characters have superpowers, witches are commonplace, and the Navajo gods, such as Coyote, play an important part in the story.

The novel is narrated by one of the main characters, Maggie Hoskie, who is a Navajo monster hunter whose grandmother was killed by a witch. Her superpowers are super-speed and the ability to go into some sort of berserker mode when she feels that she is in danger. She forms a reluctant partnership with Kai Arviso, an apprentice shaman whose superpowers are persuasiveness and the ability to rapidly heal both himself and others. He is also the grandson of Tah, a shaman who was kind to Maggie in the past. The son of academics, he grew up outside the reservation, so he brings a different perspective to what is going on. They unite on a quest to investigate and destroy golem-like monsters. Maggie's mentor used to be Naayee Neizghani, a demi-god who slew monsters, but he abandoned her nine months before the novel starts. Another interesting character is Grace, a cat-owning African-American woman who with her children runs a bar in the middle of Dinetah.

This is a very quick read and the first book in a series called the Sixth World. I'll be keeping an eye out for them, because I would like to know about the survivors and their world. The author, a Native-American, won the Hugo last year for her short story "Welcome to your Authentic Indian Experience", which did not impress me, but this debut novel did. Ranking was 5, but the other voters ranked it number six.

### Best Novella

**Artificial Condition** by Martha Wells—The narrator of this story is an android that calls itself Murderbot, because it believes that it murdered a group of 57 human beings in the past. Its memory was wiped so it does not know the details, but it has developed free will and emancipated itself. Emancipated robots are illegal in this interstellar civilization so it has to pass for human. Its immediate goal is to visit the scene of its crime on a moon named RaviHyralaboard. It travels on an automated research transport ship that is run by an artificial intelligence named ART, with whom it makes friends. Their interactions are the best part of this story. By the end, Murderbot learns something about the murders, but not what it was expecting, and those answers raise even more questions. This is the second volume in the author's Murderbot Diaries series and an immediate sequel to the previous year's "All Systems Red", which won both the Hugo and Nebula last year and introduced readers to this video watching, partly organic robot. My ranking was 2, but the other voters liked it even better and ranked it number one.

**Beneath the Sugar Sky** by Seanan McGuire—A common plot device in fantasy, especially children's fantasy, is the portal to another world, such as a rabbit hole, a mirror, or a wardrobe. The premise of the author's Wayward Children series is that there are many such portals around the world. Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children is a place for children who have travelled to such worlds and returned here, but want to go back. (There is another home in North America for the children who never want to go back.) At both homes, the children find others who understand what they have been through, and some of them are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

This installment, the third in the series, begins when a girl named Rini lands in the pond on the property's grounds. She is searching for her mother Sumi, who had been a student there. Unfortunately, her mother died several years previously before Rini was conceived. The simplest way to describe the situation without spoilers is just to say, "It's complicated." Rini's home world is called Confection and literally consists of sweets such as houses and castles of gingerbread, fields of candy corn, and oceans of soda pop.

Three students and Kade, the school's assistant headmaster, embark on a quest to help Rini change history and rescue her mother. They include Cora, who has blue and green hair because she lived on a world where she had been a mermaid, Nadya, who also lived on a water world and is missing an arm, and Christopher, who is a cancer survivor and lived in a world of skeletons. The villain is called the Queen of Cakes, and the resident god of Confection is called the Big Baker. I enjoyed this story, but found it rather slight, so I ranked it number 5. The other voters thought more highly of it and ranked it



number three.

**Binti: The Night Masquerade** by Nnedi Okorafor—It was nice to spend some more time with the title character in the third instalment of this trilogy even if it was disappointing. The previous instalment had ended on a cliff hanger. Binti, a member of the Himba people, had returned home to Namibia, the driest country in southwest Africa, after spending a year at Oomza Uni, the most prestigious university in the galaxy. This was against the wishes of her family, and now she has brought home Okwu, her best friend at school. He is a member of the Meduse, a jellyfish-like species. Unfortunately, the Meduse are at war with the Khoush, a human people. Although a safe conduct had been negotiated, the Khoush tried to kill Okwu and anyone who got in their way while Binti was gone. She was on a pilgrimage in the desert via camel to visit her father's people, the nomadic Enyi Zinariya. The relationship between the different groups is that the Khoush rule over and look down on the Himba, and the Himba look down on the Zinariya, an independent people. The Zinariya, it turns out, had been contacted by aliens generations before humans achieved space travel and have some alien DNA, which Binti shares through her father. Binti makes a new friend named Mwinyi, a Zinarian who can talk to animals, and they return to her home village to stop the fighting. The story is too complicated for a novella and should have been extended to novel length. My ranking was 6, but the other voters liked it a little bit more and ranked it number five.

**The Black God's Drums** by P. Djeli Clark—New Orleans is an independent and neutral city-state where slavery has been abolished, and it is surrounded by iron walls built by Dutch contractors in this alternate 1884. The American Civil War had degenerated into a stalemate after eight years of fighting, and a fragile armistice was brokered by France, Great Britain, and Haiti, a great power in this timeline due to one of its citizens having invented a weapon of mass destruction. The three countries also guarantee New Orleans's independence and neutrality. Technology is more advanced than in our time line, and diesel engines and zeppelins are common. Then the author adds Nigerian/Yoruban mythology and Haitian folklore to this very entertaining and well-paced story.

The main character and narrator goes by the name of Creeper (real name: Jacqueline), a 13-year old Creole girl pretending to be a boy and living on the street by picking pockets. She is the daughter of a deceased prostitute. After overhearing Confederate spies conspiring to obtain Haiti's secret weapon, win the war outright, and take back New Orleans, she goes to a Haitian smuggler with one metal leg, Captain Ann-Marie St. Augustine of the airship *Midnight Robber*. Creeper hopes to be accepted into St. Augustine's crew and see the world. In addition to regular contraband, Ann-Marie's helps "General Tubman" smuggle escaping slaves out of the South. This is a very interesting story and enjoyable story. This is one of three times this year that the other voters agreed with me, and we both ranked it number four.

**Gods, Monsters, and the Lucky Peach** by Kelly Robson—In the year 2267, humans have emerged from underground cities called "hells" to restore the surface of the Earth from the ecological disasters of the 21st and 22nd Centuries. However, the number one growth industry is time travel into the past, which had been invented about ten years previously and draws funding away from restoration projects. A project is developed to travel back in time to study Mesopotamia in the year 2024 B.C. with the intent of restoring what we in the 21st Century call Iraq to its condition at that time.

One of the point-of-view characters is Minh, an 83-year-old woman living near what used to be Calgary. She is what they call a "plague baby" and was born without legs. She tripled down by having SIX prosthetic legs surgically installed. They are designed to mimic the legs of an octopus, thus enhancing her ability to study and restore rivers. In the expedition to the past, she is supposed to be assisted by Kiki, a physically normal young woman from the generation they call "fat babies", and Hamid, a biologist from Minh's generation with a passion for horses. Kiki has her original legs replaced by goat-like prosthetics. A young man from Kiki's generation, Fabian, an experienced time traveller and historian, runs all the non-research aspects of the expedition, and he and Minh come into conflict repeatedly.

