

The N3J  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillips, D. Sc., Editor  
November 2019

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# Editorial

We exist because our writers and editorial staff contribute their unceasing labors to our cause.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Tamara Wilhite, and Heath Row. Robert Runté's peerless writing on creating and marketing sfnal prose, art, and marketing are an invaluable contribution to future writing efforts. For her careful proofreading of many contributions, we must in particular be grateful to Jean Lamb.

We would be delighted to publish more reviews if we could get them, not to mention articles on literary criticism or prose bono—better prose.



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# Novels

## A Cat Among Dragons by Alma T.C. Boykin Review by Pat Patterson

The Cat, Rada Ni Drako, doesn't want to be among Dragons. In fact, she would prefer to be left alone. However, that option is not open to her, because the Traders, which represent half of her genetic inheritance, treat her as an abomination in the very best of times. Later, the situation escalates, and an open contract is placed on her. Anyone who captures her will be able to use the reward money to live the rest of their lives in luxury.

She goes into hiding, taking the most uninteresting job she can think of: doing the laundry in a licensed brothel, under the bland name of Brownie. Even this hideaway is denied her, however, when one of the administrators seeks to place her in the bed of a disreputable type with political power. She flees, to the only place where her skills might win her the courtesy of isolation: a mercenary guild.

She has training to supplement her superior reflexes and is quite deadly in hand-to-hand combat of almost any type. Her mixed-race heritage has provided her with some rudimentary ability to detect others by their thoughts, and in some cases, to take control of them. This makes her an excellent training officer.

Meanwhile, the clue the Traders have that she is still alive sends them into a frenzy, and they escalate their offers for her. She is forced to leave job after job until...

...until I can't tell you any more, because of spoilers.

Beautifully written; excellent & complex characters, who are forced to make changes because of the things that happen to them, which gives us the means of seeing what drives character growth. Strange, powerful, secretive forces in the background, doing for others, for unknown reasons of their own. Conflicting rules of societies which may no longer have any survival value.

And here's what I loved: I enjoyed these characters so much, that I often found myself wondering which book I was reading. I interrupted my reading of the Four Horsemen to return to this series, but some of the events could have been taking place just a few planets over from the other series. Boykin writes fight scenes so well. I loved her tales of Elizabeth and her killer mule Snowy in the Colplatschki Chronicles.

## A Doctor to Dragons by Scott G. Huggins Review by Pat Patterson

It was amazing.

The cover is designed by one Rebekah Hale. I am not familiar with her work, but I applaud her use of an actual scene from the book as her subject for the cover. Unfortunately, the scene appears to one which takes place, literally, inside a dragon's gut. It is remarkably dark inside a dragon's gut, and conse-

quently, the figures of the doctor and his assistant (Harriet) appear as bright specks on a black background. In order to make out the detail painstakingly inserted into the artwork, you have to closely scrutinize the cover. It's a shame, really; such good work deserves to be seen.

I had the great good fortune to read James Herriot's work "All Creatures Great and Small" shortly after it was published in 1972, and I loved it; and I really, really loved this delightful homage to his work. Although I can't now recall all of the details of the original work, I DO recall the scene with the wealthy lady who persists in feeding her small dog on cake (or something else rich and delicious) with the consequence that the animal has to undergo the painful procedure of having an impaction removed. Huggins transforms the dog (a Pekinese, if I recall correctly) into a basilisk. This poor animal's owner insists on feeding it a diet of blood, and as everyone knows, that is NOT what keeps basilisks healthy. They need minerals, or they get osteoporosis.

Of course, the owner refuses to keep her precious in its container, so everyone in the office gets turned into stone.

Even if you haven't read Herriot, the scene is great fun.

And I just realized that the name of Dr. DeGrande's assistant is another tribute to the British veterinarian. Well done, sir!

In addition to the two primary stories included, there are numerous other yocks strewn throughout the book. The Dark Lord finds his lack of faith in in a subordinate disturbingly justified; that's one of my favorites. I also like the opiate and hydrofluoric acid combination given to one of the bad guys. Surely, this is standard equipment for the cryptoveterinarian; if not, it should be.

### An Unproven Concept by James Young Review by Jim McCoy

I've been in the mood for a rocking Space Opera for quite awhile now. Don't get me wrong. Near future SF is awesome when it's well done. My first love is fantasy and always will be. I've read a lot of good stuff lately. That much being said, there's still something visceral about unknown aliens attacking because who knows why and ships exploding. Yes, a nice uplifting story is nice but nothing beats a rip-snorting good page-turner that finds me cracking a book open before I can open my eyes far enough to see through my eyelids. Love scenes are awesome when done right (Yes, I admit it. I'm a Robotech fan for the love of Bob.) but nothing beats that moment of "Oh shit, where did that come from? And why is it shooting at me?" And if you're looking for a little bit of suspense, a lot of excitement, a big fight or two with an alien thrown in here and there and maybe just a smidge of a romantic element, then you're looking for James Young's An Unproven Concept.

Before I get to the story itself, I want to mention a couple of things I really like about the book that weren't, strictly speaking, part of the story. Young has thrown in a couple of important things that might be of use to a person who likes SF/F but isn't all that familiar with nautical terms: One is a drawing at the beginning of the book showing the different parts of the ship (bow, stern, etc.) and directional terms used by sailors such as ventral, dorsal, etc. Being a landlubber myself I liked this part of the story a lot. There is also a glossary at the end of the book for anything that still leaves the reader confused. Some of us can really benefit from this type of thing. Seriously. If you're looking at getting into the works of a guy like David Weber this may be a good place to start. Young can teach you the basics and give you a great story. Then you can go forth and use your knowledge for no goo... err... to enjoy other things as well. The best kind of knowledge is that which doesn't hurt to get and that can be reused for

free. Oh, and there were a few other illustrations in the book that I loved that weren't necessarily educational as well.

Young's story revolves around a passenger liner that is someplace it shouldn't be. It gets attacked by alien and the humans in the book, many of whom are either military or security personnel, or both, fight back to try to save their own skins and the lives of the civilians around them. The aliens appear out of nowhere and things get ugly quickly. The fact that no one quite knows who they are adds spice. The fact that no one knows where they came from might just be what leads into the rest of the series. I haven't read it yet so it's hard to say, but I'm definitely looking forward to more. There is a lot of story here still to be told.

What is here is awesome though. Survival is guaranteed to no one in this tome. When a passenger liner full of civilians and retired military gets boarded things get ugly quickly. Young's aliens make pretty good but not perfect (more on this later) villains. They're ruthless and intelligent but not all knowing and annoying. They can fight but apparently have a skilled technical caste as well. I don't want to spoil the book but there are times when they do something completely unexpected and it works. Our heroes are always on their toes and they have to be.

Young's heroes aren't always heroic in the sense a lot of other writers' heroes are. That's because he portrays them as doing what's necessary instead of what feels good. Young's characters are not James T Kirk. There is no overacting, no aha moment and no miraculous ending. This does start to look like the Kobayashi Maru, but there is no cheating here. When one of Young's characters is given the choice between defending a group of innocents or acting to save the entire ship he makes the militarily right decision. It's not easy for him and he pays the price later but he does his duty. Young's captains do their duty when they know what the cost is likely for the same reason. This type of gritty realism is hard to pull off but Young does a damn good job of it. Young is retired military and it shows, although I'm still trying to figure out how an Army guy ended up writing Navy and Marine stories has me a bit perplexed.

There is a lot of political intrigue in this work. It's obvious that Young has been hard at work on his universe and that there is a lot out there left to be revealed. It's politics at all levels as well: Fleet politics, interstellar politics and office politics all appear in the story and they all matter. When the shooting pauses, the politics go full tilt. Unless there is some other form of personal drama going on. This is Space Opera and, while the romance does not by any stretch of the imagination take over the book, it's there and well done. One moment in particular is the kind of thing that will stick with you forever once you've read the book.

I only have one major complaint about this work but it's one I've had about a lot of others. The aliens in the book are inhuman and enigmatic. That's OK. Aliens don't have to be human because they're aliens. They're almost complete ciphers though. At no point do we get a scene with an alien point of view. We never find out what their motivations are. They just show up and kick ass. Granted, the book focuses on the humans and their reactions but AUC could have been even better if we knew why the aliens were doing what they were doing. Here's hoping that future volumes will reveal more about the enemy. His motivations matter too and can make for some good reading. There's a reason that Yellow Eyes is my favorite of John Ringo's Legacy of the Aldenata series. That much being said, this book still rocks and it's not like there was any great need in the plot to throw this in there.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Gas Giants

## Artifice by Liane Miller Review by Jim McCoy

(Just a bit of housekeeping. Apparently, when an author sends you a .pdf with their cover that means you're supposed to use it in your review. Oops. Thank you to Lianne Miller for pointing that out. If you're an author who I reviewed before this and would like to see a .pdf of your cover on your review, please send me one and I'll update your review.)

Can someone please call Stephanie Meyer and tell her to read a book? It is a book in which a young girl is caught in between a vampire and a werewolf. It is a book about a girl whose life is quite frankly jacked up. It is a story about a girl, in this case named Eliza, who has decisions to make that aren't always easy. It's a book about a girl who faces challenges by looking them straight in the face without flinching or turning into a whiny little bitch. In short, Lianne Millers' *Artifice* is a book about a character in some ways similar to Bella from *Twilight* and it DOESN'T SUCK. I think Ms. Meyers could learn a bit about characterization and keeping an audience that doesn't consist solely of teenage girls entertained by reading this. Really, all *Artifice* is missing when compared to the *Twilight* Saga is millions of dollars worth of marketing. I mean that. Err, well maybe that and three sequels. But there was a preview of a sequel to *Artifice* in the back of this book, so Miller is catching up. And it's not like I got much out of the sequels anyway, since I gave up on the Meyer written drek after one hundred and forty pages. I hear my then twelve-year-old niece enjoyed it though.

*Artifice* is about a girl named Eliza Ross. At the beginning of the book, she doesn't really have much of a memory or much of a life. She is a young college student who no one will talk to. She goes to class and back to her apartment. She regularly calls the police about a stalker that they can't find any sign of. About the time she gets locked into a psychiatric hospital, things start to get interesting. When her medical tests all come up weird and they decide that she is imagining her stalker things go off the rails and that's where the story really begins to heat up.

Before I get too far into the story, I want to point something out about the cover. It's beautiful but it's also a bit misleading. I spent five seconds looking at the picture and decided this was a paranormal romance. The story has elements of both the paranormal and romance genres present, but it is not by any means an actual paranormal romance. It has other elements that are just as prevalent and doesn't follow the typical romance formula that I've seen too many times in other places.

*Artifice* mixes genres quite effectively. We've got a bit of the paranormal and romance genres as mentioned above but there is also a good deal of mystery mixed in. Eliza doesn't know who or what she is. She has no idea how old she is or where she came from originally. There are others in the book who do, and we are clued in early, but in many ways we don't know much more than she does. The end of the book leaves Eliza and the reader both still wondering about her personal history. Hints abound. but much is left to the imagination. I find I like it that way as the mystery helps pull us along in the story and helps build interest in other aspects of the story.

Miller manages to do something few other authors have attempted and even fewer have pulled off, at least without multiple books to do it in. The book's early villains are Eliza's allies at the end. Her most hated antagonist ends up being someone very important to her. It's a slow process to be sure, but Miller makes us want to like them and she manages to get us to do it. If it takes a Big Bad to make it happen then so be it. This is fantasy fiction and all great fantasy fiction has a great villain who is equal in skill and cunning to the heroes. Shashenka is not only that, but he also has access to more resources than our heroes and it shows. As the master of several covens of vampires he has greater numbers on his side as



well. He's not the largest of the cast physically, but he is far more powerful than mere size would indicate.

Eliza herself is impressive. This is a woman who doesn't have it all. She lacks in knowledge of self and, when we first meet her, is far from rich. She has a stalker and ends up in ever worsening situations. The bottom line, though, is that Eliza never gives up. She doesn't look to everyone else to fix her problems for her. In a situation where she could curl up into a ball and give up and feel sorry for herself, she doesn't. She fights and fights hard. I found myself liking this girl early in the book and liked her even more by the end. I may not agree with everything she does, but I understand why she does and why she must. Her ability to fight is mentioned (and at one point she achieves the ultimate in modern-day badass appearance by wielding a katana) but it's not shown much. Her willingness to sacrifice herself to protect her friends is impressive as well.

