

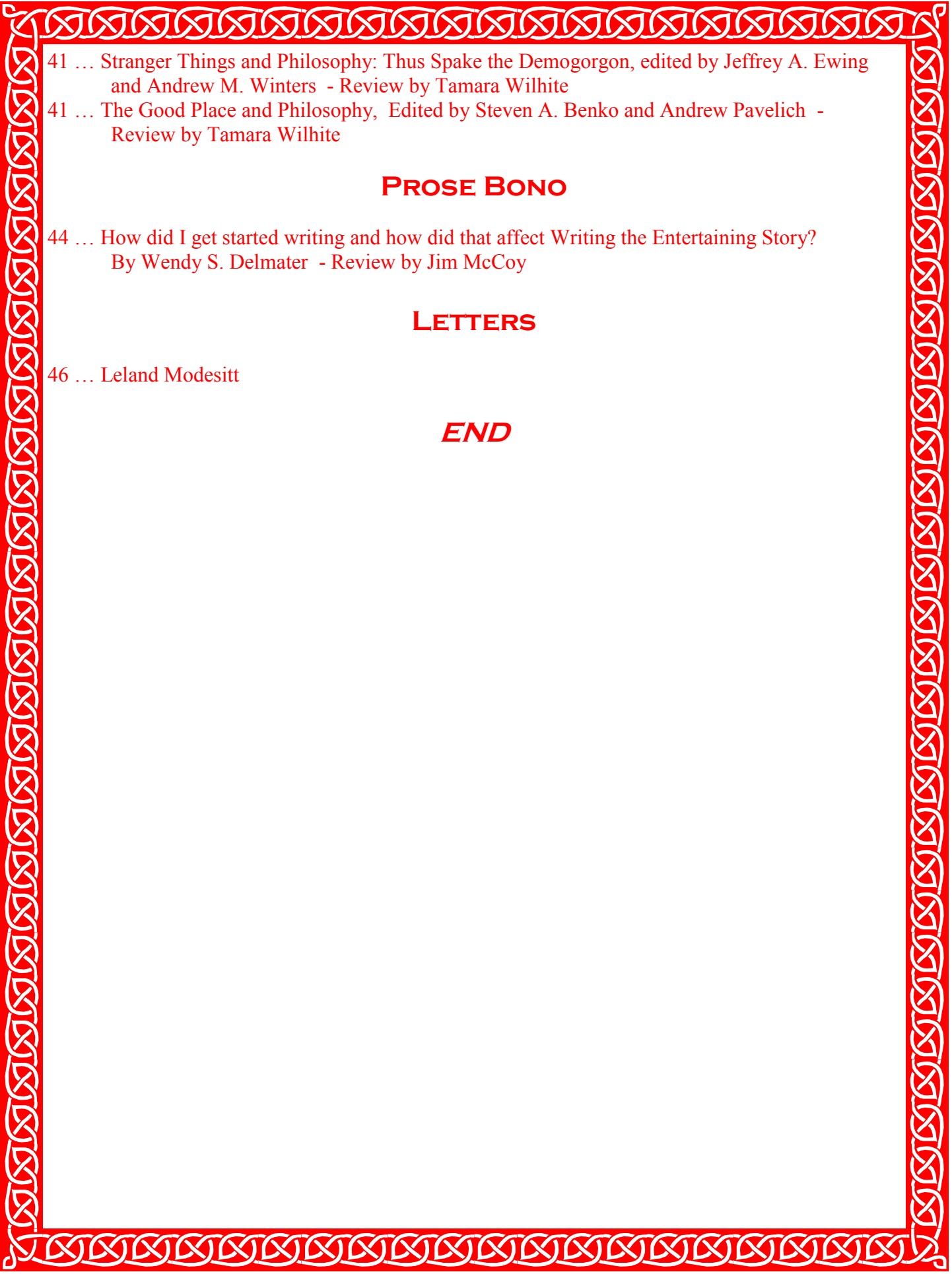
The R3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono  
Professor George Phillies, D. Sc., Editor  
October 2019

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# Editorial

Welcome to the October 2019 issue of *The N3F Review of Books*. This our third issue. We look forward to having many more. New reviewers are always welcome. We would be happy to publish in each issue many more reviews than we now do. As an encouragement, one of our reviewers reports a novel scheme for monetizing your reviews, at least under some circumstances. Details on this will appear in a future issue.

We welcome and publish reviews of new and very old books. Good writing on the part of the reviewer is prized. Honest evaluations of a book's strengths and weaknesses is paramount. It is appropriate to discuss a book's political orientation, if any; criticisms a book's author as opposed to a book's contents is inappropriate.

We seem to be more effective at reviewing books in some areas than others. To some extent, that reflects the matter that we have a limited number of reviewers, who tend to review books in subgenres that they enjoy reading. We would, however, welcome new reviewers with different tastes in subgenre. On the same line, different reviewers may review the same book while taking a different perspective; we are happy to publish multiple reviews of the same book.

Science fiction is fortunate to have a significant literature focused on literary criticism of sf works. Note our review of *View from the Cellar* in the last issue and Tamara Wilhite's reviews of the *...and Philosophy* series in this issue.

Our **Prose Bono** section publishes articles and reviews on all aspects of writing and publishing.

Informed, educational **Letters of Comment** are always welcome.



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# Novels

## A Very UnCONventional Christmas by Stephanie Osborn Review by Pat Patterson

The Division One Alpha Line is approaching Christmas, and there are some unusual circumstances.

One of the NON-unusual circumstances is the well-executed and witty cover, a comment I am inserting at this particular point because if I don't I'll forget it, and this whole word processing thing is just a fad. Why copy and paste to a better location, when it interrupts the flow of ideas? Or something. At any rate, the cover design is by one Darrell Osborn; I believe he and the author are known to take personal liberties with each other as a medium of exchange.

I hope you see what I did there, because that IS one of the unusual circumstances. Partly because Agents Echo and Omega are the top dogs in a pack of alphas, and perhaps for other reasons, there are nasty rumors floating around about the nature of their relationship. Since they both have history which prevents clear perception of relationship possibilities, they have not hurled themselves into each other's arms, and the filthy-minded simply refuse to believe that things are as they appear. She's gorgeous, they think, so he MUST be sleeping with her. And since he is sleeping with her, that MUST be the only reason she has the job.

Well, sorry to tell you nasty, nasty little creeps, but their relationship is held in check by the author.

So there.

In addition to the lies, rumors, and innuendo, Echo and Omega discover there has been a major security breach. Their first clue? Getting ambushed by children. Seems that the hottest toy this Christmas is a thinly-veiled Division One replica, with look-alike agent action figures, blasters, and so forth. And a movie is in production.

Oh, my! Who could be behind such a dastardly plan to expose the most secret of all secret agencies?

Yeah, well, the answer IS "bad guys," but I'm afraid I just can't get more specific than that.

Spoilers, ya know.

Nicely Tuckerized in the story are several figures who are Known Associates, and no damage is done to the reputation of any. Although: there is one scene in which the determination of one character to do a thorough job causes him to get repeatedly brain-bleached.

For the record, it takes place at a science fiction convention, which is the 'CON' hidden in the title. I've never attended one of those, but I have been to a large number of professional cons, and being brain-bleached is NOT, by far, the worst thing a behind-the-scenes person may expect.

## Acts of War by James Young Review by Jim McCoy

When written it was almost Memorial Day here in the States. What is a SF/F reviewer to do? How about reviewing an alternate history set in World War II? It works for me and I am, after all, the blog owner. Maybe next year I'll do some space marines, but this year it's James Young's *Acts of War*. Oh, and yes, Alt Hist IS a facet of SF. Honestly, I may be cheating a bit because I love Alt Hist but it most definitely has a speculative quality to it and the S in SF/F often does refer to Speculative right? So yes, this stuff has a home on my blog and this was a good one to start on. When Young asked me to review this, he specifically asked if I considered alternate history to be SF, so I thought I'd mention it. I never knew there was a controversy here. I mean, I've been finding my Harry Turtledove books in the SF section for almost twenty years now.

*Acts of War* takes place in a world where Germany forced Great Britain into an armistice before the United States entered World War II. This somehow results from the umm, "accidental" isn't quite the word I'm looking for, but it will have to do, death of Adolf Hitler when a British Bomber dropped a bomb on him. Changes in Germany's government led to the gassing of London by the Luftwaffe. Germany uses the "peace" to rearm. Britain does nothing to improve its military. Japan is talked out of antagonizing the United States and doesn't bomb Pearl Harbor until spring of 1942. New countries join the Axis. Things look bleak for the United States, which is fighting the war with only the members of the British Commonwealth at its side.

Under no circumstances would I present myself as an expert in naval warfare, but I have done a lot of reading (both fiction and non-fiction) on the subject. Some of the earliest history I read on my own were non-fiction accounts of World War II naval battles, I'm a huge fan of David Weber and others who have written works of fiction that include naval combat. *Tora Tora Tora* and *Midway* were both movies that I have watched many times and own on DVD. They're both entertaining and have been praised by experts on the period for the historical accuracy. That much being said, the battle sequences in this book are pretty epic. Young has clearly done more studying on the subject than I have, and it shows. When he tells the story of a battle, it all hangs together and just works. I could picture the shooting, the explosions, the bombs falling, the torpedoes moving toward the water and the gruesome injuries caused by all of the above.

Young also shows the best and worst of the US military. His heroes are heroic. More than one of them gets decorated and it's not hard to believe it. They fight hard. Some of the others, well... Every military force has members that have gotten their position through politics and family connections, and Young's US Navy is no exception. The good news is that at least one of the bastards gets precisely what he deserved. The other good news is that Young managed to make me hate that guy badly enough to want him dead. An author's job is to provoke an emotional response, and he has done that.

The family ties in the book are excellent and something that I've often seen left out of this type of story. The majority of the tome follows the exploits of the Cobb family, many of whom appear as members of the military. Their sister is also a central figure, as are many of their girlfriends. The romances don't always go as planned, but that's something we've all lived through, military or not. The effects of war on those left behind gets heavy treatment and that's a good thing.

Not everything here is wine and roses, though. There are a few things which honestly confuse me. For one, the point of historical departure (that's where an Alternate History story diverges from the real-world timeline) takes place in Europe when Hitler dies, but most of the action centers on the war in the Pacific. Either way works, but both together creates a cognitive dissonance for me. After the first twen-

ty or so pages Europe gets mentioned only sparingly and is nearly forgotten until a briefing near the end of the book. I just don't get that. Also, there are times when the portions of the book that don't involve combat drag a bit. It definitely gets better the longer the book goes on, but it's there. There is also a huge twist regarding the British government that doesn't get resolved and seems to be beside the main thrust of the book. Oddly enough, this volume reads almost like two separate books to me as well, with the run up to the start of war being one story and the prosecution of it afterward reading like another one. Don't get me wrong, they're both enjoyable, but I remember being about halfway through this thing thinking that there was a mistake in the page count on my Nook.

Acts of War appears destined for a sequel. I'm hoping that when it comes it will clear some of this up. AoW is the second in a series. It appears to be setting up something bigger to come. I want to read it, because I'm hoping that a lot of what got left out here will find its way into the new one. There are a lot of threads left hanging at the end of this one. I can't wait to see Young tie them up.

Bottom line: 4.25 out of 5 sinking battleships  
Acts of War  
Createspace, 2014

## Blood of Cayn by Stormy McDonald, Alan Isom and Jason McDonald Review by Jim McCoy

Life is often good as a book blogger. People send you free books. You get to brag about reading them to a bunch of goofballs who think your opinions are worth reading. (No offense.) You are constantly looking forward to reading the next book and believe me there, there is a next one: You've got a bunch in your inbox. I mean, you are required to spend a certain amount of time in your pajamas with your feet up, reading. Sometimes you may even find it necessary to have a glass of Coca-Cola in hand while doing so. It's a hard life, but it is a labor of love.

The problem with being a book blogger is that you are often sent only the first book of a series and sometimes it can be hard to have time to read the stuff you pay for. There is this constant nagging feeling that you should be reading something that someone gave you because they gave it to you. So often, that one Book One of something that you read that one time is the only book of the series that you end up reading because life.

What I'm trying to say here is that it's pretty awesome to be able to follow a series through to its conclusion. You actually get to see the big payoff. You're not stuck stumbling on the edge of an abyss, wondering how, and if, the heroes are going to save the world and make everything right again. And - let's face it- when you love Epic Fantasy those are usually the stakes. And now I'm happy, because I just read Blood of Cayn, the epic conclusion to The Cayn Trilogy, written by Stormy McDonald, Alan Isom and Jason McDonald.

I don't want to give too much away, but this was seriously a good payoff. I mean, we've been through hell with these characters by now, right? They've revealed their true selves. They've won fights. They've lost fights. They've lost friends. As much fun as reading The Cayn Trilogy has been, I find myself relieved that I'm not one of the characters in it. They deal with a lot.

Through it all though, they're not just comrades, they're friends. Some of the risks the main characters



take in Blood of Cayn fall under the heading of "inadvisable" to me. They still do it and they do it for each other. If you've got to go war, these are the people you want to do it with. It's always fun to spend time with characters you respect and admire and they live on these pages.

I love the world of The Blood of Cayn. It's a world on the edge and it's about to head over the precipice because of a plague. The entire series is, in essence, about the struggle against that plague and the war that it could cause. It's a worth cause. But it's not just the struggle I'm talking about here. I'm guessing there was some serious map drawing done for this thing. I hope it looks better than my artwork too, but no promises there. Seriously though, the authors of this series have done a great job of laying out their world and making it believable. I almost feel like there could be a geography class taught here, and that kind of created a bit of an (awesome) issue for me.

See, I'm a Dungeon Master. There were many times while reading Blood of Cayn that I felt it necessary to run off and add something to my campaign, since it's a homebrew and I can get away with that. I really enjoyed that aspect of it, but it did lead me to take longer to read the thing than I normally would have. Now, if I were one of the authors of this book, I may make sure never to mention to my players that I inspired the fight that almost led to a Total Party Kill, but whatever. It was fun to read. It was fun to play. And a little extra enjoyment never hurt anybody. Well, except four D+D characters but they don't really exist anyway. And really, the cleric lived long enough to save them all, so why are my players whining?