The other point-of-view character is Shulgi, king of the ancient city of Ur at the time the expedition, which he perceives as a group of monsters, visits his land. Their story lines merge toward the end. Besides the time travellers, he is in conflict with Susa, High Priestess of the Moon. One admirable feature about this story is that the author assumes that the people in the past are just as intelligent as the ones from the future.

The author avoids time travel paradoxes by assuming that the timeline created by the travellers collapses as soon as they return to the present. The world-building is excellent, but the story has a slow start because a lot of time is devoted to funding the expedition. I did not find the ending satisfying, but I have read that there is a sequel in the works. My ranking was number 3, but the other voters ranked it number six.

**The Tea Master and the Detective** by Aliette de Bodard—There are two title characters in this story. The first is a “shipmind” named The Shadow’s Child who also functions as the narrator. In this space opera set in the author’s far future Xuya universe (a finalist for Best Series), faster-than-light travel is so disturbing to human beings that most of them must be sedated during passage. At birth, a few human brains are installed into spaceships and are called “shipminds”, much like Anne McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang*. They still have human emotions and gender, but can withstand the stresses of faster-than-light travel without medication. When The Shadow’s Child’s crew all die in an accident, she is so traumatized that she can no longer go into deep space and is relieved of her duties as a military troop transport. At the beginning of the story, she is parked in orbit around a space habitat in the Scattered Pearls Belt, a minor part of human space, and pays her expenses by brewing mood-altering teas customized to each individual buyer. The second title character is a consulting detective named Long Chau. She is an Asian woman with a drug addiction who asks The Shadow’s Child to return to deep space so that she can study the long-term effects of the vacuum of deep space on corpses. The Shadow’s Child needs the money, so she takes Long Chau to the site of a fatal space wreck for which not all the bodies are believed to have been recovered. The detective discovers that the body they find for study was not actually killed in the space wreck but instead was killed somewhere else and dumped with the wreck’s debris. The story then becomes a murder mystery, and Long Chau and The Shadow’s Child develop a Holmes-Watson relationship. This is a very satisfying and entertaining story, especially the interactions between the two main characters. It is this year’s Nebula winner and I ranked it number one, but the other voters liked it a little bit less and ranked it number two.

## Best Novelette

**If at First You Don’t Succeed, Try, Try Again** by Zen Cho--Byram, the main character in this story, is something called an “imugi” from Korean folklore. It is kind of a proto-dragon in Korean folklore that does not fly. Every thousand years or so, Byram attempts to fly and become a true dragon, but something always happens that stops it. After three thousand years, a female hiker distracts him by taking a selfie that includes it. By this time, it has learned to become a shape-shifter and takes the form of a human female with the intention of killing the hiker, whose name is Leslie, for revenge. However, when they meet, they quickly become friends, then lovers, and eventually a couple. This is a very sweet and endearing story about a dragon who chases his dream. My ranking was 2, but the other voters liked it a little bit more and made it the winner.

**The Last Banquet of Temporal Confections** by Tina Connolly—The concept of a food taster for monarchs is very common, especially for widely hated ones like Regent Searle, the villain of this story. He has two tasters, one for regular food and another for pastries and desserts. The latter is Saffron, the point-of-view character of this story. Her husband Danny is the royal pastry chef, but they are kept apart and not allowed to communicate. Danny’s confections are literally magical, and he uses them to communicate with Saffron without anyone knowing. A good portion of the story consists of flashbacks that provide the back story of the two main characters. On the other hand, there is little suspense. It is a nice

story but I thought that it was nothing special, so I ranked it at number five. However, the other voters liked it a lot more and ranked it at number two.

**Nine Last Days on Planet Earth** by Daryl Gregory—LT is ten years old and living with his parents in East Tennessee when a five day meteor storm hits the Earth. However, these are not ordinary meteorites but rather the seeds of a great number of alien plants. It was as if an alien Johnny Appleseed had visited our world. All the new plants are all invasive, like Triffids. None of them directly kill people, unlike Triffids, but their ecological disruptions are so severe in some parts of the world that they cause a massive refugee problem. LT grows up, becomes a botanist specializing in the alien plants for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, marries, raises a family, and lives to a ripe old age while waiting for a follow-up invasion that never comes. The “Nine” in the title refers to the nine most important days in LT’s life. This is a very lovely and moving story, and LT’s and the other characters are very well developed as well. I was quite impressed at the author’s skill at showing one person’s life within the confines of a work of short fiction. I ranked it number one, but other voters strongly disagreed and ranked it at number 5.

**The Only Harmless Great Thing** by Brooke Bolander—This alternate history connects two historical events in the early 1900s: the deaths of a group of female watch dial factory workers in Newark known as the “Radium Girls” from radiation poisoning between 1917 and 1926 and the public electrocution of a female Indian elephant named Topsy on Coney Island in 1903. In this story, the events take place at the same time. Another historical difference is that elephants in this timeline have learned sign language and can talk to humans. One of the workers, Regan, teaches Topsy to paint watch dials with radium-soaked paintbrushes. When Regan’s male supervisor physically and sexually abuses Regan, Topsy comes to her rescue and kills the man. After Topsy is sentenced to death, Regan helps her get revenge on humans. There is another story line set in our own time that is poorly integrated with the main story. Kat is a negotiator who seeks to persuade elephants to consent to a genetic modification that will make them glow in the dark if they come close to radioactive contamination. Stylistically this story is beautifully written, but I found it hard to follow. The title, by the way, is a quote from poet John Donne. It is this year’s Nebula Award winner and the other Hugo voters ranked it number three, but I ranked it at number four.

**The Thing about Ghost Stories** by Naomi Kritzer—Leah, the narrator, is an anthropologist specializing in ghost stories, and she interviews people all around the U.S. who claim to have seen ghosts. One of her observations is that the best stories are not necessarily the most believable. After her father dies, her mother comes to live with her but develops Alzheimer’s. Early on, the mother, a retired copy editor, helps Leah with her doctoral dissertation. As the disease progresses, the mother becomes more and more like the ghosts in the stories Leah studies. Then after the mother’s death, a medium claims that she has come back, but Leah has become a skeptic, especially about the mediums who ask for money. This is a very touching story, and Leah is a very interesting person. My ranking was number three, but the other voters ranked it 4.

**When We Were Starless** by Simone Heller—Mink is a scout for a tribe of nomadic, intelligent reptiles who use some sort of robotic 3-D printers, which they call “weavers”, to scour the ruins of a lost civilization and make items both for their own use and for trade. At the beginning of the story, she finds a planetarium that is still operational. Presumably the story is set on a far future Earth in which humans have either died out or left the planet. The stars are not visible, which may be the result of a nuclear winter. The planetarium is run by an artificial intelligence that appears in the form of a hologram which Mink names “Orion”. The tribe is on the run from a species that she calls “rustbreeds”, and Mink persuades them to take shelter in the planetarium. This is a very nice story, but lacks the emotional impact of the other ones in this category. This is the second time I agreed with the other voters, and we ranked it number six.