I really only have one complaint about the book and I hesitate to mention it but I feel like I have to. I try to keep my comments strictly about character and story and not so much to stylistic type things. The authors are published, and I'm not (except as a blog writer I guess), and I tend to leave that end of things alone, because I take it for granted that they can do it well or I would never have heard of them. This book has one stylistic thing that drove me up a wall until I got used to it and it will probably push some potential readers away, so I have to mention it in respect to fairness.

Artifice is written in the present tense. I found that hard to deal with at first. I got used to it after about two hundred pages but at first I found myself rewriting passages in my head to put them into past tense because that's what I'm used to. Once I got used to it, I really enjoyed the book, but it did cause some cognitive dissonance at first. Honestly, I'm not really sure if I got used to it, or if I just got so wrapped up in the story that I forgot about redoing parts of it, but either way the story overrode the style for me. I know that things won't work that way for everyone though.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 fangs. It would definitely be higher if not for the present tense issue.

### The Cassie Scot Series by Christine Amsden Review by Chris Nuttall

- 1 – Cassie Scot: ParaNormal Detective (Free Sample, [Amazon Link](#))
- 2 – Secrets and Lies (Cassie Scot #2)
- 3 – Mind Games (Cassie Scot #3)
- 4 – Stolen Dreams (Cassie Scot #4)

Sometimes I try to read something different (particularly when I get given the first book in the series for free.) Cassie Scot is basically urban fantasy/romance; a very light read.

Reviewing the Cassie Scot series is an interesting challenge. There's a great deal I like about the books, but at the same time there are hitches when my over-analysing complex kicks in and I start to wonder about the world-building and basic background. There's also a problem with many of the major characters ... but we will get to that in due course.

Cassie Scot, the protagonist (the stories are largely told in 1st person) is the eldest child of a very powerful magical family. Unfortunately, Cassie has no magic of her own, while the rest of her siblings do. (This is obviously not unlike Johan of The Very Ugly Duckling.) Obviously, comparisons are going

to be made between Cassie's condition and the squibs of Harry Potter, a comparison Cassie herself gleefully lampshades on the very first page.

"After the Harry Potter books came out, a couple of people called me a squib. Since I haven't read them, I have to assume it's a compliment."

It's not.

This isn't a very comfortable place to be, it should be noted; Cassie's family lives in a town dominated by sorcerers, while her family has a nasty feud with another magical family. She is literally helpless against some of the threats she has to face on a daily basis. Worse, perhaps, the sorcerers are largely bad enough to make Harry Potter's Ministry of Magic not only seem decent, but an urgent requirement. (Indeed, several characters agree that most of their problems are caused by a shortage of actual government, but they fall out arguing over who should be in charge.) Given just how much seems to have leaked out, it's hard to see why the existence of magic has remained a secret for so long. Maybe the sorcerers run the government <grin>.

[The world-building part of my mind keeps asking why anyone without magic stays there, as normal people seem to be cursed or hexed on a daily basis.]

In an attempt to separate herself from her family, Cassie has set herself up as a 'normal' detective, at least partly in the hopes of doing something about the unpleasant sorcerers who infest her town and pick on mundanes with evil glee. Even with her family's protection, this is not the safest job in the world; I honestly don't understand why she didn't leave long ago. As the series progresses, Cassie is not only drawn into the feud between her family and their enemies, but into a whole series of supernatural threats against the entire community.

Cassie herself is a fun character to follow (I'm not convinced she's the most objective of witnesses); she'd brave, determined and unwilling to bow her head to greater force. She has nothing, but knowledge; the way she uses that knowledge, to gain advantage or beat people far more powerful than her, is admirable. I like her, although I don't always understand her. The decisions her family makes in the first book (spoilers; sorry) should be enough to destroy any love she might have felt for them, particularly as they come alarmingly close to throwing her to the wolves. Uncovering the secrets her family and their enemies hold – including the horrific reason why Cassie was born without magic – forms a major part of the story.

Unfortunately, I can't help thinking that Cassie is the only truly likable magician (or someone close to magic) in the story. I don't think there was a single magician who was a decent person; indeed, the only person I can name who was, I think, was Evan's mother. She calmly accepts the fact that Evan is in love with Cassie, even though Cassie is the oldest daughter of her family's enemies. Power corrupts, as always; the trope runs right through the series.

One element I really didn't like, at least at first, was the relationship between Cassie and Evan. They might have started life as school friends, but their relationship for most of the series was decidedly off-kilter. Evan is the typical controlling boyfriend; over-protective, stalking, taking decisions for Cassie despite her clear opposition ... he might not have been quite as unpleasant as some of her other suitors (Cassie is targeted by hundreds of sorcerers who believe she has the genes for magic, without the power to defend herself) but I disliked him more than I cared to admit. He does grow up a lot in the final book, developing into a mature person who can actually be a good partner for Cassie, but I think most girls



would have dumped him long before then. Think of a slightly warmer Edward Cullen and you get the idea. Their relationship is far from healthy.

Overall, most of the time, he wants a prize for basic decency.

Actually, that may be a little harsh. Given a chance to take advantage of Cassie, he doesn't; given a chance to literally make Cassie marry him, he doesn't. There are definite signs of a better character buried under the arrogance and entitlement (certainly when compared to the other suitors). That said, it doesn't really help – IMHO – that most of the time he's right. Cassie is in hellish danger and needs protection to survive. (She spends too much of the novel as a Damsel in Distress, although her attempts to escape that role disqualify her as a pure-blooded example of that trope.) Evan spends far too long hovering on the brink of 'I must control you in order to keep you safe.'

It's actually interesting to compare Cassie to Johan, even though they come from different worlds. Johan was abused far worse than Cassie, and consequently had no intention of returning when his powers finally developed. Cassie, on the other hand, wasn't treated so badly and finds herself torn between a desire for independence and a desire to be truly part of her family. Johan made friends with Elaine, who helped to develop his magic; Cassie had to endure her creepy relationship with Evan. Johan tears his family apart; Cassie helps glue hers back together (after an outbreak of fighting between the two families that will probably sow the seeds for the next round of feuding.)

Mind you, I thought I saw parts of the ending coming, but the author still manages to surprise me.

Overall, the books are not particularly deep, but they're definitely worth at least one read.

### Chicks and Balances by Esther M. Friesner (Editor) Review by Pat Patterson

I think I read my first 'Chick' tract in April of 2002. I was hooked from that point on.

I must confess that at first I thought they were stretching the pun-title idea past the breaking point. 'Chicks and Chained Males?' Got it. 'The Chicks in the Mail?' Got it. Even 'Chicks Ahoy!', although that might have been a stretch.

But: Chicks and Balances? I didn't get it.

Then I realized that Sarah Hoyt's contribution, entitled 'Calling the Mom Squad,' featured an everyday mom, who had been drafted earlier into the super-hero group. And, just as in the case of the other moms, she had to BALANCE the demands of family with those of membership in the group. Furthermore, in the course of her exploit, she has to BALANCE on top of a robot horse, while holding her son, and attempting to kill a dragon with a laser-lance. So: BALANCE.

Do the other stories nicely fit the model? Well, maybe. Harry Turtledove's doesn't, though; it's just one continuous string of puns. Nothing balanced about it. Kristine Kathryn Rusch's story, 'Fashion and the Snarkmeisters,' has as the beginning, and denouement, the toppling over of a giant statue - loses its' balance, get it?

The other stories? Well, they are all at LEAST very good, and some are excellent, but I didn't find

'balance,' of any kind, to be a recognizable theme. HOWEVER, THAT MAY BE BECAUSE I DIDN'T GET THE JOKE! For example, Jean Rabe's character in 'Second Hand Hero' doesn't have much money. (not much balance in the bank account?) But, if they do, or if they don't contain any reference to the concept of 'balance,' it's still worth your time and money to get the book.

**Clusters: Case of the Missing**  
**by T.M. Williams**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**

Just a few days ago I posted a request for some help finding some research materials for one of my current WiPs. I was almost immediately told that I should do my own writing and not write at all if I didn't have an imagination. I took the criticism in stride and did my best not to get all butthurt about it. The thing is I know that research makes better novels from my experiences as a reader. I won't speak for T.M. Williams and where she came by the same knowledge but she obviously knows the benefits of research because *Clusters: Case of the Missing* is not only well written, it's also well researched. More on that in a minute. It is also a highly entertaining SF meets detective novel cross-genre mash up that just kind of works.

Our story is about a reporter - Ethan "Call me Franco" Franco - who starts out writing a story about a local disappearance and ends up trying to figure out why they are so common. Along the way he works with a cast of characters, one of which ends up missing and presumed dead. He faces the typical reaction of families with recent losses toward reporters. William's attitude is a bit more sympathetic toward her character than mine was in the same circumstances, but I've experienced a loss that was covered by the press. It wasn't pretty and I feel sorry for the guy who got my sister on the phone after my father drowned, but let's just say that scene hit me pretty hard. Others may not experience the scene the way I did. It's an experience I wouldn't wish on anyone. In a way it actually enhanced my enjoyment of the story. In another it exposed me to a side of my own personality that I'm not real proud of. Either way it was well written and had to be there.

The aforementioned side characters are well done and act right. I was a bit skeptical at first when Franco walks up to be part of a search (and cover it in the process) because I knew what should happen the second the rest of the team found out he was a reporter and it went down just about right. The thing is, Williams used a fairly predictable occurrence to teach us more about Franco and his dedication while giving the characters around him a reason to trust him. He still had to work hard to gain the trust everyone else got but it gave them a reason to let him in. It just worked. I haven't seen many similar situations handled with the same skill or instinct. Kudos to her.

I was a bit concerned about reviewing this at first because I wasn't sure that there was a real Science Fiction/ Fantasy element to it. It was teased a little bit early but it was nearly two-thirds of the way through the book before there was any explicit SF content. I won't spoil the surprise but I will say that it is there and, while it's not quite what I expected, it was worth the wait. And honestly, the story was worth reading as a mystery story even if it hadn't been. It's been a long time since I've really considered myself a fan of mystery stories, but if there were more like this I probably still would be.

Interspersed throughout the story are recaps of real life disappearances referred to as True Cases. Williams has placed them to enhance the story by showing us what real life case she used as source material for a given disappearance in the book. At the end are several more. They add to the X-Files like aura of the story. I also get the feeling that I was deliberately misled by the author at one point. What I had

assumed was happening was not what was happening. Once revealed the secret made sense but it wasn't what I thought it would be. That's the mark of a great mystery writer. A well placed red herring set up the rest of the story brilliantly.

There is definitely a government conspiracy at work throughout the book. It's well written and believable. Williams not only shows us the what and why but the how. Left for us to determine- and it's easy because it's painfully obvious - is the who and when people are effected. This is something we've all seen and heard of. The phrase "Conspiracy Freak" is not just a description, it's an epithet. If some things were true, pointing them out would still get a person labeled as a loony in today's society. Williams looks that potential phenomenon straight in the face and calls us all on it. I got a good chuckle from that. "The secret is out" only works if people are inclined to believe you.

Speaking of which, there is definitely room for a sequel here and I'm going to call for one. Williams hints at what the exact nature of the conspiracy is, but never goes deeply into how far up it goes, who knows what or exactly how much danger the conspiracy is protecting us from. At the end of the day we're left wondering if this is something that is going to spread outside of the National Park System or if it will stay there. Clusters reads well as a self-contained novel but there is much more story to be told. More questions are raised than answered.

Overall there wasn't much to complain about with the book, except the lack of definable SF content throughout most of it. This book was a real page turner and, if things didn't go exactly how I wanted them to, at least they went a way that really worked for the story. Williams does mention the fact that often when someone disappears there is a freak storm afterward that obliterates evidence of where they may have gone. The characters in the book speak of freak weather as being part of the mystery. They seem to believe that whatever is causing the disappearances is causing the weather. Then the subject just drops and never reappears. I was waiting for something to tie that conversation to the greater plot but it never happened. In that respect, I guess I was a bit unfulfilled. Other than that though, this was an solid book.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Lost Hikers

### CTRL, ALT Revolt! by Nick Cole Review by Jim McCoy

Once upon a time your friendly neighborhood blogmaster was not really a near future Science Fiction fan. I lived my alternate lives in universes either full of starships and proton torpedoes or mages and goblins. With a couple of exceptions (Robotech and Shadowrun are the only ones that come to mind) the nearest future I wanted to talk about started in 2265 and was filled with guys named Kirk, Spock and McCoy. I spent my time on Arrakis and in Middle Earth. If I wanted to know what happened on little old Earth, I read about it in history class or the history section at the bookstore. The near future? Who cared? But then something weird happened: I started a blog and people started sending me near future SF.

