

The R3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono  
Professor Phillipies, D. Sc., Editor  
December 2019

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# Editorial

We exist because our writers and editorial staff contribute their unceasing labors to our cause. 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. For her careful reading of many contributions, we must in particular be grateful to Lady High Proofreader Jean Lamb.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row and Tamara Wilhite. Robert Runté's peerless writing on creating and marketing stfnal prose, art, and marketing are an invaluable contribution to future writing efforts of every reader.



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# Novels

## A Bard Without A Star by Michael Hooten Review by Pat Patterson

5.0 out of 5 stars

No power without responsibility, no love without commitment.

I don't suppose there ever was a little boy anywhere who didn't wish he had some kind of special powers. Michael Hooten's Bardic Tales give full expression to that desire for special power, and do not fail to warn that with special power comes special responsibility.

"A Bard Without A Star" is set in the world of "Cricket's Song," and predates those events by about 200 years. The players are different, but the music and the magic are the same, and remain beautiful.

As I was reading the book, I saw many of the same themes as in "Cricket's Son," so many that at one point I wondered if this was a re-telling of that story from a different perspective. It's not, in the literal sense; these are different people, there are differences in relationships, but the beauty, and the struggles, are so very similar?

So: does this make this a redundant story? Only if you believe that you can only kiss your love one time, and that covers it. If you are satisfied with having your cat come sit on your arm and go to sleep just once; if you only want to have breakfast with your grandson just once; if going to church and singing praises to God one time is enough for you, then I suppose that this is a redundant book. Otherwise, no; it's a sweet re-experience of warmth, affection, delight, and renewal.

Make no mistake about it: Michael Hooten, known to the Mad Genius Club as gnardopolo, is in love with his work. He paints pictures with his words, and they are just as beautiful, and just as original, as any story can possibly be. Love does not change; it has many faces, but once you've been loved, you will recognize it.

Michael Hooten loves his work. I hope that you will as well. I certainly do.

## Asbaran Solutions by Chris Kennedy Review by Jim McCoy

Yes, I'm reviewing Asbaran Solutions by Chris Kennedy. Yes, it is the second of the novels in the Four Horsemen Universe and yes, I can hear someone out there already:

"Dood! There are like a million novels in the Four Horsemen Universe and the Chris Kennedy Publishing Kindle Unlimited Writing Factory puts a new one out every four point three seconds. You are literally never going to catch up at this pace."

To which I reply: "Dooooood! I know. It's gonna be fun to try though. NOW GET BACK TO WORK PROLE!!!:

Or sumfin'.

Sorry, I'm in a weird mood today.

So yes, I picked up a copy of *Asbaran Solutions* because I felt like I needed more ass-kicking in my life. I mean seriously, who doesn't like to spend their time reading tales of derring-do and explosions? (And if you don't, why are you here?)

And this is definitely a book with a high amount of ass-kickery. Our main character is one Nigel Shirazi and his family has been fucked with. He seems to be less than okay with that fact in a "Michael Corleone said that this was too harsh" kind of way. (And if you don't get the Godfather reference, hie thee off to the video store. I'll wait until you get back.) Seriously, if he has anything to say about it, someone is going to pay for messing with The Family. Oh, and the Shirazi family owns the mercenary company *Asbaran Solutions*, hence the title of the book and the ability to commit the aforementioned acts of ass-kickery.

I really thought I was going to enjoy this one and I was right. I ended up enjoying it more than I thought I would, though. See, Chris is a veteran and, while *Red Tide: The Invasion of Seattle* was a really good book, I had to wonder if Kennedy was going to be able to deliver on the less formal atmosphere of a merc unit. Well, I'm here to tell you that he owned it. And, as the former commander of a 'Mech company cum regimental combat team in the universe of the *Battletech* board games and *Mechwarrior* pen and paper role playing game, stuff like that matters to me. Don't get me wrong, the troops follow orders (they wouldn't succeed otherwise) but you don't get the crisp salutes or the perfectly pressed pants that you would get out of a member of the United States Navy, where Kennedy served as an aviator. You also wouldn't see people switching between branches like a few switch between merc companies in the book. This is a good thing. Kennedy gets it when I wasn't sure he would. Troops sometimes talk back in ways that would get them in big trouble in an actual military and that makes sense as well.

It's interesting the way Kennedy uses the free-wheeling nature of mercs to move his story along too. In any type of military unit members are going to be faced with putting their duty over their personal feelings, but in a merc unit, sometimes it's possible to do what you want and get paid for it anyway. This is another positive about merc life that I was really happy to see Kennedy put that in his work. The ability to pick and choose contracts is what makes a merc unit different from a member of a standing military. The setup in the book just makes sense.

The fight scenes in *Asbaran Solutions* do something very well that I've never seen attempted in another book and I love it. Kennedy occasionally uses radio messages more than once to create a sense of simultaneity. (Oh look. I think I spelled that right!) You really do get a sense that there is stuff happening all over the place at the same time and it rocks. Seriously, if you're an author out there and you write military fic (whether SF or not) read this book because Kennedy puts on a clinic. I've never seen this before but I want more. It's not that reading things sequentially is bad ( I mean, that's how the human brain processes things so it makes sense) it's just that this method of writing adds a lot of excitement and a sense that things are occurring all at once. And guess what folks? Combat is chaos and *Asbaran Solutions* definitely gives you a feeling of being in a situation where no one is truly in control and there's no telling what could happen next. On the other hand, you may want to be careful here. Reading *Asbaran Solutions* before you call your girlfriend is contra-indicated if you want to call her when you were supposed to. (Huh? Experience? What? And I was only five minutes late. HMPH.)

Oh, and I kind of have to mention the aerial battles. Kennedy is, after all, a retired naval aviator and I expected these to rock. They did. I wonder how much of one particular scene was motivated by his

training and how much was based on a personal fear, but I guess it doesn't matter. Just know that it was super believable and realistic and had me in physical pain just reading it.

I don't want to spoil too much, but I really like Nigel's character arc in this story. He starts out as a spoiled little shit and ends up.. well, something else. All I'm going to say for the record is that it was a big improvement. By the end of the book I was almost to the point where I had forgotten just exactly how well I had initially wanted to clean his clock. The people around him have a lot to do with it. He doesn't just spontaneously learn to stop being a complete douche and that makes sense too. Maturation comes from dealing with people and experiencing things and that's how Nigel learns.

I've already picked up my copy of Winged Hussars, which is the book that follows this one in The Revelations Cycle. It's not by Kennedy. It's by Mark Wandrey but so was Cartwrights Cavaliers and that was amazeballs, so I'm excited. I almost feel bad for Wandrey though. I wouldn't want to have to follow a book like this. It's going to be hard to live up to.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Red Diamonds

Asbaran Solutions: The Revelations Cycle Book Two  
Chris Kennedy  
Chris Kennedy Publishing, 2017

## The Chaplain's War by Brad Torgerson Review by Pat Patterson

5.0 out of 5 stars

Finally an enlisted hero who isn't infantry, and a new BEM!

There is enough action in the book to satisfy shoot-em-up fans (and I'm one of these) but where this book really excels is in character development.

Now, I confess to being a non-impartial reader, because of the selection of the main character. Harrison Barlow is an enlisted man, serving as a chaplain's assistant. I'm third generation in a four generation family of U S Army enlisted. The hero in most military fiction is either an officer, or in the infantry, and Harrison Barlow is neither. He's just a guy, doing his job the best he knows how to do. And, in fact, that's what most people in the military are: just ordinary people doing their jobs. They take care of the mules, load the ammo, make sure that the water is clean, and only sometimes are on the front lines with a rifle. So: this speaks to my personal experience and family history, and therefore, I'm inclined to regard it with favor. But there are only five stars to award, not ten, and so my prejudices have little effect on that rating.

Here's what is marvelous about The Chaplain's War: it is an ENTIRELY NEW take on the Bug Eyed Monster. Sure, the BEMs are evil, wicked, mean and nasty; wait, no, they aren't. Yes they do kill the humans, they have overwhelming technology, but they aren't evil. They are just alien. What makes this treatment different from all the other BEMs that have come before is the way that they have been changed by their technology. Now, maybe Brad had some sort of hippie-dippie idea of making this a metaphor for 21st century man blah blah blah, but IF so, he hides it very well. It's NOT just a twist on man's inhumanity to man, or whatever the latest schtick is; it's a real story about real people, and real aliens who are definitely NOT human, but aren't either superhuman nor subhuman. They are just alien.

Now, apart from that original take on the aliens, and the fact that the hero is an enlisted man in a non-combat role, there is nothing original, but that's not a deficit. Just because Heinlein wrote *Starship Troopers*, it doesn't mean Buettner shouldn't write *Orphanage*. Basic training is basic training, but the stories are just as individual as a fingerprint. Tell it a million times. Ten million.

I've heard that some people have objected to the story because it has religious content. Well, bite me. You can't possibly tell a meaningful story about real people under stress without talking about how many of them turn to God to find meaning. If they are arguing that sci-fi is supposed to be escapist, and therefore shouldn't carry over any religious themes, I would invite them to devise an escape kit that doesn't have any items from the current reality. Like food, water, flashlights, and a good knife; those are not things found in the world we are escaping into. They are what makes it possible for the escape to be survivable. Brad's not demanding that every story about BEMs include a religious theme, but he does have the right to put a religious theme into his own work. I enjoyed it and found it both believable and an essential part of the story. If you don't like it, then be sure not to use the Force, but don't talk badly of it, or Lord Vader may find your lack of faith...disturbing...

## Crawling Between Heaven and Earth by Sarah A. Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson

*Crawling Between Heaven and Earth* opens with Sarah telling us how the book came about, and how it came to be presented in its current form. The intro is worth reading for anyone who is a fan of Sarah's, but beyond that, anyone who is interested in becoming a writer. Beside the main intro, she provides us with a brief story introduction, and these are SIGNIFICANT added value.

Here's what you get in the way of stories: Elvis, ethics of the Civil War in America, a nightmare story of the re-living of the Minotaur myth, an Oscar Wilde inspired vampire story, a real heart breaker about the tragic life of purpose grown sex slaves, the alternative universe version of Tiananmen Square, the misery of a well-bred woman living at the capricious mercy of history, a dragon love story, a ghost story, more heart-breaking nightmares of the future, Shakespeare's brother, and a preview of the misery in the society of *A Few Good Men*.

I look at the list, and decide that I have done the equivalent of describing the human body as being mostly water and the universe as mostly hydrogen.

It is a wonderful thing that she can write so well about such dis-similar topics. It is a much more wonderful thing that we FINALLY have access to it, because to hear it talk about it, most of these stories sat mouldering in a drawer for years, and the only result for the longest time was that every time a magazine bought a story, it promptly went out of business (it was the Oscar Wilde-inspired story, just so you'll know).

Here's what I think would be the best and highest use for *Crawling Between Heaven and Earth*: the text for a writers' workshop, held in a retreat site along the Appalachian trail. Each day would begin with Sarah, and any necessary additional voices, reading aloud one of the stories. She then would answer questions, with rude people being swatted the first time, pummeled the second time, and defenestrated upon the third offense. After the Q&A, budding writers return to their room, write a story inspired by the current work, which they then present at an evening meeting which goes on until everyone is given



the chance to give and receive commentary. Next day, the next story, until they are finished. That's two weeks' worth. Sarah gets a million dollars, and sets the terms for what other consultation she provides.

Anybody else on board with that?

## The Curse of Arianrhod by Michael Hooten Review by Pat Patterson

I'm going to start light, and then I'm going to get heavy; probably as heavy as I have gotten in reviewing.

Here's the light part: thus far, in reviewing Michael Hooten's Bardic Tales, I have managed to avoid hard names. Cricket's Song was easy; I just called him Cricket. And I discovered just now that when I reviewed Bard Without A Star that I wrote the review without once using the main character's name, or any character's name actually. That's because they've got these long consonant-ridden names like Cwddngkrq Twndfrgkn of Lndgdwnggth, and I'm a redneck. Bubba, Bill Andy, Ruby Jo, and Beulah; those are all family names. Those I can do. I've avoided the tough stuff, but I can't do it any longer. Here are the main three characters: Gwydion, the Bard; Llews, his son; Arianrhod, Llews' mother. There, I got that out, and I wish that I could say with certainty that I spelled them correctly, but if not, your spell check will be returned uncashed.

Now for the tough stuff.