It's weird, because I know Chris Kennedy Publishing does not have an RPG arm, but I'd pay to play in this world. Seriously. I enjoy the way that magic works. I love how well they thought out the world. I usually play a warrior, but for whatever reason, I see myself as more Chert the Cleric and less Grendel the warrior in this RPG. That could be because I have an affinity for dwarves, but I think it's because Chert is my guy. He's always there and he's a fantasy cleric the way they were always meant to be. Of course, we also have Jasper the portly mage to which I'm also partial, especially given the fact that I most likely outweigh him. And then there's Sacha and Sehraine and Xandor and...

Yeah.

For me, one of the best parts of reading a series has always been welcoming my old friends back into my life for another go around. It's about finding the same people on the other side and getting another chance to (maybe, hopefully) see them taken down. It's about familiarity and not having to learn the seventy-three thousandth world this year. And yes, my friends, it's about a payoff. It's about seeing the crew finally live up to the potential that I always knew they had. Some things are better than money. A good payoff is one of them. That's what I got here. I got to see my people do their thing and do it well. It was a good time.

Of course, there's the let down, too: The trilogy is over and there is no sequel to look forward to. That's okay though, because I'm confident that these three will find another story to write somehow. I'm looking forward to see what they come up with. Oh, and if anyone sees Chris Kennedy, let him know I've got a Dungeons and Dragons group that would just love a chance to play-test a Cayn Trilogy-related RPG. Seriously. Hit me up man.

Blood of Cayn  
Stormy McDonald, Alan Isom and Jason McDonald  
New Mythology Press, 2019

Brand of the Warlock by Robert Kroese  
Book 1 of The Counterfeit Sorcerer  
Review by Declan Finn

Robert Kroese seems to specialize in characters that may just be too smart for their own good. His character of Rex Nihilo is a good example (okay, in the case, there's also the additional elements of "He's so smart he's stupid" and he's totally insane).

Now we have Konrad. Poor Konrad. All he wants to do is be wealthy and respectable enough to marry the girl next door – who is kind, intelligent, and about four levels about his station. His plan was to join the army, find honor, glory and rank, come back home and live happily ever after.

Then when Konrad tries to stop a fugitive fleeing hot pursuit, with his lady love as a hostage, things go sideways for everybody. The fugitive is a warlock, and has transferred his brand to Konrad's face. He is tried and convicted – and instead of being thrown into Chateau d'if, he's thrown under it. As salt is a traditional ward against magic, the only fit prison for a warlock is ... a salt mine. With minimal lighting.

Once he is released from prison, we're off to the races. Konrad has only one mission – to make certain that the girl next door survived the encounter with the fugitive who stole years of his life.

To be honest, there are many elements here that belong in a traditional novel. Or as my family calls them, a Novel novel – classical literature. Our hero has one goal in mind, and a lot of other things happens to him along the way. Superficially, it almost looks like there's no plot, merely one damn thing after another. However, I can assure you that this is not the case. Eventually, everything ties together. And I do mean everything. Even one or two random encounters turn out to be important. And I suspect that at least one random encounter from this book will come back to bite Konrad in book 2.

On the one hand, it feels very much like a "BOOK ONE," or a pilot episode of the series. The best example of this feeling comes from the very first Hugh Jackman X-Men movie. It doesn't really feel like a complete story, just act one.

On the other hand, it sets up everything quite well. A good chunk of the book is dedicated to avoiding a deus ex machina moment at the end. Trust me, you'll know it when you see it.

All in all, Rob has written yet another fun, readable world. Minimum four out of five. I'll grant him a five out of five, subject to being revisited upon reading the other novels in the series.

ConVent by Kate Paulk  
Review by Jim McCoy

The Con Starts. The immortals show up. Bad things happen. Hilarity ensues. Some people I recognize are there, and I'm not sure if the serial numbers just weren't filed off hard enough or if they were never meant to be. Whatever, I recognize some of them and it makes it more fun. Bodies, rituals, black magic and summonings abound. In one case, Kate crosses the line and actually has someone bitten by a werewolf in well... a place that no man should ever be bitten by a werewolf. I laughed my tail off. If you're wondering, I'm referring to Kate Paulk's Convent Book One of the Con Series. There is also a prequel short-story? novella? (sorry, I didn't count the words) and a second book and many of us out there are



waiting (im)patiently for the third.

For those that don't know, this is a work of Fantasy with no true SF elements to it. Don't get me wrong, I love Fantasy. I write Fantasy. But if you're looking for rockets and ray-guns, you may be better off looking elsewhere. On the other hand, if you love a good story with a strong fantastic element and a hint of detective novel tossed in, this is the place to look.

Our hero is a vampire named Jim. Thank God that Paulk manages to NOT make her vampire a sparkly ass who trolls high schools looking for a date. (For the record, yes I do know about Twilight. I watched the first two movies with my ex-wife and read the first hundred-forty pages of the first book. I ALWAYS give a book at least a hundred-fifty pages. That one was just unbearable.) Jim is also a believable character on an emotional level, as he travels the con scene because he can be weird there. Granted, I've never been a blood-sucking vampire, but I do kind of know the feeling.

Jim has the standard vampire gifts: He will never die of natural causes, is nearly impossible to kill, can use the vampire charm, etc. He also has a few extra gifts: He is a day-walker, he can ground magical effects and he seems to be favored by well. I won't spoil that part. Let's just say he was as surprised as I was and that Ms. Paulk would appear to have a strong sense of the ironic.

Along the way, we meet Jim's friends. I don't want to reveal too much because the appearance of some of them (and the subsequent time spent going "Hey, I know that person) were a big part of the fun of the book for me and I don't want to ruin it for anyone who hasn't read the book yet. Seriously, it's a good time. I will reveal that he is friends with one werewolf, two succubi, a minor angel and one demon of a rank he is unsure of. There are also other, less friendly immortals about. Indeed, most (if not all) of the tension in the book comes from the interactions between characters that aren't truly human.

Being a con, there's a lot of interaction going on between publishers, agents and authors. Paulk's vision of the publishing industry is hysterically funny even if it is a bit more negative than a newbie unpublished wannabe author (ya know, like the one that publishes my blog) wants to hear, but that doesn't mean it's not entertaining or, for all I know, fairly accurate. I do, however, have it on good authority that Paulk's observations about authors being addicted to chocolate and coffee are, if not accurate, then understated.

I don't want to give up the ending here but I do want to say that it was as satisfying as it was funny. I'll be honest in stating that I didn't get all of it, but it was great nonetheless. A little asskickery crossed with some hijinks and hilarity will make my day every time. Trust me. Your first time reading this will leave you a little grossed out by what you've just read, but it's a laughing with my buddies after a disgusting bodily function kind of grossed out.

Fair warning: If you find yourself offended by sexual innuendos and the occasional double entendre this is not the book for you. If you are not offended and are capable of getting a giggle at mild sexual humor like most adults, check this work out. I loved it. There is nothing I appreciate more than a sly one liner and these characters spit them out in spades. Sean, the werewolf, also kind of reminds me of a teenaged version of myself, except more successful than I ever dreamed of being. (OK, not really. I dream big. But definitely more successful than I ever actually was.)

All in all, this is a really solid story with no major flaws. Really, my only complaint is that the Nook edition (possibly other ones as well, but that's the version I read) doesn't allow me to shrink the text down to the normal size that I used when I read. This is far from a horrible thing, but my poor little fin-

ger started getting sore from all of the page flipping. I'm just too used to having a page of text on my screen at one time, I guess. That didn't affect the story though, because the story was awesome. Other than that, the book was well written and made an excellent translation on to my favorite device.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 startled fen.

ConVent

Kate Paulk

Naked Reader Press, 2011

## Crusader: Saint Tommy NYPD Book Five by Declan Dinn Review by Jim McCoy

Guess who's back? Back again? Tommy's back! Saving men!

And women, and children, society in general, probably a dog at some point...

Kidding. I made up the part about the dog.

I think I did anyway. At least if Tommy saved a dog in Declan Finn's latest novel Crusader: Saint Tommy NYPD Book Five I missed it. I do remember a bunch of dead stuff at one point though, so maybe he tried and just got there late. I mean, no one is perfect, even if they are a saint in the making.

The fact remains that Tommy is a hero and the kind of guy we all wish we could be. I mean, unless your goal is to be a bad person in which case you probably don't like him much. He puts his life on the line to do the right thing and even has to leave his family at an important time to do what is necessary whether he likes it or not. Fortunately for him, he has a good wife who understands what he needs to do. I like Mariel too.

If you've been following the series then you know the basics: Bad stuff happens. Tommy gets called in to solve the problem. Chaos ensues and bad things happen to bad people. Bad things also happen to bad things, since demons are not people too. And yes, I know I don't do spoilers, but it's a Saint Tommy book so you already knew there were demons in it if you were paying attention.

It really is good to see a Christian man get treated with a little respect. A lot of society mocks Christians for doing nothing to help people while shutting down our soup kitchens because they hand out Bibles. Finn's Christian is a man who helps people. He saves the downtrodden. He rescues the innocent. He does what he is supposed to do, which includes praying.

At some point, I'm going to borrow my ex-girlfriend's blog (if she'll let me) and go off on a rant about people hating on prayer, but let me tell you something that Finn gets: Praying for someone doesn't mean that you don't help them otherwise. I recently had a money problem that my church helped me with. One of the deacons drove me back from the bank after I deposited said funding, provided by God in the form of my church, and then we prayed. They're not mutually exclusive.

At any rate...

For those of you who may not be Christian, this is still an ass-kicking adventure novel. There are gun fights and fist fights and insanity. There is even some sexual depravity. There are chases and woundings, quite a bit of blood, some things turned to ash and a seriously creepy setting in one spot. There are surprises. There is a conspiracy. I mean, you can't go wrong with a book that has oodles and bunches of

people with AK47s in it, right?

The worst part about this review is that I can't talk about my favorite part of Crusader because spoilers. Trust me though, it was awesome. I definitely didn't see it coming but it hit at just the right time. Of course, I read it electronically. I'm a big enough nerd that I have, on occasion, come up out of my chair and cheered for something that happened in a book. Reading something on a Kindle app makes that kind of scary to do because I can't really afford to replace my phone if it goes flying. Trust me though when you get to page such and such and the one thing happens, you're going to love it. Seriously. It made me think of two of my favorite cartoons from childhood and I'm pretty sure that's not what Finn intended, but who cares? It was fun.

I guess the thing that I've always enjoyed about Finn's writing is that it has a message but it's not message fic. Finn doesn't have his protagonist constantly harping on the evils of whatever. Yes, Tommy is a Christian and he prays a lot. His enemies tend to be demons or at least influenced by them. That's fine. At no point have I read a diatribe about the evils of non-Christians or been subjected to a lecture ala David Gerrold in Jacob. Tommy is simply a man doing what he needs to do. If he has a few extra gifts to do it with, so much the better.

Nope, not going to spoil this part either. Let's just say Finn throws in a non-Tommy character from outside the books and it's someone I've always admired. An important and august personage. Actually, two of them but I'm thinking of one in particular. It's always cool to see someone else's take on someone you admire, and I think Finn pulled it off really well. Oh, and I know what you're thinking but I promise you that it's not George Patton, even though a lot of the book takes part in Germany. Great, I thought of it, now I have to write it.

One of the most exciting things about Crusader is that there is a sequel coming soon. It's due out November fourth. This is good. I can't wait to read it. The thing about a guy like Tommy is that you're always wondering about what he'll be up to after the current adventure. I have it on good authority that there are a number of books coming after Deus Vult too. My top secret sources have revealed to me that they'll be out soon and that I should keep myself from losing it too much. I mean, it's good to know that there will be more soon but I'm going to have to wait no matter how excited I get and like, I'm a geek and I get excited about stuff, so... yeah. I'll hold it together. At times like this I'm reminded of the fact that for the longest time I wouldn't read a series unless it was already completely published. Thanks J.K. Rowling! You've ruined me!

It's all good. I'll make it through the waits the same way I did for Harry Potter... somehow. Thank God that Finn writes fast.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Paintballs Filled with Holy Water

**For A Few Credits More: Four Horsemen Anthology**  
**Edited by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**

This book bothered me, a LOT. I've read everything in the series and loved it. I was EXPECTING to love this as well, but I didn't. In fact, had it not been for the fact that I read the LAST story in the collection FIRST, that being Kacey Ezell's warped and wonderful "The Start of Something Beautiful,"

there is at least an outside chance that I would have tossed the book midway, and moved on. And that truly, truly bothered me.

It really wasn't so much that I thought the book was bad that bothered me; rather, it's that I have an almost 100% track record for loving the stories in this series, and then I found myself turning pages with distaste.

If you read my blog, you know I've had some health challenges lately. In addition to the physical body stuff, I've had to grapple with some profound issues of life and death, and my ability to stand, when there are forces trying to make me fall. It's been one of the worst periods my family has had to go through.

My question was: had I allowed the personal struggles to taint my ability to read and review a story on its' own merits? I had to ask for help.

And seventeen friends, new and old, responded. I explained my dilemma: I wasn't sure I could trust my opinion on these stories. I asked THEM to read the stories, come to their own conclusions, and then take a look at what I had written; then, tell me if my review was on target or not. (I hope some of them wrote their own reviews, but that wasn't a requirement.)

Here's what I got back: some people had the same problem with the same stories that I did. Some liked best, the stories that I liked least. However, in the end, it seems that it was just a matter of opinion, and not a systematically warped perspective, that accounted for my distaste.

At their request (and I think it's a good idea as well) I'm not going to thank any of the Review Crew by name. The opinions I publish are my own, and I take full responsibility for them.

It seemed right to me, at the time of writing the review, that I identify science fiction (or other) tropes that show up in the stories. And, in those cases where no pre-existing trope existed, I made one up. In addition, I gave a PLUS '+' rating to stories I like, and a MINUS '-' rating to stories I didn't like.

A general note about the anthology as a whole: One of the other reviewers points out that an appendix which provides the names and traits of alien races would be helpful. I endorse this suggestion highly.

And another general note about collections of short stories in general: they are MUCH harder to review than books.