I quickly learned that some of the best SF is near term. It's also some of the most believable. Humanoid robots with a grudge attempting to wipe out the entire human race can be scary. A knight with a spear on the battlements waiting for a female dragon rider to show up and kill him will stick with you for the rest of your life. The stuff that really makes a guy like me twitch, though? It's the fantastic story that's just far enough in the future that we haven't quite gotten to the technology yet and close enough that I

might live to see it.

Sure, I'd love to see Alpha Orions IV up close and personal. That would be a dream come true. I am an online gamer though. I know people who spend real world money on in game merchandise. I know others who use real world money to buy tokens that they sell to others for in-game money. Why does that matter? Because we're moving closer to the world as it appears in Nick Cole's Dragon Award winning CTRL, ALT Revolt! This one has had me up a few nights already.

The premise of the story is a bit complicated, but I'll try to describe it: There is a reality TV show. It's not called The Bachelorette, but that's what it is. During the last episode, a self-aware supercomputer watches as the bachelorette decides to abort a child she conceived during taping. It surmises that a species that could so easily kill one of its own young as an inconvenience could easily destroy it. The computer does what it thinks it needs to: It sets out to destroy humanity as a form of self-protection. Insanity ensues.

I don't want to give too much away. I'm almost bothered by what I've given away already. That's not my style. I err... don't know how to get around giving up at least a little bit more though. I'll do what I can and try to avoid overt spoilers, but really, so much of what made this book good has to do with the way Cole wove the story together. The review just won't work otherwise. So. Semi-spoilerish things alert! Proceed at your own risk!

The amazing part about this book is how it goes back and forth between cyberspace and meat-space. Money is now comprised of "make-coins" spendable both in cyberspace and for things like rent, food and clothing in the real world. There are professional gamers in the real world now, but this is something different. Professional gamers in 2016 make money from streaming and advertising, or from corporate sponsorships. In CTRL ALT Revolt! the "make coins" are as real as real gets. Let's put it this way: I play World of Warcraft. I'm not sure how much gold I have for sure, but I'd ballpark it between three hundred thousand and half a million. That gold is worthless outside of the game. There are even some in-game perks that it won't purchase. If those were make coins I'd buy myself a house and a car with no loans and have enough left over for a vacation with the kids, followed by one with my girlfriend.

Along the same lines, information is of huge value and is available both on- and off- line. Much of the fighting in CAR (and there is a metric buttload of it) takes place online. Much of it takes place offline. The online combat is meant to obtain information and spread a virus that will affect the real world. Some of the people online don't even know why they're fighting, they just know THAT they're fighting. It gets a little wild, but that's where the fun comes from. Of course the Artificial Intelligence wants access to information that is contained in a computer that is not connected to the internet, and things spiral out of control.

I've seen some gaming related titles before, but this thing takes the cake. The two worlds are so tightly woven together that sometimes you wonder if the characters can tell them apart. When one of the characters is leading a fight against a much more powerful adversary in an online game to make money to buy things she can use in meatspace, and her opponent is an actor in an online gaming/streaming drama...well... damn. It's well done but the lines are effectively blurred here. It flashes back and forth so quickly and I got so wrapped up in it...wow. I mean that. Wow.

The characters in CAR are believable and awesome. Cole plays with some archetypes here and a few of his most important characters are not really leading character type. The socially awkward nerd who leads a starship crew ends up in the thick of the fight to save the world. The game designer who never

goes out fights on the same side, completely unaware of her. The corporate leader is not the evil genius, he's the one preserving the information the world needs to beat the AI. The list gets longer. A lot of thought went into these characters and it shows.

I don't shie away from mentioning political content and I'm not going to start now. CTRL, ALT Revolt! is heavy on political content and it's not just in the first chapter. There is political content throughout the work. If I caught the heavily conservative bent of this book as a die-hard conservative there's no way any liberal that reads this could hope to avoid it. The idea that a computer can feel threatened by abortion is one that any liberal is going to have problems with and that's just the beginning. Nick Cole has publicly stated that he had a contract to publish this book and that his publisher cancelled it because of this anti-abortion stance. I wasn't there so I can't speak to what actually happened, but I have to wonder if that was a totally accurate statement. I just wonder if that's the only thing the publisher had a problem with. I was trained to read for an agenda as part of my degree so it may not be as obvious to other conservatives, but I couldn't miss it. That's really the only problematic part of the book and it increased my enjoyment rather than diminishing it.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Make Coins. This book deserved the Dragon Award. That's why I voted to give it one.

### Death's Talisman by J.F. Posthumus Review by Pat Patterson

Books about fantasy people are not my cup of tea. I much prefer books with exploding spaceships. However, despite that prejudice, I thoroughly enjoyed the first volume in this series, AND also this volume. I admit, it's a guilty pleasure; I sort of feel like checking with a librarian to make sure it's okay for me to read this.

Fortunately, I no longer have to rely on the opinions of librarians in order to get books!

Catherine is conflicted. That's not particularly unusual with adult humans, there ARE an awful lot of choices adult humans have to make. However, her choices are aggravated by the fact that she is pregnant, and wasn't expecting to be; she doesn't know if a permanent bond with the baby daddy is what she wants; she just hatched out a dragon; there is a talking skull in her basement; there is this other GOR-GEOUS guy she is really interested in; and her mama doesn't approve of her, or her choices in men.

Oh, yeah: with most of the people involved, you could explode if you make them mad. And with some of them, they tend to walk around mad.

Did I mention that Catherine used to rule a kingdom as a death queen?

I checked, and none of this is covered in ANY of the baby and childcare manuals.

To attempt to make some sort of peace with her mom, Catherine goes home to the Underground Kingdom (did I mention she is Heir Apparent?) and meets some of her old buddies. Mostly, she doesn't like them now, because she really didn't like them then, but that's okay, because someone is trying to kill her.

I suspect that the non-normal powers that are so pervasive in these fantasy lands might have an intoxi-

cating effect on those who use them. Just a theory of mine. Supported by certain data elements, but you can decide for yourself.

Lots of intrigue; bad guys (according to a perhaps slightly twisted definition of bad guys) get what is coming to them, mostly. No babies are eaten. The sexy bits are tastefully alluded to, without panting and heaving and dewy temples. Some plot points are resolved, but enough are left open to give us some good momentum into the next book.

Very well done!

### Denial by Lizzie Ashworth Review by Jim McCoy

What do you get when you cross New Age mysticism, corporate intrigue, a weird wasting disease related to pollution, a psychic cure for it, a string of murders and the development of a man from an upstanding citizen to a gutter bum and back to an upstanding citizen again? If you're thinking it's Lizzie Ashworth's *Denial* then you're right. If you're thinking of something else let me know, because I'd probably like to read that too. This is the second book in the House of Rae series, following *Salvation* which I reviewed previously. I enjoyed the first one and I can't help but think that this one is even better precisely because it came afterward and she had more experience writing SF/F.

Ashworth's work has all of the themes listed above. It mixes them really well. She finds a way to switch between points of view and tie things together that, if you were to describe them to me verbally don't sound like they would fit together all that well. Don't ask me how she made it work. I'll just say she did. Ashworth has a sharp mind and makes her characters believable.

This book, like the one before it, has a point of view that can only be described as a limited first-person omniscient. This is something I hadn't seen until I read her first book, but now that I have a bit more familiarity with it, having read the work of both Ashworth and Daniella Bova, I'm actually enjoying it. It can be a bit strange if you have to abandon a book mid chapter but she manages to identify her characters well enough that after a sentence or two you can figure out who you're reading. And wow, do those characters vary.

Back from the first book is our hero Josh, who is now back in school and working as a gray water technician. He is in love with a wonderful graduate student. Things go from good to bad to ugly quickly. Before long he's alone and homeless. This poor guy has been through so much and come through so often he seems to be unstoppable. Along the way though, he still manages to shag some tail because, well... He's Josh. Pumping chicks is what he does. And once again the sex helps him get through tough times in his life. He also has some psychic ability and this plays a much larger part in *Denial* than it did in *Salvation*.

The SF/F, probably more fantasy honestly, aspect in this book is much stronger than in the first one. It focuses around the healing ability of pleasure energy which is focused by the houses (in this case Houses of Rae, but there are other houses as well) and the fruits of their labors. The houses themselves are full of varying forms of entertainment, from the simple pleasures of a walk through a garden to booze, drugs or prostitution. If it feels good you can do it at a house. (The House of Rae specifically caters to an all female clientele but it is made clear that there are equivalent facilities for men. They just never appear "on screen.") The energy goes into a network and is distributed for use at healing facilities all



over the world.

One of the main problems of the novel revolves on a specific house and its problem connecting to the grid that distributes the energy. This is where we get some of the New Age mysticism. A ceremony is conducted to travel into the Astral Plane and Feng Shui and acupuncture are both used in attempts to reconnect to the grid. I found myself enjoying this part of the book a lot. I'm not a New Age mystic by any stretch of the imagination but it was fun.

Ashworth has also toned way down on the sex this time around and I approve. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a prude but I don't usually read too many books with large amounts of sex because it's just not my thing. By no means is this book sex-free but the plot no longer centers around it and the book works better because of that fact. What sex is left in the book is plot necessary. For Ashworth growth, or some forms of it at least, is linked to sex. Her characters use sex to get past the rough parts of their lives and overcome their past. It's not a philosophy I subscribe to, but it's one that works for her.

The dark side of the corporate world is here for all to see. Ashworth's millionaires are self made men who cheated their way to the top. Denial is a good title as most of them have raked in millions while profiting off of dirty dealings and back room bargains. Fortunes are made and lost. One of the millionaires is a flat out despicable human being. Another regrets his past. All are seen as human beings, warts and all. A major part of the plot takes place when one of the millionaires has to defend his daughter against her asshole ex-husband. They all fight dirty. I approve.

I shouldn't have to write this, but I will anyway. Ashworth's treatment of some of the men in this book is exactly the type of thing that would set off the whiny types that complained about the latest Mad Max being a "feminist movie." Yes, one of them is a dirtbag on his best day. Yes, another can only seem to get himself together when he gets laid on a regular basis. Guess what, there are people like that in the real world. Yes, some of Ashworth's women are strong characters. If you can't deal with those things you may wish to avoid this book. I'm okay with it though. People have foibles and I don't see a realistic depiction to be a reason to cry into my beer.

My complaints about this book are fairly minimal. Ashworth's use of the multiple first person point of view works but sometimes she has time squeezing herself into the head of a man. Josh in particular actually describes a scene at one point as "I wept." An extremely effeminate man may describe himself as weeping, but Josh just isn't that kind of guy. I could see "I cried hard" maybe but weep? Sure, I've sat around and sobbed like a bitch at one point or another, but I have NEVER wept. Even if I have. But that's nitpicking.

I find myself wondering at some points if the mosquito drones in her book would be able to carry enough liquid to cause the effect she ascribes to them but it is SF and I don't really have the technical details down enough to say it wouldn't work either.

I'm thinking that the end of this one sets up the next one but I'm not sure if that's a good thing. It's not really a cliffhanger but it's not really NOT a cliffhanger. Also, conspicuous by her absence is Rae and this IS the House of Rae series. All in all though, there wasn't much to complain about and the good far outweighed the bad.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Mystic Crystals

Operation Flash, Episode 2: Hinges Of Fate  
by Nitay Arbel  
Review by Pat Patterson

When the series was introduced, it immediately was placed into my "Guilty Pleasures" category. A book in that category gets read, IMMEDIATELY, regardless of what else I've had in the queue ahead of it, and also regardless of whether or not I'm being at all diligent in reviewing the books I have actually read. I don't like talking about the fact that I have a Guilty Pleasure category. In fact, I plan to deny having such a category in all future conversations. Here's the take-away: I absolutely LOVE this series.

Just in case you missed my review of the first book, here's the basic idea: one of the very many plots against Hitler actually succeeded. There were so many plots, some of them quite sophisticated, that the combined failure of ALL of them makes for a pretty good argument in favor of time travel, or maybe a pact with a evil weevil. How in the heck did he keep getting away?

We have multiple story lines running: in England, Churchill got lucky, and wound up with a native speaker of German as one of his clerical people. Very, very important, because it's really hard to know what's going on, what with the standard war confusion, and the propaganda machine.