## Best Short Story

**The Court Magician** by Sarah Pinsker—A boy on the streets is interested in magic tricks and learns enough from street magicians that he is taken to the city’s palace where he learns real magic. He becomes the ruler’s official magician but discovers that using real magic has a price. Casting spells takes a lot out of him both physically and morally, because they are used to eliminate the ruler’s enemies. This is a very creepy and downright depressing story, although definitely award worthy. My ranking was number three, but the other voters ranked it at five.

**The Rose MacGregor Drinking and Admiration Society** by T. Kingfisher (Ursula Vernon)—Four male fairies, a selkie, and a pooka sit around a campfire and talk about the title character of this story. They are all her former lovers, and they are all still holding the torch for her. Meanwhile, Rose, now a widow because her blacksmith husband passed away, is at home talking with her granddaughter, who resembles the selkie, about the birds and the bees. This is a very pleasant although rather insubstantial story. My ranking was number six, but the other voters liked it more and ranked it number three.

**The Secret Lives of the Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington** by P. Djeli Clark—The first president of the United States was known for having bad teeth, and he had to use artificial ones or ones obtained from other people. Nine of those teeth came from Africans, according to a Mount Vernon accounting ledger, and the author imagines a story about all of them, some of them fantastical. The donors, all slaves, included Solomon, who came from a different world, according to the story. It is the winner of this year’s Nebula Award, and both I and the other voters ranked it number two.

**STET** by Sarah Gailey—Self-driving cars are in the news these days, usually when they are involved in a fatal accident. The author imagines a future in which they improve to the point where they become ubiquitous. Each car has its own artificial intelligence, and the story asks whether they are capable of moral choices. The incident in question is an accident in which the car swerved to avoid hitting a bird and ended up killing a three-year-old child instead. The story starts with a paragraph on the subject complete with footnotes and is interspersed with the e-mails between the editor and the author. The title refers to the abbreviation for the phrase “Let it stand.” I found it fascinating and ranked it first. The other voters did not like it as much and ranked it number four.

**The Tale of Three Beautiful Raptor Sisters, and the Prince Who Was Made of Meat** by Brooke Bolander—The three raptors in the title are named Allie, Betty, and Ceecee, and they are velociraptors. The local prince is so clueless that everyone assumes that that he is smarter than he seems, because, everyone feels, nobody could be as stupid as he acts. This is why Ceecee does not kill and eat him when he first ventures into the forest. Instead, she accompanies him back to the castle to find out what plot is being hatched against them. She makes friends with the prince’s fiancée, who just happens to be a witch.

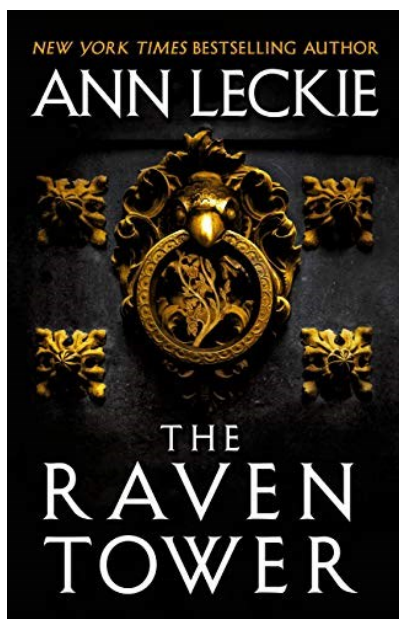
When the prince locks Ceecee up, the fiancée helps the other two sisters rescue her, and they all escape from the castle. The fiancée sets herself up in a cottage in the forest, and eventually all four cross paths with the prince. While not exactly a fairy tale, this reads like one, although not a particularly profound one. In *Spinning Silver*, Naomi Kritzer shows what can be done with fairy tales, but this story is nowhere up to that level. My ranking was number five, and the other voters liked it even less and ranked it number six.

**A Witch’s Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies** by Alix E. Harrow— The narrator of this story is a middle-aged librarian, who just happens to be a benevolent witch. She tries to match books to the reader’s needs. In this story, she tries to help a male teenage African-American foster child who loves to read one particular young adult fantasy novel over and over again. This story celebrates the power of books to make our lives better. My ranking was number four, but the other voters liked it so much that they made it the winner.



## The Raven Tower by Ann Leckie

### Review from Pat Patterson



I've not read this author, Ann Leckie, before. I am aware that she hit the science fiction field big time not too long ago: she was awarded the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Arthur C. Clarke awards for her first novel "Ancillary Justice." The cover of the version I saw has a picture that's probably little space-ships shooting a big spaceship, so that's good; exploding spaceships and/or pirates improve just about any story. I read that part of the book's impact had something to do with the use of pronouns. Why pronouns should be an issue, I'm not sure, but there you have it.

I'm pretty sure I have never read a book with this POV before. It's that of a (seemingly) objective observer, who happens to be focused on one particular character, by the name of Eolo, a riding companion of Mawat, who is a person of importance.

Over the course of some flash-back reveals, we learn that the POV character is, most likely, a rock. Furthermore, the rock is sentient; and, eventually, we discover that the rock is a god. However, it's rather hard at the beginning to determine exactly what that means, other than 'sentient rock who can observe things.' The reveal progresses, and we learn that people have taught the rock language, and that their offerings provide the rock with power.

Without exception, the following applies to all gods, although it's mostly the rock who is used to introduce us to the rules.

Power and language are, evidently, two facets of the same item for a sentient rock, and THAT is a really interesting concept to dwell on. Deny a person the ability to communicate; how much power can they be said to have?

I love it when the boundary rules of a story are spelled out, and Leckie does a great job of doing that via the rock's self-examination. The CORE rule is that all utterances must be the truth. That happens to have a significance in this universe that the same statement does not have in ours; in THIS universe, if the rock says it, then it HAS to be true, even if the universe itself has to change to make it so. If one of the gods voices an impossibility, then they have to pay the price. Therefore, the rock has to be very careful what it says; there is no such thing as a word spoken without consequence.

A permutation of the rule: the rock can report what someone else told it without being responsible for the truthfulness of the statement. In such cases, the expected form is to say "Here is a story someone told me," or words to that effect. Also an implied result: it's better for the rock to speak generally, rather than specifically.

That last is a particularly elegant rule, as it covers all of the cryptic prophecies given in stories about magic, ever.

The rules for the rock are essential for the plot development. Also essential for the plot development is the otherwise merely-very-interesting memories the rock discloses. The time it sat on the floor of the ocean; trilobites and bony fish; glaciers, which recede, leaving it on top of the hill; dinosaurs; meteorites; people who brought it offerings and taught it language. Fortunately for the rock, it experiences the passage of time differently than we puny people do, else I fear it would have experienced some huge amounts of boredom along the way.