In A Bard Without A Star, Gwydion begins by being a rather shallow young man, and he harbors a long-time fascination/infatuation with Arianrhod. She won't give him the time of day, which initially is a pretty good choice, since he's the sort of lad who needs to buy a watch and be responsible for time-telling himself. However, Gwydion is given many challenges, and he grows into them, and receives a great deal of power, which he uses responsibly. His infatuation for Arianrhod remains, however, and when he finally is given the opportunity, he confesses his love for her, and wins her body, if not her heart. The heart question remains unanswered, because immediately after they bed each other, he is called away by circumstances he cannot control. It is years before he is able to return to Arianrhod, and when he does, he finds that she hates him. They conceived a son on their single night together, and Arianrhod chose to interpret his absence as rejection, and to reject their child as a means of gaining vengeance. She not only refused to have anything to do with their son, she refused to allow anyone else to care for him, either (not everyone is compliant to her demand).

Despite that, he is a sweet-natured child. When circumstances finally permit it, and Gwydion returns, he takes the boy into his care. Arianrhod responds by cursing the boy, denying him a name until she gives him one. This is more than merely the lack of a name, however; in the curse is the power to render him invisible, unnoticed by those around him. Gwydion alone can see him, and that requires significant concentration on his part.

The story continues; there are numerous adventures and significant plot points. However, the aching core of the book is this: the vicious rejection of an innocent boy by his mother. It remains; even when Gwydion is able to trick her into removing the consequences of the curse, that's a technical point. She immediately places another curse on Llews, because her heart is still set on rejection.

I'm a father of three grown children. I know the importance of the relationship between a father and a



son and between a father and a daughter. In this latter portion of my life, my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant foxy praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA and I are raising another young boy and girl, and I know that they love me and need me. But the one they turn to when they skin a knee, either literally or figuratively? It's always Vanessa, their mom. The very concept of a mother vindictively rejecting her child, and persisting in that rejection, is a perversion of all that is best, and all that is natural.

And so, this story, even though it is filled with little victories, is fundamentally a tragedy. It's as if all the nurturing care Arianrhod should have lavished on her son has instead been given to the bitterness in her heart. That has become her child, instead of the son she carried and gave birth to.

For every child rejected by a mother, I weep.

## Dark Moon Arisen by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey Review by Jim McCoy

(Disclaimer: I am not just a member of The Mercenary Guild: The Official Fan Club of the Four Horsemen Universe. I am its Public Relations Officer. I'd like to think that I'm being perfectly non-biased here, but I'd also like to think I'm rich and famous. Read at your own risk.)

So, why exactly has a Dark Moon Arisen? Do I look like Mark Wandrey or Chris Kennedy? So why are you asking me? Look, I know this is my blog and I'm theoretically the one in charge here, but it's not my day to know what's going on. That would be on the eleventy-first of Aintgonnahappenuary and today is December twenty-fourth, so it's clearly not my day. See me on my day if you want an explanation of what's going on.

Of course, if you've read the book (and you should) then you know that this is the third book in the Omega War Series and life pretty much sucks for humanity, so that juuuust might have something to do with it. I'm going with possibly on this one. I mean, in the Four Horsemen Universe, which Dark Moon Arisen is part of, and in the Omega War series in general, it's Earth against the galaxy, or at least the Mercenary Guild. There are thirty-seven mercenary races in the Galactic Union. Humans are one and we're at war with the other thirty-six and a few traitors from our own side. Things look bleak.

Of course, being the Omega WAR series, there is a lot of action and this is where Kennedy and Wandrey excel. Things go boom. People end up bleeding. Troops seem to be short of everything but the enemy at times. In short, this is a work of military (and, given the setting, it does feel a little more military than mercenary at this point. It's not so much about the contract at this point. These mercs may be a little more free-wheeling than a typical standing military, but they are focused on the end of the conflict and not just on the current objective and how much it pays this time around.) fiction. If you're looking for some high-class lich-rit-you-er that your college professor would approve of, then you're in the wrong place. This is something you can actually enjoy reading. I mean, I read it and it wasn't even assigned by anybody. I loved it.

Seriously, this is the finest in escapism. I've been there and done that as far as reading "important" stuff and I have to tell you that I'd rather read Kennedy and Wandrey than Bartov and Woods (those are historians if you missed it.) They write scholarly books that are like, peer-reviewed and stuff. Unless you're looking for scholarly cred, you're better off with Stephen Ambrose.) any day. They're like Mi-

chael Bay if he knew how to make a good story instead of just a bunch of exciting explosions. Seriously, this is good stuff.

Of course, if you've read anything in the Four Horsemen Universe then you already know that the Horsemen are the four largest human mercenary corporations; Cartwright's Cavaliers, Asbaran Solutions, The Golden Horde and The Winged Hussars. The first four books in the Four Horseman Universe were known as the Revelations Cycle and featured each company. They're pretty awesome too. At any rate, they're running things and the rest of the human mercs that haven't sold out are following their lead.

I like watching the leaders of the various Four Horsemen units working together. When I first started reading the series I was a bit dubious about how well that would work. The different units are all human but they're also kind of rivals, right? Well, maybe not. They've all got different specialties, but they're also working within the same market. I wasn't sure if they'd get along. I can assure you all that the old saw is true here: Nothing unites within like an enemy from without. And if Nigel wants to get a little closer to one of his allies than everyone else, can you blame him? I like bad-ass women too. Seriously. The only reason I haven't married Susan Ivanova is because she doesn't really exist. Nigel has good taste.

What? Oh, you want to know who he's after? I bet you do. If you got the book and read it, I'm willing to bet you could figure it out pretty easily. Don't worry. I'll drop a link at the bottom of the review, because you need to pick this up.

The villains are villainous as well. I like having bad guys that I can hate. General Peepo is well deserving of a MAC round to the head. I'd love to be the one to give it to her. Unfortunately, if she ever does get it, it won't be from me. That's alright though. I'm keeping hope alive. Somebody's gonna get that wench someday, right? RIGHT? Somebody has to. I hope.

It's weird too, because a lot of science fiction has humanity at, if not the top of the entire pyramid, at least at the top of a smaller one. Humanity ran first the Republic and then the Empire in Star Wars. The headquarters of the United Federation of Planets is on Earth. In Battlestar Galactica it's humanity versus the robots that they built. The same holds true in most fantasy. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series features a war primarily between humans, in the form of Rohan and Gondor, and admittedly with some help from dwarves and elves, against orcs and goblins. The largest armies on both sides of the War of the Lance in Weis and Hickman's Dragonlance Chronicles were human, but it's not that way in the 4HU.

No, humanity is comparatively new to the Galactic Union. We're a small, poor, weak race and we're up to our backsides in manure. Things are rough for the little guy out there. This is, in many ways, an asymmetric conflict and humanity is the small combatant. They need friends and they're looking for them. Of course, in any asymmetric conflict, the smaller side must act in a surprising manner. Think Washington crossing the Delaware on Christmas Eve. I'm not going to say what, but there just might be something that happens here that Peepo didn't expect. I'm not saying I found myself chuckling at certain points. I'm just saying that my belly shook like a bowlful of jelly. Or sumfin'.

Anyway, check this thing out. I'd recommend reading the first six books first, but you don't really have to in order to get it.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Broken Repair Bots

Deadly Farce by Jennifer McAndrews  
Review by Pat Patterson

I received a loaner copy of this book for review from The Real McChuck, a fellow Mad Genius Club fan, and a friend of the author's husband. I specifically asked to borrow this book, because I've reviewed nothing but F&SF for so long, I wanted to try my hand on something else.

(Ummm...now that I think about it, I realize that the wicked, wicked authors at MGC made me read some other stuff as well, notably Farmhands by Liliana Begley (Cedar Sanderson's pen name), but I still love them.)

Here's the plot: Lorraine, or Rainny to her friends, works security for a firm in New Jersey. She's relatively new to the company, and so she's the one who gets sent to guard museums, warehouses, and porch swings in the pale moonlight, while her more senior colleagues get the prestige jobs as bodyguards for Very Important People. This changes when Shepard, an old friend from WAY back, now a major movie star, calls her and asks if she come to a movie set in Atlantic City and keep him from getting killed. It seems when they were in school together, he was a shrimp, and she rather accidentally stepped in a few times to protect him, so now he has an image of her as a superhero.

Major characters are:

Lorraine, the hero. She is a TRULY nice person. In fact, she's so nice, that her friends take advantage of her good nature, and often will get her to do something she doesn't really want to do. On the other hand, she refuses to get pushed around by people who aren't her friends, which includes most of the other people in the book.

Barb, Lorraine's buddy. She is a high school teacher, and since the action takes place in the summer, she's on vacation and is available to act as a sort of sidekick. She's the person Lorraine goes to when she needs information on what's happening in Movie Land. Barb knows the players, and what she doesn't know, she will research. The downside to Barb is that she is fascinated by the actors.

Shepard, the movie star and Lorraine's friend from way back. He thinks someone is trying to kill him, so he wants her protection, but he is rather a bit of a spoiled brat. In fact, there were moments when I rather hoped that he WOULD get killed, because he acts like such a jerk to those around him. He won't give Lorraine all the information she needs, won't cooperate with her instructions on keeping safe, and seems oblivious to the fact that his problems come directly or indirectly from his own actions. The only sympathetic aspect to the guy, in fact, is that Lorraine likes him.

Eddy, another movie star, friends with Shepard and Lorraine's secret weakness. He is an astoundingly nice person, despite being an actor. Seems like a Bruce Willis to me, but that's not based on any physical description, just the impact he has on Lorraine.

Assorted crazy Hollywood types. There are bullying directors, wacko actresses, and an occasional hint of agents.

Decent, hard-working support staff. These tend to be likable people, not caught up in the fame game, who are getting the job done in spite of rain, snow, sleet, gloom of night, or crazy wacko Personalities.

The characters are very well done. The mystery is well-written, and I didn't know whodunnit until the reveal scene. Interestingly, there's no gun play, and Lorraine bemoans the fact that state law prohibits her from carrying.

I took longer to read this than I usually do, because of circumstances. That was not a bad thing, at all. It spread the experience out longer. However, I have a feeling that this is a book that could very easily deprive you of some sleep, if you start it too late in the evening. It's worth staying up past midnight, though.

And do try not to do that if you have work in the morning, okay?

## Dragon Noir by Cedar Sanderson Review by Pat Patterson

"Riding a charging rhino doesn't get any easier the second time."

And it is PRECISELY sentences like that which make it possible to write this review.

I received a pre-publication copy for review, which lets me in on the plot while the rest of you have to wait, which is a benefit, but on the downside, I have to be PARTICULARLY sensitive about spoilers.

But with Cedar's work, that's not going to be particularly difficult. What makes her writing stand out isn't the surprise when the Death Star explodes, because who knew Luke could do that with the Force, right? Yes, there are battles, both great and small. That's not a spoiler. Yes, here are creepy places with creepy villains which have to be, uh....crept through. And that's not a spoiler either. I promise you: you will get your adventure fix.

But with Cedar's writing, you don't have to wait until 'THE END' in order to enjoy yourself. It occurs to me as I write this that Cedar enjoys cooking, and so I have a nice little illustration of that ready for you. My gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant foxy praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, also enjoys cooking. And on the way to the final product (which at the moment is a chocolate cake made with coconut oil), there are all sorts of delightful moments involving sights, sounds, smells and tastes.

So it is with Cedar's writing. You get the throw-away humor of lines like riding a charging rhino. That's a great line, and it's not a spoiler, so there. You have no idea who is riding the rhino, you don't know the circumstances, and so it's not a spoiler. But it's still funny.

There are some very moving, may I even say heart-warming scenes as well. I had planned to include one in particular of them, but then I realized that there is no way to do that without revealing one of the major plot elements. So never mind. But how about this:

"She always had a garden." He told me gruffly. "I used to tease her about her weeds, but it was pretty, and smelled good. I didn't mind it."

That's well written, evocative, and as close as I can get to giving you a taste of Cedar's work without spoiling your dinner.

Magic Casement by Dave Duncan  
Review by Pat Patterson

A big shout out to Scott J. Robinson fellow Mad Genius Club fan, for recommending Dave Duncan to me. And another big shout out for reminding me of that fact, BECAUSE I had absolutely no recollection of downloading the book. No, I do not drink, but I do occasionally sleep, and sometimes right before that, I do things. Not BAD things, but things like watch part of a movie, and then the next morning...what was I talking about? Did I say that out loud?

Once upon a time, there was a princess named Inos. She lived in a tiny little kingdom as the daughter and only child of the kindly king. She didn't like to dress up and have her hair done, but she loved riding her horse and digging for clams on the beach, and she played with the other children without regard for station in life.

Okay, did that sound even the LEAST bit pretentious or hoity toity? No, it just sounded like the start of a great story that you'd love to read for yourself, and then read to your children and grandchildren. And that's exactly the kind of story this is. I wish there were millions more just like it, because then we'd all be reading to our little ones, and Cartoon Network would go out of business....but maybe that's taking this too far.

There really is a princess, and she really is like what I said. But it's not all tomboy princesses. There are wizards and mages and sorcerers, and even gods and goddesses, and in this story, they intervene some of the time. And not all of those with magic powers are nice.