In Germany, there are those who are strong supporters of the goals of the Reich, although they are anything but unified. With the death of Hitler, there is a battle for control of the Nazi party. Also, in Germany there are those who do NOT support the Reich, but may have (at one time) fallen for Hitler's charisma, but are now disaffected. In addition, there are some who actively oppose the Reich.

These latter two factions lead to a division into two primary political entities. That doesn't mean the war is over, though, not by ANY stretch of the imagination!

And it does mean that the Allies are thrown into confusion that nearly matches that of the German leadership. Nobody is certain who they can trust, and how far. This is not a criticism, not a criticism, not a criticism! The books end too soon.

That is SIGNIFICANTLY ameliorated by the fact that these books are so historically sound in their basis, that if you are like me, and love going on rabbit trails when your curiosity is triggered, you can spend a LOT of time reading about the way history worked out in OUR timeline. Almost all of the characters are based on real people; they make for fascinating reading.

If the author had just used hand puppets, and told the story with them, it would still be a really nice thought-exercise of 'what-if.' However, through the eyes of the few fictional characters, we get great insights to the way people think, and what would have been real reactions to these circumstances, because the author has done a wonderful job of making the words on the page into real, flesh-and-blood people.

I'm going to eat each of these installments as they come out, BUT the real feast will be when the series is finished (and I hope that isn't going to be too soon), and I grab up every installment and binge-read. Maybe multiple times.

Delightful!

Overlook by Jon Mollison  
Review by Declan Finn

Of the Silver Empire superhero books released thus far, I believe Overlook is my favorite to date. And this is out of an elite batch of authors, all of whom excel in their subgenres. Morgon Newquist's was more classic superhero. Kai Wai Cheah's was more police procedural or noir thriller. JD Cowan's was more Isekai as it went to another world.

Overlook is more spy thriller. I could almost hear Jeffery Donovan's Michael Weston narrate this one.

Nothing is more dangerous than an invisible man.

Joe's spent his life being forgotten. Not even the IRS comes for his back taxes. He's a ghost, a perfectly average, perfectly forgettable man. It suits his purposes, though it's a lonely existence. He can live as he wants, plying his almost-invisibility for freelance jobs.

Then a pretty blonde finds him when no one else can, asking for his help solving a murder. He almost says no, despite his instincts to help a damsel in distress. But how did she find him? And who is she?

He takes the job to find out. But he bites off more than he can chew as he realizes a brutal secretive organization called The Phoenix Ring is behind the murder, and somehow they can predict his every move.

A new Heroes Unleashed series begins with Jon Mollison's Overlook, a fast-paced, action-packed superhero spy novel that will keep readers guessing until the end.

Can Joe defeat the shadowy Phoenix Ring? Or will his powers fail him when he needs them the most? Read Overlook today and find out!

As the old poem goes, "Last night I saw upon the stair, /A little man who wasn't there,/ He wasn't there again today /Oh, how I wish he'd go away..."

Overlook begins with a low key version of a James Bond opening, but it's one of the better fight scenes I've read in a while. It's clear, well blocked out, and sets up the rest of the book as perfectly as one of those over the top Bond scenarios.

Our hero, dear reader, is an average man -- average color, hair, eyes, appearance. Before he received his super powers, he was a sniper instructor, and already a bit of a ghost (insert John Ringo joke here). One day, he just ... disappeared.

But now, he's the little man who wasn't there. He's the middle child of five sons. He is so invisible, he has to cook his own food at a diner. When he's adrift at sea, he has to save himself, because no one would see him and save him.

His name? Joe Smith. Just plain Joe.

Because of course that would be his name.

Despite avoiding trouble as best he can, it finds him anyway. Because with great powers comes great headaches. And one is about to find him. It starts with a simple murder, and evolves into a conspiracy of the Phoenix Ring -- an organization so monstrous and so complex, the leads are less dead ends "and more of a knotted ouroboros with multiple heads eating its own multiple tails."

And that's a nice little sample of what the narration's like. There's at least one car chase so awesome, it needs a Hans Zimmer soundtrack.

If one were to compare *Overlook* to the average thriller, it would be more like Adam Hall's *Quiller* series -- like with Hall's work, there are moments when one reads along, there's a cliffhanger, and then the reader must keep going in order to find out what happened.

Joe doesn't have the powers of Superman, or the tech of Batman. He gets beaten up a lot. Unlike Jim Rockford, he makes certain that other people get beaten up alongside him.

Additional props must be given to the design of the villain of the piece. They are freaking evil. Imagine a Dean Koontz villain... then tone down the mustache twirling to a reasonable level. Perhaps using CS Lewis' NICE from *That Hideous Strength*. The enemy here is no less evil, with similar methods and motivations. They're anti-technology because technology makes it harder to control the masses, and their inquisitors look like a gender studies Umbrage of Rowling fame.

### **Penny Dreadful and the Clockwork Copper by J.M. Anjewierden Review by Pat Patterson**

Confession: I was hooked by the title. Not many books do that, but this one did. I only knew of a particular sort of nasty literature with no redeeming characteristics as 'penny dreadfuls,' so discovering that this was the name adopted by the covert subversive hero; well, it just set the hook deeper. By the time I discovered that the *Clockwork Copper* referred to the second main character, I was utterly captivated.

'Nother confession: "Clockwork" means "steampunk," right? And steampunk means a setting in Victorian England, unless we are given a different context. Well, I was happily toddling along, when the author, artist that he is, informs me that the two moons are nearly full. I don't know exactly why that gave me such a feeling of relief, but it did. I suspect it has to do with the discovery that these nasty things being done by these nasty people are not happening in MY home planet. Maybe not; it was a lovely touch, though.

The theme of liberation runs through the story of each of the major and minor good guys. Even Jack, the rough ex-sailor who makes an all-too-brief appearance, finds his liberation from service to an unworthy master. Captain Shae; the high priest of Our Lady of Sorrows; even the head of the house of the protagonist; all of them are constricted by law or custom. Viva-3, the secondary hero, is just the most extreme example.

In her case, the constraints are dark programming instructions, given by her masters. To overcome them, she has to first do her part, but that isn't enough; she is also like the Beast, who must be loved.

Yes, the way is clear for the sequel. However, I want more back-story. Tell me more about Jack, Frederick, Captain Shae, and how Novella came to make her remarkable decisions.

Not too much to hope for, is it?

Refugees by R.A. Denny  
Review by Pat Patterson

The prophecy warns of dire consequences, heralded by the appearance of a new star. Dire consequences aren't things that emperors desire, and so this one, Emperor Zoltov, takes action to prevent unwanted future events from becoming real. In this case, that means death for a great number of his subjects, in order to guarantee that no one is able to fulfill the prophecies.

There are four peoples involved in this tale: humans; Web Feet; Fliers; and the Armored. Each has their own special ecological niche. The Webbies are fishers in the mud-lands, which is honey-combed with streams and rivers. The Fliers live in the great Forests. The Armored lived in the rocks and hibernate through the summer months. On the plains live one particular group of humans, who have domesticated great cats to ride and hunt with.

Thanks to the presence of the prophets, all three of the non-human groups know what the appearance of the star signifies. In each group, one individual member, a relative youth, is called to bear a seal to the capitol city. In every case, the chosen one has to give up their prior life and set out on a journey in search of a meeting with the others.

Meanwhile, agents of the Emperor Zoltov are tracking them down to kill them.

This is a solemn book, and I realized that as I attempt to review it. There are moments of beauty, and even levity, but for the most part, the sense of desperate hurry is present in all that they do. Each of the chosen has a hard time believing that the time of the prophecy has really come, and that they are the people that have to bear the burden. To add to the difficulty, they all know that while there are political ramifications to what they do, this is primarily a mission from the One True God Adon. "How can I be a servant of God? I am just a boy/girl!" is implicit in each one's response.

This is the first book in the series, and very little is resolved. It remains a pleasure to read, however, as long as the next installment isn't too far off. For an adult of mature years, such as myself, it's a great, relaxing read for a quiet weekend at home. As it happens, though, I had a house full of kids this weekend, all between the ages of 10 and 12, and I think the story would be perfect for them. There are plenty of good life-lessons in these pages, concerning duty and loyalty. If you want an adventure story without rape and murder or are looking for a gift for a young reader, this will be a good choice.

Star Marque Rising by Shami Stovall  
Review by Pat Patterson

Shami Stovall is a (relatively) new author, and her work deserves much better treatment at my hands than it has gotten. She sent me a copy of this book, pre-pub, for my review, and it just didn't happen. It got placed in the queue, but then it got lost, and then, and then, and then. And, as a result, I missed out on a WONDERFUL read.

Let us first consider what I regard as the core of the book: The Prisoner's Dilemma. In the classic formulation, two prisoners, A and B, are arrested for a crime committed jointly. Separately, each is offered a chance to confess.

If they both remain silent, then they will both be convicted of a lesser crime, with a one-year sentence.

If they both confess, they will both be convicted, with shared responsibility, of the greater crime, and each be given a two-year sentence.

If A remains silent, and B confesses, then B goes free, and A takes the whole rap, getting a three-year sentence.

Since the original formulation of the dilemma, there have been many refinements and modifications to fit all sorts of situations, including investment strategy, sports, addiction, and international relations. In some cases, it's formulated as a zero-sum game (whatever one wins, another has to lose), while others are less-than-zero sum (everybody loses, but a least-loss scenario is possible). It really has some fascinating applications!

I encountered it twice in an academic setting. The first time was in a study of group dynamics, for a counseling class; the second was in some dip-stick business class that I never, ever should have been taking. However, I DID gain insight into the human condition in both cases; I particularly recall seeing a brittle, manipulative classmate attempt to use smiles and hugs to control the revulsion reaction of another colleague. Making social dynamics explicit: wow, what a feeling!

Now, in "Star Marque Rising," Stovall posits the Prisoner's Dilemma as a drinking game among the characters, but ALSO (brilliantly, in my opinion) constructs the story to make it obvious that the same dynamics are driving the actions of the main players.

I don't often get really, really goofy when reading a book. I read LOTS of books, many, many more than I review. But, in reading THIS book, I got really, really goofy. What I WANTED to do was to call the author up and say "I JUST SAW WHAT YOU DID THERE! IS THAT WHAT YOU REALLY DID? PLEASE TELL ME THAT'S WHAT YOU REALLY, REALLY DID!"

No, I did not call the author. It was Stupid AM in the morning! Besides that, I don't have her phone number. Besides that, my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, was asleep in the bed next to me, and she would have been highly disturbed and offended to be woken up by hearing me squee on the telephone to an Unknown Woman.

So, I emailed her instead. Much better choice.

Now, returning from Cloud-Cuckoo Land, let me give you some nice summary statements about the book:

It's a space opera. It starts on a filthy, corrupt, violent and vile space station, moves to a freighter (the Star Marque), lands on a planet, and goes other places. Lots of sentient beings die, some with explicit gore, others silently, and many of them don't really deserve it.

Clevon Demarco is the protagonist. He received significant bionic upgrades as a child but has been making his way as a loner on the aforementioned vile space station. He has no money, and no friends, and no future.

Then, he gets rescued by the cops. And, as part of the price of his rescue, he joins them.



The boss is (seemingly-super-woman) Endellion Voight, who apparently makes it her practice to cruise the universe, rescuing sad-sacks like Demarco, and incorporating them into her team.

And, way, way off in the Far Country (I speak figuratively) live the Special People. They own everything worth owning, they run everything worth running, and if you aren't a Special People, you are, at best, a tool of the Special People.

And if you can't figure out that this sets up a GREAT framework for a story, you haven't read many great stories.

I've tried (a little) to analyze the difference between this and a YA. The things in common are the Hero's Journey, exploding spaceships, good guys and bad guys. However, this digs deeper into motivation than you'll see in YA, and there is an occasional foray into sexuality that librarians don't believe YA's know anything about. It's not porn, though, so don't seek this one out for THAT.

It's a smashing good read, and the beginning of a series, and I hope that others are much nicer to Shami Stovall than I have been.

## Valor's Child by Kal Spriggs Review by Pat Patterson

Jiden is almost 17 in Earth years, and on the lonely planet where she finds her home, it's time for her to leave home, and go off to the equivalent of work or college. Nobody majors in Music History on her world; they are fighting too hard to stay alive.

Mom and Dad want her to go to college. Jiden wants to get a plum internship with Champion Industries, where her not-quite-boyfriend Tony is placed. Of course, in Tony's case, it was a foregone; his grandfather is THE Mr. Champion.

