The N3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillies, D. Sc., Editor
January 2020

Editorial

Novels

Literary Criticism

2019 Index

Editorial

Reviewers wanted: We are very grateful to our regular reviewers for their many fine reviews . We would, however, be delighted to have a more reviewers. I n particular, while our reviews of Military SF are ample and well-done, there are many other subgenres within science fiction. Reviews from reviewers interested in some of those other topics would be most appreciated. In particular, given the political divisions inflicted upon us, having reviewers whose personal opinions ranged from the left to the libertarian radical center to the right would be a positive step.

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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Our lead reviewers have blogs or web sites. Several of them link from their reviews to Amazon; if you buy at Amazon.com via their web pages, they get a modest financial reward. Some of them also write novels:

Pat Patterson https://habakkuk21.blogspot.com/

Jim McCoy https://jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com/

Chris Nuttall https://chrishanger.wordpress.com/

Tamara Wilhite also appears at LibertyIslandmag.com

Robert Runté is Senior Editor at EssentialEdits.ca

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Novels

Born in Blood by Kate Paulk
Review by Pat Patterson

I have been wanting to read this, and the subsequent work 'Impaler,' for a LONG time. However, at the time I started my ramble, neither was included in the KU program, and regrettably, I had to pass them up. O, frabjous day! when I finally bothered to check again, and found them on the list! I wonder how long my lack of diligence kept me away....Doesn't matter. Now, I've got 'Impaler,' and this little prequel, too, my pretty!

Vlad is 17, and near the point of death. He has refused the carnal desires of Mehmed, the nasty, nasty son of the Sultan Murad, and been cruelly tortured as a consequence. He and his younger brother are held hostage for their father's good behavior.

That was a real thing, as I'm sure you know. However, it was a fundamental violation of the agreement for Mehmed to abuse Vlad and the other hostages. They were surrendered with the understanding that they would be brought up with the appropriate education and treatment for young men of a royal family. In violating those terms, Mehmed risked the safety of his own father's rule, since other semi-belligerent princes would never subject their children to abuse, and would therefore continue to wage warfare against the Ottoman Empire.

While Mehmed is certainly the primary instigator of the crimes, the ultimate responsibility is his father's. He had an obligation to know what was going on in his own household, particularly with respect to the welfare of the hostages. That he did not is a flagrant foul. Regardless of his subsequent conduct toward Vlad, there can be no justification for his failure in this regard.
Politics was a nastier gig 700 years ago.

One point I found mildly disappointing, and slightly hopeful at the same time. Although it explicitly states in 'Impaler' that Mehmed is responsible for the vampire curse laid on Vlad, the mechanism of the curse isn't described here. I read this blisteringly fast (it's that good, yes indeed it is) and I may have missed the actual transmission of the disease, but I don't think I did. I am HOPEFUL that this means that there are other parts of the story, either published already, or on the way.

At any rate, it's a good retelling of the Dracula myth, repositioning Vlad as an unwilling target and subsequent flawed hero, rather than as a cruel monster.

Borrowed World Series by Franklin Horton
Review by Jim McCoy

The life of a book reviewer is a hard one. See, for us it's not always the right thing to do if we want to freak out on a new series or author we just discovered. I have a backlog of books that people have given me that they want reviewed, and if I take time out to read what I want to read, I sometimes feel like I'm letting those people down. But then I get a gift card from Amazon and I'm like..."Wow that sounds good." Maybe it's a new author and a new series. And maybe I blow almost the whole twenty five

bucks on a seven book series.

But if you're paying attention that means I got seven books for less than twenty-five dollars. They were worth it too.

And I have to admit that my discipline broke down twice here. Not only did I get a book that hadn't been give to me, but I found myself unable to review it immediately. Why? Because I couldn't manage to break away from the series long enough to write it. Seriously, pretty much all my free time for the last however long has been taken up by this one series of books.