## BUTCH AND SUNDANCE by Peter Cawdron

A routine snatch job is a set-up. The protagonist has to figure out what is happening as the events unfold. As far as I know, I hate stories like this. The object of the snatch knows more about what's going on than the mercs doing the snatch. You might like stories like this, but I found it to be grim, complicated, and unsatisfying, and the fact that it is the lead-off story rather soured me against the entire book. Betrayal of mercenaries, check. Rating: -

## WHERE ENEMIES SIT by Rob Howell

Lt. Frazier MacKenzie was a freshly minted officer in command of a detachment of a particular mercenary company. Either I have a nasty mind (a possibility) or the name of the outfit was designed for purposes of potty humor. I found this story to be one of the best possible portrayals of the "second lieutenant"

ant goes into combat” situation; he knows what he doesn't know, he defers to the experience of the experienced warrant officer under his command, but he ALSO has the command ability to recognize that this action is a set-up, and attempts to save his troops, while preserving evidence for post-action evaluations. Betrayal of mercenaries, check. Redemptive self-sacrifice on behalf of others, check. Rating: +

#### BOSS by Scott Moon

I don't know that the environment is mentioned in this story; even so, I'm left with the impression that it all takes place in the dark, with a cold, wet, drizzle coming down. The mercenary Ogre Fist Company is out of money, their equipment is substandard, and the commander and his executive officer are, literally, about to kill each other. Furthermore, one of their troopers has been arrested for stealing a computer tablet and killing a cop. This is a linked story, so that just when I thought that I was done with the characters, they crop up again in the next story. Mercenaries scheming against each other, check. Rating: -

#### LEVERAGE by Josh Hayes

This is a dirty-cop story; it's always seems to be dark and rainy in this story as well. It's linked to the previous story through the follow-up on the activities of the accused cop-killer. The tie-in to the Four Horsemen universe is that Macintosh Sacobi, an apprentice Peacemaker, quits because his training officer is a bad cop who cares nothing about collateral damage and beats suspects in handcuffs. He returns to his original position as a community-based cop, but another encounter with the (now) escaped cop-killer brings him back into contact with his former Peacemaker trainer. Bad cops beating up prisoners, check. Falsely accused prisoners dying to save their captors, check. Rating: -

#### LUCK OF THE DRAW by J.R. Handley & Corey D. Truax

Ivan Petrov is a worthless loser, working sporadically as a bounty hunter to get gambling money. His loan shark/bookie is in the process of having him beaten to death, when he gets a reprieve, in the form of a job offer. The new employer is a Level 4 Peacemaker Hunter named Boudicca, a dog-like Zuul. She has disconcerting puppy-like characteristics, and in addition to a life-saving job, she offers him some potentially life-changing advice:

“I know what it is to lose your pack,” she said. “We can only honor them with our future actions.”

It's an interesting concept for Petrov; he hasn't had the slightest interest in honoring anyone for quite some time; only in ending his existence in the way designed to aggravate the maximum number of people. Loan sharks with incredibly stupid business plans, check. Pawns selected because of their faults, check. Rating: -

#### CONTRACT FULFILLED by Tim C. Taylor

Sisters Midnight and Solara command a merc company which is under contract to Oriflamme, decadent governor of a mining world with suspicious sources of income. They kidnap a suspected spy, and on the way to cash him in, things happen. One of the sisters, Midnight aka Blue, has so interfered with her nanite load that her pleasure centers are always turned on, and are particularly stimulated by danger. Hint: never, ever place a person with this condition in charge of anything. It seems to be an excuse for writing soft porn without having to resort to descriptions of body parts. Also, if there is not a limit on the number of times you can throw a flashback into the story, there should be, and the limit had better be one; perhaps one per character, at the most. Otherwise, it comes across like a kindergartner telling a

story. Booty call, check. Betray the employer, check. “Oh, I forgot to tell you,” check. Rating: -

EMANCIPATION by Mark Wandrey

Cartwright's Cavaliers are one of the original companies making up the Four Horsemen, although their survival was almost negated by the subsequent action of she-who-is-better-off-forgotten. Jim Cartwright has rebuilt the company and provided it with the leadership it needed more than the equipment. He has bad taste in music, though.

As they are dropping into a hot combat zone, he plays “Radioactive,” by Imagine Dragons. I was previously unfamiliar with this music, and so I researched the band and listened to the song. If they had played it for me when I was dropping into combat, I would have frantically searched for another channel; heck, even talk radio. Admittedly, the hot zone is that, literally; in addition to the fire from hostiles, the area is, well, radioactive. So, the song is, perhaps, appropriate. Still, the music is an acquired taste, and does not pound the blood like 'Days of Elijah,' or even 'Seven Spanish Angels.'

Apart from that, however, Cartwright demonstrates the best of the admittedly limited options left to the human race. Forced into an undesired role, they not only perform focused violence with elan, they exploit the system better than anyone else, by actions not directly related to their own self-interest. Great story in the tradition of Four Horsemen, check. Rating: +

FORBIDDEN SCIENCE by Terry Mixon

An advanced graduate student can see the Promised Land clearly, but also understands that there is an impenetrable barrier to entry: approval by a faculty committee. In this case, Jeff has been handed an assignment which cannot possibly work out well: he has been ordered to take part in forbidden research into anti-matter, while simultaneously serving as a spy for the administration, which decidedly does not wish the research to succeed. Although only peripherally related to the main narrative of the Four Horsemen universe, several goofy elements make this an excellent read for me, a surviving post-grad student. Kill your faculty advisor with a meat-ax, check. Rating: +

CHANGE OF COMMAND by Thomas A. Mays

When you are young and inexperienced, you want command because it's fun to tell other people what to do. Then, at some point, you learn about responsibility, and things change. Unfortunately, humans found themselves with an expanding need for military organizations, and not enough time to grow the leaders. That is precisely the situation the Terrible Texans faced when the simple garrison duty contract turned hostile. The very few competent leaders died fast, and officers who had some specific technical skills found themselves unprepared. And as is always the case, the poor bloody infantry foots the bill. Betrayal by REMFs, check. Science rocks, check. Rating: +

A FAMILY TRADITION by Ian J. Malone

Wow. This is one you have to read for yourself, because it's a gimmick story. It's a GOOD gimmick story, and well within the traditions of the Four Horsemen, but everything I want to mention as a hint gives the whole thing away. I only had a slight tickle while reading it, but once I finished, everything tied together. Tribute to departed, check. Rating: +

GO FOR BAIT by T.C. Bucher



The title is a pun, and it's the only thing that's funny about the story, although there might have been humor involved in setting up the original scene. It IS intriguing, though: how fast can you adapt to an enemy who is coming in an altogether unexpected direction? I can see this emerging as a thought problem in an after-con discussion. Bad intelligence from the REMFs, check. Sacrifices for comrades in arms, check. Rating: +

## THE KRA'DAAR by Chris Winder

An unknown something is setting fires for some reason on a planet where that is particularly bad, for reasons that are partially revealed. No, you aren't going to get much more description than that. I'm not fond of stories that leave out significant details. Primitive world exploited by Galactic Union, check. Former savage despises roots, check. Rating: -

## BLOOD OF INNOCENTS by James Young

At best, a second-tier merc company can expect second-tier jobs with second-tier pay. When a truly lucrative contract appears, it's because no one else will take it.

So far, so good.

But then, I lost the story in the middle of the witty repartee being conducted between the leader of the mercs and a sentient owl, representing one group, and a horse-faced Peacemaker, representing... something. I re-read the story, looking for details I missed, but it didn't work. I don't know who the mercs were working for when they hit dirtside. And the story just...stops. No resolution, no hints. I hope we don't die, check. Rating: -

## MESSENGER by Nick Cole

Years ago, there was a saying: "There are no atheists in foxholes." I don't know if that expression still exists; it's been 42 years since I took off the uniform for the last time, and I'm out of touch. There's a basic truth, though: when you are alone, and facing death, you become very devout.

It doesn't take an actual foxhole to make that happen. For lots of young guys, having the comfort of home stripped away, facing a seeming eternity of wearing a uniform, in what seems to be a consistently hostile environment, those factors are what raise the question of the nature and meaning of life. And, once converted, they become enthusiastic, dedicated evangelists; they burn with a pure fire. And that's the story here: sift the messengers as fine as you like; you may find them to be misinformed, they may be ignorant; but their devotion is as pure as clear water and sunlight. Continue the mission, check. Rating: +

## FAITH by Chris Kennedy

There are a lot of reasons mercs are distrusted by civilians, but one of the most insidious is the mixed hatred and contempt that people in power have for an armed force that isn't under their control. In this story, we find out one of the consequences of a world government: if you use a firearm in the commission of a crime, your sentence is automatic: life without parole. In a cave. On Phobos, orbiting Mars.

Pretty bleak, eh?

There are no such things as extenuating circumstances; nobody is concerned about whether the dead 'needed killing' or not. The government would take away all firearms if possible. However, since the economy now depends on mercenaries, that isn't an option. So, they grudgingly ignore the armed mercenaries in their midst, until they have an excuse to incarcerate one forever. That's the thing about totalitarian authorities: they will go to any lengths to enforce their system on the rest of the universe. And that's why we can NEVER have any truce with kings. Bad intelligence from REMFs, check. Loyalty to comrades, check. Rating: +

TINKERMAN by Jake Bible

Another variant on the theme that authority cannot tolerate power not under its control. For a person raised in the exact opposite end of the country, it takes a bit for the incongruity of Oregon as tumbleweed country to sink in, but I DID catch on by the time I read that there was no snow on the mountains. Ancient refugee engineer stymies modern corporate tech, check. High Noon revisited, check. Rating: +

THE START OF SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL by Kacey Ezell

If you want to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast, this story is a good place to start.

It's IMPOSSIBLE not to shudder when thinking of the giant spider warriors known as Tortantulas. It simply cannot be done; we are hard-wired to hate spiders. These aren't just spiders, though; they are gigantic spiders, with lasers. And they eat their prey, and just about anything that exists qualifies as prey. One of the looming events in the Four Horsemen saga is a battle scene involving a gratuitous assault by Tortantulas; why couldn't it be butterflies? Because butterflies, even giant butterflies with lasers, don't produce a visceral reaction, that's why!

To make things even worse, they are accompanied by furry, wile-tempered, bitey riders. We hates them, yes we do, precious, nasty monsters with rats on their backs!

And yet...

...this one is...cute. Sort of.

At least in these circumstances, which frankly seem to be the only way in which such a horrid pairing could be concocted. We assume it follows under the category of imprinting, or symbiotic relationships, or science or something.

If you can't find six impossible things to believe in THAT, here's one more for you: This is the last story in the book, but it's the first one I read. This turned out to be a REALLY GOOD THING, because otherwise, I would not have kept reading; I disliked five of the first six stories, and it was really because of THIS story that I knew there had to be more material I would enjoy. Women warriors, check. Cuddly monsters, check. Team loyalty, check. Rating: +

And thus endeth the review. Many thanks again to those who helped me verify that my perspective wasn't distorted.

And I'm looking forward to MORE writing in the Four Horsemen Universe.

## Forged in Blood, edited by Mad Mike Review by Pat Patterson

I am not a blade or firearms collector. I use a term borrowed from the blade genius Hank Reinhardt: I'm an 'accumulator.' Like many others of such habits, I have on numerous occasions looked at a particular item and thought: "I wish you could tell me your stories." I've got a Mosin-Nagant 91/30, a 1934 Tula hex with matching serial numbers, and I wonder: did you drive back the invaders at Stalingrad? Or maybe something a bit nastier? But (fortunately), I don't get a response.

Williamson, who IS a collector of sharp, pointy things, has, in this volume, also collected authors. They share in these pages the stories of a finely crafted bit of steel, whispered in the hearts of warriors, over centuries in time, and light years in space. Each story is linked to the next by his brief narratives, which are essential to understanding the book as a whole.

Although the cover states that these are stories in the Freehold Universe, I don't think that is precisely true. They just pass through that neighborhood, picking up hitchhikers on the way. Most of the stories were written this year for this volume, although one appeared in slightly different form in the novel that named the universe, "Freehold."

The stories:

The Tachi, by Zachary Hill. In addition to providing great stories of combat and perseverance, the stories can also provide a novice with instruction in the construction and naming of blades. The tachi is one of the more ancient Japanese designs, and it is in this form that the sword appears. On display as part of a household shrine, it does not see use as an actual weapon until the very end of the story, because the young mistress of the manor does not find herself worthy to touch it. The sword is only slightly self-aware at this point and joins with the young wife to create new legends.

Due to one of those freakishly unexpected biological accidents that happen to humans, the author did not live to see publication of his work.

Musings of a Hermit, by Larry Correia. Whether it is true that a man is a product of his time, I do not know. I do know that things which may be accepted standards in one age are rejected in another. Hatsu Kanemori was known for having a fiercely independent streak, which was only tolerated by the overlord because he was also known to be fierce in battle, as well. Unfortunately for him, the battles came to an end, and with it, toleration. The multi-great grandson of the lady of the manor fled, bearing only the sword of his ancestors. His troublesome reputation remained, though, and he was both sought out, and rejected, by the peasant community. If you consider this as a small slice of "The Seven Samurai," you won't be too far wrong. The sword, now in the form of the more modern katana, waits, serves when needed, and waits some more.

Stronger than Steel, by Michael Massa. 'The battle doesn't always go to the biggest army, but that's the way to bet.' Superior technology changes the balance of war, and after much time has passed, it seems that the only thing that will surpass a charger-fed bolt action rifle is a belt-fed magazine gun. The Russo-Japanese War is a horribly efficient destroyer of humans, between the technology of small arms and artillery, and the diseases faced by soldiers who are cold, wet, and poorly fed. Even so, cold steel has its place. The Russian counterpart to the Japanese katana now carried by Major Tanaka is no less endowed by legends. The Kladenets legend is of a self-swinging sword, which

cannot break if drawn with honor. However, metallurgy gets a vote, too, as do physics and luck. In the end, when two superior swordsmen face each other, don't bet on either side.