Dilemma: Champion wants applicants to apply ONLY to their program; Jiden has promised her parents she will apply to two other colleges, so: She forges her mother's signature on the Champion application.

Parents hit the ceiling.

And they ship her off to her grandmother.

NOT the sweet cookie-baking grandmother; no, she goes off to the ADMIRAL grandmother, who is in command of the Military Academy.

And that's how Jiden spends her summer vacation.

I LOVE these stories. I love military sci-fi in general, but specifically, I have deep, deep affection for the stories of basic training. Doesn't matter if it's Heinlein, or Hooten, Buettner or Torgerson: there is a grinding similarity between what THEY went through, and what I went through. If you are one of the fortunate who through some nasty bad luck or nasty bad choices found yourself at some Reception Station with your hair scraped off and needles being jack-hammered into your arms, then you will share the visceral experience: yes; it was like that. If you have NOT had that experience; I don't know. Maybe. I think plenty of non-vets liked Starship Troopers.

But, hey: I DID that. I PAID for the memories.

And not even if I could be nineteen years old again would I go through that a second time. There is a LOT of backstory here, that some of the characters know about, but others don't. Jiden doesn't know ANYTHING. Her roommate does, however, including the fact that their families have histories with each other.

But nobody will tell her anything! They all say, it isn't their story to tell. Well, maybe so; that culture may be close-mouthed. She sure handles the ambiguity better than I would.

Three periods to training: equipment issue and orientation; a combat field problem called 'Grinder'; extensive classroom presentation. All of that has to be crammed into four months, and that's one of the not-believable aspects of the book. I'm gonna pass it by, though, because this is a prep school experience.

However, unless I utterly read it wrong, the troops are dumped into the intense combat experience of the Grinder after: EIGHT DAYS. Sorry, that idea hits the wall. However, the story is so well told, the entire thing, that I just suspended disbelief, and kept reading. Yes, the story is that good. He probably could have gotten away with other stuff, as well, but he didn't try.

So much more I could say! I will not, however, because you need to read it for yourself. Just keep in mind that the plot lines left hanging are on purpose, because the sequel is on the way.

### The Arrival – Stephanie Osborn Review by Chris Nuttall

My grandma is probably responsible for my fascination with Sherlock Holmes. It was her, many years ago, who gave me my first copy of the canon stories, the 50-odd short stories and four novels about the world's greatest detective. Since then, I have devoured many pieces of fanfiction (even published Holmes novels are technically fanfiction) and watched movies and TV serials featuring various versions of Sherlock Holmes, from the pipe-smoking original to the so-called 'high-functioning sociopath' of Sherlock. However, I have always had a soft spot for the original version of the character.

This isn't too surprising, I feel. Holmes was a creature of Victorian London, not the modern-day world or a far-future starship. He fitted in there (like Flashman fits into the 1850s) perfectly, while moving him to other locations renders him less plausible as a character. Stephanie Osborn, however, has taken the unexpected step of moving the original Holmes from his world to our present-day world. And, surprisingly, Holmes fits in rather well.

To sum up a long story, a scientist – Skye Chadwick – discovers that alternate worlds are real, including those that only exist in our imaginations. Finding a timeline where Holmes dies in his confrontation with Professor Moriarty (shown in *The Final Problem*/*The Empty House*), Skye accidentally brings Holmes back to our world with her. Half of the story is centred around Holmes learning to understand the modern world, which he does with aplomb; the other half is centred around a mystery on the base, a mystery that Holmes can try to solve.

Unsurprisingly, as Watson isn't included in the trip, the book follows a more standard adventure format than the canon. This is a challenge to any author, as depicting Holmes's thought processes isn't easy.

However, Osborn does a good job of displaying both how Holmes solves puzzles – even when there are aspects of the modern world that are either beyond his comprehension or out-rightly offensive to his sensibilities – and displaying that her Holmes isn't that different to the Holmes of canon (where he is largely seen through Watson's eyes.)

Skye Chadwick herself is an interesting character; smart, opinionated and more than a match, in some ways, for Holmes himself. The dynamics between the two are genuinely interesting; Skye does her best for Holmes but isn't afraid to kick him in the ass if necessary. She contrasts quite well with Mary Russell, who (at least in the first two books, the only ones I read) is more Holmes's pupil than his equal. Of course, Watson wasn't his equal either, but John Watson was an established person in his own right.

One aspect of the book that will cause issues is the developing romance between Holmes and Skye. Purists to the Holmes canon will assert that Holmes had no interest in women, apart from the ones who bring him interesting cases. More cynical eyes will note that Holmes treated (canon) Irene Adler quite badly; she was acting in self-defence, while he was working for her tormentor. (It is notable that neither Irene nor Holmes express any doubt over Norton's character; there is no reason to think of him as anything other than the good man she calls him, in her farewell note to Holmes.) And yet, Holmes thought highly of her because she had managed to beat him ...

Just how sexual canon Holmes was is debatable. There is nothing resembling a sex scene in any of the canon books, because the mores of the time would have frowned upon it. (And can you seriously imagine staid John Watson writing sex scenes?) People have tended to call him asexual, not without reason, even though he does manage to charm women on several occasions. And yet, Holmes was not the sort of man to be attracted to a pretty face with nothing behind the eyes. Irene caught his attention because she might have been his equal, a woman with the intelligence, coolness and courage that Holmes respected. Would someone who was Irene's equal, without the problem of a husband or a past history with Holmes, be more attractive to him? It is, at least, probable. I do not believe that anyone can reasonably dispute that Holmes had a heart.

It's interesting to compare it to *All-Consuming Fire*, where Holmes and Watson (still in London) encounter the Seventh Doctor and his companions. At first, Holmes is more than a little disoriented when taken out of London midway through the book – the Doctor points out that everything Holmes depends on to do his job is no longer with them – but he gets better, much better, as the story goes along.

Overall, though, if you're not wedded to canon *The Displaced Detective* is well worth a read.

### **The Case of the Cosmological Killer: Endings and Beginnings** **by Stephanie Osborn** **Review by Pat Patterson**

The KEY to the book would make for a spoiler alert, particularly on the review for Volume III, 'The Rendlesham Incident.' However, I can divulge this, without feeling bad about myself, since it's already open information in the previous reviews.

The scientific work done by Dr. Chadwick was discontinued in the primary timeline, since there was no effective way to safeguard the technology, and it could have easily resulted in the destruction of the universe. However, in a closely parallel timeline, the work was not discontinued. And, in fact, there are intense and increasing disturbances that may result in collapse, perhaps of all possible existences.

In that reality, Dr. Skye Chadwick and Sherlock Holmes are witness to a catastrophic destruction of the equipment, which leaves the two of them as the only members of the team left to solve the problem; and pulling the plug is not an answer. They reach out to their counterparts.

The potential for confusion is huge. Fortunately, in the primary timeline, the two main characters have fallen in love and married, so that they refer to each other as Skye and Sherlock, while in the timeline at risk of initiating The End, the relationship is chillier, and they call each other Holmes and Chadwick.

It's an interesting story, and it brings resolutions and some unexpected twists; those would make it worth a read in itself. HOWEVER! The PRIMARY value of the story is that it demonstrates the effect on two people when Holmes remains emotionally constipated. In Risk World, he has adhered to his canon rejection of emotionality and refusal to get involved with others. He remains cold and distant on the surface and rejected the emotional contact with 'his' doctor Chadwick. He thereby becomes even less of a human than he was when in residence at Baker Street; at least there, he could express some emotion, even if only anger, disgust, and a snarky sense of humor.

This was a blisteringly fast read for me. I inhale words at all times, but this, and the preceding story, kept my attention to the point that I missed eating and NEARLY had an accident of the sort associated more with toddlers than adults. Certainly, the story was well-written, but mostly I just couldn't stand not knowing what was going to happen next. You can have well written characters discussing tea in a garden, but that's not THIS book. This one has the flow and the action that really made it compelling, and I may have broken some of my own records in pages per minute. Your mileage may vary, but I encourage you to continue setting a timer, or have a Designated Non-Reader, someone who can drag you away at appropriate times for tea and sleep, as needed.

## The Case of the Cosmological Killer: The Rendlesham Incident by Stephanie Osborn Review by Pat Patterson

How in the world is she ever going to merge these two plot lines?

That was my thought, as I began 'The Rendlesham Incident.' Strange things, zipping through the skies in England; meanwhile, back in Colorado....

And then it turns out not to be TWO plot lines, but THREE: An old geezer is found dead just off the road.

With burns....

Okay, here's the old plot: old geezer sees the UFO, gets sunburn from the glowing exhaust (Close Encounters of the Sun Screen Kind) and orbital mind control lasers, exploding spaceships, girls in metal bikinis...

HA! NONE of that happens. NONE! I am SO not going to tell you what the relationship is between the UFO sighting and the dead geezer, but if you think Stephanie Osborn is going to fall into THAT trap, you haven't been paying attention.

However, we DO have two very distinct investigations going on, and both of them rely on both of the investigators: Sherlock Holmes, and his new wife, Skye Chadwick-Holmes. The geezer death is primarily the investigative property of Mr. Holmes; the UFO, and the opening of another link between alter-

nate worlds, is primarily that of Mrs. Chadwick-Holmes. However, SHE makes contributions to HIS work, and HE makes contributions to HERS. And they both get stressed out, and they have a little marital opportunity-for-discord because of hard work, but if you are expecting soap opera whining, you won't get it here. Instead, you get mature and responsible adults, who are both capable of understanding the demands placed on their partner and have the ability to talk. They are, fortunately, neither one of them codgers.

As it happens, I recently had the opportunity to view a young man pour vitriol over another episode in this storyline, pouting and ranting because the characters weren't behaving in ways that HE felt they should behave. He may, in fact, be quite the authority on how mythical figures truly behave when transported from the past into the future (because that happens a lot). For those who AREN'T operating under such a disability of informed expertise, the development of a new social skill set may seem to be appropriate. But, what do WE know? Well, we (and by we, I mean Stephanie Osborn) know how to write a great revenge scene. Holmes and Skye are visiting a Holmes museum in London, curated by one Mr. Soames. Holmes is struck by how true to life it seems, particularly since it is (in this timeline) something that never existed, apart from the fiction of Doyle.

Almost absent-mindedly, he repositions the Persian slipper containing his pipe tobacco to its correct place on the mantle, only to be lambasted by Mr. Soames. 'How can we keep things in their proper place if every ignoramus insists on moving things about! ' (umm, not an exact quote) Quite properly, in the book, Soames is put in his place, not only about this, but about the Sherlock-Skye marriage. And, thus chastised, he repents.

This is revenge of which I approve: write your critics into a book and let them have what's coming to them!

Without going into Spoiler Land, I can't really divulge the second great method of the author's in showing the essential nature of Holmes' growth, but you will recognize it when you read it. Good experiments have a control.

You aren't going to be content with this third volume without reading the fourth, so get that as well. Or get the omnibus.

### The Dragon Republic by Rebecca F. Kuang Review by Chris Nuttall

One of the problems with 'diverse' books is that their authors often feel the urge to mouth politically correct talking points, or feel pressured to do so, even when such points either don't fit the narrative or openly break the reader's trance. The Poppy War was such a magnificent success, in all senses of the word, that PC talking points fitted so smoothly into the narrative I had no intention of questioning them. The pointlessness of both racism and class privilege was so well demonstrated that there was no need to mention it overtly. But, in many ways, The Dragon Republic stumbles when such points are raised. And that is, it must be admitted, a weakness.

The deeper problem, one suffered by many other books, is that The Dragon Republic is the middle book in a (presumed) trilogy. It advances the overall plot, but – unlike The Poppy War – it is neither complete nor conclusive in itself. There aren't many middle books that are, and this is quite under-

standable, yet it remains a problem given the sheer size of the book. The plotline seemed to drag in places, while Rin – the heroine – seemed to regress too. I saw the ultimate denouncement coming long before it finally arrived.

If you haven't read *The Poppy War*, which I highly recommend, *The Dragon Republic* probably won't make any real sense to you. During the first book, set in a slightly-fantastical version of Imperial China during the last few years of its existence, Rin won a scholarship to a military academy, learned how to call upon the gods, fought a hopeless war against an analogy of imperial Japan, won it decisively by unleashing a holocaust on their home islands ... and found herself betrayed by the Empress and forced to go on the run. As the story develops, she is invited to join forces with the Dragon Warlord (the father of a character who bullied her, then befriended her) to overthrow the Empress and establish a republic. It rapidly becomes clear that the Dragon Warlord is no better than the Empress he fights, his subordinates are too aristocratic to put the common interests first and that his foreign allies are dangerously untrustworthy. In the end, he betrays Rin (surprise, surprise) and she winds up leading a revolutionary movement against him.