I don't feel bad about. As a matter of fact, I'm kind of glad I did it. I'm also bummed that there are only seven books available, but whatever. I've only got like a dollar left on my gift card anyway. Oops. I blew the whole thing on one series. Ah well, I'd do it again.

So now, dear reader, I can see the look in your eyes. You're frustrated because that darn Jimbo guy won't tell you what books they are. You think I should just spill the beans already and tell you all what I'm so excited about. I find that entertaining, because the name of the series and its author are the title of this post! You should already have that information.

And seriously, how fun is it to be a blogger if you can't mess with your audience every once in a while?

Ready?

I'm talking about the *Borrowed World Series* by Franklin Horton. And yes, the story is about a right-wing gun nut named Jim, but it's not like that's it's only appeal. Okay, maybe that added a bit of enjoyment for a Second Amendment supporter named Jim but hey, no system is perfect, right? And his last name is Powell, so it's not like he's totally named after me.

At any rate...

The Borrowed World Series starts off with a novel named... *The Borrowed World*. (I bet you never saw that one coming, huh?) I don't really do spoilers, HOWEVER...

It starts off with a terrorist attack against the US and its infrastructure. The terrorists hurt us in a big way. They take down the majority of the Grid that provides electricity to the US as well as a number of our largest oil refineries. In like an hour or so the entire country goes from thriving to screwed, although it takes a bit for most people to realize how bad it's going to be.

Our hero, Jim, and his co-workers, Randi, Alice, Gary, Rebecca and Lois are caught in a hotel hundreds of miles from home when the Shit Hits the Fan and have to find a way home through the chaos. It's not easy. The story continues from there.

I loved this series, but it is not for the faint of heart. Horton seems to have researched his subject very well before beginning the series. It has a grittiness, a realisticness that a lot of other works lack. I can see things going exactly the way he describes them in the books. Everything from the choices Jim makes in what he puts in his bug-out bag to how he defends his home. But it's not just that. It's the reactions of common, everyday people as the whole country begins to fall apart.

A man will do what it takes to defend his family. Any parent will do what it takes to feed a child. But what if the supply of food is cut off because there is no fuel for trains or trucks? What if the power is out and the gas is off and there's no way to cook. What happens then? Horton's answer, in not so many

words, is that it gets scary.

And I don't mean scary in an Eighties slasher flick kind of scary. I mean, I remember being scared out of my wits by Freddie Krueger as a kid. The Borrowed World, however, is totally different because it's so realistic. I always knew, deep down, that no badly burnt, glove wearing whackadoo was going to come to me in my dreams and kill me. Even if some psycho started chopping up kids at a campground, it would be over the FIRST TIME they killed him. It was all so easy to come down from after the show was over.

Reading the *Borrowed World Series* is not like that. There is absolutely nothing in the story that is impossible or even that unlikely given the circumstances. Jim and friends struggle with the bad guys and at times with each other. The bad guys really just want what the good guys want, only in most cases they weren't prepared for the inevitable collapse of society. Jim was. He's a prepper who has done an absolute buttload of work ahead of time so that when it all goes down he's got what he needs.

The Borrowed World is definitely dystopic, but it's not all bad. I'd actually refer to Horton's work as flat out superversive. Jim and friends don't have it easy, but they work together to overcome whatever is in front of them. If it seems like there's always something, that's life as a character in a book. I feel for them but I wouldn't want the story to get boring. The bottom line is that they never give up and never give in. And if there is a bit of Southern Justice along the way, then that's what's necessary. (I wonder what my odds of getting Franklin Horton and Jack July together for a drink would be?)

Oh, and don't get too fond of too many of these characters. Horton may not be George RR Martin's long lost little brother, but then again, he might be. Not everyone I wanted to still be here is still here. As a matter of fact, Horton killed off my two favorite characters. I'm not going to tell you who they were, but I think you'll like them too. I think you'll like the whole series come to that. And yes, it was worth the heartbreak.