He Who Lives Wins, by John F. Holmes. The 132nd Infantry Regiment was one of the first American units to go to war. Just six weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the regiment sailed from New York. Later that year, they were inserted into combat on Guadalcanal, which is where this story takes place. The katana is carried by Japanese Lt. Shizuka and represents the last remnant of his samurai heritage. Unfortunately, Lt. Shizuka has almost no other aspects of the warrior, besides the sword, and he commands his squad of starving, diseased troops mostly because of they have been brutalized by training to follow orders. On the other side is slacker and all-around screw-off Chicago punk Private Tony Montero, who uses his enterprising talents to swap his weapons for booze and make himself scarce when there is work to be done. Then, combat happens. It is truly amazing to observe unsuspected reservoirs of moral character emerge, when people begin to die. HOWEVER!!! I have a question about the dialogue. The action takes place in 1943, and at one point, Montero compliments fellow soldier BAR gunner Erik Nilsen for an excellent grenade throw, by comparing him to Babe pitching one across home plate. Now, while it is true that Babe Ruth was primarily known as a power hitter, he got his start as a left-handed pitcher, and was highly successful in that role, so that's the most likely reference. However, Ruth retired in 1935; he essentially retired as a pitcher after 1919. A more likely candidate is Babe Adams, a control pitcher who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates until 1926. But why would a boy from Chicago mention either of those players?

Souvenirs, by Rob Reed. A story about lessons, and sacrifices, and losses. There is a generation that learns the lesson and makes the sacrifice. That is followed by a generation that learns the lesson, because it is told of the sacrifice. That is followed by a generation that is not told of the sacrifice and does not learn the lesson. Then, the lesson must be taught again. Now, that is not EXACTLY the message of this story, but it's a corollary. The message of the story is that you must be prepared to do what is necessary; and I THINK that the additional message is that you must be prepared to make the sacrifice, even if it is forgotten. And the sword is passed from the line of warriors and scholars, and into the hands of the ignorant.

Broken Spirit, by Michael Z. Williamson and Dale C. Flowers. If you go to a carnival sponsored by the PTA to raise money for an elementary school, you EXPECT there to be spongy animals to be won by matching numbers on floating ducks. It is the appropriate experience for small children. On the other hand, when adults get their hands on priceless relics and spray paint them neon pink, it's disgusting. Your toddler may not understand WHY you don't want them to color in the family Bible, but typically, you don't permit your toddler to be alone with the Bible and a box of crayons. Unfortunately, idiots have access to power tools, and priceless antiques as well. The story has a somewhat happy ending, in that the sword is rescued. However, she wants to be used, not displayed.

Okoyyūki, by Tom Kratman. Confession: Because the story SAYS the Japanese makes no sense; and since the best translation I could get for the title is 'snow occurred;' and I know Kratman has a gonzo sense of humor: I just didn't chase down the transliterated Japanese phrases in the story. I SUSPECT that if there is any sense whatsoever in the words, it is related to the fact that there is a two word phrase in English, the second word of which is 'happens' (similar to occurred), the first word of which also starts with 's', but is not snow. I may be completely off base. End of confession! The sword finally has something of a kindred spirit. A certain Captain Reilly is going off to war, and he is bughouse nuts. He and the sword speak to each other, and the sword trains him, and can enhance his perception and reflexes somewhat. It is black humor, and perhaps no person who has not been in the military, AND been a fan of both Princess Bride and Monty Python, can possibly appre-

ciate it. I am a person who can.

The Day the Tide Rolled In, by Michael Z. Williamson and Leo Champion. We now move into the (near) future in the narrative of the sword. A distant relative of the last owner is retired Gunnery Sergeant James Chesterton, USMC (ret), a merchant seaman in Indonesia. Things go south, battles happen, and he lends his hand to the side of the good guys. This contains some of the better urban battle sequences in the book; true to life, the fight with edged weapons doesn't start until everybody runs out of bullets.

Ripper, by Peter Grant. After long years of peace/dormancy/boredom, the sword moves off planet. The Freehold Universe is officially on duty; the action takes place in the early days of settling Grainne. It's an Earthlike planet, and if you like the peaceful and soothing environments of Africa and Australia, you will just LOVE it here. In other words: everything is trying to kill you. I was an Army medic; wouldn't have been a combat engineer not no way, not no how. It's worse than being a medic, because at least as a medic, you had some hope that after you dragged the bleeding casualties back behind the lines, you could take a break after dealing with the sucking chest wound. Not the engineers: these guys are trying to build things, even while smart animals are trying to eat them. The sword has been reconfigured, and lost some length, and is now a wakizashi. Tom, the bearer, is the grandson of Gunny Chesterton. He has been brought up to respect the blade and is proficient in its use.

Case Hardened, by Christopher L. Smith. Yet another planet, yet another war. The sword's bearer dies in an ambush in the opening moments and is accidently dragged away by being snagged on a rifle strap. The new bearer is a certain Private Cook, the errant son of a prominent military man. He runs, leaving companions behind. Whether in shock from this violation of the warrior code, or for some other reason, for the first time, the sword manifests visibly to the bearer, as a young Asian woman. He stops running.

Magnum Opus, by Jason Cordova. Rowan Moran is a deadly young man, and he uses anything available as a tool to accomplish his job. On this night, his job is to protect the Ambassador from attack, and gather as much information as possible. He doesn't LIKE the job, though, because it requires him to use his race and sexuality as camouflage to his real role as an Operative. His relationship with the sword is an art form; he flows through prescribed routines like a dance. There is always something just a little bit off, though.

Lovers, by Tony Daniel. Lisa Riggs had always known the sword would be hers one day. She just didn't realize that her parents would sell it to her, in anger and rejection because she chose the life of an enlisted member of the service, not a commissioned officer. She bore up under the rejection and was successful in her career despite their low opinion. And that's how she got sent to Mtali, the worst place in the universe. It didn't seem to have much potential to be a paradise, but the behavior of the assorted religious factions toward each other made it an open cesspool. She never liked the place, but she didn't hate it until they killed the one good thing she had found.

The Reluctant Heroine, by Michael Z. Williamson. The oldest story in the book, this tells how Kendra Pacelli and the sword picked each other, and how she used it in the desperate battle to save Grainne.

The Thin Green Line, by Michael Z. Williamson. A new Kendra Pacelli story for the book. Invited back to the cesspool that is Mtali, Kendra goes out of a sense of duty. It's supposed to be in support

of a peace settlement, but on Mtali, that can degenerate quickly; and it does. Her counterpart is Aisha Rahal, also a woman in the service of her planet, in this case, Ramadan. Forced by her culture's gender models to take a back seat, Lt. Rahal is nonetheless eager to serve. As must Kendra.

Family Over Blood, by Kacey Ezell. Wayne Carreon tells the story, but he is not the bearer of the sword. That honor goes to his commander, Captain Naomi Aiella, who may not be as crazy as prior sword bearer Captain Reilly, but she will do until something else comes along. Humanity has a new enemy, and there appears to be no negotiations possible; the Cutters are expanding their territory, and attack whenever they come into contact with humans. It's exactly the sort of situation that calls for cool and crazy, and it seems to fit nicely for Captain Aiella. Unfortunately, it's not THAT nice fit that has Wayne's attention; during the fight for entry into the Cutter ship, their power armor has been disabled, and they have to carry on in their composite underwear. Wayne LIKES the way Captain Aiella looks in her composite underwear. Now, some may theorize that it is the after-effects of the concussion he took on ship entry that have scrambled his neurons, but I think not. I think he's just normal. It just takes a while to work out the kinks on the job when there are beautiful women and handsome men involved, and when the jobsite involves the possibility of sudden death, it takes a little longer. That's all.

Choices and Consequences, by Michael Z. Williamson. Without this chapter, I don't think the book works; at least, it wouldn't work as well. Through SCIENCE, the new sword bearer is provided with the information about the history of the sword. There is evidence to document owners going back to Lisa Riggs, and proof that the sword was much, much older than that. And then comes the question: what is the highest and best use of the sword? To be treasured and placed on display, for all to see? Or to be returned to battle? Hint: It's a Mad Mike book. What do you THINK the answer is going to be?

### Hell Will Rise by Skyla 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.

## In Conquest Born by C. S. Friedman Review by Tamara Wilhite

### Introduction to In Conquest Born

“In Conquest Born” by Celia S. Friedman's is an engaging epic from start to finish. One young Braxi lord seeks to make his mark killing one of Azea's few trans-cultural translators for the Braxi language and culture, Anzha Lyu's father. That act propels his personal independence and political ambitions, while it triggers the girl's telepathic abilities at the youngest recorded age, leading to an epic personal and cultural clash almost two centuries later.

You witness a decades long conflict that propels each to the heights of their worlds while changing both them and their societies as each seeks to take the other - and their empires - down.

The two main cultures in CS Friedman's book have been at war for millennia, in a universe where human have been scattered to the universe so long that Earth is a theoretical explanation for all the human species today. The book gives us an in depth look of both alien cultures. Braxi is a sexual and libertine free for all and advanced society with slavery, unified by conquering the stars and maintained by the spoils of war.

Azea is home to a genetically engineered human species programmed for moderation and gender equality, while Anzha Lyu is a genetic throwback to an unknown ancestor. At the death of her parents, she is left to the telepathic institute for education and study. Her quest for acceptance and vengeance leads her to unlikely contacts and military.

Every chapter brings the character's personal development, progress toward their goals, revelations and action. Whether it is international intrigue on Dari, crossing the frozen wastes of another world, political drama on Braxi or internal struggles on the telepathic institute's home world of Llornu, we gain a glimpse of diverse human societies without side-tracking from the story. Details like a random remembrance of a very alien old saying or recognition of a neuro-leash used to induce pain or kill slaves make the worlds more real than long descriptions of incredible things to make you feel like it is the future on an alien world.

The network of relationships in the book is incredible and intertwined. Braxi and Azea have intentionally become opposites of each other, to the point Azea remove the trait for facial hair from their men and changed their hair to white because the enemy's hair is black. Yet both sides face petty internal political squabbles and conflicts of culture and ethics. Anzha Lyu is driven by vengeance for the loss of her parents, the agony she lived telepathically for their deaths and recognition for her victories in a society to which she is apart in appearance, amazing abilities, political mandates put in place to punish her parents and deliberate engineering by those who raised her. The Braxi leader Zatar seeks to reform elements of his society while building a power base that shapes the known universe. Yet he himself harbors a fatal flaw that his rival can exploit upon.

Yet they are in many ways very human. Despite two century life spans and Anzha's great telepathic abilities, she is lonely, long-suffering and stubborn. Braxi lord, then Kaimera (political assembly leader) and then new single ruler. Friedman plans so far ahead that minor characters become threads in the story throughout, creating a complete epic. While the foreshadowing hints in the book “In Conquest Born” prevent the ending from being a complete shock, I have reread it several times and

This is the kind of art that screams to me : "DO NOT GET THIS BOOK!" It is very well executed, I should make that clear. It's just that it trumpets 'ROMANCE' to me, and romance, dear friends, is something I *do not like*. My gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, likes romance. She also likes Hallmark movies. Especially Christmas movies. I wouldn't mind that so much, if she didn't want ME to watch them WITH her.

And this looked like the kind of book she would read. There is a beautiful blond woman, staring dreamily off into the distance; standing behind her is Mr. Tall Darkan Handsome. He gazes on her with just the right amount of love and intrigue in his eyes...

STOP THE MADNESS!!!

But, despite the cover, I got the book.

And it's great! It's not a cow-eyed romance at all, although there IS love and affection exchanged between the two characters portrayed on the cover.

It's an adventure story, with intrigue, and treachery, and adherence to principles, and honor, and all of the good sorts of things that produce a nicely done story. It is, I suppose, going to be forced to bear a YA label, just because there isn't any naughty language or scenes with heaving whatever's. Don't let that YA thing put you off, though. It's a great read. And this recommendation is from a guy who left off reading this book and immediately for sheer reading pleasure picked up one of Ringo's earliest Baen books, about the Posleen invasion.

The core story is that on a planet far, far away, a group of idealists have formed their society, and now demand everyone else conform to the terms of their perfect social order, or be deported. Eventually, that's not only murderers and thieves, it's anybody who has an innovation in mind.

The penal colony rebels. The parent civilization sends governors who repress, and then a general to rescue the governor. And he takes his daughter along.

That's her on the cover. And that's one of the lead rebels standing behind her.

But it's not a romance! Oh, my, NO! It's an ADVENTURE story!

### Memorials and Winged Hussars by Mark Wandrey Review by Pat Patterson

I usually immediately forget the names of cover artists; however, having read multiple volumes in this series over the past month, I recognize the work of Brenda Mihalko and Ricky Ryan, and say: Bravo! Even the choice of the font (looks like war metal) contributes to the picture. Author's name & book title are both easily read, and the mecha and armed furry critter are nicely framed.

When the aliens made contact, the earth was dismayed to discover that they really didn't have anything to trade in exchange for the advanced technology available through the Galactic Union. Fortunately, before we dwindled into insignificance, it was discovered that we could fight. Since this was a rare condition among the vast majority of the alien races, good mercenaries were always in demand. Details

only subsequently recognize hints dropped in the story that foreshadowed plot twists or later revelations.

While the book centers on the two generals featured on the cover, there is a host of secondary characters key to the story and full of contrasts and conflicts that would be their own separate books in this universe if not for the writer's skill at keeping prose to a minimum but maximizing information. In these contrasts are a father and son rivalry that is suitable for Shakespeare, an interracial spy who fails himself and tries to redeem those who he harmed, and a leader at the institute who faces down the enigmas he created and loses everything he tried to improve upon. The book weaves in questions on the ethics of telepathy and social engineering and complex questions of identity when it is defined by genetics, culture and/or personal traits.

In the middle of this is a coming of age and saga of a strong female character who is brilliant, talented but flawed and suffering. Forget the bad-ass females who literally kicks ass with inhuman physical strength, speed and stamina. The central character outmaneuvers men, including the enemy's patriarchal culture and her own, restrictive culture, politically and militarily, while still remaining a relatable character.

In short, "In Conquest Born" is an intense, self-contained book, and it is a masterpiece. Is There a Sequel to the Book In Conquest Born?

Though "In Conquest Born" was written as a self-contained novel, it did spawn a sequel.

C. S. Friedman's follow up book to "In Conquest Born" is "The Wilding". "The Wilding" is set two centuries later, where all the main characters of the first are dead. That book contains more cliches, characters who make truly stupid mistakes, has a weaker plot and fails to deliver a fraction of the quality of "In Conquest Born".

In my opinion, while "In Conquest Born" is a five star novel, the sequel "The Wilding" is hardly a three, a rushed work by an excellent author to capitalize on the readers who wished for another book as good as the first set in the same universe.