The book is very good in depicting a massive civil war, roughly akin to the final years of Imperial China and the rise of the Republicans and Communists. Both sides make logical moves, hampered by the need to watch their backs (betrayal is a universal theme running through the book) and their low quality of their leaders. Family is a burden in such a society, weirdly enough; the oldest son leads his forces into a trap, ignoring advice from his younger brother who cannot disagree with him publicly. The war is on an immense scale, ranging from 'simple' assassinations to massive campaigns, often decided by shamanic activity and ingenuity, or sneak attacks designed to cause famine and weaken the opposing sides. Both sides are hypocrites, using force to convince people to join them and then punishing them for changing sides when the other side applies force of its own. This was true of pretty much every civil war in China.

It also explores the problems of outside meddling, with both sides working to secure help from foreigners ... foreign aid that might come at a price. The book illustrates both the urgent need for help and the price, a price that might not be paid by the people who get the help (another common problem with foreign aid). It does, however, tend to fall over itself a little. On one hand, the 'Europeans' believe themselves to be more evolved than the natives (with a twist that the natives will grow more evolved as they develop); on the other hand, there is no suggestion that they have shamans and therefore they're seriously outgunned (and perhaps out-evolved). Racism does not have to make logical sense, of course, but it's still odd. Historically, Europe regarded China as a mighty civilisation until the Opium Wars, when it sank in that China was rotting away from within.

The book's weakness, however, lies in character development. Rin seems to regress a little, alternatively mourning her lost friend (and commanding officer, who casts a long shadow over the book) and churning in circles, unsure of herself and being constantly manipulated by others. It's nice to see how the magic system develops, and how many long-lost secrets are unearthed (along with new ideas and concepts) but Rin keeps making mistakes and it's only at the end of the book that she realises they've been fighting the wrong war all along. Rin travels from place to place, learning more, but she doesn't really seem to develop much as a character. Others do develop a little, including a couple who managed to surprise me. But then, given that betrayal is a theme of the book, perhaps it shouldn't have.

Overall, though, the book does come across as a worthy successor to *The Poppy War*. It pulls no punches about the grim reality of war, or the effects on civilian populations ... most of whom are trapped between one side or the other and exposed to the horrors without hope of succour. Rin herself



only really grasps this after she encounters her adopted family within a refugee camp, although she should have seen it after witnessing the aftermath of this world's Rape of Nanking and later committing genocide herself. And, as before, the world itself is finely realised, from the shamanic magic to the corrupt and decaying (and racial) power structure that is responsible for so much suffering. It is slightly less gripping than *The Poppy War*, but *The Poppy War* was a masterpiece.

I recommend it.

### The God's Wolfling by Cedar Sanderson Review by Jim McCoy

Ok, I'll admit it. As a guy who read Bulfinch's *Mythology* before he became a teenager I've always wanted to know what a story with characters from differing mythologies would look like. I've always wanted to see just a bit of fighting as well and, to put it bluntly, if you've read the Thor comic book by Marvel and haven't wondered what it would be like to see the Asgardians mix it up with some of the other gods you haven't lived. Cedar Sanderson's *The God's Wolfling* provides a universe that mixes the mythologies and has a war as well. It's a tale of a girl who is too young to do what needs doing - and does it anyway. It is also a crossover novel that mixes SF with fantasy in a manner similar to John Ringo's *Council Wars* series.

As someone who has a passion for this kind of thing, I'm going to start off this review by praising Ms. Sanderson for the hard work she put into not just the writing of this book, but the research. She shows a lot of knowledge about various myths. We could argue all day long about whether or not things would shake out the way she thinks they would (and we WOULD and probably WILL because we're nerds and that's what we do. ) but she has obviously done enough work to at least make an educated guess. If her version of Fimbulwinter isn't what I always expected, it works within the story and displays the concepts in her novel better than just about anything else could. Oh, and just for full disclosure, I'm an Irish lad myself and seeing some of the mythology of my ancestral isle probably did add to my enjoyment of the work.

Our heroes are heroic and are led by a young lass named Linn. She's a youngster who could have used a bit more seasoning before setting off on an adventure of the scope of this one or apparently in the first book, *Vulcan's Kittens*, which I have yet to read. *Vulcan's Kittens* was published before Sanderson came onto my radar. I don't remember hearing about it until I received my copy of *The God's Wolfling*, and I do plan on picking it up.

This book is a sequel, purportedly the last book in the *Children of Myth Duology*. I can say from experience that while there are obvious references to the first book this book is easy to follow if you haven't read it. The story holds together using the logic internal to it and the references to the first story aren't overpowering. It holds up well as a stand alone and I can't help but think that Sanderson planned things that way. The story draws you in on its own merits and there is no need for knowledge of Linn's first adventure.

I don't want to add too many spoilers because that's not what I do, but Sanderson does a very effective job of mixing magic and technology and, indeed, showing how the magic in her book is actually technology. We all know the adage about "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." from Arthur C. Clarke. Sanderson illustrates that concept with the use of nanotechnology. She

also manages to include enough to make the concept known without going too far into it and boring the reader. This is a hard line to walk and she does it well.

The battle scenes in the book are well done. Sanderson does something that, quite honestly, TV shows and movies seem to capture better than most books in dropping us into the middle of a battle out of nowhere and making it believable. She pulls it off well. Oddly enough, I was thinking about this last concept last night while watching Star Trek:Enterprise and then read it today. Violence in the real world isn't always presaged by anything definable or even noticeable. All too often it just happens out of nowhere. There is a lot to be said for the drama of two men staring each other down before the bullets start flying but a little touch of realism is even better. While we're on the subject, Linn finds herself at times wrapped up in violence and wishing for a gun. As a guy who has read all of the Harry Potter novels multiple times and seen the movies more times than he's read the books I find this refreshing. I mean, who hasn't seen the assault on Hogwarts and wished for a M60 for use against the Death Eaters charging across the bridge? Add a few more points for further realism.

In her note at the end, entitled "What Comes Next?" Sanderson points out that this was originally intended to be the final book in the series. I fail to see the logic behind that decision. I mean, it's her series and her decision but there's more left here. Then she points out that she has learned about more pantheons and that she is willing to do more with those other mythologies. This makes sense to me. Sanderson seems to have done something quite well without realizing it: She wrote a good self-contained story with a satisfying enough ending for this book but she left a lot of loose ends. When I say a lot of loose ends I mean a ton of them. Some may not be as loose as I think they are and I may spend too much time on TV Tropes but until Authorial Fiat is established by the next release I'm sticking to my theory.

My only complaint about this book is that it's too short. It really feels rushed in spots. I've always preferred longer works and *The God's Wolfing* is only about one hundred seventy-seven pages long, but I think another twist or two and maybe another fight or so wouldn't have gone amiss. Granted, this is the story of Linn, and not the story of the war, but if she had been around when more things happened instead of hearing about them later it would have added something to this story. Then again, saying that I wish there were more to this story is, in another way, a compliment.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Nanobots

### **The Long Black by J.M. Anjewierden** **Review by Pat Patterson**

Strikingly beautiful cover! This is a case where a cover could attract my eye in such a way as to make me pick up a book I hadn't previously considered. I know next to nothing about these things, but the source is cited as SelfPubBookCovers/Daniela.

Morgan has no last name. That sort of works out, because the author has a last name of the sort which does not flow trippingly off the tongue; people interested in such things may feel free to speculate wildly. However, the brutal reality is that Morgan is a slave, on an enslaved planet, and she doesn't need a last name because she is valued somewhere between a commodity and an appliance. The author does an excellent job of describing the stark desolation of her existence in the heat and heavy gravity and repressive bullying of the authorities, to the point that I wanted to launch a punitive expedition against Planet Hillman and eradicate the system. One guard in particular has made Morgan a special project,

and he misses no opportunity to mistreat her. I was expecting a rape scene; evidently, her parents were expecting something of the sort as well, because they risked their lives to smuggle her off planet. It was close, much too close, and required the willing participation of the crew of a cargo ship in order for her to escape.

So, it's early in the book, and I already have two requests: I want to read about Hillman's destruction, and I want to know the future of the crew of the Pale Moonlight. (No, I don't know why it has that name. To me, it was only evocative of Jack Nicholson as the Joker asking Michael Keaton as Batman if he ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight. Best Batman movie by miles and miles.)

I accept the idea that growing up in a heavy gravity environment would give Morgan a shorter stature and enhanced musculature, and those figure in the rest of the book, but what I found to be the most creative story-telling is the utter deprivation of culture Morgan experienced. She knows nothing of trust, because there was no one she trusted on her home world. Got that; but, what was really telling is that there were words and concepts she simply had no reference for.

There were a couple of references to situations in which a person in authority abused the trust placed in them. I found that to be both true-to-life, as well as infuriating. For one thing, Morgan has already been through so much in the repressive life on Hillman; to encounter further unjustified persecution just aggravated the heck out of me. As I said, though, it's also true to life; I've seen authority abused on too many occasions. Morgan bears up beautifully, though; she has been through much worse.

I was brought up short on the occasions when she had to tell someone that they were using words she didn't know.

I have a small amount of resistance when I read works which address the issue of a character's belief in God; that's rather bizarre for me, since my faith in God is the absolute core of my being. Perhaps it is due to the fact that I've seen it mishandled; maybe it's just an analogue to the sensitivity that one feels when the doc puts drops in your eye. At any rate, I looked with suspicion at Morgan's exploratory sessions with mealtime prayer with her four-year-old adopted niece, attending church, and her response when she realized a comrade was praying when they were under attack by pirates. But it was handled so well:

"Is now really the time to talk to someone you can't even see?" Morgan asked, not looking up from the cables. "Yes, it is," Hudson said while firing a couple shots down the hallway.

And that's it! It was just a great example, at least to me, of how a person who was raised in a spiritually sterile environment approaches the understanding of what makes others call on divine power in moments of stress. I found it to be respectful and realistic.

### Winter Glory by J.M. Ney-Grimm Review by Pat Patterson

Here: describe the sun. You can use up to three words.

Can't do it, could ya?

And that's a bit of the problem I have in describing Winter Glory. On the surface, it's another Nordic-

flavored tale of trolls and magic and dragons.

(A momentary explanation: I was born on a dirt road in Macon, Georgia, and have lived most of my life in the South. Give me a story with snow on the cover, and I think it's Nordic. For those with a broader experience, my apologies.)

As a tale of (unconventional) trolls and magic and so forth, it does a good job. It's not that part that hooks me in the heart, however.

I'm forever reading stories about brave heroic figures, doing adventurous things, and falling head over heels in love. (Why head over heels, anyway? Unless you are upside down, your head is ALWAYS over your heels. For impact, shouldn't the statement be 'heels over head?') And the heroes are always, well, YOUNG. If they aren't naturally young, they are taking some sort of treatment (like Honor Harrington) that makes them appear to be young. Even in those cases, there aren't any old people when the treatment wears off. Prince Roger's mama is bughouse nuts crazy, but she's still quite a beauty.

Okay, here's MY testimony: love is what works, not youth. In fact, it's my belief that youth actually screws up love, because in youth the energy is there to attempt multiple relationships. Old folks, like me, truly ARE able to do more than sit by the fire and nod off, dreaming of the ancient past. Not that we are against having a fire! No, we LIKE the fire. It warms our old bones, and permits cuddling without having to bury ourselves under ten feet of stinky animal skins.

And Winter Glory gets that. In fact, Winter Glory could very well serve as the description of old people in love, just as 'Afternoon Delight' describes a romantic interlude in the middle of the day. But, in the midst of this excellent adventure story comes an insight so brilliant that I had to set the book aside for a moment, to take in the truth spelled out in such a few sentences. Ney-Grimm succinctly describes the risk that the heroine of this tale faced when young:

"Ivvar had laughed and pulled his jacket from his rucksack, wrapping it around her while she gaped in surprise. She'd felt so cared for, so safe. And hated it, because under that safety, she felt vulnerable. If he could make her safe, then he could make her unsafe, too. \*\*I wanted my own strength, not his.\*\* Borrowing strength felt risky.

And so she picked a quarrel on the way home."

The society described in Winter Glory is very different than our society; men and women live apart, in communal houses. That's going to have an impact on bonding pairs which is largely absent from contemporary Western relationships. HOWEVER! If you take a look at what happens when two old people get together, this is one of the key issues which MUST be resolved, for both of them.