It would be POSSIBLE, perhaps, to strip out all of the plot pertaining to the gods, and still have a rea-

sonably interesting story. It wouldn't be nearly as interesting, though, as it would just deal with humans striving for power. Removing the gods, here's what it looks like: Mawat's father was the Human-in-Charge, and his term and life were at an end. We encounter him in the first scene about to enter the city, expecting to have to take over. Instead, he finds his uncle on the throne. Power struggles ensue.

Yup, that is the making of a fairly good story, but not that distinctive. It's been done, at least in Hamlet form, many times. It's the addition of the actions, and inactions, of the rock and other gods that sets this apart.

Well, that, and the unusual point of view. I'm reminded of the "little did he know" interplay in the movie "Stranger Than Fiction," with Emma Thompson, as the author, and Will Ferrell, as her character. It's not so much a god perspective, as it is an author perspective. I do understand that some found it tiresome, but I thought it made for a nice change-up. I doubt I'd like a DIET of that, mind you, but it was rather fun.

Then again, I also enjoyed the trilobite story, and from what I've read, some people didn't, at all. I wonder about their commitment to science fiction; if you don't enjoy a good trilobite reference, how can you be claim to be a fan? Well, never mind. Not my circus, not my monkeys.

### War Demons by Russel Newquist Review by Jim McCoy



So what would you do if you were a combat veteran who got stuck fighting something you didn't recognize? What if it killed your buddy? What if it followed you home? How badly would that suck? Yeah, I'm not really sure how that would feel either, but if you wanted to ask Sergeant Michael Alexander, main character of Russel Newquist's *War Demons*. I bet he could tell you. I mean, I'm not sure the answer would be all that pleasant, but that's kind of beside the point, right? I mean, not if you were asking for the truth.

I'm going to start this thing at the beginning though: *War Demons* had a prologue that I actually enjoyed and found relevant. There aren't too many books that can say that. Of course, explosions do help here but I still think that this was well written. It's also indicative of a wider world than the one we see throughout the rest of the book. I notice that Russel has a sequel planned (this is, after all, *The Prodigal Son*, Book One.) This is good. Most of *War Demons* takes place in a southern college town and it might be fun to see it go worldwide if that's what Mr. Newquist wishes to do. He may or may not. I'm just saying I'd read it if he did.

I really enjoyed Newquist's portrayal of Alexander. The good sergeant is a complicated man. He's been there, done that and gotten the t-shirt. Dude has been places that most people have and done things that most people never will. He's faced things that have others who have similar experiences doubting that they actually happened. He truly is on the outside of just about everything. He also suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but it doesn't rule his life. He's a good guy with some stuff to work through and a good heart. I like this character. I'd have a drink with this dude.

The rest of the heroes are pretty cool as well. I kind of got the feeling that maybe Newquist has seen and/or read some post-apocalyptic fiction featuring some weird weapons, but that's okay. It makes for some interesting reading and it's not like every random townie is going to have a huge stockpile of firearms and the knowledge to use them effectively while being attacked by a massive wave of enemies.

Of course, there are also the villains. Let's start out with the mooks. There are lots and lots and lots of mooks in *War Demons*. They fight, they die and then there are more. I'm glad I'm not in charge of

Newquist's Magic Mook Generator because if I were, I'd be overworked. The thing is, the use of so many mooks works. Why? Because A.) They present a palpable threat to our heroes and B.) they keep the good guys from getting to where they're going too quickly. War Demons is a book that generates a lot of suspense, and a lot of it comes from the little guys getting in the way.

Oh, and by the way..

If I admitted that part of my love of the mooks comes from a desire to screen shot a few of these pages and email them to the D+D group I DM with a caption like, "I wonder how you guys would handle this. I'll see you Thursday!" then, well...

I mean...

It's true. How could I be a Dungeon Master if I didn't have a bit of a sadistic streak? Honestly? How?

Of course where there are mooks, there needs to be a Big Bad of some type. I'm not going to say who, what or how, but there is definitely someone worth hating here. That's good. I like hating bad guys. It makes it more fun to cheer for the good guys. I have a strong dislike of the big bad in this one for a very particular reason, but I'm not going to say what it was here. If you really want to know, feel free to buy the book (as you should anyway) and find out what it was for yourself. I kind of feel like it should be fairly obvious to anyone who pays attention.

Something Newquist does get into a bit here is religion. I'm okay with that. The religion he's espousing is the one that both of my daughters were baptized into. I find that it works well within the story. I think that it really does add a dimension to what's going on. I just know that there are those of you out there who style yourselves as atheists and would be repelled by the thought of a book that includes religion. That is your right. I think it's a good story, but I'm telling you now so that you can't say I didn't warn you.

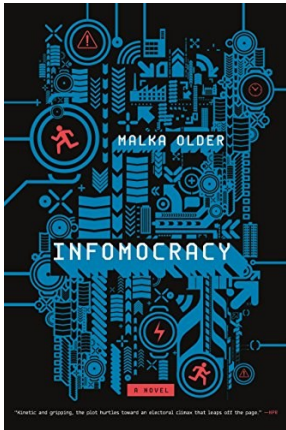
Overall though, this isn't a truly religious work and if some of the framework of Catholic belief seeps in, I'm alright with that. If you've read my reviews of Declan Finn's work you shouldn't be surprised about that anyway. As long as it fits the internal logic of the story and moves things along then it belongs there. I once read something similar in a book by Leonard Nimoy and I agree. He was speaking about the use of characters and why he wouldn't do Star Trek: Generations but the gist is the same. If it works, use it. If it doesn't, don't. In this case, it does.

As a complete work, I really enjoyed this book. The characters are believable. The action sequences are fun. If I wanted my shift at work to end earlier so that I could read War Demons, I suppose I'll have to forgive the author. That just means he did his job well. I'm looking forward to the sequel and I'm wondering when I'll see it. That's also a good thing. When the audience wants more, you know they loved what you've already done. We'll see when it hits. I'll make sure you see something here.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Yellow Noses

### Infomocracy by Malka Older Review by Tom Feller

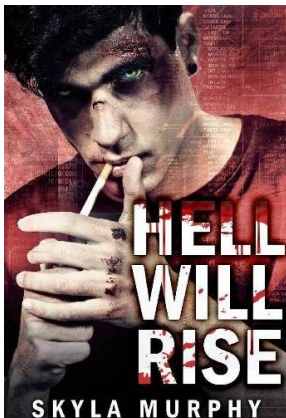
Around the year 2040, our current system of governments will be replaced by a worldwide democracy. Several countries opt out, such as Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, and parts of North America, China, and Russia. Most of the world is divided into small political units of 100,000 people called centenals, and it is now 2060, an election year. The party that wins the most centenals, not necessarily the one that wins the most popular votes, becomes the governing party for the next ten years, although how much power the world government has is never explained. The story begins sixteen days before election day.