In that vein, I think you should read "In Conquest Born" as a stand alone novel and, if you love the work, move on to Celia S. Friedman's other novels.

### Insurgents by Margaret Ball Review by Pat Patterson

So a couple of weeks ago, some of my literate friends were raving about Margaret Ball, and her latest book. I do not know this Margaret person, and perhaps that means that my environment is sealed just a bit too severely. Couldn't say. Don't really care. But one thing was clear: Margaret Ball issuing a new work was making people run around in circles, emitting squeee noises; people whose opinions I respect.

So, I figured, I'll get the book. Assorted Huns and Mad Genius types like her work, it's worth a try.

Then, I looked at the cover art.

Oh, my.

are, at this point, somewhat sketchy, but we DO know that there was skullduggery involved; of the 100 mercenary companies to head into space with a contracted mission, only four came back, Coincidentally, all four featured a horse on their unit flag, and thus began the story of the Four Horsemen.

The Winged Hussars had 'lucked' ( luck = preparation+opportunity) into an alien ship, and came home better prepared than they had been when they went out. Their missions were largely space-based, unlike the other three Horsemen, who tended to specialize in ground-based combat.

Alexis Cromwell commands the Winged Hussars, as well as their flagship, the EMS Pegasus, which is the ship recovered by the original contract team. It has unusual characteristics, which she is careful to hide from enemies. And allies. And crew. She's widely regarded as filthy rich, drop-dead gorgeous, and ruthless in business negotiations as well as in combat. Some of that is due to her secret weapon.

Rick Culper is a gentle giant. I KNOW THIS GUY, because I have a son just like him. He rarely has to resort to violence being somewhat physically overpowering. As a young boy, he befriended a pudgy klutz, just out of a desire to see fair treatment and stop a bully from getting his way; when he discovered this was the designated heir of the senior of the Four Horsemen, he figured he had found his place in life. He would become a mercenary, go to work for his buddy, go to exotic places, meet interesting beings, kill them, and get rich. Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way. The nasty plot running in the background bankrupted the Cavaliers, and Rick had to go elsewhere.

After his training, and before his first combat deployment, a bad thing happened. While hitching a ride on a freighter to a place he can get hired as a mercenary, Rick has to fight pirates, and suffers a pretty serious brain injury. Physically, he comes back, but he's lost a lot of his memory, and doesn't seem to be able to feel emotions, either. After he is patched up, mostly, he signs with the Winged Hussars, who are looking for people with his skill set. Umm..the shipboard marine skillset, not the brain-damaged skill set.

Other items of note:

1. Beside the standard, contract violence, some person or corporate entity has the agenda of destroying the Winged Hussars. This is absolutely forbidden by law and custom.
2. In Interlude sections, we get clues to what drives Captain Alexis.
3. Winged Hussars uses aliens as mercenaries in every position, including having them hold command over humans. Anyone who can't deal with that doesn't get accepted.
4. The aliens are treated as people, with complex motivations. The best example of this is the gigantic spider, Oort. Although her species is known for battle ferocity, including feeding on the bodies of the dead, Oort has had repeated near-death experiences, and it's caused her to attempt to determine The Meaning of Life. When not engaged in a duty assignment, she is reading books by some horrible 19th century German philosophers. Now, I have ATTEMPTED to read some of the works mentioned, and they are so impenetrable as to be frustrating. I think the only way to get through the works would be to have a time machine, go back to a beer hall, and demand that these people explain what they are talking about over beer and sausage. Even Soren Kierkegaard is impenetrable, even if you already know what he's going to say. Frankly, I think that class set back the study of the meaning of life by at least 200 years, by muddying the waters so badly. But, this is the sort of thing the spider reads right before going into combat.

So: great continuation of the storyline, great characters, great exploding spaceships.

Minutegirls by George Phillies  
Review by Pat Patterson

I'd truly like you to consider giving this one some splash, since it's an excellent book from a much under-appreciated author. You can do that by writing a review on Amazon, and by voting 'helpful' on my Amazon review.

Kudos to the excellent cover art by Cedar Sanderson on this edition; it's a much better representation of the story than earlier versions.

Well, this is for sure: this is a BIG book, at 440 pages. For guys like me, who like to read a LOT, that's a good thing. There have been times when I've pulled a book off the shelves by James Michener, Herman Wouk, or Tom Clancy, and given a pleased, relaxed sigh, even before I turned the first page. It DOES have a disadvantage for me, personally, though: I not only read, but review these things. And I confess to feeling a little bit guilty when ANYTHING puts me off my pace of reading and reviewing a book every other day.

It's still a pleasure, though, and for those who are waiting for me to get off my duff and review YOUR book, all I can tell you is: I'm doing the best I can.

Here's the set-up: in the not-too-distant future, at least one world war gets touched off, and before it's resolved, the United States is an occupied country, with a (somewhat) unified Europe being the primary occupier. Their troops behave very badly, and don't appear to show any remorse for that.

Most of the causes of the war and the following armistice aren't discussed; primarily, this part of the history serves to provide a rationale for the quite functional paranoia that drives diplomatic interactions. In addition, significant technology with war applications was developed by multiple parties to the conflict, and I get the impression that it was the difficulty of continuing the occupation that ended it, not any real change of a problematic policy, on anyone's part.

In particular, defense screens have been developed, and these not only stop kinetic and beam energy, they also serve as an effective barrier to observation by spies, on either side, of military and commercial developments.

The European Union is dominated by the French as the executive arm, with the Germans serving as an administrative element. Other countries are allowed to contribute unskilled or semi-skilled labor, but certainly are in no position to make or influence policy. The French and Germans appear to regard their lack of rulership of all they survey as an aberration, and all of their actions seem to have a return to domination as the primary goal. However, their ideology has massively crippled their ability to wage war or to administer peace, and they cannot even perceive the problem. They have rigidly controlled the economy, and innovation is discouraged. Furthermore, in the interest of producing a worker-friendly society, the workweek is restricted to 32 hours per week, even under emergency conditions. On the other hand, they clearly have had some technological advances over the Americans and have made contact with non-human races in their space program. Could those two be related, I wonder?

The Americans, meanwhile, have radically transformed their society as a reaction against the atrocities committed during the Occupation. One of the more striking transformations has been in the physical characteristics of women, most likely a direct result on the number of casual rapes committed against



the population under the Occupation, when the citizens were treated as chattel. Through undisclosed means, bone density and musculature differences have been eradicated, and the long-standing advantage men had in upper body strength has been eliminated as a factor. Prominent female Resistance leaders during the Occupation established a new set of norms for women warriors, the Minutegirls. They constitute deadly combat troops, and contain nested secret societies, all designed to prevent any future attempt to subjugate the US from being successful.

There are some marvelous other adaptations, as well. For one, anyone in the National Command Structure MUST, by law, be accompanied by a bodyguard, whose job it is to execute their principal if it appears they will violate any of a set of rules stipulated as a part of the new form of government adopted by the US. No secret meetings; no standing army; nothing restricting the right of an individual to keep and bear arms. And the original idea of fleeing from the power of despots remains a fundamental part of American policy.

Excellent battle action; complex characters; very well thought out societies, with appropriate humor slashes at all the right places: all these combine to make this a good book for a nice, long read.

## Mistress of the Waves by George Phillipies Review by Tamara Wilhite

Mistress of the Waves is an intriguing science fiction novel by George Phillipies. On the surface, it is a young woman's attempt to achieve her dreams of a greater life after a chance encounter with interstellar visitors to her colony world. She also clashes with an incredibly well-engineered society intended to remain at the technology level the founders consider ideal, though she finds ingenious ways to do it literally "By the Book".

This isn't just a story of coming of age and developing personally (she gets ahead economically, too). It is also a mystery to be solved, because her society is so well engineered you don't realize how deep things go – or the nature of enforcement, at first. There's plenty of action, too, from real pirates to murder attempts. This is futuristic medieval or pre-steam tech, not steampunk. It reminds me of "Glory Season" in that regard, though there is no magical matter replicator introduced at the end. They will literally have to work for everything, and that's a good thing.

"Mistress of the Waves" is unusual in several regards. Having a female protagonist in a very libertarian novel is one. Having such a character and remain PG is another. (I'm thinking "Friday" by Heinlein as the polar opposite.) There is a personal arc in a flawed but relatable character, and her business's growth along with her adventures is reasonable, as well. You don't jump ahead a year with lots of hand waving, "Oh, yeah, we worked that out, no biggie". The politics and the personal sacrifices are shown. There's a fair economics lesson woven into the story, too, but you aren't getting long lectures broken up by the "real" story.

As a science fiction author and reader, I give "Mistress of the Waves" four stars. It is entertaining, accessible, realistic and rich both on the surface and in the world-building. I'd give it a fifth star if they'd shaved a few dozen pages from it and had fewer forced additions to try to show the world is backward but the character isn't.

Nocturnal Rebellion by Amanda S Green  
Review by Pat Patterson

For those of you who come here in order to read my latest philosophical or theological struggles, I warn in advance: this is a book review about a police detective who is also a reserve Marine officer who can shape-shift into a jaguar. Don't anticipate passion and depth, beyond that found in story dealing with the line-of-duty loss of fellow police officers.

As for the book: There are two different groupings of shape-shifters. One group inherits, and can pass on, the ability to transform; the other has to get bitten first. The first group, the Pures, tend to be more powerful and they are in a role somewhat resembling that of aristocracy. The second group, the lycans, tend to be less controlled and are generally more likely to prey upon humans.

There is a question debated among Pures: when shall we reveal ourselves to the world at large, if ever? And there is also a faction that wants to reveal themselves so that they may finally exert control over the mundanes or exterminate them.

While appearing to work within the system of government of the Pures, the Conclave, there is a rogue element that seeks covert control, and it really seems to amount for a desire for personal power more than a desire to influence policy. At least, their actions seem to be of the 'burn it all down' nature.

Now, it's one thing to write about secret operatives exposing plans to bring down civilization by introducing an Ebola variant into spray containers at trade shows across the USA. As it happens, I've read and enjoyed those stories as well; at least, I've enjoyed the stories where the good guys win and the bad guys lose.

It's another thing entirely to present the tragedy in such a way that we can feel and empathize with the loss experienced by the hero. And that's what sets apart this book; Mac, and others, had a deep relationship of trust and loyalty to the group of officers who were killed in an ambush, and yet, they MUST shut up, suit up, and show up if there is to be any justice done.

It's really very well executed.

It does not bring the dead back to life. That loss must somehow be endured, which is precisely the treatment that makes the fantastic tale of shape-shifters something that we can relate to. Without kryptonite, we cannot care for Superman, because he is untouchable. It's the weakness of the heroes, not their strengths, that makes them real and allows us to care for them.

And Amanda S Green does it AT LEAST as well as anyone in the field.

Peacemaker by Kevin Ikenberry  
Review by Pat Patterson

Jessica Francis simply will not accept that she is overmatched. Although her choices haven't been perfect, it's the actions of others that keep dumping adversity on her, and she seems to have been born without the ability to quit.

She's a former mercenary. While she was good at what she did, her incompetent, manipulative husband managed to wreck the company, killing off friends and comrades-in-arms while doing so.

She gets a chance to become the first Human Peacemaker, thus becoming part of the thin team that provides what little galactic security there is. Since Humans are a newcomer to the Galactic Union, they encounter all of the standard prejudice of the old-timers, some of whom have the desire and ability to eliminate the species. Her first mission, in fact, as a Probationary Candidate, is to stop exactly such a project.

She succeeds. And because of her actions, the Earth is not depopulated.

Sorry, that's not good enough.

So, they give her another project, and maybe this time, if she succeeds, she'll get to join the team.

Maybe.

All she has to do is solve the puzzle of three races fighting over turf, when there should BE no problem. It is pathetically obvious that there is at least ONE behind-the-scenes manipulator, because the original set-up should have produced a good environment for the three races, separate from each other, at a nice profit to the merchant-engineers behind the deal. The mission has FAILURE stamped all over it, in glowing letters. But hey, if you don't play the game, you can't win, right?

Somebody in the hierarchy likes her, though, because he arranges for her to have some support. Admittedly, it's in the form of an under-strength mixed unit of armor and CASPERS, composed of raw rookies and redliners, but at least she has a bit of a reaction force.

Except she's not supposed to use it.

And she has one especially hostile individual assigned as her Mediator.

Secrets. Everybody has secrets. And what you don't know probably WILL kill you deader than Fergus' goose.

Expect plenty of action, and the elements of a detective story. It's a great read!

As the title of my Amazon review, I used the Lazarus Long quote about the game being rigged, but how you can't win unless you play. There are, however, other options.

You can not play the game.

You can cheat.

And you can pull out your trusty Browning Hi Power and blow 15 tiny holes into the serpent trying to suck you into a losing set-up.

Then reload and make more holes.

Now, the only reason I can see that Jessica doesn't use that third option is that she really DOESN'T have a 'Quit' function incorporated. This is not a feature; this is a bug.

For whatever reason, she thinks she can win the game, but all the evidence suggests that isn't the case. It's going to take some significant deus ex machina for her to have a chance, and that's not something you can count on. It makes sense to sacrifice yourself, IF you are standing between your loved home and the war's desolation, but she clearly states in the beginning of the story that the Earth is no more her home than her CASPER unit. Maybe she's just running on automatic, and that's NOT a long-term survival strategy. True, in a stressful situation, you let your training take over, but that's not the way to plan out a campaign.

NONE of these aliens are our friends. None of them respect us; we are, at best, cannon fodder. At worst, we are alien fodder, literally.

So: when is it time to hoist the black flag, and start slitting throats? Hmm...I think I might see the Jolly Roger on the horizon!

## Riding the Red Horse Edited by LTC Tom Kratman, US Army (ret) and Vox Day Review by Chris Nuttall

The spectre of war once more looms on the global horizon. A new generation of writers and military theorists are addressing the new forms of warfare that now challenge the nation-state's monopoly on war. Terrorism, technology, 4th Generation warfare, the decline of the Pax Americana, and the rise of China are among the issues contemplated by the 20 contributors to RIDING THE RED HORSE, the new annual anthology of military science fiction.