Man, I have GOT to stop writing like I'm talking to an eight-year-old.

It's just that the book is so well written, that an eight-year-old could be entertained by it, but it's deep enough that an adult can enjoy it as well. That's a special gift that Dave Duncan has, and evidently I DON'T have it, or I wouldn't have to stop writing so often and return to the adult world.

Okay, let me rip through this before I start getting all precious on you: The two main characters are Inos, the princess, and Rap, the nothing. At least, he is nothing to start with, just an orphan, but as it turns out, he's good with animals. And then the plot thickens.

The people in the kingdom are either imps or jotuns, and Inos comes from both lines. Their kingdom, although small, is critical to the well-balanced running of the rest of the world. Beside imps and jotuns, there are fauns (Rap is half faun, on his mother's side) and goblins, and maybe other types as well. Because they are in a key location, and because the king is getting old, the matter of Inos' future husband is a great concern. There is MUCH intrigue at this level.

Warning: this book is the first of a series, and you aren't going to want to stop with just one. That's okay for YOU, because you aren't reviewers, but if I indulge myself on nothing but Duncan for the next month, my influence will begin to fade, and my contribution to taking over the world and then leaving it ruthlessly alone will become insignificant. Oh, yes, it is a high and lonely road we reviewers have chosen. (Gives a deep sigh, and gazes into the distance. Sees no one watches. Finishes reviewing.)

## Heroes Fall

### A Heroes Unleashed Novel by Morgon Newquist

#### Review by Jim McCoy

So yup, I'm reviewing two superhero novels in a row. But sometimes that's a good thing. One of the weirdest things about being a book reviewer is the mental shifts I go through between books. I mean, I read the entire Honor Harrington series up to *At All Costs* in one fell swoop and only stopped there because that was the last book that was available at that time. I read through *The Dragonlance Chronicles* straight through and then *Dragonlance Legends* starting the next day. But when I'm reading things in an order that goes SF Comedy, Space Opera, Urban Fantasy, Superhero novel, etc. it gets a little weird sometimes. As soon as I come down from the last book I read and its universe I end up in a completely different one. At least this time they were similar and my poor, abused brain didn't have to suffer as much. Come to think of it, I didn't suffer at all because *Heroes Fall* is a really good book.

Don't get me wrong. *Heroes Fall* starts quickly but you don't really get a full taste of what's to come right up front. This novel is a slow burn and a long build. I liked that about it. As you're reading, pay attention to what is going on. It will be important later and that includes some of the stuff that you're convinced doesn't matter. The stakes keep on increasing right up until the end.

Victoria Westdale is our heroine and she goes by her actual, real name. I found that a bit strange in a superhero novel. I mean, I had thought that I was going to get someone with named after a power or a bird or something but nope. She's Victoria and she rocks. Victoria spends her time using her superpowers to bust smalltime crooks and working in a gas station. She's about the most unpretentious superhero I've ever heard of. In a weird way, her lack of pretense is what makes the whole story work.

Look, I like heroes in the Superman mold, and I think Green Lanterns in general, and Hal Jordan in particular, are the greatest things that ever happened to the superhero genre. I love watching those guys fly off to save an entire star system that's at war with itself, armed only with their powers and a plucky attitude. I really do. That's not Victoria though. She doesn't set out to save the entire world. She starts out the novel trying to save one girl from a gang of thugs. That's the single biggest reason that *Heroes Unleashed* makes sense.

Victoria is a smalltime hero that gets caught up into something she hadn't anticipated. I like this approach because it allows her to learn what is going on. While she is learning what the problem is, so are we. We're not dealing with long bouts of exposition while someone takes us by the hand and walks us through the problem. We're actively learning about the world that we've been dropped in and we're not being talked down to. I really liked this approach.

Now that I think about it (Don't tell my mom I was thinking. She'll tell you it always gets me in trouble.) Victoria is pretty much the answer to anyone who has a problem with the "strong female protagonist" movement, and not just because super strength is her superpower. While it is true that Victoria is quite the asskicker, there's more than just that to her. One of the strong themes of *Heroes Unleashed* is Victoria's caring nature. She's not just a woman with lots of muscle, she's a woman that wants to help. The superhero culture in the work is one of crass commercialism and Victoria rejects that, deciding instead to work someplace where she can make a real difference. I don't want to spoil too much, but she remembers her roots and works really hard to protect those who are like she once was. I have a lot of respect for this chick and I don't say that about too many people, real or fictional.



Any superhero novel is going to include a number of fight scenes and Newquist has done her job splendidly. Not only are the fight scenes fast paced and exciting but she groks that which lies at the core of a superhero fight: A battle between the participants and their powers. When characters in Heroes Fall go up against each other it feels right because they're taking advantage of everything they can, using both their powers and the way they interact with the environment around them. Newquist could teach a class entitled "Superhero Battles and How to Write Them." I'd probably sign up.

Of course someone out there is going to consider my praise for the battles as being a condemnation of the plot. They're wrong. I've mentioned the slow burn aspect of Heroes Fall previously and that's a big part of it. There's more to it than just that though. There is a lot of backstory here and it is woven into the plot seamlessly and in a way that makes it not just relevant, but important. There isn't a wasted page here. What is here makes sense though. It moves quickly and we're constantly trying to keep up, but it is about as logical and entertaining as is humanly possible. This is one of those books where I knew you had to go to work and that meant I should've been in the shower ten minutes ago, but let's fact face it, I'm a Lyft driver and I don't have a schedule so I can go ahead and read this next chapter and... uhhh... I was supposed to leave half an hour ago and I'm still in my pajamas. It's a good thing I don't have a boss.

I can't quite believe that I'm just now mentioning this, but Heroes Fall is the first in a new series. I believe it's going to be a magnum opus with multiple contributors along the lines of Chris Kennedy Publishing's Four Horseman Universe. I hope I'm right because the Heroes Fall universe is one with a lot of potential and more authors means I get new books faster. I'm Mr. Greedy Fan. I like that.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Thrown Vehicles

## Jinxers by Sabrina Chase Review by Pat Patterson

I'm 61. Do I qualify as a Young Adult? Well, based on my reaction to Jinxers, I'd have to say yes.

Jin is a street rat, fighting for survival in a bitterly cold winter in a city of Thama. (I'm thinking London-ish, but YMMV.) He's cold and hungry, and he lost his shelter in a fire. He's on the run from thugs, who think he might have stolen gold from his deceased benefactor; actually, he thinks he stole the gold as well, but the truth is that he took it to the undertaker to pay for a decent burial. It's a neat little plot point, which keeps him on the edge, regardless of the other circumstances.

While searching through the ruins of a burned-out building for something he can swap for another day of life, he finds...

Okay, I promise this won't be a very long rabbit trail. When I was around 10, marbles suddenly emerged as a wonderful thing for boys to have. Nobody that I knew ever played with them like Tom Sawyer, but we collected them and swapped them. Some of them were incredibly beautiful.

...a glowing glass sphere, and when he takes it in his hand, a door to another world opens up, and he falls through, and he is WARM! Hot, actually, because he's in a sandy desert (I'm thinking generic Middle East, but again, YMMV) and before long, he passes out...

...only to awake in an underground cavern, where he is cared for by a woman and her daughter, both of whom are "swathed in fabric from head to foot."



And his adventures begin...

...I appear to be fascinated by the use of ellipses in this review...

There comes a point in every good book where you find you are captured. After that point, there is NOTHING you can do, because the author OWNS your attention. I'm guessing what all authors strive for is an opening sentence that accomplishes the capture: Call me Ishmael; "TOM! YOU, TOM!"; Lou- is Wu was under the wire. Those are classic, and there are certainly others which may be your personal favorite, and I hope not to insult you by leaving them out. You may, if you wish, append them to this review by way of adding a comment. However, the point at which Sabrina owned MY attention was when I read the title of Chapter 2, which is: "More Lost Than Usual."

Is that not beautiful?

"More Lost Than Usual." That would make a good bumper sticker, wouldn't it?

Jin and Zinde (the daughter swathed in cloth) and Moro (the son of the well digger) conspire to free the village of Gilbadeh from the grim predations of The Repressive Exploiters, in the process discovering allies and enemies, some more incredibly beautiful marbles, umm, I mean glowing spheres, and bounce from world to world in the process. If you think that rips the beauty from the story, it does. The ferocity of Zinde, who craves any reason to use her father's sword, and the snarky comments of Moro must really be read to be appreciated. I'm leaving out the contributions of the adults almost entirely, because the story isn't about them. It's also really not about the ability of Jin to manipulate the marbles to open the portals, although that is an essential plot point; those with that ability are referred to as Jinxers, hence the name of the book. What makes the book satisfying, other than the excellent writing, is that Jin finds freedom from his demons of guilt, and finds family and purpose as well.

I hope this isn't going to be a stand-alone book. The characters are engaging, and there remains a great deal of injustice to be relieved, but there are ethical issues with that, as well. I'd like to see how those resolve, so:

Please, Sabrina, may we have some more?

## The Lawyers of Mars by Pam Uphoff Review by Pat Patterson

First, I must offer my profound apology for going so long between book reviews. This was totally a function of life as we know it, a buzzing, incessant turbulence of irritations and stimuli, separated only by the blessed surcease of sleep.

There, I've used my quota of purple prose, now I can get to work.

I've been squeezing in reads of The Lawyers of Mars in between other things, and that's not entirely a bad thing. This is one of the books that I have had mutually contradictory thoughts about. On the one hand, I wanted to read read read fast so I can find out how the plot resolves. On the other hand, it is SO well written that I wanted it to go on forever. So, I indulged Hand Two for several days, and today I finally indulged Hand One. And the Gripping Hand is this is a funny, engaging book that keeps you on your toes throughout.

Xaero is the hero. She's a lizard, and a lawyer. You are hooked already, aren't you? You never expected lizard, lawyer, and hero all to be used in the same sentence, and yet, there you go! She's a she, but it's complicated, and I absolutely refuse to diagram out why that is true, because it will ruin the fun for you.

Her law firm doesn't do criminal law, but they have taken on one case, and stuck her with it. Her client is a nasty piece of work, and just as soon as she gets him off, she gets stuck with an even nastier client. And from there, we move into the intrigue of the first novella...

Office politics. Gender politics. Even political politics; not to mention raquetball playing plants and attempts to blow up the ecosystem. Xaero can handle them all, and she always has a knife, which is VERY important to her future.

Here's one of the greatest aspects of Pam's writing: she doesn't tell, she shows; and she doesn't show it all at once, either. There is a LOT to be shown, from the physical descriptions of the Martians, to the ecosystem, even the measures of time and distance. I found myself being swept up by the story, with a little question in my mind about (whatever) and then she does a reveal in a page or so, and the story doesn't suffer at all! In fact, she gives you enough of the differences, and there are enough similarities, that you can read the story without any sense of discontinuity at all.

Another thing: the book is about Lawyers. Says so right in the title. I'm not a lawyer, don't play one on TV, and I didn't sleep in a Holiday Inn last night, BUT I did expect to have to use my secret weapon. My gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant foxy praying black grandmother of Woodstock GA, is a legal parapro, and I was fully prepared to have to ask her to translate some lawyer-speak for me. DID NOT HAVE TO DO THAT! Although some of the scenes take place in court, and there are legal proceedings, it was never so advanced that I lost track of the story. I think people in the legal profession will be amused at some of the banter, but it was amusing to me as well.

Now, I have recently been admonished for including a spoiler (it was a mistake, honest) so I'm not going to divulge much more. I will say that the book consists of three novellas: The Lawyers of Mars; Martian Times; Martians in Space (aka M-A-ARTIAANS IN SP\_A\_A\_ACE!!!) and you may draw your own conclusions from the titles. Each novella could be a stand-alone, but the characters carry over, and they really are too good a mix to split up.

And I will leave you with this final bit of wisdom: How do you hug a Martian? VERY carefully, no kidding, I mean it. Do it VERY CAREFULLY!

## The Municipalists by Seth Fried Review by Heath Row

I had high hopes for this novel, allegedly a science fiction story about urban planning, artificial intelligence, computer viruses, and domestic terrorism. What's not to like? Truth be told, much. Given the writer's pedigree -- a contributor to The New Yorker, as well as Tin House, McSweeney's, and The Kenyon Review, Fried is an accomplished writer, but that doesn't necessarily make for good science fiction -- but modern fiction with the suggestion of science. In fact, Kirkus Reviews called the book "fun" and "relatively harmless." Personally, I prefer dangerous visions or the mostly harmless. This debut novel is neither. It's... nice. Fine, even.