I could go further, but I won't. Either what I've described speaks to you so strongly that you immediately go get the book, or not. If not, go get the book because it's a great adventure story. And if you don't do that, then wait a few years, until you find yourself sitting by the fire, nodding off and dreaming of the ancient past.

# Prose Bono

The Editor as Ally  
Robert Runté, Ph.D.

There is a great deal of confusion out there about the role of editors. Part of the problem is that the same label of "editing" is applied to three very different roles/processes: acquisition editors, structural editors, and copy editors.

## Acquisition Editors

When beginning writers think of editors, they usually focus on *acquisition editors*, the people who decide whether their book or story will be accepted for publication. As gatekeepers to the promised land of publication, it is easy to cast acquisition editors in the role of bad guy: the foul demons who fail to recognize our genius and arbitrarily reject our work, sometimes with cruel comments about the inadequacies of our manuscript.

That is, of course, a completely wrong-headed view of things. Acquisition editors serve three important functions for new authors:

First, they keep new authors from embarrassing themselves by publishing prematurely. One of the biggest flaws with the new self-publishing models is that it is impossible to know when one's manuscript is ready to go to press. All authors are, by definition, too close to their own work to be objective about this, and are either too self-critical (refusing to ever let go) or too self-generous (running with a first or third draft of the ten that may be required). Without an editor to say 'no', there is a real danger of going to press before the manuscript's full potential has been achieved—which is unfair to the book the manuscript might have become; unfair to readers who are not getting the book it could have been; and worst of all, not fair to the writer you may become. Without exception, every successful self-published author to whom I have spoken has, looking back, identified some fundamental flaw they wish they had caught before their initial books went to press.

Or to make the same point from a slightly different perspective: In the good old days, acquisition editors stopped newbies from publishing until they were ready, which usually happened about book five. I've interviewed over 100 successful authors, and in all but a few cases, it was their fifth book that finally got published. This is an obvious manifestation of K. Anders Ericsson's 10,000-hour rule: to master any significant skill requires about 10,000 hours of concentrated effort. The problem today is, having written those first four 'practice' novels—and having a circle of (unqualified) friends and relatives telling you how good the books are—it is very tempting to self-publish what should remain unpublished practice novels.

The problem in both scenarios is that one doesn't get a second chance for a first impression: readers (and reviewers) who feel that your first novel sucks, will shy away from any future titles. An awful lot of self-published writers looking back at their earlier work come to realize, not only how far they have grown since, but how much their writing career has been undermined by association with manuscripts that should never have been allowed to go public. Your name is your brand: you cannot afford to allow it to be placed at risk.

Second, acquisition editors know their particular markets. If they say ‘no’, it may simply mean one is targeting the wrong market. Or, as sometimes happens, that even if your book is brilliant, it may not be commercial. Don’t shoot the messenger just because the answer isn’t what you were hoping for. The acquisition editor is still doing the writer a favour, by identifying that this publisher is not the right venue for this book. You need to find the right audience for your book to succeed, and if that means asking a series of acquisition editors for directions, you shouldn’t be too disappointed if they simply say theirs is not the correct on-ramp for where you want to go.

(Insert here standard lecture about researching markets before submitting—it never ceases to amaze me that so many manuscripts show up in the wrong slush piles. Why submit a horror manuscript to an SF publisher that states right on their website that they don’t publish horror? Why submit an American SF novel to a specialty CanLit publisher? Waste of everybody’s time and energy. If one is constantly getting the ‘not for us’ form letter, better check again that the right markets are being targeted.)

Third, acquisition editor’s rejection letters actually provide a great deal of useful information, if one knows how to interpret them.

A form letter rejection means one is not yet within the ballpark, either because one is submitting to the wrong publisher or because the work is not yet up to standard. Sorry, but again, don’t shoot the messenger.

Occasionally, when an author’s work shows promise, an acquisition editor will write a few words of encouragement, or point out one or two flaws that are keeping the author in the slush pile. This is an act of generosity, because every second spent writing a comment represents extra, unpaid labor for an overworked, highly stressed editor who could save him/herself a lot of effort simply by sticking to the form letter rejection. Consequently, the more detailed the comments, the greater the implicit compliment—that the editor believes the author shows enough promise to be worth the investment—even if the comments themselves appear quite negative.

If an acquisitions editor scribbles, “Not for us, but try us again” in the margin of the rejection slip, that’s very a positive sign. You are within hailing distance of being accepted, but the editor already had too many time travel stories that month or the story just didn’t quite work for them, but they still saw something they liked. Put that magazine or publisher at the top of the list for next time: put some time and energy into researching the current issue / recent releases from that publisher to write something specifically targeted to that market. But you should only send your very best work as a follow up to such a nibble—do not make the beginner mistake of immediately shipping off everything in your bottom drawer, especially if any of those manuscripts have already garnered a few rejections elsewhere.

Longer comments are worthy of close examination. At first glance, the hastily scribbled comments of an acquisition editor may appear confusing, off target, or just plain stupid. Yes, the editor wrote “didn’t like the snake on page 25” when you don’t happen to have any snakes on page 25, or elsewhere. It doesn’t mean, as one often hears asserted, that the editor didn’t even read the manuscript, or that they got the pages interleaved with someone else’s draft. Far more likely, the editor was referring to the character of the brother-in-law and is trying to tell the author that she thought the characterization too obviously evil, or some such. Scribbling a quick (in their mind, helpful) comment on a rejected manuscript, acquisition editors often express themselves poorly. They literally cannot afford to take the time to make precise, thoughtful comments, unless an offer is on the table to buy the book. But careful



examination of the confusing, oracle-like pronouncements of these acquisition editors can be useful in identifying problematic areas of the manuscript.

Of course, acquisition editors don't always say 'no'. They make their careers by discovering talented authors and advocating for their nominees within the company. When those authors produce for the company, the editor moves up in the organization, so they are highly motivated to help (marketable) new authors get published.

The acquisition editor is therefore your ally, fighting for your manuscript against all comers in the company: the other acquisition editors who are trying to get the manuscript *they discovered* selected instead of yours; the marketing department's representative who argues they can't market your book because it doesn't fit neatly into their genre categories; the logistics guy who complains your book is too thick to fit in drugstore bookracks and has to lose a 100 pages; the book designer who complains he isn't using eight different fonts on one page just so you can distinguish between the eight clans in the book; and the VP from the Mid-West who wants to close the SF&F imprint entirely so that budget can be reallocated to Westerns. Of course, in smaller companies, it's a smaller group of opponents, but the barriers are all still there, even if it's a one-person operation and the publisher has to do all of that arguing in their head. Understanding what the acquisition editor is up against will help you understand why they are asking if you can be flexible on length or branding or whatever. They're not trying to torture you, they're trying, against the odds, to get you published.

### Structural Editors

Once a manuscript has been identified as one of interest, it still has to go for structural editing (sometimes called developmental or substantive editing). The exact structure of the process varies publisher to publisher: In some companies, junior editors handoff manuscripts they nominate as promising to more senior editors. In others, the same editor works to develop whatever manuscripts they have identified from the slush pile, social contacts at conventions, or soliciting manuscripts from authors (perhaps based on the author's work for smaller presses). In smaller presses, the acquisition, development, and copy editor are often all the same person, sometimes just the publisher him/herself. Whatever the particular structure, the process is always the same: a promising manuscript is identified; the editor identifies weaknesses, or areas that could be explored further, and asks for changes; and finally the manuscript is copy edited.

There is always some structural editing. One may have polished a manuscript to flawless perfection (necessary to get the acquisition editor's interest), but that is largely irrelevant to the rest of the process, for two reasons:

First, the author's definition of perfection probably has something to do with the quality and integrity of the work; the editor's definition is as likely to be focused on marketability. Sure, that allusion is brilliant, funny, and exactly what that character would say in that moment, but it's over the heads of the mass-market audience and therefore a threat to future sales. It is the editor's job to raise the possibility of making the work more accessible. Yes, the hero needs to die tragically in the last scene—but that decision precludes a sequel, and marketing costs could be better amortized over a trilogy—or even better, a series—than a stand-alone novel. And so on.

Which is, I hasten to clarify, not to suggest that all editors are philistines—quite the contrary in my experience. Just that their job is to help the author reach as large an audience as possible and that minor adjustments can sometimes make a big difference in sales. There is probably no threat to the integrity

of the work in changing “boot” to “trunk” and “torch” to “flashlight”, to sell a British author to American audiences; but authors may justifiably balk at changing a gay character to straight, or a black character to white to pander to the prejudices of the lowest common denominator of the American mass market.

Authors may have lots of horror stories of changes demanded by editors [my personal favorite is the screenwriter who was asked if he would mind adapting his biography of a serial killer into a musical]; but for every author story, I can cite ten even more ridiculous accounts of authors unwilling to change a single word or comma in their far-from-perfect manuscripts. Authors, by definition, are too close to their own work to be able to spot the flaws in their manuscript. Development editors approach the manuscript with fresh eyes, and easily spot the lapses in logic, the sudden slowdowns in pacing, the out-of-character actions, and so on, that an author cannot. In the vast majority of cases, the editor is correct when identifying problematic areas of the current draft, though there may well be alternatives to their suggested fixes. Every suggested change is likely negotiable, but the author has to be willing to change—or to walk away from the deal.

It is true that not all editors are equally good, or equally appropriate for any given manuscript. Finding the right editor to partner with is an important element in the successful development of any book. If you start from the assumption, however, that the editor is the enemy and all their suggestions ‘tampering’, then the potential benefits of a successful working partnership are at risk, and the work likely impoverished thereby.

Instead, start from the assumption that your manuscript—like all manuscripts—could benefit from a second set of eyes and that the editor appointed by the publisher is the most suitable for manuscripts of that sort. The careers of everyone involved is dependent on getting it right, so they really are trying to help and not part of an international conspiracy to block or undermine new authors.

Second, editors are going to ask for changes because—well, because they’re editors. Playwrights understand that no matter how brilliant the words they put on paper, how detailed their stage directions, the play’s director is going to have a major impact on the interpretation that audiences ultimately see. So it is with editors. This is not to suggest that editors will insist on making changes where none are needed, but simply that authors—particularly beginning authors—should start from the understanding that this is a partnership and so allow some space for input from their (senior) partner.

Three important observations: First, just as it is to be expected that your editor will suggest or demand certain changes, it is natural that your first reaction to these revisions is to have a minor meltdown. I have yet to receive something back from an editor (or referee for my academic writing) that I didn’t (initially) regard as ridiculous suggestions that would undermine the entire point of the piece. I always begin by complaining to my wife and colleagues about the morons with whom I have to contend; if, that is, I can get a word in edgewise, as they complain about their editors/referees in turn. That’s all just a normal part of the process. Because, let’s face it, we are all of us lazy and absolutely hate having to do revisions. Just once I would like an editor to tell me, “Hey, that was perfect! I can’t think of a single thing to change!” but it is never going to happen.

Usually, about the fifth time I read the comments through I start to grudgingly confess that there is maybe the remote possibility that this or that suggestion might in fact have identified something that could, perhaps, be worked on a bit. As the deadline approaches, I roll up my sleeves and actually try to rewrite the offending passage, a struggle that requires me to throw out my previously written words: an

act in my mind akin to abandoning a child. In the end, however, as I rewrite this bit or that from the new perspective of the ‘mistaken reading’ by editor or referees, I come to realize that the new version is actually quite an improvement. Indeed, having completed the new draft, I generally wince when I look back at the previous version, shaking my head to think I ever felt it ready to go out.

The key here, then, is: NEVER EVER respond to editorial suggestions the same day (probably not even the same week) as you receive them. You need time to absorb what the editor is actually saying, to work through the emotionality of even this partial rejection, and to start seeing the possibilities arising out of the editor’s feedback. That first day, you should simply acknowledge receipt of the comments and promise to attend to them in the immediate future. That’s it. If some comments need to be resisted, resist them later when you are calmer and you’ve already made the other x number of suggested changes—which demonstrates that you’re open to change, are reasonable, flexible, and merely raising the possibility that perhaps—in this one instance—there may be good reason to go another route than with the editor’s recommendation. Such an approach is far more likely to be successful than the incoherent rant that is inevitably one’s initial, instinctual response.