RIDING THE RED HORSE is a collection of 24 essays and short stories from technologists, military strategists, military historians, and the leading authors of military science fiction. From the Old Guard to the New, the anthology features some of the keenest minds and bestselling authors writing in the genre today. Three national militaries and three service branches are represented by the contributors, the majority of whom are veterans.

Edited by LTC Tom Kratman, US Army (ret) and Vox Day, RIDING THE RED HORSE covers everything from real-world lasers, intelligence ops, threat assessments, and wargame design to space combats, fleet actions, and ground operations taking place in some of the most popular future universes in science fiction. The anthology consists of contributions from Eric S. Raymond, William S. Lind, Chris Kennedy, James F. Dunnigan, Jerry Pournelle, Ken Burnside, Christopher G. Nuttall, Rolf Nelson, Harry Kitchener, Giuseppe Filotto, John F. Carr, Wolfgang Diehr, Thomas Mays, Benjamin Cheah, James Perry, Brad Torgersen, Tedd Roberts, Steve Rzasa, Tom Kratman, and Vox Day.

## Snow in Her Eyes by Cedar Sanderson Review by Pat Patterson

The starkly beautiful cover, also by Sanderson, shows the faint outline of a beautiful, big-eyed little girl, looking out in puzzlement from a frame of evergreens in the snow, an exquisitely drawn red snowflake and red spatters providing the hint of tragedy.

The first paragraph confirms it all.

Paranormal investigator Amaya is at the site of a multiple homicide, kneeling outside beside the frozen body of a three-year-old girl. The image of an unfrozen snowflake resting on the little girl's open eye is written with a pain-filled brutality; this is all there is left of the little girl, her life is no more, for reasons she would have been too young to understand.

The death is obviously caused by magic, because the cold is unnatural; there is no way the body of the little girl could have been frozen solid by the moderate temperatures at that time of year.

Inside the house are three other dead bodies. Two are the result of conventional forms of homicide, a man killed by a slashing attack, and a woman dead by a shotgun blast. A second man is frozen solid, like the little girl, still holding the shotgun that took the life of the woman.

The investigation that follows is an elegant blend of paranormal investigation, logical puzzle-solving, and old-fashioned police work. The clues to the crime are in plain sight; this isn't one of those mysteries where you have to know the thirty-seven varieties of English cigar ash in order to solve the problem. On my second read-through, I drew out a diagram of the relationships as I met the characters, and proved to myself that, yes, this WAS a fair mystery. It's just complex.

As is the case in real life, details exist that are neither red herrings, nor are they essential elements of the crime. Mixed in with those are some factors which DO have bearing on the story, but you don't know which is which. Amaya's office is in a broom closet, because magic gives her migraines, and she wants to throw up in private. The head of the local witches' coven is Amaya's great aunt. The police chief hasn't learned how to eliminate paper from his paperwork. Amaya's left hand is prosthetic. She likes tea, because coffee is too bitter. All of the elements combine to describe the people and the environment, BUT this isn't one of those heavy-handed stories which only mentions the tsochkes because one of them is missing/the murder weapon/a clue to the murderer. They just go into making an elegant tale.

As does her precise beauty of word choice. In one scene, she describes the effect of a defensive spell which is keeping her and her partner from approaching a house.

“I could hear that he was talking, but the words were distant, almost music if a muted trombone were playing a solo.”

I read that, and I've got the Miles Davis band playing in my head immediately.

Although this is a short piece, and there are no elements left hanging, there are plenty of details which tickle. For example, the professional status Amaya has as an official paranormal investigator is bothersome to some of the other law enforcement officers. For another, how did she come by a prosthetic arm? And why was her aunt only free from jail because of Amaya's sufferance? Sanderson does these things, though. About five years ago, she wrote a short work called 'Stargazer' which DEMANDED one or more sequels, and so far, that hasn't happened. I believe that is something we are going to have to accept about Sanderson; she is always going to leave us wanting more.

The Boogey Man x 3 by Tom Rogneby  
Review by Pat Patterson

This ain't DaddyBear and the Minivandians, but they are at the very least distant cousins. Members of DaddyBear's crew, if dropped into a story in the BoogeyMan world, would recognize the core values of loyalty, importance of family ties, and the hard work needed to get ahead. And the weird. Maybe a different kind of weird.

Book One, The Boogeyman, could almost pass for a Bogart movie. There are tiny bits of supernatural in the story, but nothing that is essential to the plot. Martyn Shelby, the protagonist, is the proverbial tough guy investigator with a heart of gold, fists of oak, and a face that would remind you not to spend any more nights face down in the gutter. That's all normal stuff, right, for the tough guy private eye? Could be Cagney, Falk, but definitely not Hercule Poirot or Nero Wolfe.

There is ONE skewed angle, maybe two: Absolutely skewed is Aunt Sarah, a sort of family guardian/baby-sitter, who poses as a mark to draw in a junkie so she can drain him. When Martin happens on the scene taking place outside his lawyer's office, he shoos the pusher home, and catches up with Aunt Sarah over coffee. It's a nice, domestic scene.

But the 'maybe two skewed angles' pops up here. Marty got a phone call in the middle of the night to rescue four teens who vanished from a drive-in movie. His lawyer tells him there may be federal involvement. But: it happens too fast for normal investigative work. As in, there has to be surveillance, of SOMETHING going on, and that all fits in well with the story..

It's a flat-foot, gum-shoe kind of story, except that he married his lady and loves her, instead of incessantly flirting with the dames. I hope we get LOTS more. Please?

Book Two contains two short stories. The first, "The Devil Drinks Sweet Tea," is back story, the second, "Working Vacation," is a contemporary incident.

"The Devil Drinks Sweet Tea." I love back-story. I think I'd rather read backstory without the main event than the main event itself. Except for the Silmarillion. Tried that a few times, just couldn't tolerate it.

Here, we see Martin as a young lad of 16 who is spending the summer with his grandparents, while his mother and father enjoy the touristy flesh-pots of Florida. And, as is the case with any number of Southern grandmothers, Grandma is working Grandpa and Martin to death in the yard, while she cleans the house. You can't understand the degree of frugality and self-sufficiency people like this strove for, unless you contemplate that they grew up in the South in the terrible years following the Great Depression. You throw NOTHING away; you buy NOTHING that you can make or do without. You eat the food you raise, and you do not doubt; you make do. And there is little time for foolishness such as radio; instead, you sit out on the porch in the evenings, and carry on long conversations while the ladies shuck peas, and the men smoke. And almost without fail, the center of community action and involvement is the local church: Sunday School, Sunday morning service, all day singing and dinner on the grounds, evening prayers; then throughout the week, there are other opportunities.

And that's why, when the Devil tries to break through Grandma's flower bed, he encounters a mighty warrior who stops him in his tracks. (My grandmother was very similar.)



At some point, I feel certain we will discover how the devil recognizes young Martin, and calls him by the name "Boogeyman."

The second story, "Working Vacation," is set in the present day, just a few years after the events of "The Boogeyman." I'm going to shout this next part:

WE ALL NEED MORE STORIES LIKE THIS!

We need them because they include paranormal events that are merely things that happen, so you don't know until you get to the end whether they have anything to do with the mystery at all. I think this is a wonderful use of magic/supernatural events. There is no point in resorting to burning floor roots at midnight, when the same thing can be accomplished by just asking the waitress at the all-night diner.

In this case, Marty gets dragged away from his delicious breakfast of shrimp and grits, because a Very Important Person is missing, and many people will be disturbed unless he is found soon. (Note: you might be able to recognize the Very Important Person from the description, but I didn't. It doesn't matter.) The plot INCLUDES some paranormal elements, but it's really a straight-up detective story.

It reads fast, and it reads fun!

### The Golden Horde by Chris Kennedy Review by Pat Patterson

As a matter of fact, click on Amazon, and mark my review 'Helpful' (if you find it so). I'm working on three fronts now: this blog, Amazon reviews, and Goodreads reviews. The only one that matters for the authors (except in terms of exposure) is the Amazon review, and for reasons I can't go into right now, but have explained elsewhere, 'Helpful' clicks have the best potential for translating into money for the people doing the creative work.

It's been a month since the worlds of the Four Horsemen exploded into my reading sphere. It was the launch of "A Fistful of Credits" at LibertyCon (which I was able to not attend, for the nth year in a row) that got my attention, and I reviewed it here on July 7.

And I was in love.

I should say, rather, that the love I already had, for military sci-fi, had found an additional object of affection. I had some prior reviewing commitments, but I immediately added "The Revelations Cycle" (for such is the name of the Horsemen series) to the queue. It SEEMS as though I've been entirely immersed in Horse product ever since, but actually, Dear Readers, that has not been the case. I just went back and counted, and discovered that since that review of FOC, I reviewed nine works by seven different authors. They were GOOD books too, although perhaps not in the transcendent sense that Theresa is a GOOD girl.

However, it's extremely rare for me to review multiple works out of the same series in a short period of time.

I can only think of one other time I've done that, and that was when I read David Pascoe's Volumes 2 -

6 of "Tales of the Unquiet Gods" from July 2 - July 4, 2015, but those were short stories/ chapters issued later as a single book. It's well worth your time, by the way.

The reason is that there are a LOT of great authors out there, writing a LOT of great books, and it's aggravating to me that they get lost in the crowd. So, I rarely review more than two in a row from the same series or author. Except with this series: With this review, I will have done seven works in the past month. Five are novels, reviewed here and on Amazon and Goodreads; the other two are short stories, which I have submitted to Tightbeam, the National Fantasy Fan Federation ezine.

It's been GREAT! And I'm given to understand that more is on the way.

The "Golden Horde" features another great mecha battle scene (taken from the book, by the way) by Brenda Mihalko and Ricky Ryan. I was not familiar with their work prior to starting the series, but the art and lettering has been great, and the consistent approach means you can recognize a book from the series without question.

The basic storyline is that the aliens landed on Earth, once Voyager 1 left the solar system, since that qualified us as an interstellar species. They had huge technological advances to sell us; unfortunately, apart from some raw materials, we had nothing they were interested in. However, through an unfortunate series of events, they discovered we could fight, and that turned out to be a rare trait in the Galactic Union.

The fix was in at the start, though. In addition to dumping their rubbish on Earth buyers, the initiation into the Mercenary Guild turned out to be particularly brutal. Of the 100 mercenary and military groups who went out first (known as the Alpha Contracts), only four came back. Each one of these happened to feature the image of a horse on their battle regalia, so they collectively became known as the Four Horsemen: Cartwright's Cavaliers, Asbaran Solutions, the Winged Hussars, and the Golden Horde.

Recently, each one has faced some pretty tough luck. But, as the saying goes: once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, the third time is enemy action. Since the Golden Horde is the FOURTH occurrence, there can be no doubt about the malevolence.

All of the Four Horsemen have some unusual ways of accomplishing missions, but the Golden Horde is just downright...weird. Their tradition demands that they be led by a matriarch, who receives a vision on her deathbed, which she passes on to her successor. These visions are treated with utmost sincerity by the leadership, and their fervor communicates itself to the cadre and the troops.

The transmission of believe is facilitated by two things: the troops are recruited from orphanages, so the Horde becomes their new family, even giving them new names; and each troop is given cybernetic upgrades, so they can link with each other and their equipment through electronic telepathy.

The close-knit nature of internal relationships is contrasted with the distance the Horde keeps from everyone else. Although they will ally with other mercenary groups, they take special care to make sure they have complete control over all modifications of their equipment. They employ the best hackers in the universe to refine and protect their operating systems, and that's been working well for them.

Until they get struck with their own version of the Summerkorn Blues. He has been trained in logistics, and initially just got off track because he couldn't see the forest for the trees; he's dithering on submitting the moist precise report possible, until it was too late for it to make a difference. Cashiered from

each of the other Horsemen, he is, somewhat inexplicably, hired to fill a critical spot in the Horde's supply team. And here, his desire to make up for his previous errors results in the greatest threat to the human race being unleashed.

Those spunky Earthmen: will they manage to muddle through? Tune in next week!

DO quote me on this: it's a most excellent series, a most excellent book, and it has some of the most interesting characters and monsters I've seen all week.

## The Darklings vs. Spark series by James Alan Gardner. Book 1: "All those Explosions Were Someone Else's Fault" and Book 2: "They Promised Me the Gun Wasn't Loaded" Reviews by Robert Runté

As soon as I read the titles, I knew I had to buy these two books, and they didn't disappoint. In fact, they were both much better than one might expect, given that the back cover description is completely accurate: They're novels about superheroes vs vampires, werewolves, ghosts and so on. That wouldn't normally might not be a promising premise, but James Alan Gardner is a writer I trust more than most and he pulls it off beautifully.

The story of the first book ("All Those Explosions Were Somebody Else's Fault) is told seriously from the perspective of a newly created superhero and while less haha-funny than the title might suggest, there is a strong element of the absurd underneath it all that nicely balances the page-turning action and some pretty dark characterization. The story arc and the personal growth of the viewpoint character are way better than any comic while staying faithful to the form. There's even some depth to Gardner's examination of human motivation and the line between good and evil, morality and viewpoint. Gardner's love of comic books is obvious, but he raises the genre a step above anything from Marvel or DC.

The viewpoint character, Kim, is trying to cope with her new superpowers at the same time as sorting out her maybe trans identity, her dark backstory, and her relationships with her three undergraduate roommates—all of whom were turned into superheroes at the same moment. Personal reflection has to take a back seat, however, to doing battle with the supervillain currently attacking their city, and worrying about the international conspiracy of darklings who in this universe are also the superrich 1% (because only the superrich can afford to buy the magic that makes them both immortal and powerful magical beings).

My only very minor reservation is that Gardner occasionally breaks the fourth wall by having our narrator explain that the sometimes outrageous coincidences in the plot are actually part of the world-building, a natural consequence of the magic/super-science of this world--only I hadn't noticed the lapse in verisimilitude until Gardner pointed it out. I was going with it because the edge-of-your-seat action kept me from thinking about it too deeply and because it did all make sense within the rules of Gardner's universe. I suppose we can forgive Gardner these rare lapses if we accept that the novel is also intended as a meta examination of the superhero genre as a whole--those comments really aren't about his book, but about why we should accept superhero plotlines in general. All in all, a very satisfying romp!