Having lost his parents in a train accident while a preteen, Henry Thompson is a civil engineer working for the U.S. Municipal Survey in Suitland, Maryland. Terrorist attacks -- drones, naturally -- destroy the Survey's Suitland headquarters in addition to facilities in the city of Metropolis. Thompson is paired with a holographically embodied AI named Owen -- OWEN being an acronym for Object-Oriented Database and Working Ekistics Network -- to track down the leader of the Esperanto-speaking insurrectionists, station chief Terrence Kirklin, who also seems to have abducted, brainwashed, and perhaps seduced Sarah Laury, the Olympian teenage daughter of Metropolis's mayor.

Owen's holographic self is projected by a tie clip worn by Thompson, and the AI is more Marvin than R. Daneel Olivaw. The mismatched pair of sleuthing buddies hunt Kirklin and attempt to rescue Laury, making for a pleasant and occasionally glib caper.

Despite the relatively shallow nature of the novel, there's enough geekiness, if not science, to be intriguing. Trainspotting of a sort plays a role, and Fried balances references to actual movies such as *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Changeling* with fictional texts including Andre Denard's *Anatomy of a City* and Eleanor Pomodoro's *The Syntax of Friendship*. While interesting, the aspect of being neither wholly real nor fantastic proves uneven and dissatisfying. The book teases with aspects of Ayn Rand and Isaac Asimov but doesn't quite deliver.

## Night Shifted by Kate Paulk Review by Pat Patterson

What if vampires WEREN'T the creepy blood-lusting monsters Bram Stoker described? What if they were regular folks who had one bad date too many?

Well, that's what I found out when I was loaned this short story by my fellow Mad Genius Club fan The Real McChuck. Seems it's rather difficult to live a normal life in Houston if you are a regular guy, and a vampire. The benefits (including the speed and muscle power) just don't offset the hassles of trying to get a college schedule consisting of nothing but night classes meeting after dark. Frankly, as a person who scranched my way through taking night classes for three degrees at Georgia State University, I might recommend moving from Texas to Atlanta, but then again, it seems that everybody else in the country has already had that idea, to judge from the traffic, so I'm not going to offer that as career advice. Just, you know, you always have options, even if you are a vampire. Heck, I saw plenty of undergrad art students that might have been vampires, and this was as far back as 1977, when nobody was goth yet. I don't think any of the business students were vampires, although they were all night students, and I'm pretty sure the psych majors were mostly harmless. The school of journalism, though: well, all bets were off.

So, our hero, the hapless vampire and truly a nice person, by the way, does what the rest of us do: he gets a job to pay the bills. Mind you, he is somewhat restricted, because the daylight thing? It's a deal killer. Not to mention a vampire killer. Fortunately, he has a boss who will cover for him on those few days when sun intrudes on the graveyard shift in the job he finds to be most convenient: clerking in a convenience store. It's not all bad, if you don't mind working hard part of the time (and being bored out of your gourd, part of the time, but that doesn't enter into the story). There are some regular customers who make the store a part of their routine. And by the way, this is a true-to life description. I used to work the night shift at the Pig in Macon, and there were cops who would drop by nearly every night, which worked in my favor once when I got lost downtown and ran a red light while looking for a street I recognized.

But in the Houston convenience store on the night shift, it gets weird one night. Yeah, even more weird than a vampire ringing up Slurpees. A pitiful, scrawny, frightened little snip of a girl walks through the front door and tries to kill the vampire, because, well, they are evil, ya know? Except this one isn't, so it's really good that the girl (going by the name of Anna, although it COULD be an alias, nobody checked her ID) is so marvelously ill-informed about what kills vampires, and is pretty incompetent at what she does know. Really, the only thing she accomplishes is to make a mess.

And then the plot thickens...

It's a short, sweet little story, and well worth a buck for those of you who have one. Kate's humor shines in this one, and that's a really, really good thing. I happen to like warped, and this is just warped enough to make me smile. In my brain. I don't really smile with my face at anything, except my kids and especially my grandkids, or when I tell my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant foxy praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA a long involved explanation of something and then tell her I just made it up. That will, rarely, make my face smile. But *Night Shifted* definitely made my brain smile.

## The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman Review by Heath Row

Having recently reread *Good Omens* so I could watch the Amazon Prime streaming series with my wife, when I saw this new mass market paperback at the airport, I knew it was time to finally read it. This 13th printing issued in 2019 sports a glorious cover drawn by Robert McGinnis and joins recent editions of at least four other Gaiman titles also with McGinnis cover art. The work of McGinnis, one of the best paperback artists ever active, makes these editions well worth getting, regardless of whether you've read the book before. They're beautiful.

I had not read *Ocean* before, and I'm not sure why I waited so long -- though I'm glad I did. Originally intended as a short story, the book tells the story of an opal miner and the Hempstock family, drawing on the landscape of Gaiman's own childhood. In the Prologue, that's described as "winding Sussex country roads," as the reader is introduced to the first-person narrator and ostensible protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout. That man seeks some alone time after a funeral and finds himself driving past his childhood home to the farmhouse at the end of the lane. There, he encounters Ginnie Hempstock, or her mother, Old Mrs. Hempstock (after all, it has been 40 years), who remembers him. He asks if he can go to the duck pond, a pond that Ginnie's daughter Lettie, the narrator's childhood friend, had called the sea.

When Lettie and the narrator first met, she was 11, and he was seven. An active reader -- Dick Whittington and His Cat, *Smash!* comics, *The Secret Seven*, Egyptian myths, and the fictional *Pansy Saves the School* and *Sandie Sees It Through* -- he didn't have many friends, and his seventh year brought several challenges: the suicide of a lodger, a seductive housekeeper, and an incursion of various creatures and spirits from the margins, fleas, all, disrupting the relative peace and calm of the community.

The new housekeeper, Ursula Monkton, isn't what she seems, and neither are the Hempstocks. Lettie; her mother, Ginnie; and her grandmother are all old, very old. "I remember the day the moon came,"

the eldest says. But they are most definitely not witches. Together, the three of them help stave off the incursion of the fleas, saving the narrator's life -- and the world.

This slim fantasy -- only 237 pages in this edition -- contains a lot of wonder: fairy rings, dowsing, manta wolfs, wormholes (or hole worms?), hunger birds and other varmints, and a pond that is an ocean, that is the universe itself, "from Egg to Rose." In the end, the book is about sacrifice, the sacrifice by wonder for the mundane. It is also a book about memory, and about forgetting: What we remember, how we remember it, and whether it's better to remember, or to forget. And it's about returning home, regardless of whether we can ever really remember home.

## The Sky Suspended by Laura Montgomery Review by Pat Patterson

5.0 out of 5 stars

Tasty, filling, and packed fully of yummy nuggets!

I've tried to come up with something to compare this book to, but all I get is 'fruitcake' and I am NOT going to go with fruitcake. I don't LIKE fruitcake, and I like this book.

If my big fat Manx cat SugarBelly will cooperate by staying off my left hand and not playing with the touchpad, I will explain the comparison. MOVE, SUGARBELLY! There, that's better. You will find many little 'stop and look at me' moments, particularly in the beginning, that you probably are going to want to read the book a second time, just to appreciate the descriptions. For example, the book opens with the chase of a young man on the Washington Mall by two mounted police. The second policeman is described as 'a piebald on a piebald.' What? Does the second cop have some awful skin disease that is described rudely? Well, no. As we continue the read, we discover that genetic engineering is in common use, and that one of the options parents are choosing is for their children to have wildly colored skin. And that there has arisen a Department of Souls, to enforce regulations limiting the modifications to non-brain involvement. It is Washington, after all, and bureaucracy thrives in that environment.

The first Laura Montgomery book I read was 'Manx Prize,' and throughout I thought, this book was written by an engineer. Well, I was wrong, and if I had read this book first, I would have guessed correctly: this book is written by a lawyer. That presents us with many of the 'stop-and-look' moments (let's call them nuggets), because in the midst of a crowd event (a spontaneous line forming), two main characters start talking about legal issues. It's funny enough to me, a non-lawyer type, but it's probably a great yock to lawyers, and it has the look of being fun to write.

When I first started reading Larry Niven in 1978, I was hooked immediately. He says that one of his techniques is to imagine 'ONE' technological change (for example, the transfer booth) and then extrapolate from there to write about the way it will impact society. You can find evidence of this approach (which is an EXCELLENT approach) in the way Laura writes about gene engineering. Not only do we have the Department of Souls, we have the case of Molly, a woman who was selected by her parents for longevity treatments. As an unintended consequence of the treatment, she has the appearance of a 12-year-old girl. So, despite her brilliance and academic achievements, she can't get hired as a lawyer, and works as a reporter until such time as puberty hits.

Now, about that line: They have lined up for non-existent lottery tickets to select people to go on the next interstellar voyage. The first interstellar voyage is returning, and for me that presented a mystery I wanted SOLVED! I absolutely get that it was going to take months before ship arrived on earth, but I was willing to wait those months. Alas and alack.

Instead, there was a deeper mystery, which is: why has there been only one ship? Why isn't another ship being built RIGHT NOW? And there we have the central issue. And, as is appropriate for a lawyer-written book, the solution comes from the legal process. Watching the lawyers work through their various ethical dilemmas in order to solve the 'real' problem, as opposed to the client's problem, is rather fascinating. It's as if they have to out-think themselves in order to come to a result they can live with.

I have to make a comment about the cover art, which is beautiful. It's from a photograph taken by the author of her son from the Lincoln Memorial. It was set in its final form by Phil Smith, who has also done covers for her other works.

Any incoherency in this review should not be attributed to Laura's work, but rather to the fact that my fat Manx cat SugarBelly would NOT leave me alone. She demanded to know why this book didn't have Manx in the title, and when I told her it wasn't all about her, she turned her cat eyes on me and clearly told me I was speaking nonsense.

## Slow Train to Arcturus by Eric Flint and Dave Freer Review by Pat Patterson

In the coolest science fiction, you get to play around with the powers and the limits of the gadgets. You get to undertake incredible missions, and discuss the impact on the travelers as well as those left behind. And finally, for me at least, the real story is about how the author makes people come alive, and observes them being human. And Eric and Dave have done all this, and given us a great swashbuckling adventure at 0.3 lights, even throwing in aliens, one of whom has a much worse case of PMS than humans will ever, ever experience.

Somewhere I've got a copy of the ideas Larry Niven came up with for spaceship worlds. The form of the ship in Slow Train offers a lot of advantages over some of those ideas, at least in the sense that it doesn't require technology that we just don't have yet. What we have is a series of nickel iron asteroids, heated in a solar mirror and expanded by water flashing into steam. Build the habitats separate them from each other, and populate each one with a group that doesn't want to live on earth any more, for whatever reason. Launch them outbound, and every time you get to a star with a Goldilocks zone, you drop off a bead. Never slow down, so you aren't wasting 70% of your fuel in braking and recovering lost momentum. That's most of the science part, but to emphasize the difficulties that took the colonists out bound in the first place, an alien race with interstellar capability in decline spots the train, and decides to make rendezvous. Since the bead they land on first contains cannibalistic whack jobs with explosives, things don't go well.

Kretz, the central alien, discovers he has to pass through several more habitats to be rescued, and to effect rescue of his partner. He accumulates a following, as he passes through a zero-tech farming habitat, a Naked Dominatrix habitat, a jungle primitive habitat with a kick, the habitat where people fly (and are engineers) and finally, to a Great Leader habitat.



There is plenty of humor available here, beginning with the fact that the aliens themselves were required to be misfits before they could handle the stresses of a long space voyage. There is a standard language of the alien joke, where Kretz meets Howard, then thinks all humans are called Howard. Differences of sexual dimorphism bring some embarrassing moments, as does priggery and pomposity. Throughout, though, the issue of 'who is the real alien' shifts, each time Kretz and crew enter a new habitat. And when faced with survival, those pre-disposed to learning eventually accept the most divergent.

Those who don't pretty much get blasted between the eyes.

And IF a great story, which this is, HAS to have a message, that's it. But the message never gets in the way of the writing, nor the story.

## The Space Between by Scott J. Robinson Review by Pat Patterson

Well, if I'm not in Texas, I seem to be in Australia. At least, that is the impression I'm getting by the books I've been reading.

I have only JUST now gotten back into the swing of things of reviewing. For some bizarre reason, Pam Uphoff's "The Lawyers of Mars" took four days to read, which is longer than I spent reading "Gone With The Wind." That is NOT a criticism of Pam's work, by the way, I loved it. It's just that life, the universe, and everything seemed to conspire there for a bit to put me off schedule.

And after reading about Martian lawyers, I found myself with two books in my queue, and no idea of how I put them there. I'm sure I had a well thought out plan, and so far, it's looking like a good choice; just no memory of adding these two items.

However, I can at least identify the source of the book I'm reviewing today. Scott J Robinson, of Woodford, near Brisbane in Queensland, Australia, is a fan of The Mad Genius Club, as I am. However, Scott's also a writer, and evidently I glommed on to that fact and grabbed his book to read and review. I hope he doesn't mind.