There are five points of view characters in this novel, three of whom work for one political party called Policy1st, because they claim to try to minimize personalities in favor of the issues. Suzuki is the head of that party. Ken is a Brazilian of Japanese descent who goes around the world doing political research for the party under the cover of a graduate student. Yoriko is a taxi cab driver working as a spy for Policy1st in a centenal under the control of another party. She is unique among the POV characters in that she supports a family and does not hop around the world having adventures. Mishima is a trouble shooter for Information, a kind of public utility that appears to have a monopoly on news and information and also serves as the world's election commission. (Apparently it does not occur to anyone that such an entity has enormous potential for the abuse of power.)

Finally, there is Domaine, who actively works to undermine this new form of government, but somehow he is friendly with Mishima. The paths of the characters cross from time to time, especially Ken and Mishima who become lovers, and the novel ends with a surprise winner in the election. It is very entertaining, although it never explains how we get from our current system to a worldwide government in just 20 years and some of the technology advances seem to have been imagined merely to advance the plot. Unfortunately, character development takes a back seat to world building, especially in the first half of the book.

### Hell Will Rise By Skylar Murphy Review by Tamara Wilhite



Hell Will Rise is a 2017 horror-thriller novel that leaves readers wondering what will happen next. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this novel? The book follows Hunter Garciez, a man who joins the mafia to save his sister and whose unusual abilities make him a valuable asset. The book's title comes from a command Garciez receives — "complete the mission, or hell will rise." This book was written as the first in the Bloodthirst Mafia series.

#### Points in Favor of the Book

The story's plot contains several whiplash turns and many genuine surprises. This narrative style is consistent from the beginning of the story to the end. While many novels typically start to tie up loose ends near the end of the book, this novel concludes its storyline with more than one final whiplash twist.

While there is foreshadowing in the book, it doesn't telegraph events.

There is violence and gore fitting for a Mexican mafia book, but it isn't excessively rendered. Think "True Blood" rather than a cheap vampire movie that uses excessive smears of blood to intensify the horror.

Many books featuring a supernatural element require you to suspend disbelief. In this book, the main character's abilities are so limited that it is believable, as is his personality. You understand why he acts in a certain way or makes certain choices, and unlike other crime and supernatural books, this one is logical. Convenient solutions aren't just thrown in to advance the plot.

The ending in the last few pages is a major twist. It is a strong lead into another, weirder book but it also lets the novel stand on its own in the event that no follow-up books are published. It also interestingly builds up the title's threat that "hell will rise."

#### Strikes Against the Book

The descriptions can drone on and on. One example of this is obvious when the description is trying to



explain the narrator's peculiar psychic sense. Some of this is done to build up the characters, and part of it to increase the drama, but it is still done in excess.

The main villain's monologues are way too long, and they occur often.

The sexual tension is rated R, and there are scenes that border on being X rated. The most annoying fact about this book is that the characters go to absurd lengths to protect a particular character's virginity, despite the fact that doing as much results in nearly costing her that. Still, *Hell Will Rise's* approach is not as bad as the way the *Chemical Garden* books convey the determination to protect the virginity of a character while playing up the drama. A good example of this is "50 Shades of Gray." Compare the film version's sex scenes to the scenes in the book.

#### Observations

The conspiracy theory that there is a cure for cancer and it is being kept from the public by executives is both incredibly hopeful and naïve. After all, those who have such a cure have friends and family who may develop cancer, and their doctors would most likely learn of the cure and want to share it. Then there's the high price you could charge for such a cure, rivaling the painful and time consuming chemo treatments used today.

While human trafficking does exist, suggesting that girls are grabbed out of clubs for sex slavery is a melodramatic conspiracy theory, whereas the likelihood of girls coming to the West looking for work, only to be trafficked into brothels is depressingly common and more realistic.

If you kill an intruder in your home who has assaulted a family member, it is not murder, it is self-defense, even in California. This is especially true if you kill a known criminal who has invaded your home. Because of that fact, it is hard to understand this book's absolute insistence that the system is rigged to ruin the life of someone who killed a person in self-defense? This is the only illogical point in the plot, but it is necessary to the plot.

#### Summary

I give *Hell Will Rise* by Skyla Murphy four stars. The second book in the series promises to be an interesting horror novel.

## Video

### The Insensitivities and Bravery of Pre-Code Cartoons By Heath Row

In mid-August, after joining a friend for a birthday gathering in El Segundo—and grabbing a quick bite at the Richmond Bar & Grill—my wife and I went to the Old Town Music Hall for a cartoon festival hosted by animation historian Jerry Beck. Billed as the Vintage Pre-Code Cartoon Festival, the event featured 10 animated shorts originally screened between 1923 and 1937.

The Old Town Music Hall was the perfect venue for the fest, which included extremely brief introductory remarks by Beck, author of *The Animated Movie Guide* and other books. Originally the 188-seat El Segundo State Theater, which was built in 1921, the hall doesn't seem like it could seat 188 people any more—perhaps because of the pipe organ.

Two area musicians, Bill Coffman and Bill Field, bought the Mighty Wurlitzer Theater Pipe Organ from

the Fox West Theater in Long Beach and installed it in El Segundo. The Wurlitzer has more than 2,600 pipes and a console featuring four keyboards and 260 switches in addition to other controls and pedals. The console controls the air-powered pipes, as well as other instruments including a xylophone, marimba, piano, drums, and cymbals.

Since 1968, the Music Hall has hosted a well-curated vintage program of movies, animated shorts, other screenings, organ performances, and music events. This September, for example, the theater is hosting a Science Fiction Film Festival featuring *Them!*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The Curse of Frankenstein*, and *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*; as well as the 1953 *Titanic*, *Top Hat*, and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*; along with Janet Klein and Her Parlor Boys performing *Vaudeville on Film*. Movie tickets generally cost \$10.

The following cartoons were screened during the festival, after an organ performance by volunteer Arnold Torres:

“*Felix in Hollwood*” (1923, 9:17): Named one of the 50 best cartoons, this short features Felix the Cat and was directed by Otto Messmer for Pat Sullivan Studios. In the short, Felix goes to Hollywood, where he meets Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart, and Ben Turpin. It was the first animated cartoon to caricature Hollywood celebrities. Interestingly, a 1921 car dealership in Los Angeles, Felix Chevrolet—still in business today!—licensed the character as its mascot. The auto dealer sports a wonderful neon sign featuring the cartoon cat on South Figueroa Street.

“*The Gorilla Mystery*” (1930, 7:27): A black-and-white Mickey Mouse cartoon directed by Burt Gillett for Walt Disney Pictures, this short focuses on Mickey and Minnie capturing zoo escapee Beppo the Gorilla. In the context of this festival, it served as a good reminder that, at one time, Mickey Mouse actually had competition: Felix, Bosko, and Oswald.

“*Betty Boop’s Bamboo Isle*” (1932, 8:00): Directed by Dave Fleischer for his own Fleischer Studios, the cartoon opens with a filmed performance by the Royal Samoans. Bimbo and Betty are stranded on a desert island, threatened by a waterfall, hostile trees, and savages. Definitely pre-Motion Picture Production Code, the cartoon’s racial stereotypes are challenging (Bosko in black face!), and Betty a bit risqué. At times, Betty is topless but for a lei, and there’s a wonderful rotoscope hula scene that was later reused in at least two other cartoons.