The second book in the series ("They Promised Me The Gun Wasn't Loaded") is every bit as good as the first and perhaps even more enjoyable as we already know how the world works, so there's a bit

less breaking the fourth wall to explain things.

The story picks up exactly where book 1 left off, but the viewpoint character shifts to another of the four newly created superheroes. Shifting POV fleshes out that character nicely as the plot plows forward. Presumably, the next two books will cover the other two characters in turn, so that we'll end up with the whole set. The villains from the first book remain, with several more thrown in, as well as a lot more moral ambiguity around exactly who counts as a good/bad guy in this universe. The action is pure superhero adventure, but the text format allows for a lot more nuance, and better coverage of the viewpoint character's interior life. It all works very, very well.

Looking forward to the next two books in the series...and wondering what the overall story arch is going to turn out to be...

## The Last Roman by Edward Crichton Review by Jim McCoy

So how about a Navy Seal who is detached from service in the US to fight for the Catholic Pope in World War III and transported back in time to Ancient Rome? Does that sound like fun? It does it me. Actually, it was fun too. If you're wondering, I'm referring to Edward Crichton's The Last Roman, part one of the Praetorian Series. I really enjoyed this one and I'm betting you all would too.

Our hero is Lieutenant Commander Jacob Hunter, Navy Seal, Historian, Classicist, Catholic and SF geek. I liked this guy. He holds the series together and is believably written. I mention that specifically because I've just listed a group of seemingly incompatible traits, but somehow Crichton pulls it off. Hunter is a complicated guy with an extensive backstory and a varied personality. He manages to be a stone cold killer when he needs to be but he has a soft side. He's even more clueless with women than I am. His knowledge of Ancient Roman history is amazing. (More on that in a minute.)

Part of the appeal to this book, at least for me, is that Crichton manages to convey the type of camaraderie found among small groups of men the world over. There is a bit of a hierarchy but the guys (and one girl) are quick with a wisecrack and are not always nice about things. They know how to take things, however, and God help the man who comes from outside their circle to insult one of their own. Especially if it's their only female. Then again, it's not like she needs all that much protecting. She's a sniper with some pretty serious hand-to-hand training and a bit of an attitude, yet she is accepted once she proves herself.

Crichton found a way to avoid every historian's pet peeve with Historical Fiction or Alternate History. He wrote his story in a period that was remote enough in history that most of what was known has been lost and included a character, Hunter, who could point out the inconsistencies. Hunter's moments of "Oops, guess the historians got that one wrong," are both informative and amusing. They're also used to keep the story moving and, in one case, warn our heroes that not all is well. This was really well done on Crichton's part.

Crichton starts the book with combat in the near future and ends it with combat in thirty-eight AD. He's obviously done some studying because he manages to pull both off believably. Granted, his ancient battles take place with modern warriors and firearms intermixed but he makes it believable. In a related note, the reaction of the Ancient Romans, to include Emperor Caligula, are pretty epic but also about what you'd expect from people who have never heard of guns and are suddenly exposed to

modern firearms. That brings up something else that Crichton does well.

Throughout the story, Hunter agonizes over the role of himself and his comrades. He has done some SF time travel geeking in his time and is worried about what he and his friends will do to the timeline. He eventually concludes that they have established an alternate timeline, but it's still fun to see him engaging in a debate that I myself have taken part in, even if the person he's debating is himself.

Crichton knows his hardware too. His bio says nothing about having served in the military so I'm assuming that it's mainly research but he knows his stuff. He's not exactly a Larry Correia level gun-geek but Crichton displays much more understanding of firearms than most.

A word of warning here: Although I really did enjoy this book, it occurs to me that I may have enjoyed it this much because Hunter is a lot like me. I mean, I'm not a super athletic Navy Seal but the other stuff. I have a degree in History, as does he. I have done some studying of the Ancient World, although none formally. I went about halfway through the confirmation process in the Catholic Church before I dropped out due to a sudden change in life circumstances and I fully intend to go back. I'm not saying that people from outside those groups can't understand the story, but I just thought I'd mention all of that in the interest of full disclosure.

This is the part where I'm supposed to rip Crichton a new one for goofing with the timeline but I already covered that. At times it seems like the team is too well rounded, but then that's exactly the type of team that any military organization would try to build, so that makes sense. The time travel McGuffin is a bit wonky, and the explanation for why it works is kind of weird, but it kind of needs to be. All in all, my complaints about this novel are minor and I'm looking forward to reading the sequel.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Gladii  
The Last Roman  
Edward Crichton  
Kindle/CreateSpace

## Trickster Noir by Cedar Sanderson Review by Jim McCoy

(I don't usually do this but I'm going to mention something the author told me when she sent me this book for review. Apparently, there have been a few men who have read this story and thought that it hit a little too close to home. The recovery of Lom, our hero, from a horrific injury is a central plot element to the story. He starts the book off in a very bad way and reading the book was uncomfortable for a few men who had suffered long periods of sickness. I'll get to my thoughts in a few seconds, but I can see why she warned me. Go forth and read it, but don't say I didn't warn you. Oh, and I know I don't usually do spoilers but when the author warns you about reading her book, it's only right to share. Oh, and she brings it up on like page two, so it's not like I killed the ending here.)

Trickster Noir, by Cedar Sanderson is the second in the first series ever to make me feel bad. Seriously. See, the first book in the series is named Pixie Noir, and while it does indeed kick ass (and may be given its own review someday) it's named Pixie Noir. I don't usually do a whole lot with pixies because that's what I have daughters for. I was turned off by the title. Fortunately for me though, I heard enough good things about it and picked up a copy. Trickster Noir is a worthy sequel. It takes up right after the ending of the first one and continues rocking along.

The book is equal parts badassery, political intrigue done faerie style and family bonding time. Oh, and there's a bit of a love story but fortunately, from my point of view at least, it's not overdone. Lom and his bride-to-be Bella (no not THAT Bella, thank God) are very clearly in love but this is a story about more than just that. Sanderson moves things along between them while keeping the story going in its other respects, in a manner similar to the one that Catherine Asaro uses in her Saga of Skolian Empire. It's a technique I very much admire.

This one has a few genuine surprises in it. I enjoyed that. I've studied the art of writing (while completing exactly nothing) for quite a while now and I usually either see something coming from a mile away or feel completely blindsided because it wasn't foreshadowed at all. Sanderson manages to strike the right balance though and in one particular case, I was floored for a good five seconds before I like...got it. So good job for her there.

Watching Lom struggle is a bit painful at first, but I think it needs to be. He is recovering from an injury that left him nearly lifeless and without his magic, a horrible thing to a faerie. At the beginning of the book he can barely lift his head. The thing is, he's a sympathetic character instead of simply a pitiful one. Sanderson makes it clear that Lom wants to get better and get back to doing his thing instead of sitting around soaking up the sympathy of others. It's impressive.

The action scenes are impressive. Remind me never to piss Sanderson off, because she seems to have enough of a knowledge of weaponry and tactics to totally ruin not just my day, but the day of everyone I know. Bella knows her way around weaponry and so does the extended family. She is a bit more protective than she probably should be, but it's her first time leading troops in battle. She's a decent tactician though and she's got good help. It probably doesn't hurt matters that she's got an entire library stored in her skull and more magical ability than has been seen in any one individual basically ever. Bella is a female protagonist in my favorite mold: strong, proud, smart, tough and brave. She's also caring and compassionate if that's what you're into.

My one complaint about the book, and maybe I'm just whining here, is that the characters in it spend so much time eating that it starts to become a distraction to the story. It sounds weird typing it, but I've never seen a series of books with as many meals in it as this one tome. It seems like every chapter ends with a meal. Don't take me wrong. I love food as much as the next guy but damn. I hear Sanderson is herself a good cook, writes a column called "Eat This While You Read That" and is apparently a very good cook, but there is such a thing as taking it too far. It's not the worst transgression in the world, especially given that eating helps recovery after using too much magic, but it could be toned way down without detracting from the story. Overall though, this one is definitely worth your time and money. You can buy it by clicking the link below.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Faerie Wings.

Trickster Noir

Cedar Sanderson

Stonycroft Publishing, 2014

**Vengeance from Ashes by Sam Schall**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**

They stripped her of her career, but they could have gotten away with that. They locked her up, but she



survived it and could have gotten over it. They took away her rights and her dignity, but the vengeance she seeks is not for herself. They messed with her people and that, my friends, was inexcusable. Now she's out for payback and it's going to get ugly. Who is she? She is Captain Ashlyn Shaw, this is Vengeance from Ashes and I assure you that you have someone you'd rather not mess with.

Shaw was the leader of an elite unit of Marines known as the Devil Dogs. Leadership, both military and civilian sold her and her people out. The ones who survived were imprisoned, stripped of rank and status. Even their Devil Dog tattoos have been removed, along with large portions of their skin. Their families were persecuted. Ms. Shaw is among the unhappiest of campers and she has damn good reason to be.

What follows this horrifying beginning is a story of anger, carefully controlled because releasing it would be ruinous, and Shaw knows it. She has to find a way to get her people out of prison and back into the service. She has to find a way to get herself back into fighting trim, both physically and mentally. She also has to learn to trust again. It's not always easy for Shaw to tell who had her back and who did not. She can't be sure who, if anyone, to trust. Even when things go well the scars of her imprisonment remain. She is, in short, a well-written and thoroughly entertaining character. I once had a conversation with someone who claimed there were no strong female characters in SF/F. Vengeance from Ashes had not been published yet. That's too bad. I would've loved a chance to whack someone over the head with it at that point.

Schall does a good job of balancing this book out. There are several scenes of asskickery and derring-do, but there is also plenty of time spent on character development. Shaw is a complicated woman who has been through a lot. It takes her time to become used to being on the outside once again. VfA is a thriller as well. There are times when a straight ahead charge won't work, so trickery has to be employed. Shaw has enemies still remaining in power and not everyone is best friends with the people who freed her, either. This is a much deeper work with more twists than I had anticipated it to be. A book that I had initially figured as a straight up kill-'em-all type turned out to have more turns than a trip down a mountain road.

The action in the book is relentless. If there's not a military operation going on, there's political intrigue. If there's no political intrigue, there's personal tension. Things just don't let up. I couldn't put the thing down until I was done. The first time I read this the sequel wasn't out yet and I wanted to read it now, now, now. Oh well. It didn't matter what I wanted because I was waiting anyway.

There is only one thing about this book that I didn't like, and I have to admit that it makes me a bit crazy. Schall picked the nickname Devil Dogs as the designation for his Marine Specwar unit. Sorry, but I've got a history degree and that kind of thing makes me twitch. The nickname Devil Dogs was given to the United State Marine Corps at Belleau Wood by the Germans they were fighting. The Germans were convinced that no human could shoot that well. The Marines were picking them off at seven to eight hundred yards with aimed rifle fire. I know I'm interfering with authorial fiat, but I can't get over the simple fact that Schall took the name Devil Dogs away from the entire Corps and gave it to one elite unit. In spite of that, it's still a good book though.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 rifle rounds

Vengeance from Ashes  
Sam Schall  
Hunter's Moon Press, 2014

# Literary Criticism

**Blade Runner 2049 and Philosophy: This Breaks the World,**  
**Edited by Robin Bunce and Trip McCrossin**  
**Review by Tamara Wilhite**

The original movie “Bladerunner” raised complex ethical questions. What makes us human? How do we define human, and what does that mean for our manufactured creations? “Bladerunner 2049” takes things even further by adding Joi, an AI who is clearly intelligent and cares for K but doesn’t even have a body. The second “Bladerunner” movie also brings home the environmental destruction that was a key point in the book but not discussed as much in the first movie, merely hinted at by real animals being so rare that they are a status symbol to own.

“Bladerunner 2049 and Philosophy” contains roughly twenty essays mining the entire Bladerunner series, including several serials that cover the time frame between the first and second Bladerunner movies. There are the expected essays on what makes us human and whether this applies to replicants. We also get everything from a question as to what “real” means to whether or not Joi and K can actually love each other. What is identity when you can have implanted memories? One interesting chapter analyzes the philosophical implications of K-Joi-Mariette’s sex scene. (Don’t worry, the essay is rated PG.) K and Luv are contrasted in several places, too.

The psychology and nature of the baseline test is analyzed in separate pieces. For example, how does the test determine deviation in a replicant? The role of cops is discussed in another. At least one essay focuses on the rather enigmatic villain Niander Wallace. Several analyze Joi herself. Is she a person? Can she consent? At what point did she become her own person?

Blade Runner 2049 and Philosophy  
Edited by Robin Bunce and Trip McCrossin  
Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy Series)

## **The City as a Literal Character** **By Tamara Wilhite**

The city is sometimes seen as a supporting character in a novel. In science fiction, the city is sometimes literally a character.

“The City Who Fought” by Anne McCaffrey

Anne McCaffrey is most synonymous with dragons, but she also wrote more conventional science fiction. She had an entire series of books featuring disabled children turned into “shell people”, if the state so chose. Your child would then live for centuries in a variety of roles after being educated, permanently cared for. This is attractive when the only alternative is euthanasia. The most famous book in this series is “The Ship Who Sang”, but one novel in the series is “The City who Fought”. Simeon is the brain running a space station, a city in the sky, when alien invaders take over the station. The crew tries to hide his existence while he helps them fight back.

“The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress” by Robert Heinlein

The central computer that controls most of the colony is a key player in the resistance against Earth. And it pays the greatest price for the colony’s freedom. This is one of the few cases where the AI is fighting on behalf of the humans against oppressive governments instead of being the oppressive force or a tool of it.

“Mayflies” by Kevin O’Donnell

A man finds that he’s been blessed and cursed to a long second life as the main administrator on a generation called “The Mayflower”. He can do anything as long as he doesn’t kill so many people that it compromises their genetic diversity and ability to colonize another world. Interestingly, the idea of human brains running starships disappears in science fiction as we made radical advances in artificial intelligences, though intelligent, self-aware computers have been a staple of sci-fi for ages.

Is That the Whole List?

Almost any sentient generation ship could fall into this same category, such as the starship that literally demands worship in “Destination: Void”. Depending on how you read the book, the ship actually bends space-time to create colonies and shape humanity, too. However, it creates colonies independent of itself, so I can’t call it both a city and a character.