I don't think he will, though, because he wrote a great book, and I'm going to tell you about it.

First, The Prologue. Skip it. Don't read it. It will confuse you twice, and the second confusion is the only one that's going to be cleared up in this book. I feel relatively certain that the first confusion will be cleared up in his later books, but it won't add ANYTHING (well, maybe a smidge) to the story, so: just skip The Prologue. My advice, take it or leave it.

So, start the book off by meeting Kim. She's irritating. She's irritating because she's usually right, and because she has a very low tolerance for fools. However, she is rather brilliant at grasping the key facts of a confusing situation, and getting things done, so there is that. Umm, she's a regular old Earth-type human by the way. Half Aussie, half American, and maybe that's why she is so irritating. Don't know; the only Aussies I've ever hung out with were magnificent in every way. I did know a New Zealander once who was a bit abrupt, but that might have been because I was 19 and a bit of a pain in the patoot at the time.



After you've met Kim, meet Meledrin. She's irritating, too. She's irritating because she is an elf, and has a deeply internalized belief in her own superiority, with respect to everyone else she comes in contact with AFTER she leaves her homeland. In her favor, though, she does condescend to treat her pet man with courtesy and respect, unlike her sister elves, and she has kept him around for 23 years when a year is the most that the other elves will spend on their dalliances. Perhaps related to this quirk in her character, she also is willing to take responsibility for Keeble, the one-handed dwarf, who has been exiled from his home to die. (Note: I don't know if his name is an intentional joke. In the States, Keebler is a company that makes cookies, and they used to run an ad campaign that claimed their cookies were made by elves in hollow trees. So, naming a dwarf Keeble is funny here. Is it funny Down Under?)

Keeble, the dwarf, isn't irritating. He is to Meledrin, but that's partly due to the fact that she has to be responsible for him, and partly due to the fact that she is contemptuous of all who aren't elves. To the rest of us, though, he's a nice guy, although a bit pathetic. All he wants to do is work, he can't keep a thought in his head, and he is great at whatever he does. I almost said "at whatever he sets his hand to," but then I'd have to explain that no pun was intended, and it's just not worth the effort.

And finally, there is Tuki, the giant. He's a bit irritating as well. It's mostly because he is so passive, due to being raised in a culture in which men can't make any decisions, but he also has what is a fatal flaw, at least for a Southern Redneck like myself: he won't eat bacon. Not only that, but he won't eat ANY meat. And he's really big, but he refuses to use his strength to get his way, and consequently gets the sand beat out of him by smaller people who mistake him for a troll. He's not a troll, by the way, he's a moai. (The Easter Island statues are also called moai, but if there is a tie-in, it doesn't happen in this novel.) He has found a crystal ball (his sweetie sent him after it) which acts as a...nah, not gonna tell you that.

So, four different kinds of people, each with a different skill set. First, they have to combat space bats. (The story reads a lot better than that.) Then they have to deal with organizational stodginess. And then other things happen, but I'm on a no-spoiler kick, so I'm not going to further divulge.

What I will do is tell you this: Scott is an excellent writer. No purple prose, no confusion, no dithering about; just good, straight forward writing. This is why I love indie publishing: phenomenal writers can get their work published without having to get sliced to pieces by corporations. Of course, I'd LOVE to see Scott's work become the next Game of Thrones, but actually, I don't think George RR's books had that much of an audience until HBO made a series with nekkid wimmin in it. Could be wrong, been wrong before. But I ain't wrong about this: The Space Between is worth your time.

## Sweet Alice, a Shifters' Short Story by Sarah A. Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson

Even though "Sweet Alice" is included in the Bonus Content section of "Crawling Between Heaven and Earth," it's also offered as a separate transaction on Amazon, and that's how I got it. So, I'll give it a review of its' own.

My first introduction to Sarah Hoyt was "Draw One In The Dark," which I picked up on Baen.com. I don't remember if I got it when it was part of the Baen Free Library or not, but it was there and still is, and whether the first taste was free or not, I got hooked enough on the stories of the Athens Diner to read all of them. Sweet Alice is the back story of one of the main characters (or should I say 'mane characters') in the series, Police Officer Rafiel Trall, of the Goldport Police Department.

He's a shape-shifter. A lion. And when we meet him, he is in that form, and he wants to ... snuggle ... with the main character, Kyrie, who also happens to be a shape-shifter (a panther). Despite the intense chemistry between the two of them, they never hook up. Some of that is due to Kyrie's attraction to Tom, a shape-shifting dragon, and former drug addict (and unfortunately in real life, sometimes good girls really do like bad boys, but it works out okay in the story), but partly because Rafiel just doesn't try to push the relationship. He's got some problems with commitment.

And the story of Sweet Alice explains that. She was his high school sweetheart, but he never told her he was a lion.

And I'm not going to tell you not one single thing else about the story. Get Sweet Alice by its lonesome, or get *Crawling Between Heaven and Earth*, and find out yourself.

You will be glad you did.

### The Ugly Knight by Elizabeth A. Lightfoot Review by Pat Patterson

This is such a pleasant, pleasant book! There is a lightness in the way it is written, that even in the scenes where Korton (*The Ugly Knight*) and Elzi (his resolute love interest) face the Ultimate Evil, it's almost...peaceful. There is one exception, which I'll get to later.

I THINK that the reason the book is so pleasant has to do with the nature of Korton. He is an unassuming young man, the son and grandson of a tailor, so he doesn't have snooty attitudes to get over before he becomes likable. He succeeds in his difficult apprenticeship process because he works hard. He gets up early. He takes care of his own horse. And while he does not have the raw, natural talent of Jelan, a senior squire who befriends him, he just keeps practicing and hammering away until, pretty much to everyone's surprise, he finishes early and with greater skills than any of his peers.

It's true character, not just a role that he is playing. On his first quest, to kill a dragon, he takes the time to befriend an aged house servant. Because this is a book, of course, it MUST be shown that his easy-going relationships with servants produce unexpected rewards, but honestly folks: he's not doing it for that reason. He's just a nice guy. And he meets a nice girl, and good things happen: they become friends, and eventually fall in love.

Now, the girl (Elzi) is an orphan, taken in during a time of troubles, and put to work in the castle to earn her keep under the tutelage of the aged house servant mentioned earlier. She is one tough cookie. She takes care of him after he returns, with a badly burned arm, from killing the dragon, and crochets while doing it. He takes her crocheting, drops the needles, and then they engage in mock sword fights with the crochet needles. And giggle. (Yup, that's true love on the way.) When he recovers, he uses his carpentry skills to carve a couple of wooden swords, and teaches Elzi how to fight. And because she can use a sword, she absolutely refuses to let him go off and do dangerous stuff while she waits back at the cottage, stirring leeks and lentils. It's a good thing, too, because she just happens to have....nah, not gonna tell you that part.

Okay, you remember I said there is one exception to the peaceful feeling in reading of his adventures? It relates, surprisingly, to Jelan, the senior squire who befriended him. There is a creepiness to the inter-

actions. Don't know how she does it, but it's there. And that's one of the several points at which future books ( and PLEASE let there be future books) can extend and expand.

A point worth mentioning: there are two Amazon authors named Elizabeth Lightfoot. You want the one with the middle initial A. Got that? Elizabeth A. Lightfoot wrote "The Ugly Knight." The OTHER Elizabeth Lightfoot wrote a book about First Lady Michelle Obama. And if you are crass enough to try to make a joke about ugly, shame on you. Shame, shame, shame on you!

## Victoria: A Novel of Fourth Generation Warfare By Thomas Hobbes Review by Chris Nuttall

If you like politically correct books, run away!

It is immensely difficult to review this book.

There are bits of it I liked immensely and approved uncritically. But there are also bits I disliked strongly and sections I thought made little or no sense. The main character – the book is written in a memoir style, not unlike *The Last Centurion* – is a strange mixture of positive and negative trends. He is smart and crafty, thinking up new angles of attack very rapidly when necessary, yet he quite definitely crosses the line into bare-faced hypocrisy more than once. The only thing that redeems him from a charge of being worse than those he fights is a self-awareness that should be recognised, if not admired.

The book is set in the very near American future. The main character, John Rumford, is a Marine who is pushed into retirement after taking a stand against the introduction of women into the Marine Corps. This whole scene grates; I can see his point, but at the same time he is very clearly guilty of at least one offense against military order – and, frankly, his treatment of a fellow Marine is appalling. There is nothing to say if she is actually capable of pulling her weight or not, as the narrator doesn't tell us anything about her. (Later, the narrator takes care to justify his sharp treatment of another, far more idiotic, woman; maybe, just maybe, a piece of fridge brilliance.)

I should probably note, for the record, that this is the precursor to a nasty streak of sexism running through the book that tends to suggest women are better off in the home, instead of the battlefield. Rumford clearly believes that women should not be in the military (or the church) – which is arguable – but that they should also be looked after by men. I don't think there was a suggestion anywhere in the book that women should be armed, even though a woman with a gun is a proven deterrent against rape. Nor does the book recognise the problems that gave birth to early feminism, problems that will probably reappear within a generation in Victoria.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. After he leaves the corps (and discovers that bureaucratic regulations make it impossible to make a living farming), Rumford is drawn into the efforts of a group of people harnessing the power of the people to oppose the 'Cultural Marxists,' which might also be known as Social Justice Warriors/Bullies. This is easily the best part of the book, with the main character organising local groups that fight back (non-violently) against the drug dealers and suchlike infesting their neighbourhoods. Rumford goes into considerable detail about how the government, which is supposed to help the poor, actually makes life worse for them – a problem caused, in part, by 'big picture' people who put the rights of criminals ahead of the rights of ordinary people. There are many ideas here that can and should be used to take back the streets and revitalise helpless communities, as well as reawakening public participation in democracy.

The downside of this is that the book draws a sharp line between the ‘good’ characters and the ‘bad’ characters. (It is notable that most, if not all, of the ‘bad’ characters are quite incompetent.) One incident explores a protest movement against the insertion of gay councillors into a school. The politician whose idea it was is depicted as the blackmail victim of one of the most radical homosexual rights activists. There is no suggestion that this idea might be born from genuine concern, if ill-expressed. If you view the world in black and white, you will probably applaud the situation; if you view the world in shades of grey, you may find it makes you uncomfortable.

Rightly or wrongly, though, this does touch on one of the most dangerous problems facing the west – the curse of political correctness. A sensible refusal to cause offense has mutated into a flat refusal to hold an open discussion about race, sexuality, abortion and any of the other issues ... even though such issues are quite obvious to all with eyes to see. To brand one’s enemies as racist/sexist/etc does not help, it merely makes discussion impossible. If nothing else, this realisation is one that should be borne in mind at all times. Just because someone has a different point of view doesn’t make them an unredeemable scumbag.

Of course not. That’s the kind of thinking that led to the gulags.

The second part of the book covers events in the former United States as the federal government finally overreaches itself and collapses into chaos. Rumford finds himself serving as a military commander in one of the free states (the Northern Confederation, later renamed Victoria), tackling a number of different foes and tactical problems arising from the wreckage of the USA. Some of them are more reasonable than others; on one hand, I have no problems seeing radical regimes rising out of the ashes, but it’s hard to understand how such regimes survive for very long. The international involvement also doesn’t make sense; loaning a navy is, by any reasonable definition, an act of war, while very few current world powers will survive a collapse of the US unscathed. China will probably have a civil war instead of becoming top dog in Asia.

It’s probably better to look at these as a succession of tactical outlines, rather than actual novels. Even so, there are still issues. One of the most striking is the author’s contemptuous attitude to women in both government and the military. A radical feminist faction that actually manages to take and hold power cannot be casually dismissed, no matter how demented it is. The author points out, correctly, just how many flaws there are in the defences they use ... but the underlying tactical doctrine, the use of technology instead of boots on the ground, is a male invention. Furthermore, the final solution to that whole issue is absurd. I would not care to be the military officer in training who dared propose it to his superiors!

The third and final part of the book covers the large-scale adoption of ‘retro-culture;’ a regression, of sorts, to the technology used during the Victorian Era. There is something to be said, as the author notes, for living in an idealised community, such as the Shire (from *The Hobbit/The Lord of the Rings*, which the author mentions by name). On the other hand, I simply know too much about the past to consider it a smart move. The Victorian Era was very good for the people on top, but rather less good for everyone else. *Little House on the Prairie* sounds good; *Pioneer Girl* makes it clear just how hard life actually was for the settlers. There’s also the additional problem that the Shire was practically defenceless (and perhaps the last major settlement of Hobbits in existence) and did get occupied during the War of the Ring. Victoria is not defenceless, but how long will that last?