“*Laundry Blues*” (1930, 8:47): Produced by the Van Beuren Corporation and released by Pathe, this cartoon was part of the cartoon series Aesop’s Sound Fables—despite not being an adaptation of a fable. Instead, the cartoon is set in a Chinese laundromat. Rich comedic fodder, to be sure. The short portrays insensitive Chinese and Jewish stereotypes and is set to a nonsense song parodying Mandarin. It ends with four men saying, “Chop suey.”

“*A Dream Walking*” (1934, 7:00): Also directed by Fleischer for Fleischer Studios, this Popeye the Sailor cartoon features Popeye and Bluto trying to rescue Olive Oyl while she sleepwalks through a construction site. This short features a brief scene featuring Olive Oyl in a see-through nightgown. I remember Swee’Pea appearing in a cartoon with a similar gag premise, but I can’t find any references to it. (I emailed Beck to see if he knows off the top of his head.) The characters were originally featured in the comic strip *Thimble Theatre*, which was written and drawn by Santa Monica resident E.C. Segar. Reportedly, Popeye was based on local salt Olaf Olsen.

“*Bosko the Doughboy*” (1931, 6:54): Featuring an erstwhile rival to Mickey Mouse, this short was directed by Hugh Harman for Harman-Ising Productions and was part of the Looney Tunes series. In the cartoon, the usually chipper Bosko braves—and participates in—the horrors of World War I. The cartoon is basically a one-reel animated war movie, and there is gunfire, explosions, and artillery galore. The short ends with Bosko in black face—the results of a shell exploding—quoting Al Jolson:

“Mammy!”

“**Piano Tooners**” (1932, 7:00): A Van Beuren Studios production, this cartoon features Tom and Jerry, but not the Tom and Jerry with which you might be familiar. (They were later renamed Dick and Larry to avoid confusion with the cat-and-mouse cartoon.) The Van Beuren Tom and Jerry—a pairing similar to Abbott and Costello—work as piano tuners. The humor focuses on fantastical representations of the instrument and inventive tuning methods such as cutting an out-of-tune key to a shorter length and removing a key like a bad tooth. Several songs are featured, including “Margie” and “Doin’ the New Low-Down.”

“**I’ve Got to Sing a Torch Song**” (1933, 7:00): Tom Palmer directed this Merrie Melodies cartoon. A number of characters and celebrities around the world sing and dance to the song “I’ve Got to Sing a Torch Song.” Africa, China, the Middle East, and New York City are stereotypically portrayed, and celebrities include Benito Mussolini, Bing Crosby, James Cagney, Zasu Pitts, and Mae West. A sultan listens to Amos ‘n’ Andy, the Statue of Liberty imitates Jimmy Durante, and Greta Garbo ends the cartoon saying “That’s all folks!”

“**Carnival Capers**” (1932, 7:14): Walter Lantz and Bill Nolan directed this Walter Lantz Productions cartoon featuring Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. It’s the 65th cartoon featuring Oswald. A pit bull harasses Oswald and his beagle girlfriend at the fair. In some stills, Oswald looks a lot like Mickey Mouse.

“**The Case of the Stuttering Pig**” (1937, 8:00): Directed by Frank Tashlin and featuring music by Carl Stalling, this Looney Tunes cartoon’s title parodies the contemporaneous Perry Mason mystery, *The Case of the Stuttering Bishop*. Porky and his siblings—four brothers and one sister—inherit a fortune from a dead uncle. The lawyer who informed them drinks a concoction and becomes a Mr. Hyde-like monster that then threatens the family. The cartoon breaks the fourth wall, with the monster-lawyer warning an audience member in the third row—and, later, someone in the presumed audience throwing a theater chair into the screen.

While I would have welcomed additional commentary from Beck, perhaps brief remarks before each cartoon, this screening was wonderful in terms of its content and setting. And the program was mindfully curated, showcasing some of the insensitivities—and bravery—of pre-Code cartoons without being overly offensive.

You can learn more about the Old Town Music Hall at <http://www.oldtownmusicall.org>. You can learn more about Beck’s work at <http://cartoonresearch.com>.

## Doctor’s Invasion of Maryland By Heath Row

A long time ago, I chanced upon an eBay lot of Doctor Who video tapes recorded from television and sold as blanks. With the debut of the new series and Thirteenth Doctor—who is wonderful so far—I’ve been digging into those old tapes, and it’s a joy. In 1989 with the Seventh Doctor, Sylvester McCoy, Maryland Public Television acquired the rights to all the episodes available from Lionheart at the time—and aired them in chronological order. I’m not watching them in order, but I have started with the First Doctor.

I quite enjoyed Peter Capaldi as the Doctor, but I didn’t keep up with the series every episode. I figure I’ll catch up on DVD. But I’ve been trying to watch the Thirteenth Doctor weekly as a family. It’s neat to think that Jodie Whittaker could be my son’s Doctor, much like Tom Baker was mine. That said, *The Flash*—and now *Lucifer*—is much more his favorite program.

So far on the video tapes, which were recorded from Washington D.C. and Maryland Public Television in the late '80s, I've watched three serials and the 1987 documentary *Doctor Who: Then and Now*. The stories I've seen are "The Dalek Invasion of Earth" from the second season (six episodes); "The Edge of Destruction," from the first season (two episodes); and I'm currently watching the fifth episode of "The Keys of Marinus," also from the first season (six episodes).

As I watch, I dip into several reference books on the series that I quite like: Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier's *Doctor Who Programme Guide*, which is perhaps the best brief episode guide for the first eight doctors; Cornell, Day, and Topping's *Discontinuity Guide*, which concentrates on foundational tropes, bloopers, continuity, and intertextual connections; and Howe and Walker's *Television Companion*, the best book in the bunch because it includes the original air dates and points out the ends of the original episodes—so you can catch the cuts in the stitched-together re-airings and tapes.

Of the three serials, I most enjoyed "The Edge of Destruction." The two-parter was made as a fill-in to round out the 13 episodes needed for a season in case the show got canceled. It takes place entirely on the Tardis and only includes the four key characters: the Doctor, Susan, Ian, and Barbara. It's really pretty intense and suspenseful. I'm also enjoying "The Keys of Marinus," which is very much an old-time cliffhanger. There are about six subplots and locations—and Hartnell even goes on vacation for two weeks, so the Doctor isn't even in two of the episodes.

But it's the in-between TV bits that are the most interesting. The Daleks story aired during a fundraising telethon, and a local Doctor Who fan club compiled a raffle package—including the roleplaying game—for donors. I called the 800 number, which still works, and gave \$20 as thanks for their support 30 years ago. Another time traveler!

Heath notes: This piece first appeared in a slightly altered form as a letter to the N3F's Doctor Who Round Robin in October 2018. Heath still receives mail from Maryland Public Television.