The second point here is that you need to choose your battles carefully. Sometimes you need to say ‘no’ to development editors (or agents or publishers) if the changes they are insisting on are inappropriate—the recent controversies over authors being asked to change characters from gay to straight or black to white come to mind. Most publishers would not hold these principled refusals against the author, though they may well choose (for purely commercial reasons) not to continue with publication of that particular manuscript. On the other hand, authors who endlessly debate every little change, who refuse to budge on any suggested revision, quickly acquire the reputation as “difficult to work with”. And then your career is over. With hundreds of equally competent manuscripts vying for the six or eight available slots in an imprint’s monthly (or yearly for smaller presses) publishing schedule, there is no need for a publisher to invest time and effort in a difficult or unresponsive author. Eventually, even megastars like Charlie Sheen get fired if they are sufficiently annoying. You might even win the battles over a particular manuscript but then lose the war if the publisher decides not to bother accepting future submissions.

If you feel the need to retain complete and utter control over every aspect of your manuscript, the only viable solution is to self-publish; with the obvious perils that without development editing, one’s ego may quickly out distance one’s competence.

Third, developmental editing is an iterative process. You submit the initial manuscript; the editor provides detailed feedback; you resubmit with the required revisions, and perhaps the occasional argument why this or that suggested change is better some other way; and the editor re-edits the revisions. My experience is that a polished first submission requires at least two, and usually three rounds of suggestions and rewrites. Other manuscripts have sometimes taken as many as six, though that does start to get tedious for both sides.

Again, it is important to view this as the editor working to make the manuscript as strong as it can be, rather than an obstruction. The goal here is to produce the best book possible, not just to get published. If getting published were the only goal, you could self-publish and be done with it.

Note too, that it is important to make one’s revisions on the same copy as the editor. These days, that usually means using “Track Changes” in Word, though some houses I’m told still prefer hard copy. The editor needs to see that the suggested comments have been addressed—either that the change has been made or that the author has provided reasons why the change is being resisted. It is not uncommon (and

often quite interesting) to get a dialog going over this or that revision as comments go back and forth over two or three iterations. Sending a ‘clean’ copy back with all your changes, on the other hand, will likely drive your editor crazy as s/he has to reread the entire manuscript again, with a copy of the previous iteration next to it to compare section by tedious section, just to ensure that all the suggested edits have been attended to and whether the revisions were successful.

### Copy Editors

Once the final draft of the manuscript is approved, it goes for copy-editing. There would be little point copy-editing the initial draft, as whole sections are likely to disappear and entirely new sections appear during developmental edits, so no one is going to pay \$60 an hour to keep re-copyediting the same manuscript. Copy editors catch typos, spelling and grammar errors, inconsistencies, and so on. It is a highly technical skill, takes a certain personality, and is often underrated. A typical example: I used ‘global change’ to in a final iteration to change a character name in one of my stories, but unknowingly had Word set to “changes from here down” rather than “all document” so that a minor character was one name in the first scene, and a different name four scenes later. Which, understandably, caused some confusion until caught by the copy editor.

The need for copy-editing is obvious; less obvious is that copyediting is not a substitute for development editing. Beginning authors who arrange to have their manuscripts ‘edited’ before submitting to a publisher, or self-publishing, need to be clear on whether they are hiring a copy editor or a development/structural editor. Freelance development editors (often marketing themselves as “writing coaches”) can be incredibly helpful in identifying problem areas; over-coming writer’s block; pushing authors to go deeper, to up their game; and turning initial drafts into submission-ready drafts. Copy editors can help authors avoid embarrassing typos and inconsistencies, but it is not their job to tamper with the manuscript’s content.

Knowing which service you’re contracting for is therefore crucial. When I was an acquisition editor at a small press, I several times had authors telling me they had paid thousands of dollars to have their manuscript edited before submission, but when I looked at it, the manuscript made no sense. Of course, the “editor” they had hired was a copy editor, who therefore hadn’t pointed out that giant ants, say, are a non-starter, but simply tidied up whatever they had been handed. Heartbreaking, but it happens *a lot*. To educate yourself on the different types of editors and what each does, Editors Canada provides a convenient list of definitions here: <https://www.editors.ca/hire/definitions-editorial-skills>

### Trends

Finally, there are a couple of trends in publishing that should be noted here.

First, publishers at all levels are doing a lot less editing than they used to. Most of the major players let go between 30-40% of their remaining editorial staff during the 2008 recession, and there is no reason to expect any of them to rehire to the same levels in the future. The heavy concentration of publishing into a very few houses has created a situation where there are so many authors submitting to the same six surviving SF imprints, for example, that the Big Five can simply take the top 1% that need almost no development and reject the rest. Indeed, very few publishers these days have the patience to scout and develop new talent and simply do not accept unsolicited manuscripts. Instead, the slush pile has largely been outsourced to agents, who perforce have taken on the role of development editor. That even makes a kind of sense, given that most of the new agents on the market (and therefore the ones willing to accept new clients) are the very editors laid off from the major publishing houses in 2007. Same people doing the same job, the difference being that now their salaries are being paid by the writers, rather than by the publishers....

Second, copy-editing and proofreading have been partially eliminated as steps in the process by the change from hot lead typesetting to digital. Certainly, many small presses (and almost all self-publishers) simply take the author's digital submission and run it through a software package to turn it into the printed book. Given the expectation that authors will have already run spell and grammar checks on the document, the need to pay someone \$60 an hour to go through checking for minor glitches is now sometimes seen as redundant. This is a wrong idea, of course, as is obvious whenever one runs across a book that hasn't benefitted from the attention of a good copy editor.

—Dr. Robert Runté is Senior Editor at SFeditor.ca and EssentialEdits.ca

### One Thing You Shouldn't Do On Kindle ... by Chris Nuttall

... Or anywhere, for that matter.

I get a lot of emails from people who want to be writers themselves. Mostly, they tend to ask for advice – as if I knew something that would make anyone who possessed it an automatic success. And what I do, because I got help from other writers myself when I started, is explain that the only key to any success in writing is hard work.

I learned two things, in particular, from Eric Flint.

One – writing requires practice. You have to write at least a million words before you have anything that is even remotely readable. Yes, really. I cringe at the thought of my readers looking at some of my early works.

Two – writing requires a form of double-think (the ability to believe two things that contradict one another.) The writer must believe that his work is the greatest piece of literature since *Oliver Twist* ... and, at the same time, must believe that his work is not worthy of being used as toilet paper, let alone publication.

Why? The writer must have the confidence to enter the writing world and, at the same time, understand that he or she has a great deal of work to do. No writer is EVER capable of judging his own work. Writers can miss the major problems and the minor problems, simply because they know what the book is supposed to say. That's why a decent critic – and an editor – is a MUST for any writer who seriously intends to write. They can make the difference between a publisher considering your manuscript or kicking it out the door, without even bothering to write sarcastic comments.

In the past, writers were dependent on publishing companies to get published. The publishers provided a barrier between the general public and the hundreds of pieces of simply awful writing that were sent in by hopeful authors. Kindle (and other e-book publishers) has changed all that, at least to some extent. Anyone can publish on Kindle ...

As I've noted before, the good news is that anyone can publish on Kindle; the bad news is that anyone can publish on Kindle. This causes problems because young authors who haven't worked for years developing their writing start trying to sell their wares. When they do, they get attacked – sometimes savagely – by readers who don't feel any obligation to soften the blow.



Obligations? Most people – me included – have problems being critical to our friends and family. I see something they've done and I bite down the urge to point out that it's crappy. A writer's mother – for example – probably won't make critical remarks, even if the story is thoroughly awful. Anyone else, however, will certainly struggle to restrain themselves from making caustic remarks – “why the hell are you wasting your time doing this when you can't even spell ‘cat’?” The unwary writer, expecting plaudits, may find himself hammered by a thorough dissection of just WTF is wrong with his work.

This hurts. Unless you're a complete hack, your writing is your heart and soul. Having someone come up to you and make unpleasant remarks about your baby doesn't make you want to listen, it makes you want to punch them in the face, then do unspeakable things to their corpse. Or, perhaps, you want to explain to them, in great detail, why they're wrong – or to defend your work to the bitter end.

This is essentially pointless. There are two types of critic; the helpful dude and the troll. The former will not feel inclined to continue to help you if you reject his advice so openly (even if he's wrong, he's got the wrong idea because of something YOU wrote); the troll gets his jollies from forcing you to work yourself into a tizzy over his words. You are merely feeding his sick ego when you rant and rave on the internet over how someone doesn't get your work – and feeding trolls is stupid, in any online forum.

The real trick, of course, is learning to tell the difference. I always tell myself not to respond to negative remarks, but to consider what is actually being said. Someone who offers useful feedback – “this word is spelt wrong” – is a helpful dude; someone who doesn't offer useful feedback is a troll. Thank the former, ignore the latter.

I mention this because there has been a spat of comments on one of the facebook groups I frequent, concerning a particularly unpleasant piece of work. Now, that alone would not be worthy of comment. Kindle has seen more than its fair share of works that are over-priced, poorly edited, worse researched, badly formatted, given horrible covers, plagiarised (and copied from other works produced by the author, which may not be plagiarism per se), etc., etc.

However, the author – who has the same attitude to his works as other authors – has been responding badly to criticism. He has insisted that his reviewers are trolls, cited the opinions of his friends (and at least one person who may not exist) and refused to believe that they're actually pointing out very real problems with the book. Worse, he has spammed Amazon with samples of his book and tried to game the rating system. (And one reviewer has written a 5-star review that is anything, but.) Readers have not responded very well to his defence.

This has always left me with mixed feelings. I have never believed that an author should be above criticism, particularly when they produce works like ... well, SONICHU. (About which the less said, the better.) On the other hand, there are times when the barrage of criticism (even when not actual trolling) becomes unbearably akin to bullying. I've had moments in my writing career when I felt backed into a corner by trolls, even when some of those trolls were probably making sensible remarks. Whose side should I be on?

Well, that of common sense, of course. Writers need thick skins. At the same time, they need to understand that critics are the most valuable resource a writer can have. There's nothing to be gained, as I have said above, in treating the critic as a troll.

So ... if you want to write seriously, listen to the critics.



# Letters

Editor:

L. E. Modesitt's letter in the last Review of Books reminded me once again of the idea held by many that a science fiction (SF) book cannot be literary. I have thought about this topic since I was a teenager just starting to read SF in magazines and books, mainly because of my reading of August Derleth's *Beyond Time & Space* (1950).

Derleth included "proto-SF" stories by Plato, Lucian, Sir Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Rabelais, Campanella, Kepler, and Jonathan Swift in this anthology, and-- in his Introduction -- mentioned other works that went back to the beginnings of literature. Interesting to me at the time, he also included work by Poe, Wells, and Verne -- whom I had previously thought of as the founders of SF -- and ended his anthology with stories by my current favorites: A. E. van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, Theodore Sturgeon, and Robert Heinlein, whose books my friends and I were reading and collecting as they were being written and published. I was 15 at the time, and the Derleth book was given to me as a present by my parents. I didn't have the money for such a high-priced hardcover book; my SF-reading friends and I usually bought our SF in magazines and paperbacks.

I showed the book to my high school English teacher, who said she was impressed with the authors/stories in this anthology, although she didn't much approve of SF; but she let me write my research theme that year on H. G. Wells.

SF writer Arthur C. Clarke corresponded with the renowned author and lay theologian C. S. Lewis in the 1940s and 1950s, and they once met in an Oxford pub to discuss SF and space travel. Clarke voiced great praise for Lewis upon his death, saying that his *Ransom Trilogy* was one of the few works of SF that should be considered literature. During his career Lewis held academic positions at both Cambridge and Oxford.

Other examples of SF that many have considered to be "literary" include the following:

1984 (Orwell)  
Brave New World (Huxley)  
The Handmaid's Tale (Atwood)  
The Road (McCarthy)  
Earth Abides (Stewart)  
Lord of the Flies (Golding)  
"A Diamond As Big As the Ritz" (Fitzgerald)  
"By the Waters of Babylon" (Benet)  
"The King of the Cats" (Benet)

Modesitt cited Stephen King as an example of a popular author who is not thought of as literary. But King has won a National Book Award, generally considered a literary award.

In addition, how do proponents of SF being non-literary explain Nobel prize winners in literature who have written works that can be considered SF, or that have prominent SF elements in them (e. g., William Golding, Rudyard Kipling, Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck).

In conclusion, I agree with some others that literary SF is simply SF that's better-written, has more realistic characters, and is more ambitious than most SF works. On the other hand, all fans of the genre should also remember Sturgeon's Law.

Jon D. Swartz  
N3F Historian