(Alternate The Hobbit/The Lord of the Rings: Smaug discovers where Bilbo actually comes from and flies off to lay waste to the Shire, instead of Laketown.)

Victoria does avoid the trap of a top-down adoption of retro-culture (unlike almost all the other radical groups in the novel) but it walks headlong into another trap. I don't see that much difference between dictates from on high and communal pressure to conform. The spread of Radical Islam follows a similar path; it starts with encouraging people to conform and ends with forced compliance. There is an indefinable air of smugness around the book's founding father character, who on one hand refuses to approve a law to force the imposition of retro-culture while planning a social crusade to force its imposition.

I am a child of the digital age. I know that technology brings problems – hell, every new development brings problems. (The Victorians complained about steam ships, of all things.) Yes, there will be problems with advanced technology being used to build weapons (the author specifically discusses genetically-modified diseases) but advanced technology can also be used to cope with the problems. Many of the moral headaches caused by technology owe their source to older problems, not technology. The failure to provide consistent morale leadership is far more damaging than internet porn.

But it is the failure to understand such leadership that undermines all attempts to renew it, including the solutions depicted in this book. Moral leadership requires adherence to two basic rules; 'let he who is without sin' and 'don't be a dick.' Compromising those rules destroys moral leadership; the Catholic Church, for example, completely ignored the first rule when trying to come to terms with abusive priests. Politicians who seek to hammer minority groups (everyone from homosexuals to smokers) for political advantage merely act like dicks, further undermining moral authority. The reason gay marriage is the gift that just keeps on giving, as far as liberals are concerned, is that it is, at base, an issue of freedom. To draw moral lines requires the ability to look beyond the next election and justify, for the ages, the reasons for those lines.

Freedom is important – and yes, sometimes, that includes free-dumb. Adults should be allowed to make their own personal choices – and to deal with the consequences.

The author has several of his female characters declare that they are content to be homemakers, content to leave outside affairs to the men. (And yet, the women are one of the largest forces behind one of the wars of the post-USA era.) They may be happy there – but not all of them will be. To insist that women remain within a very limited sphere, based on their gender, is a direct assault on freedom. It is sickening when Saudi Arabia does it in real life and yes, it is sickening in the book. If someone chooses it of her own free will, that's fine, but someone else shouldn't have to pay a social penalty for merely choosing to seek her own path (as long, of course, as non-consenting people are not harmed.)

There is a lot to like in this book. Non-violent grassroots activism may well hold the key to renewing the West. Taking back local government is vital if freedom is to survive. But there are attitudes in this book that grate ... and, at the same time, pose a threat to freedom just as dangerous (if less insidious) as those of the Social Justice Warriors.

One of them is worth giving special mention, because it touches on a very important present-day issue: the slow conversion of universities and colleges into indoctrination centres for the young. They preach the evils of western civilisation, while ignoring the far greater evils of all other civilisations. Midway through the book, the main characters – having allowed a bunch of academics to set up yet another indoctrination centre – carry out a massacre, killing them all. Part of me would like to applaud this, but



the rest of me is horrified. Ideas are not killed by creating martyrs, but by dismantling them piece by piece. Deprive the SJWs of their tricks and let them compete on equal terms. They will not win.

Nor is there any solid reason why the new college even exists. A major problem in the US today is the need for a college diploma to get anywhere, even though many courses are padded and have little to do with the sought-for job. (See this blog post for details). Why would this happen in Victoria, where the ability to actually do a job is more important than a piece of paper? Why would students go there if they can go straight into a job? And tackling this problem in real life would be simple, given the right amount of political will. Grassroots activists can push for college courses being slimmed down to the bare essentials, or discarded altogether.

This book will make you think. And that, perhaps, is the most important thing of all.

## White Magic Academy by Emily Martha Sorensen Review by Chris Nuttall

Emily Martha Sorensen is quite good at writing books and webcomics that have a habit of subverting our expectations, often in ways that seem unpredictable in foresight and practically inevitable in hindsight. Indeed, *Black Magic Academy* is more of a fairy tale story than a plain and simple magic school story. It starts out as the former and shifts smoothly to the latter. *White Magic Academy* switches the setting to the titular academy and changes the main character from Mildred, a good witch in a family of wicked witches, to her death-enemy Rulisa, a good witch who really doesn't want to be good.

Rulisa is ... odd, by any reasonable definition. On one hand, she's prickly, obnoxious, somewhat bigoted and misandrist and obsessed with proving herself (to the point where she's prepared to provoke a feud between two schools to boost her status). On the other, she's willing to risk everything for her friends and family (to the point that she gets expelled for doing a bad deed with good motivations), surprisingly brave and smart enough to question the fundamentals of her society. Mildred wanted to get out, although it took her some time to realise it; Rulisa really wants to fit in. And yet, she can't.

The story starts with her being expelled from yet another school for destroying a priceless artefact (on the grounds that the magic used to make it could be a major threat to both her father and her fiancé). Word has gotten around and no other school for wicked witches will take her, forcing her to attend *White Magic Academy* instead. Humiliated, Rulisa swears she'll make her new school the equal of her old one, a task she finds rather difficult when she discovers that the school is very different (and that Mildred is also a student there.) She learns, almost despite herself, and discovers that her tutors didn't tell her everything. And then she finds herself targeted by assassins, sent by her old school.

In some ways, *White Magic Academy* is more traditional than *Black Magic Academy*. There is more of a focus on schooling and education, rather than leaving the school halfway through the story. In others, it explores aspects of their society that weren't covered in the prequel. There's a good reason why witches have the maturity of thirteen-year-old girls (including her father, who gives me the same sort of negative vibes as Fred and George Weasley), ranging from a willingness to act like hormonal idiots to carrying jokes and pranks well into 'not funny' territory. And being told they have to kill their death-enemies or risk being killed in turn. Rulisa grows up, a lot, as she realises just how much was left out of the books she was forced to read at her former school.

And where *Black Magic Academy* can be said to be about Mildred finding her place, *White Magic*

Academy can be said to be about Rulisa growing into a mature young woman.

Overall, the book is light reading, but extremely fun. And clean – Rulisa is engaged to her boyfriend (their society practices betrothals, probably because of the lack of maturity), but they share nothing more than a few kisses throughout the story. I would recommend it to both young and old readers, without hesitation.

## Literary Criticism

### The Antichrist Handbook: The Horror and Hilarity of Left Behind by Fred Clark. Review by Chris Nuttall

The people in this book are not human.

If you are genuinely interested in writing, there are few better online resources than Fred Clark's elaborate takedown of the Left Behind books. The books fail on so many levels that it is utterly depressing to contemplate the fact that there are 11 novels and uncounted spin-offs, including three movies, based around them. Clark, however, dives into precisely why the series is so utterly awful, as well as putting forward snide comments and insights that leaves one worrying about the sanity of the writers.

Left Behind claims to be a story of Earth's last days. God has taken his true believers to heaven, leaving everyone else ... well, left behind. Centred around the main characters of Rayford Steele and Buck Williams, the series follows their adventures (and countless telephone calls) as they struggle to survive, while the Antichrist slowly takes over the entire world. Thankfully, as Clark points out, the writers have inadvertently proved that such events cannot possibly take place.

One particularly jarring example of their warped logic appears within the first few chapters. Israel, through a magical formula, has managed to make the desert bloom ... which, assuming one includes both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, still gives them less productive capability than a single small US state. Wanting to claim this formula for itself, Russia (!) and Ethiopia (!! ) launch a massive nuclear (!!!) attack against Israel (enough tonnage to obliterate Israel a hundred times over), which is a complete and utter failure. With Israel protected by Almighty God, the rest of the world ... yawns. No one seems to take account of the sudden shift in power.

What makes matters worse, however, are the two main characters. Steele is creepy; he's a middle-aged married man who has his eye on a pretty flight attendant, but reassures himself that he has never touched her and never will. This might have worked if his conversion had shown him what he really was, and how best to redeem himself, but he's still a complete jerk after becoming a Real True Christian. Buck Williams, meanwhile, is supposed to be a globe-trotting reporter, yet it is painfully obvious that he lacks any real competence at his work. On one hand, he witnesses the attack on Israel; on the other, he isn't interested in writing about it (and later his inaction will help the Antichrist rise to power). In short, both characters are Jerk Sues with paper-thin backgrounds.



For example, Steele is supposed to have served on a church board at one time, making him a hypocrite. However, as Clark points out, someone capable of faking such a role convincingly would not be bemused by relatively simple and common bible verses. He cannot be both a naïf and a hypocrite.

If this isn't bad enough, there is a nasty streak of sexism running through the story. We are meant to regard Irene Steel as the very model of a decent woman, yet there is a strong sense that Irene isn't (wasn't) the sort of person anyone would enjoy knowing. It is actually quite hard to blame her poor husband for considering an affair. On the other hand, Hattie Durham (the object of Steele's creepy lusts) is a much better person, yet the book considers her a slut and has many – many – punishments for her in store. This gets worse, as if it could, later in the series; Buck's female boss (tagged as a lesbian, although the word isn't said outright) is entirely correct to consider Buck a moron, but the book presents her as a villain. Her humiliation conga is the sort of thing that would only be enjoyable to watch if it happened to either Buck or Steele himself. And then there's Chloe Steel. She starts out as a competent resourceful girl, easily the most capable character in the series, and turns into a zero-dimensional idiot at the end of the first book.

But it is in world-building where the authors show their greatest failures. At the start of the book, God defends Israel. This would be quite startling, but no one ever reacts to this. Later on, millions of people just vanish ... including all of the world's children. A few chapters after that and everything is ... well, not quite back to normal, but certainly much calmer than they should be. And then there is the rise of Antichrist himself, which makes absolutely no sense at all. The authors needed to do a lot more bloody research.

Worse, they honestly can't decide what sort of book they're writing. It starts out as a disaster story, of sorts ... and then it turns into a conspiracy novel. Apparently, a group of international financiers (think Jews) are somehow involved with the Rapture. This might not be a bad idea, if it was clear that the financiers in question had prepared for the Rapture, but none of the characters in the book seem to consider the possibility. Later (beyond the scope of Clark's first book) it tries to turn into a romantic comedy. Trust me, it isn't remotely romantic.

Clark believes that many of these problems grew out of the subculture itself. The Satan-figures are ones that pervade the culture, but that tends to weaken them when compared to the real Antichrist. The UN, Jewish financiers, liberals, lesbians (I can't recall any suggestion that the authors even know that male homosexuality is a real thing), etc.... they're all nightmares haunting the authors' minds. And their response is not warm and welcoming, nor an attempt to convert the unbelievers; it is little more than a florid "we're right, you're wrong, burn in hell, etc."

The truly annoying thing about the series, although Clark doesn't say as much, is that it had a great deal of potential. What if they'd worked to turn both of the main characters into genuine people? Or what if they'd thought through the implications of some of their concepts? A disaster on the scale of the Rapture would provide an ample opportunity for Antichrist to come to power ... but that, alas, seems to be beyond the authors.

You can learn a great deal about writing by reading this book. Above all, Clark provides excellent commentary on what not to do. But you will probably also find moments to amuse you and moments to depress you. Clark notes moments where Jenkins – the prime writer – offers insights into Rayford Steele, but offers none into Buck. Could it be that he was taking a subtle shot at his co-author? There are also vast moments of infodumping – the writers seem curiously obsessed with telephone calls and the minutiae of international travel – bad science and worse.

Reading the Left Behind books is tedious ...

... But reading this takedown is unashamedly fun.

**Reclaiming the Blade: The History of the Sword**  
**directed by Daniel McNicoll**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**

[Editor: Here we have something different, namely a review of a documentary video on combat with swords, an issue of great importance in many fantasy and a few space opera novels. It is indeed literary criticism, given that there are writers who glean their understanding of the sword from watching movies.]

For decades, and possibly centuries, there has been a myth that Eastern swords were superior to European swords. That Eastern swordsmen were light years ahead of their European brethren in the ability to use their weapons, despite the fact that swordsmanship training in Europe started at the age of seven. Meaning no disrespect to Eastern swordsman, they weren't the only ones who knew how to fight and had good steel to use.

Enter Reclaiming the Blade: The History of the Sword. It covers the history and traditions of European swords and swordsmanship. It also covers the struggle to rediscover what was taught by our (well, some of us anyway) ancestors. Oriental Martial Arts are of course well known and well thought of. There are two reasons for that:

1.) They're effective. If you don't believe me, step into the ring with a kickboxer. When you wake up a couple of days later, call me and tell me how you're feeling. But it's not just with empty handed techniques. The art of Kendo, or the katana, AKA the samurai sword is still well remembered, even if it is not currently taught as it was classically per the practitioner, whose name I didn't write down.