## Sercon

### The Daisy Handbooks of the 1940s

by

Jon D. Swartz, Ph. D.

N3F Historian

Daisy has manufactured guns of various types for over 130 years. When the company began operations in Plymouth, Michigan, circa 1882, they were known as the Plymouth Iron Windmill Company. By the late 1880s there wasn't much demand for more windmills, so the company began looking for new ways to attract customers.

In 1888, the founder of the company, Clarence Hamilton, brought the prototype for a new air rifle to his board of directors. The president of the firm fired the gun and after his first shot exclaimed, "Boy, that's a daisy!" or words to that effect. The name stuck, and the BB gun went into production as a premium item given to farmers when they bought a windmill.

The new air rifle was such a success that, in 1889, Plymouth Iron Windmill began manufacturing the Daisy BB gun in place of windmills. On January 26, 1895, the board of directors officially voted to change the name of the company to the Daisy Manufacturing Company, Inc. In 1958 Daisy relocated its manufacturing facility from Plymouth, Michigan, to Rogers, Arkansas.

Before the turn of the century, Daisy started advertising in newspapers and in magazines. From the



1910s on, Daisy took advertisements in *The American Boy* and in *Boy's Life*. Chief among the products advertised was their Red Ryder Daisy Air Rifle.

### Red Ryder

Red Ryder was a long-running Western newspaper comic strip created by artist/writer Fred Harman. Beginning Sunday, November 6, 1938, Red Ryder was syndicated by Newspaper Enterprise Association, expanding over the following decade to more than 750 newspapers, translations into ten languages, and a readership in the United States of an estimated 14 million. The 26-year run of this popular strip came to an end in 1964.

### Daisy Handbooks

Of interest to science fiction (SF) and comic book fans of today are the Daisy Handbooks published in the 1940s. The Handbooks featured Red Ryder comic strips, ads for Daisy BB guns and pistols, articles on science and western lore, "how-to-do" articles, contests, miscellaneous activities for children, and reprints of the comic book adventures of Red Ryder and other comic characters.

#### 1946 Edition

Of special interest to me and my friends was the Daisy Handbook published in 1946. While Red Ryder (and his boy companion, Little Beaver) were featured on the cover – and a center section in full color was an 8-page catalog of Daisy products for sale-- the contents of this Handbook also included a reprint of a Buck Rogers comic strip (and a full color portrait of Buck plus a scene of Buck flying on parts of the book's covers), and informative articles on science and engineering (atoms, jet propulsion, the magnet, the steam engine, television, etc.).

Featured was the 1946 Buck Rogers Atomic Pistol.

Of interest to those of us who read Basil Wolverton's "Spacehawk" in *Target Comics*, was a reprint of Wolverton's "The Culture Corner" strip, originally published in *Whiz Comics*.

The comic strips "Atoms Unleashed," "New Fangled Machine," "The Story of Steel," and "Vanished Genius" from *True Comics* and "How to Train Your Dog" from *Polly Pigtales* were also included. In addition, of course, Red Ryder comic strip reprints were featured.

This version of the Handbook was 132 pages in length, and sold for 10 cents.

#### 1948 Edition

The 1948 Daisy Handbook, 132 pages in length, was of even more interest to me and my SF-reading teenage friends, as it was full of reprinted SF/fantasy comic strips. The featured comic book characters in this edition were Captain Marvel, Ibis the Invincible, Robotman, Two-Gun Percy, and The Boy Commandos.

Captain Marvel Adventures was at one time the best-selling comic book in the world, and the character also appeared in other Fawcett comic books, including *Whiz Comics* – along with Ibis, the Invincible, who used his magic Ibigstick in his adventures. In his reprinted story in this Handbook, Captain Marvel encountered the "Atom Ambassador" and in his, Ibis defeated The King of Darkness.

Robotman and The Boy Commandos were from DC Comics. Robotman was a robot with a human brain, and The Boy Commandos, written and drawn by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby -- creators of *Captain America* -- often engaged in SF/fantasy adventures. In the one reprinted here, Rip Carter and his Boy

Commandos discovered Atlantis.

Even Two-Gun Percy had a talking horse named Horace. The strip was a Western parody created by Joe Samachson, a biochemist in his mundane life, who along with writing many scripts for DC for established characters such as Batman and Green Arrow, also wrote the first J'onn J'onzz Manhunter from Mars story. In addition, Samachson wrote SF stories for the pulps (using his William Morrison pseudonym).

Two-Gun Percy appeared a couple of times in DC's World Finest Comics (along with Superman and Batman), but mainly he appeared in DC's All-Funny Comics.

In addition, this 1948 Handbook reprinted several examples of "The Culture Corner" by Wolverton. "The Culture Corner" usually appeared in Whiz Comics (1945 - 1952), although it also appeared elsewhere (The Marvel Family in September, 1949, and later in some Charlton Comics).

A comic strip on Nicola Tesla ("Prophet of Science") from True Comics and an article, "How a Rocket Works," by "a rocket expert" were also included in this edition.

The 1948 edition of the Handbook had an 8-page Daisy BB Gun Catalog in the center, and ads in full color for Daisy products on the inside of the front cover and on both sides of the back cover. It also sold for 10 cents.

#### Daisy Gun Book

These Handbooks of the 1940s evolved into the gun books of 1955 that had 128 pages, and were now priced at 25 cents. The Daisy Gun Book was different from the previous ones in that it featured more information on real guns and the sport of shooting. But cartoons, jokes, western lore/ lingo, and outdoor tips were still plentiful. The center section advertising the new Daisy models was increased to 16 color pages, with even more BB guns and toy guns advertised. A Marksmanship Manual and The Sportsman's Code were included, along with information on how to start a BB Gun Club. Even the Junior NRA was represented.

DC and Fawcett comics were not featured, with the exception of a 13-page Boy Commandos reprint (the same one as in the earlier 1948 Handbook, "Boy Commandos in the Sunken World") and a 5-page Two-Gun Percy reprint, both from 1947 -- and a single "The Culture Corner" reprint from Wolverton. Even Harman's Red Ryder strip was limited to a single 4-page strip.

A reprint from True Comics, "Vanished Genius" (about Dr. Rudolph Diesel), and a couple of "Doc Sorebones" strips completed the comic reprints included. In addition, however, an ad titled "Famous Names on Daisy Guns," advertised Davy Crockett, Annie Oakley, and Ramar of the Jungle products, as well as Red Ryder ones.

Curiously, that same year another version of this same handbook was published, featuring different front and back covers. This slightly altered version was titled Daisy's Red Ryder Gun Book and was also priced at 25 cents. All of the internal information was the same. The only significant difference was in the full-color, 16-page center section, which featured a few guns and toys not advertised in the earlier Daisy Gun Book.

Both the 1946 and 1948 Handbooks, versions of the 1955 Gun Book, and revised and expanded reprints of them have been sold on eBay, with some of them revised as late as 2019.