The Minds of Iain Bank’s culture often live in ships, too. They’re self-aware and often create virtual worlds where they admit they are god-like, but they aren’t asking Culture residents to worship them. And while their ships can house communities, most have just a few passengers and are not “cities”. By holding to the relatively narrow confines of “city” and “character”, I’ve excluded some of the best self-contained, self-aware characters who aren’t human in sci-fi.

**Rick and Morty and Philosophy:  
In the Beginning Was the Squanch,  
Edited by Lester C. Abesamis and Wayne Yuen  
Review by Tamara Wilhite**

As the mother of 2 teens, I was aware of the science fiction kid’s show “Rick and Morty” before the publisher gave me a copy of “Rick and Morty and Philosophy”. I knew the show brought up a number of issues such as identity, morality, and the complex nature of relationships. For example, the scientist grandfather accidentally destroyed at least one universe before coming to the current main one. How ethical is that? And how is he able to live in a universe just slightly different from his own? If you are flexible on identity and consider it close enough, you can.

The book brings depth and potential explanations for various characters in the book. Why is Rick able to bond with this particular Morty when he’s unable to do so with almost anyone else, including Morties in other timelines? What are the motivations of the evil Morty? What are the ethics of leaving your biological child in stasis and creating a replacement with false memories so Morty has his Mom?

While the book is written by philosophy professors and ethicists, it isn’t so abstract that it can’t be read

by the average adult. My teenaged fan of Rick and Morty was able to read some of it, too, and tried because it looked interesting. Extra points for accessibility.

Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy Series)

**Stranger Things and Philosophy:  
Thus Spake the Demogorgon,  
Edited by Jeffrey A. Ewing and Andrew M. Winters  
Review by Tamara Wilhite**

The “And Philosophy” series has analyzed the implications, ethics, worldviews and characters in science fiction and fantasy series for years. For example, they collected philosophers’ essays that analyzed Doctor Who, “X-Files” and Battlestar Galactica several times. It was time they did the Netflix show “Stranger Things”, and they just did.

“Stranger Things” is a Netflix science fiction/horror show set in the 1980s. The “Stranger Things and Philosophy” book asked 16 different contributors (and even teams) to give their perspective on the show. There are two different essays analyzing Eleven’s character, and one determines why Eleven didn’t follow Eight’s path. The role of ego and harnessing of the Jungian shadow is addressed, but I’m surprised no one talked about how the Eggo waffles used to save Eleven were such an obvious tie-in to ego.

More than one philosopher and professor explains why Upside Down is terrifying and why we’re drawn to horror in general. One gives their own treatise on childhood nostalgia and why it is built on false memory. One discusses how the show is authentic in the physical details but fails to be authentic to the era in other ways. Others ask who the real hero of “Stranger Things” is.

I liked “Stranger Things and Philosophy” more than the average “And Philosophy” book because they didn’t have constant Trump bashing references in this one. (This is a series where their token ideological diversity seems to be a Communist essay in every edition.)

This book is a great read for “Stranger Things” fans. I give it five stars.

Disclaimer: I was given a copy of this book by the publisher in exchange for my honest review.  
Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy Series)

**The Good Place and Philosophy,  
Edited by Steven A. Benko and Andrew Pavelich  
Review by Tamara Wilhite**

Introduction

“The Good Place” is a comedy set in an unusual place – the afterlife. This raises all kinds of philosophical questions, and the book “The Good Place and Philosophy” intends to answer at least a few of them.

Spoiler Alert – we will share revelations and twists from Season 1, Season 2 and Season 3 of “The

Good Place”.

What Is “The Good Place”?

In the TV show “The Good Place”, the universe has a karmic score keeping system. Every action is watched and measured by a benign otherworldly bureaucracy. You gain points for good deeds, but they are worth more if they have good intentions behind them. You lose points for bad deeds, and bad intentions hurt your score, too. The effects of your actions impact your score, for better or for worse. Generally for worse, since negative ripple affects you didn’t plan on ended up preventing anyone since the 1500s from getting into heaven, also known as “The Good Place”. The bad people go to “The Bad Place”. The “Good Place” on the show is actually a trial version of “the Bad Place” intending to capitalize on psychological horror instead of physical torture.

We end up in a trial before Judge Gen as the squad argues they have improved and should thus be sent to Heaven. We learn that there is a “Medium Place”, a de facto purgatory for one woman. All of this raises more philosophical questions, a few of which are answered by contributors to the book “The Good Place and Philosophy”.

The Highlights of “The Good Place and Philosophy”

Chapter 1 brings us the ethics of bureaucracy and bureaucratizing morality. There are points where the man seems eager to overthrow literal systems in life. The author seems to forget the very oppressive nature of socialist systems that rely on the unethical, impersonal bureaucracy that is being decried.

Chapter 2 asks how torture can be funny and the nature of torture itself. Interestingly, you get an analysis of the torturous reenactment of the trolley problem Chidi had to go through.

Chapter 3 discusses the sympathy we should have for the devils and demons. There is also a discussion on how modern life removes us from morality. For example, the karmic point system doesn’t give you as many points when you order artificially grown flowers sent to your lover versus picking it yourself and giving it to them.

Chapter 4 is the bundle theory of self. Chapter 5 analyzes the show relative to the war between free will and determinism. Chapter 6 asks whether or not the punishments should be proportional instead of eternal and ends up arguing for purgatory. Chapter 7 asks about meaning in the afterlife and is the first essay to ask, “Where’s God?” Then Chapter 8 suggests that the karmic system means there is no God, though supernatural creatures like demons and neutral arbiters clearly exist.

Chapter 9 discusses the ethical paradox at the heart of the show: the Good Place is a recreation of heaven in the Bad Place. And, ironically, it is reforming its inhabitants and turns a demon good, in the end.

Chapter 10 explores the merger of theory and praxis via Chidi and Eleanor. Chapter 11 discusses the paralyzing effect of worrying about the morality of everything and the impact that had on Chidi. Chapter 12 uses the concept of souls and body swaps to explore identity. Chapter 13 addresses the ethical quandaries presented by Janet, the good interdimensional helper who isn’t really omniscient.

Chapter 14 is the first of several chapters railing about Kant. It also asks if it is examples like Chidi who follow Kant that explain why people hate philosophy. Chapter 15 contains a different essay on

Chidi and Kant. It argues that the show supports care ethics, though the morality of that worldview is a whole other problem.

Chapter 16 is the first serious reference to Sartre's work "No Exit", the likely inspiration for "The Good Place". The Good Place is likely the antithesis of "No Exit" in multiple ways. Chapter 17 is also about Sartre's philosophy, but it focuses on his existentialism. It explores the tug of war between individual accountability and social responsibility. Chapter 18 tries to argue that the Good Place is religion-less Christianity and the opposite of Sartre's classic work. Furthermore, it ignores the rules outlined in every faith, much less Christianity, while setting the stage for relativistic ethics and subjective morality.

Chapter 19 is notable for analyzing the Good Place relative to Hinduism. Chapter 20 talks about why reading the philosophical works for great thinkers are unlikely to make you more moral.

Chapter 21 touches on several major religious questions. Why does God allow people to make bad choices? Why does evil exist? The answer is that you must be capable of bad to be able to choose to do good. Then it analyzes the ethical quandary Jason poses, since his lack of self-awareness and lack of a moral compass means such ethical dualism doesn't always work.

Chapter 22 discusses how and why Chidi, the philosophy professor, never realized he was in "The Bad Place" despite having a literal gut feeling. It then discusses how cognitive science could affect morality.

Chapter 23 looks at social contractalism and Tahani.

Observations about "The Good Place and Philosophy"

Despite more than one criticism of your eternal fate coming down to a single number, there is no mention of the real world equivalent of "Sesame Credit" currently used in China.

Chapter 19 is a great piece, and I wish there was a similar one comparing "The Good Place" afterlife to Buddhism. That parallel is all the more apt after the squad gets returned to Earth to try to do better. And there's a natural lead into this discussion given that Jason spent several episodes pretending to be a Buddhist monk.

Wow, these philosophers loved seeing an ethics professor on the small screen ... and gave Chidi far more time than the other characters.

Summary

"The Good Place and Philosophy" is a decent collection of philosophical essays analyzing this light comedy. It could have benefited from more religious and viewpoint diversity. However, it is an interesting exploration of the philosophical questions raised by "The Good Place". Given the intense focus on Chidi, it must be a must-read for philosophy professors who feel ignored in modern media.

Open Court (Popular Culture and Philosophy Series)



# Prose Bono

## How Did I Get Started Writing and How Did That Affect *Writing the Entertaining Story*?

- Wendy S. Delmater

Review by Jim McCoy

Some people might find it odd that I have chapters in *Writing the Entertaining Story* on what I call “related markets”: Essays and Articles. But my belief is that good non-fiction follows the same rules as good fiction. Well-written non-fiction is just stories about real things and real people. Storytelling rules make non-fiction saleable, and make it sing.

Perhaps this belief is a product of the path I came into the craft from: nonfiction. My fiction writing and editing career followed an odd path. I started with actually enjoying writing papers for various classes in school, and when I graduated that translated into writing letters to the editor, and an occasional paid editorial. Oh, so I could get paid for this writing thing? Cool. But I wrote to fill needs.

My first regular writing gig was for a newsletter for parents and educators working with children with Attention Deficit Disorder. As a volunteer, I wrote a very practical and helpful humor column that was a big hit with subscribers. I got a job doing construction safety management and did newsletter articles for the corporate rag. Then I started writing articles for my local American Society of Safety Engineers newsletter, which got reprinted at the regional and national level. Within two years I was editing their national construction division newsletter. I had an article published in ASSE's peer review journal, *Professional Safety*, the same month I graduated with a BS in Safety Science.

By this time I'd started to write fiction for pleasure. I joined an online writing workshop. I not only honed my craft there, but made many writer friendships, some of which have lasted for decades. From there I started publishing short stories and poetry, and once the time-pressure of things like single parenthood, caregiving for an elderly parent, and an 80-hr-wk job were removed, I started writing books. I have fiction novels on my hard drive, but considering my path to publication it's not surprising non-fiction books like *Writing the Entertaining Story* came out first.

So it was natural that I'd suggest that fiction writers consider writing nonfiction, too. After all, nonfiction pays much better than fiction, and if you're a good writer of fiction you already have most of the skills you need!

I cover two kinds of non-fiction writing in the book: essays and articles. A large number of literary magazines that accept fiction also accept essays, usually university presses or those related to scholarship. Many of them are entirely regional or only publish a certain segment of the population. For example, *Ricepaper* magazine (Canada) is a literary journal that showcases the work of emerging Asian-Canadian writers.

It's best to stay within your lane when writing essays for literary journals. If you're a disabled writer, there are literary journals just for you. If you are a writer of color, live in a particular region, are someone of Norwegian descent, or are a member of any other distinct group, it's just a matter of finding a

place that would prefer to showcase your work.

Obviously, if you are a fiction writer who has a scholarly background, these will be an easier market for you to break into than other people. But I know writers without scholarly backgrounds who have gotten into prestigious literary magazines writing essays, and made good money doing it.

Please note that many literary magazines require a submissions fee, but this is offset by the fact that they can pay pretty well — much better than fiction. The decision to pay an entry fee is entirely up to the writer, but in this case it is not a cause for concern. There are also legitimate essay and fiction contests that have entry fees. Just be aware that it is customary for many literary journals to have submissions fees.

As far as articles are concerned, in *Writing the Entertaining story* I give a short excerpt from an extremely well-written piece about Mike (Dirty Jobs) Rowe's testimony before Congress, regarding getting more people into the trades. It uses all of the fiction writing tools and tricks I mention earlier in the book, including a hooky opening line and engaging characters.

There is absolutely no reason writers cannot use their fiction-writing skills to write nonfiction magazine and online articles. Again, one of the sad, unavoidable truths of the writing life is that nonfiction pays better than fiction. Unless, of course, you give it all away.

And sometimes giving away articles will actually make you money in the long run. For example, what is a typical blog post except an article? As Samuel Johnson said, "Only a fool doesn't write for money," but that's not entirely true. Johnson didn't live in the digital age, and one of the first rules of internet marketing is that you have to give people a taste of whatever it is you're selling, for free. Digital marketers say that a certain percentage of those who read a writer's blog or — better yet, sign up for their newsletter or Patreon — will spend money on whatever it is they're trying to sell. In the case of fiction writers, they're trying to get people to buy their novels, or anthologies that contain their short fiction. So that "taste of free" can be an excerpt from a work-in-progress, a chapter from a novel, or a teaser for one of their short stories.

Blog posts, newsletters, and a Patreon articles are a way that writers can keep in touch with their fans and build the online friendships that make them into deeper fans. And they are a great places to practice learning how to write articles for pay.

Writing articles for pay is not all that hard to break into. Most, if not all, print or online magazines have sites with a submissions guidelines link, and you follow their guidelines in the same way that *Writing the Entertaining Story* suggests you follow the guidelines for short fiction markets.

You can find more in my book, here: <https://www.amazon.com/Writing-Entertaining-Story-Wendy-Delmater-ebook/dp/B07WZ6V87Z/>

# Letters

Dear George:

Your review of R. W. Watkins' book *The View from the Cellar*, in which you reference a few of my remarks, takes on the issue of whether genre books can be literary. In a very real sense, this is a one-sided controversy, because a great many F&SF writers and readers are well aware that there are more than a few F&SF novels that meet all the so-called "literary criteria," whether "classical" or "political." From what I've observed in my years either in or incredibly close to academia (having both taught English at the university level for several years and been married to a university professor for nearly thirty years) is that it is largely the literary and academic community, and certainly not all of it by any means, that rejects even the possibility that genre works can possess an incredible wealth of literary features.

Much of my own work has definite political aspects and critiques, hardly surprising for someone who spent nearly twenty years in the political sphere in Washington, D.C., and there is a great deal of literary allusion, symbolism, metaphor, and the like in what I write, yet very few in the F&SF field would consider me literary for, from what I can determine, two reasons. My sentences tend to be understandable, if long, and I'm also somewhat popular.

So what I find equally interesting and amusing is that in both the "literary" and F&SF fields, there is an underlying assumption that a book cannot be literary if it is also popular, regardless of whether it may meet all the other criteria. I'm far from the only author to whom this applies. Just look at Stephen King, or, on the other side, Umberto Eco, with *The Name of the Rose*.

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.



