2.) They survived. Especially in the case of Kendo, it seems that Eastern Martial Arts were tied even more closely to their culture than those of the west. This was particularly true in Japan, where guns were outlawed for centuries. Why? Because the thought of some unwashed peasant being able to kill a samurai was unthinkable. A commoner with a gun had too much power over his samurai masters. As a result, the sword remained the most popular weapon in Japan until the late 1800s.

This didn't happen in Europe. In Europe, there were external enemies to fight and, although no nobleman want to think about their own peasants shooting them, the thought of a peasant putting a hole in an opposing noble was welcome to them. English archers had already earned a reputation for piercing armor with their arrows. Guns were just a continuation of the same tradition.

And now that the goofy host is going to step down off of his soapbox:

Reclaiming the Blade is well written. Don't make the mistake of telling any of my college professors I said that. It's not "scholarly" or "peer-reviewed." The fact that there are actual primary sources pictured on screen and the techniques demonstrated by actual people seconds later would not matter as much as

the fact that there hadn't been 5456465655465465 other scholars who had nodded sagely and given their approval. Then again, what do I know? I've only got a bachelor's degree.

The thing is that Reclaiming the Blade is also very entertaining. Part of this is the cast. Jonathan Rhys-Davies narrates. Half the cast of the Lord of the Rings trilogy is featured. Blademaster Bob Anderson is featured, and he's the guy that taught everyone from Errol Flynn to Johnnie Depp how to fight with swords on stage. I'll be honest. The Errol Flynn thing blew my mind. Those are some old movies. I'd have thought that anyone who worked with Mr. Flynn would be retired at best by now...

But I digress.

Actually, I kind of don't digress. All of those guys are my justification for discussing a historical documentary on a Spec Fic blog.

But anyway...

The best part of the thing, at least to me, is the part with all of the people I hadn't heard of. The movie goes into the work being done by members of both the Association for Renaissance Martial Arts (ARMA) and the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA). I really enjoyed this part and for a very simple reason:

It's real. It's really real. These two groups (and probably some others like them) are working with the remaining written records (there are still period manuals of arms in existence. Some have been copied and the copies distributed.) to restore what has gone before. This is important historical work. I makes me very happy to know that someone is doing it. Maybe someday I'll get the chance to help out. I'm guessing it won't be anytime soon though.

Something they mention that I hadn't realized is that movies typically mix Martial Arts styles on screen. So a sword battle might feature the same combatant using techniques that were originally developed in Italy at one point, in England at another point, and in China at some other time. The people in the film feel that the audience of a film would enjoy it more if the fencing techniques used in movies were kept correct to one style. I'm going to disagree with that for one simple reason: If I don't know the difference, I'm guessing most of the rest of the audience doesn't either. What they don't know might hurt them, but it's not going to effect their enjoyment one way or another.

And that, to me, is the point of the whole documentary. It's all about trying to find something that has been lost and educate the general public about it. The cool thing is that, despite the educational aspect, this is a really fun thing to watch. It killed a couple of hours when I felt like absolute crap and kept me enthralled enough that I stopped worrying about my belly aching and got into the story of something fascinating. I hate it when I feel like that and I needed something like Reclaiming the Blade to help me through it.

The only bad part about this movie is that it's only available on Amazon Prime. Don't get me wrong. I love Prime, but if you don't have Prime you can't watch it. That makes me a little bitter since something like this should be on like DVD or something so that it can be shown to high school level history students, at least in my opinion. It may be Hollywood history, but it comes closer to being right than anything else I've seen from the movie industry.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Bladed Weapons

# Prose Bono

## Ten Points About Flash Fiction by Robert Runté

A colleague recently asked me to tell him about flash fiction. His writing group's next meeting was going to be about flash and he wanted some background beforehand. "You're the only person I know who has published flash, so what can you tell me?"

Here's my answer:

There are more flash markets than one might think. I've compiled a list of about 50 for myself, but that doesn't include genres I'm not interested in.

Each market defines flash differently (or publishes a different kind of flash, if you prefer). Everyone agrees it's no more than 1500 words, but I've seen 42 words, 50 words, 100 words (which is called a Drabble and has to be *exactly* 100 words) 140 words (the old Twitter limit) 500 words, 1200 and 1500. Titles are not usually counted, but editors will reject long titles, especially for shorter forms of flash, if they think you're trying to sneak in extra words. On the other hand, a carefully chosen title can orient the reader, suggest an interpretation, and carry a lot of the significance of a flash piece, though of course, that's true of any story title.

It's easier for an editor to take a risk on a new author if the story is 500 words than if it's 5,000. As a subscriber, if I don't like the ending of a 500-word story, I think, "Well, that was a dumb ending", shrug, and move on. No harm done. But if I've read through a 5,000-word story and think, "Well, that was dumb" I might not buy the next issue of that magazine. Why would an editor risk the space for 9,000 words if they can fit in two 4500-word—thereby doubling the number of authors in the magazine and on the cover, or eight flash fiction pieces and therefore 8 more sales to authors' mothers? Shorter is generally better if you're trying to break into a market.

Flash doesn't pay a lot. I've seen the occasional contest for \$1500, which would definitely be worth it, but we're never going to win that contest, so I don't think that counts. Most markets pay a flat rate of \$5 or \$25 or at most \$50, but that's rare. A few markets claim to pay "professional rates", but they mean 8 cents a word, so at 50 words, that's only \$4.00. Given that flash takes as much or more work than a longer short story, return on effort is low. Therefore, many flash markets (like many poetry markets) don't bother with token payments and are simply non-paying.

For many authors, the primary motivation for writing flash is for the challenge of the format (like writing haiku).

Some authors like writing flash because it inflates the number of publications to list in their bios. Again, good flash takes probably takes as long or longer to write as a regular short story, but it may be easier to collect acceptances (see #3, above).

My motivation for writing flash—and why I recommend it to many of my clients—is to learn how to tighten my writing. I am frequently told that my style is too "flowery" or "verbose" and that I need to "tighten" it up. I was never clear what "tightening your writing up" meant until I started writing flash.

Writing flash forces you to be more focused, to cut down to the essentials. It teaches you which words can be cut out without any loss of information, what can be implied without being stated, which details you don't need, and so on. I was then able to take those lessons back to my novel writing and really pare down my bloated manuscript to something readable.

[I'm not, of course, suggesting that all authors need to "tighten up". I have to encourage some clients to expand their abbreviated manuscripts, fill in a little more color commentary, broaden their brush strokes. The point of undertaking flash as a writing exercise is simply to acquire and refine that skill for those who need to develop it and for when it needs to be applied. It's just one tool in the writer's toolbox. Action scenes can probably benefit from tight, staccato writing, but rich description may be in order for another scene in the same manuscript. Knowing how to successfully condense writing, as poets must, is just one of many useful writing skills.]

Plotter vs. Pantser applies to flash, same as any writing. Some people need to outline to make sure their flash is an actual story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Others just start writing to see what comes out, which is fine, as long as you then go back to edit with "beginning, middle and end" as a checklist. Most flash markets complain that they get too many submissions that are just pieces of description or mood pieces or a chunk of dialog, and so on, with no actual story. Fitting the story into 140 words (or whatever) *is* the challenge. Reading successful flash where others have managed to cram a story into a drabble (or even shorter) is the best way of knowing it can be done, which is the first step in doing it yourself.

Some story ideas are clever but cannot sustain 3000 words. If the idea *is* the story, then it needs to be flash. Trying to flesh out an idea with redundant characterization and action just makes for a weak story where those things are a distraction rather than a strength.

Flash is prose poetry. Same density of words/thought per line. Same level of difficulty to write well. Same mastery of language. Both represent the ability to compress experience into a tiny package and both require the reader to do some unpacking on their end. The main difference is that flash doesn't rhyme, relies less on meter, and doesn't necessarily focus on metaphor or symbolism and so on, though of course it can.

Some Further Reading:

<https://blog.reedsy.com/what-is-flash-fiction/>

<http://www.thereviewreview.net/publishing-tips/flash-fiction-whats-it-all-about>

<https://electricliterature.com/7-flash-fiction-stories-that-are-worth-a-tiny-amount-of-your-time/>

<https://www.reflexfiction.com/how-to-write-flash-fiction/>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-flash-fiction-2990523>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/famous-flash-fiction-2207735>

You can read two examples of my own flash fiction, free online, on *Drabble* (<https://thedrabble.wordpress.com/2019/06/30/pillow-talk/>) and in *Active Voice* at (<https://activevoice.editors.ca/spring-summer-2019/misdial/>).

Some Markets for Flash

(Not everything listed is currently open for submissions)

A3Review: themed: 150 word limit

Applebeard: 750 word limit, non-paying  
Archanist: 1000 word limit; \$50/story; SF&F; Simultaneous subs ok.  
Augur: 6¢/word; Simultaneous subs ok; SF&F; blind submissions  
Burningword: non-paying; Simultaneous subs ok; \$3 fee  
Centropic Oracle: podcast 1¢/word; some flash  
Chestnut Review: some flash; Simultaneous subs ok; \$5fee; seasonal topics  
Dimeshow Review: flash >1000 word limit; non-paying  
The Drabble: 100 words exactly; NO Simultaneous submissions; nonpaying  
DrabbleCast: SF&F podcast; flash is non-paying; Simultaneous subs ok  
Everyday Fiction: 10 to <1000 words; NO Simultaneous subs; \$3/story  
Factor Four: SF&F; word limit <1500; 10¢/word; NO Simultaneous subs  
50-Word Stories: word limit 50 words; non paying  
Flashfictiononline: 2¢/word; NO Simultaneous subs; \$60; >500 words <1000  
Flashbang Mysteries: 500-750 words, wants surprise ending; \$20/story  
Frozen Wavelets: <750 words & drabbles; 6¢/word; NO Simultaneous; blind submissions  
Harbinger: \$25/story; <1000 words; No Simultaneous; contests only  
Haunted Waters Press: Penny category=19 words; \$20/story  
Jellyfish Review: <1000; Simultaneous submissions ok; non-paying  
The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts: \$50/story; Simultaneous subs ok; blind submissions  
Mud season review: Simultaneous subs ok; \$50/story  
Nashville Review: some flash >1000 words; Simultaneous subs ok  
New Flash Review: varies by call  
New World Writing: non-paying; >500 words  
Page & Spine: 50 words & 500 words; pays \$20-30; NO Simultaneous subs  
Paper Butterfly Flash Fiction: >1000 words; Simultaneous subs ok  
Paper Darts: literary; >1000 words;  
River Styx : occasional microfiction contest <500 words; \$1,500 first prize  
Rune Bear: <300 words; non-paying; NO simultaneous subs;  
Short Edition: pays \$125/story; >8000 characters; Simultaneous subs ok  
Skyisland Journal: non-paying; <1000 words; Simultaneous subs ok  
Smoke Long: >1000 words; Simultaneous subs ok; \$50/story  
365Tomorrows: non-paying; <600 words  
Thrilling Words: 2 related flash; \$160/pair; <4000words/pair; NO simultaneous  
Tin house: \$100/story; Simultaneous subs ok



Tiny Journal: want poignant; Simultaneous subs ok  
Split Lip: paying; some flash <1000 words; Simultaneous subs ok; no SF&F  
Unstamatic > drabble (<100 words) \$10/story; Simultaneous subs ok.  
Vestal Review: <500 words; \$25 or \$10/story; Simultaneous subs ok.  
Wizards in Space: some flash; \$30/story; Blind Submissions  
Zizzle (for kids 9-14); >1200words; pays \$100; simultaneous subs ok  
Robert Runté, Ph. D., is Senior Editor at EssentialEdits.ca

## The Economics of Indie Publishing By Chris Nuttall

I was on a panel with Chris Kennedy and a couple of others discussing the economics of indie publishing. These are my conclusions.

There's a general rule in traditional publishing that the money should always flow downhill to the writer. If you're being asked to pay for anything, once you get picked up by a publisher or agent, you're being conned. Editing? Cover design? Formatting? Promotional material? The publisher should pay for all of those – and if he doesn't, something is very badly wrong.

However, this isn't actually true of independent publishing. Certainly, as before, the writing is the author's work, but there's no publisher to pay for all the other items (or, for that matter, to find them.) The author has to meet those costs himself, unless he can do the tasks for himself. (I know authors who can do cover designs, but I haven't met a single author who could edit himself successfully.)

In these cases, the author needs to budget – and pay for these items as a lump sum.

### General Advice

Before you start hiring anyone to do anything, sort out the terms. You will need:

-Cost. How much is it going to cost you? I'll try to give a set of basic figures in the more specific sections, but everyone has different figures.

-How. How are they going to do it?

-Payment method. How do you pay? I normally use PayPal; check this first, because it is quite embarrassing not to be able to pay. Do they want to be paid in a lump sum or in instalments?

-Time. How long will it take? What happens if they can't produce the service/item in a given space of time?

-Rights. What rights to use the material do you get?

-Credit. How much credit do they want?