#### Conclusions

The Daisy Handbooks of the 1940s were very popular when they were first published, and are still col-

lected today by SF and comic book fans. They are sometimes available on Internet sites, but they no longer sell for 10 cents. A recent check found that they currently sell in the \$25 -\$100 range.

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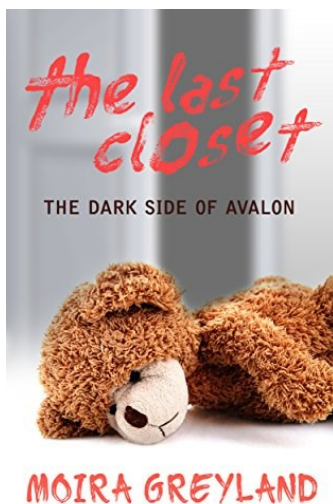
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**Some readers may find the book being reviewed to be controversial.**

## The Last Closet: The Dark Side of Avalon by Moira Greyland Peat Review by Tamara Wilhite



Before #Metoo was Breendoggle.

Breendoggle refers to the pedophilia scandal in the science fiction community centered on Walter Breen, a man later convicted of multiple counts of pedophilia. He's most famous for his books on coins, but he was active in the sci-fi world. The trials brought to light the involvement of his wife Marion Zimmer Bradley, author of "The Mists of Avalon" and the Darkover science fiction series.

The sex scandals faded away, though the legacy of pain and the defensive fandom of both authors remained. The book "The Last Closet" by their daughter Moira Greyland Peat is a personal memoir of her and her siblings' sexual abuse at the hands of both authors. It remains close to verified sources like court records for much of the length.

This book is important for several reasons. First, it has been a top selling sexual abuse survivor memoir and led many to share their own stories. They are literally coming out of the closet to say yes, this happened to me, too. Second, it shows that subcultures like science fiction fandom may ignore the sexual abuse by celebrities and cover it up, even years later and though the person was criminally convicted of horror. In that light, some of the Me Too Hollywood stories become more plausible.

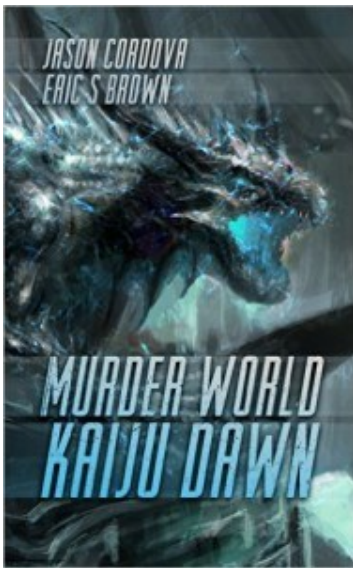
Third, the book comes from a rather silent minority – the children of homosexuals. Walter Breen and Marion Zimmer Bradley were both open homosexuals, though they chose to create several children. Moira addresses the performativeness demanded of such children to always advocate for and ever support the parents' decisions and politics.

As their child and as someone who documented many details of the book, sexual activists can't criticize her for that. Instead, they denigrate her as deluded or criticize her choice to become religious. They've attacked her book and her income as a musician. This is how her harp music was falsely labeled "explicit". The Celtic-inspired music often has no words, though the book itself is easily rated R for sexual content.

What about the book itself? "The Last Closet" is the story of a little girl in a most unusual counterculture family, and her struggle to reconcile her love for her father with a desperate need to stop him from injuring every child he meets with his sexual addiction. The book is an effort to tell her story and save others from that fate.

## Gourmet Bureau

### Read This While You Eat That Jason Cordova — Chorizo Con Pollo



I won't even pretend to understand the whole Kaiju thing. Giant monsters from the deep with no basis in biology? Hey, it's science fantasy, I can roll with that. The stories are entertaining and anyway, they are more about the big BOOMS and stompy feets, and the brave souls fighting off the terrors that have no name. If you're going to read Kaiju stories, you have to look up Jason Cordova's stories (mostly co-written with Eric Brown). I'd say start with Kaiju Dawn, and while you're making this dish with the monster flavor profile, you can immerse yourself in a world that has no parallel.

Jason's an Iberian, and proud of it, so he didn't surprise me with his dish. I was delighted when he suggested Chorizo con Pollo, and made a note of the instructions his grandmother had passed on to him. It wasn't a full recipe, but it really didn't need to be – this dish is more about preparation and presentation, it's not complicated at all. As a matter of fact, Jason pointed out that it could be made even more simply than I prepared it, and I've included those notes below the recipe.

Chicken, sausage, cheese, and rice: ingredients that make magic together.

#### Ingredients

- a package (about a pound) of chorizo sausage
- Chicken - I used 1 1/2 lbs of boneless skinless chicken breast, diced to 1" cubes
- 1 cup uncooked rice
- 2 tbsp oil
- Chopped onion
- 1/2 a lemon
- saffron flowers (or saffron) \*see notes
- garlic powder
- 2 c chicken broth
- 1/2 c salsa or pico de gallo
- 1 tsp cumin

#### Instructions

In a skillet, brown the chorizo. When it is cooked into crumbles, scoop it out to a bowl with a slotted spoon, leaving the fat in the pan. Reserve about 2 tbsp of this and any bits of sausage remaining. Brown the chicken, turning occasionally, in the fat from the sausage. Once browned, cover the pan, reduce heat to low, and simmer for about 15-20 minutes. Make sure the chicken is done, and remove from heat.

In another skillet or heavy saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Pour in the dry rice and fry, stirring gently, until it is just slightly browned. Add the onions and spices, fry for another 2-3 minutes and then pour in the broth, squeeze in the lemon juice, and salsa. Allow to come to a boil, then reduce heat to low and allow to simmer WITHOUT stirring. Every five minutes or so, push the rice away from the side. When you no longer see broth liquid, remove from heat.



Jason's grandmother always served the chorizo carefully spooned over the chicken. I added crumbled Queso Fresco on top of the heap, and it was all delicious. Monster flavor: the chicken is a mere vehicle for that lovely spicy chorizo. The rice has a personality of its own, savory, a hint of acid... it's a beautiful thing.

### Spanish Rice

Frying the rice. I really need to look up the chemistry of what's happening here, but I already know it does make a difference.

The First Reader is already planning when he's going to ask me to make this again. I don't mind – even on a school night, if I add Jason's modifier of a packaged black beans and rice to serve under the chicken and sausage, this is simple to fix and packs a potent punch of deliciousness. And I could probably throw the rice in the rice cooker and have it all done in 20 minutes. Even with my schedule, that's doable. It makes wonderful leftovers, too.



### Saffron Flowers

If you want to add that lovely golden color to the rice without the expense of real saffron, you can use Saffron Flowers. No actual relationship to saffron, these are florets from the Marigold, *Tagetes* spp.

### Chorizo con pollo

The layers all go together very well. You could mix it up in the pot, but this looks nicer.



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THE MANDALORIAN



Cara Dune by Jose Sanchez