## Editing

There are, in my opinion, two different categories of editing.

First, you have the conceptual edit, which covers everything from plot holes (just why do you have magically binding contracts enforced in your universe when someone didn't actually agree to the contract?) to how the plotline shapes out (that's a Deus Ex Machina) and continuity notes (you killed this character in the last book). Having someone read your book with a fresh eye is perhaps the only way you'll catch these errors before the reviewers do.

Second, you have the line-edit. This basically covers spelling, grammar and everything else.

Editors vary wildly, both in cost and performance. Any editor who's been in the field for a while should have a handful of authors willing to give a reference. (Ask for names or samples of their work.) A basic conceptual edit should cost between \$100-\$200, although costs can rise steeply if the editor has to read a handful of prequel books first. (If you don't have the money, try finding another author and trading reads.) A line-edit can cost between \$300 and \$900. (Editors, in my experience, tend to raise their prices if the manuscript is riddled with errors.)

You're paying, in a sense, for a private review of your work. The conceptual editor should not pull any punches – and you don't want to encourage him to go lightly on you. Listen to the editor, then decide for yourself if their suggestions are valid or not. Even if you think the editor is wrong, it's good to take another look at a weak section.

Editors, in my experience, don't normally want to be credited in any way.

## Cover Design

A book should not be judged by its cover – but the plain truth is that most books are judged by their covers. Getting a cover, unless you're an artist yourself, can be daunting or expensive. However, there are some reasonable shortcuts.

-Stock Photos. Sites like ISTOCKPHOTO offer thousands of images, ranging from very basic drawings to outright space battles. Purchase a copy, place your title, name and tagline on the front, then upload it to kindle. (Hint; make sure your image fits the kindle requirements.) Prices, again, can vary; I've purchased images at prices from \$30 to \$100.

However, there can be two problems. First, you may not find anything suited to your needs and, second, someone else may use the same cover. (This has happened to me).

-Artists. If you don't mind spending a bit more money and waiting longer, you can hire an artist to design the cover for you. Prices can, of course, vary sharply; I've had artists charge minimal prices in exchange for the exposure and artists who wanted full price (\$500-\$1000). For this, you need a contract (or at least a stated agreement); you want permanent, exclusive, and comprehensive rights to the artwork.

(By comprehensive rights, I mean you want to be able to use it as a book cover, CD cover, promotional artwork and anything else, without either referring to the artist or having to pay royalties over the long term.)

If you're strapped for cash, try browsing an artist website and looking for someone willing to draw a basic cover for relatively little money.

The artists I've worked with have asked for cover concepts, then drawn sketches for me to approve before they started the serious work. Feel free to make the concepts as detailed as possible; remember, the artist has to work from what you tell him. Also, make sure the author understands requirements for kindle and other self-publishing platforms. It's no good getting a spectacular piece of artwork when it can't be uploaded onto the web.

DO NOT be afraid to raise objections or ask for alterations. You're the one putting the book online.

Artists generally want to be credited as the artist and to have the right to host copies of the artwork as samples of their work. You should agree to this – free advertising <grin>.

## Online Promotions

Now you've got your book online, you want to promote it – and, being an author, you will get emails advertising various services that promise to promote books.

Unfortunately, my general observation is that such services aren't really worth the money you spend on them. I've tried a couple and I didn't notice any real jump in sales. My strong advice would be to refrain from using any paid service.

Facebook does offer a paid promotional service, but again – I haven't noticed any improvement in sales coming from using it.

Generally, it's better to build up a presence on the net using free spaces – Facebook, a blog, twitter, etc. – but be careful not to let yourself be sucked into spending all your time on the net! However, it's worth investing in a domain name and a website; prices for these, of course, are very variable.

## Paid Book Reviews

No. Don't even think about it.

Yes, there are sites out there that promise thousands of 5-star reviews for an author willing to shell out. Some of them even actually do it. But ...

It's dishonest, it's easy to spot, it will undermine the review system and it will utterly destroy your reputation. Trust me on this; don't do it.

## Conclusion

Ideally, you want to get more money out of indie publishing than you're putting in. Keep decent accounts, work out what's costing you time and money (and don't forget to put money aside for taxes, as this is generally taxable income.) See what works, see what doesn't work and ...

Good luck

## Self-Publishing Thoughts by Chris Nuttall

A week or so ago, an article popped up in my Facebook entitled ‘Why I don’t generally recommend self-publishing for beginners,’ by Marc Aplin. (<http://fantasy-faction.com/2015/why-i-dont-generally-recommend-self-publishing-to-beginners>) I made a note of the article with the intention of returning to comment on it at a later date. When I read through the article and the comments today, I discovered that I’d been name-checked in the very first comment. So I thought I’d write a short response to the article here.

Anyway, there’s some good advice in the article and some misconceptions.

One of the problems facing Big Publishing is that they can’t publish everyone. A large company with an open submission policy (like Baen) may receive upwards of 1000 submissions per month. These can then be divided into the following subcategories;

-Absolute Trash/Writer Didn’t Follow Submission Guidelines (500). The latter can range from forgetting to do even a basic spell-check to leaving editing marks all over the manuscript. I once saw a honest-to-god submission that was entirely composed of edits. Slush readers will take one look at anything that doesn’t follow basic guidelines and throw it out.

-This Writer Has Promise (300). The slush reader didn’t like the manuscript or thought it lacked polish, but figured the writer has potential and should be encouraged.

-This Book Needs Revisions (150). The slush reader liked the story, but figured it needed some changes before it could be reconsidered. If you’re lucky enough to reach this point, you might actually get some decent feedback.

-This Book Is Worth Considering (50). The slush reader not only liked the story, but figured it could be published after a solid edit.

The problem with this is that sorting through all the slush can take years. I’ve met a number of writers who absolutely HATE agents, but agents serve a vital purpose for publishers in sorting the gems from the dross. It can take so long to comb through 1000 submissions that publishers prefer to pass the task to agents, knowing that the agents won’t try to submit anything that doesn’t fit into the final category.

However, there’s another hitch. I’ve noted there are 50 books per 1000 submissions that might be worth publishing. However, any publisher will only have a limited number of publishing slots. They may only be able to produce 10 books per month. If there were no other considerations, 10 of the 50 submissions might be published. BUT ... any established publisher will have a stable of writers who already have an established following. They would be grossly unwise to give one of those slots to an untried newcomer when they have a book lined up from an established author.

What this tends to mean is that the odds of getting published, even by a relatively small press, are very low ... even if you happen to write a great book.

In a sense, a publisher is investing in a writer; they pay an advance, find editors and cover designers and do a great deal of promotion. (There’s a considerable amount of cachet in being published by a ma-

for publisher, even if the financial rewards are lower.) You, the writer, has to justify that investment in you ... and you have to compete to win one of a VERY low number of publishing slots.

Ark Royal is actually quite an interesting case. I was unable to get solid figures on how much it costs one of the big publishers to publish a book, but I received educated guesses that ran up as high as \$30,000. If that's the case, Ark Royal earned itself out within the first month; everything after that, if the book had been published traditionally, would have been pure profit. However, it made more sense for me to go the self-publishing route.

Why? I would have had to wait months, if I was lucky, before I knew if the book was publishable. (This is one of the reasons agents are useful; a manuscript submitted by an agent has a better chance of being looked at quickly.) And, as most publishers have rules against simultaneous submissions, I would not be able to send it to a second publisher until I'd heard back from the first one. I had reached a point in my career when trying to win one of those coveted slots seemed both futile and unnecessary.

TL/DR: the odds of being published traditionally, even if you're a brilliant writer, are very low unless you bring something else to the party. Hillary Clinton and Pippa Middleton both received publishing contracts and staggering advances (in Hillary's case, the advance might well have been a disguised campaign contribution) because they were famous. Indie writers like myself hope we can build up a following that makes us seem a good investment to big publishing's beancounters.

Having said all that, would I recommend self-publishing to beginners?

Well, the short answer is yes ... provided the beginner approached self-publishing with open eyes.

The article is quite correct to say that authors cannot edit their own work. I've been writing since 2004 and, even now, my beta-readers send me corrections that would be easily noticeable, if I didn't already know what I meant to say. Sometimes this is fairly simple – substituting 'their' for 'there' – and sometimes it's a great deal more serious. The best authors are the ones who admit they need an editor, find someone they can work with and stick with him or her.

The worst thing that can happen to a new author or, for that matter, an established author is to believe himself editor-proof. I'm sure anyone with a serious interest in writing can name a dozen once-great authors whose writing has declined, once they became so famous that their publishers lost the nerve to tell them that changes had to be made. For a new author, this is disastrous; their book is either roundly mocked or simply ignored. As the article notes, agents and publishers will check your sales figures.

So ... if you're serious, this is what I advise.

Write your first manuscript. (Make sure it stands on its own. One of my pet peeves is getting through a book and discovering that it's the first part of a story, without hitting a reasonable stopping point.) Then get an editor. You will probably have to pay something for a professional piece of work – see my article for details. This editor, if he or she is any good, will tell you in great detail what's wrong with the manuscript. (In the unlikely event of you producing a publishable manuscript in the first draft, they will tell you that too.) You will probably be quite upset with what they have to say, because the best editors are ruthless as well as constructive. (If you're serious, grow a thick skin. You'll need it.)  
<https://accordingtohooyt.com/2015/06/06/the-economics-of-indie-publishing-chris-nuttall/>

Read what they have to say, take it to heart and then write your next manuscript.

Unless you start at a higher level than I did, your first manuscript will probably not be worth revising (again, your agent will tell you if it is.) Write something completely different, at least in basic outline, and try to incorporate what you've learned. If you do this properly, your second manuscript will be a great deal more readable than your first. Go back to the editor, get another list of what's wrong with the manuscript and write your third manuscript. By then, you should be getting closer to writing something publishable.

You'll notice I didn't suggest putting either of the first two manuscripts online. That's good – like the article notes, a bad reputation will follow you. Keep them for later; you can either look back at them and wonder what you were drinking at the time, or rewrite them when you're more confident in your abilities. (Note that this is true of slush piles too; I have a feeling that a few would-be authors have submitted so many duds that editors are routinely ignoring them.)

Ok ... by now, you should have a reasonable piece of work. Time for the next step.

It is a point of fact that books should not be judged by their covers – but they almost always are. You will need a good cover – and, unless you can do a reasonable one for yourself, you'll need a cover artist. (I have a feeling that most of the covers featured on Lousy Book Covers come from authors who think they can design a cover themselves.) Make sure you check your work with someone else – the editor, perhaps – if you think you can do it yourself. ([lousybookcovers.com](http://lousybookcovers.com))

Now, you can start publishing online.

There's a lot more that I could say here, particularly about promotion, but I don't have the time.

What I will say is that you need to be mature.

There isn't a single writer in the entire world who can please everyone. Not one. You will get some reviewers who absolutely hate your book and write a scathing one-star review for all to see. You will get comments that will make you want to reach through the computer screen and strangle the troll who's just insulted your wonderful piece of work. (Or, at the very least, write an angry response that will leave him in no doubt that you utterly reject his views.)

Well, don't. There is nothing to be gained by slamming critical reviewers. You'll just make yourself look an ass.

I think this is worse, in some ways, for self-published authors. A traditionally published author has the vindication of knowing that someone actually invested in his work. It's a great deal easier to shrug off a particularly annoying review when it's clear that people who know the business have faith in you. (Given the twin flops of *Hard Choices* and *Celebrate*, one might argue that they don't, but I digress.) The point is that you need to brace yourself for some nasty comments ...

You're trying to build a brand here, as well as selling books. The last thing you need is a nasty reputation. It'll haunt you for far longer than any lousy review. Read the review, consider if it raises any valid points and then dismiss it.

Writing is a great job. Being a self-published author is immensely rewarding. But it's a job and you have to treat it as such. Think carefully before you start and never lose sight of your goal.

Good luck.

# Letters

Editor:

To answer the question: "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)."

It is simple. They don't. They can't.

They don't explain them, anymore than they explain a conversation with the Devil in *The Brothers Karamazov* -- if they explain it, it cannot be as science fiction. They explain it as is a fantasy. A delusion. A conjuration of Freudian nightmares and Jungian archetypes. The same with other novelists and authors that the literati have already deemed to be "literature," and thus too good for SFF. Anything resembling the lower genres can be explained away! Deconstructed! Vivisected! A monstrous manta ray after a black pearl? It is not science fiction! It is metaphor! It is allegory! It is whatever ephemeral hook they can hang their hat on to escape the content and focus on the "literature." This makes it something to be deconstructed, and therefore destroyed. The literati don't need to explain themselves, they just need to do what their type has always done -- spin. It is the entire point of postmodernism and deconstructionism -- make things up about the meaning of words until they say whatever they want them to say.

...Declan Finn