Bottom line: 5.0 out of 5 Go Bags

The Borrowed World Series
Franklin The Borrowed World Series
Self Published, 2015-2019

Cartwright's Cavaliers by Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson

I keep a list around here somewhere about things I just don't understand. The first four, of course, are found in Proverbs 30:19

> The way of an eagle in the sky,
> The way of a serpent on a rock,
> The way of a ship in the middle of the sea,
> And the way of a man with a maid.

Other items include WHY my fat black Manx cat SugarBelly INSISTS on sitting on my hands when I'm trying to use the keyboard; why I am the only person in the house who can put water in the water jug and re-fill the ice cube trays; and why did I allow myself to be persuaded to buy such an expensive

iPhone and iPad when I don't want to use any of those fabulous functions.

Well, there is another thing I don't understand:

How is it that this book came out last December without me noticing it?

I started out fishing for books to read in the Mad Genius Club a few years back. I decided I was going to review the books written by all of the authors I found there. At first, it was just my intent to include those who were writing the columns, but I quickly added those who participated in the discussions to my to-be-read-and-reviewed list. And then, at some point, I discovered Sarah's Diner. And I adopted THAT as the source of my reading list.

And, inadvertently, I stopped making sure I was reading MGC on a regular basis. I've fixed that, now, by the way, by subscribing, but I hadn't realized just how far I had slipped until the other day when I realized there was an entire series of Alma Boykin's that had escaped me. I'm fixing that, too.

But what STARTED it all was my review of "A Fistful of Credits, " launched at LibertyCon, just one hundred miles from my non-attending location. I devoured it with a passion, gobbled two of the prequel stories available online, and demanded MORE! Which resulted in the discovery of "The Winged Hussars;" which lead me to the brutal fact that the series had started in December, and I hadn't noticed.

I have NO excuse for that.

But, I did have a remedy! I got both of the previous works, and I read THIS one pretty much simultaneously with the first Alma Boykin series book I'd missed (you understand, I must have multiple books due to existing in multiple places, right?), enjoyed it IMMENSELY, and have already begun the second book in the series. When I finish that, I will return to finish 'The Winged Hussars,' and then pound on the table for more.

But, that's all background. Here's where the review starts:

Shortly before the time the story begins, the aliens landed. We discovered they had a LOT of things that they wanted, but we didn't have much to give them in return. It was a bad thing.

Then, we found out that fighting was a rare skill, and various alien groups would happily hire humans to break things and kill people. Unfortunately, most of the jobs were sucker bets, and only FOUR of the first 100 groups of human mercenaries returned. It happened that all of them featured a horse on their insignia, so the groups became known as the Four Horsemen.

The greatest of these groups was Cartwright's Cavaliers. Through luck, hard work, luck, integrity, and luck, they became a dominant force in the industry. Thaddeus Cartwright was the commander of one of the grandest enterprises in human history, until his luck ran out, leaving elementary school-aged son Jim as the heir.

For reasons not clear to me, Jim's mother set out on a course that destroyed the mercenary company. Assets were squandered, contracts entered into without regard to profitability, and by the time young Jin turned 18, his inheritance was worth less than zero. A considerate judge allowed him a trifle which would keep him from starving for a bit.

If that weren't enough, Jim was NOT qualified for the life of a mercenary. To be blunt, he was obese,

and rather uncoordinated as well. He had covertly had brain implants installed, so knowledge was easier for him to acquire, but he knew that without experience, he was pretty much good at turning pizza into solid waste, and that was it.

He needed a break, and after all the bashing he took as the lawyers broke his father's company to shreds, he really deserved one, as well. When the opportunity essentially dropped out of the sky on him, he was ready.

What follows is some great scenes of exploding spaceships against the background of character development. Maybe it's the other way around, but it doesn't matter; the elements of smashing great adventure are all there. Detractors may whine at the failure to consider horticulture as an acceptable alternative for an obese teen, or the appalling assumption that under-utilized humans will turn to crime, or the tendency of volcanos to erupt at inconvenient moments, but these are merely the quibbles of people who haven't gotten a nice nap recently. For everyone else, this is a great place to start reading the adventures of the Four Horsemen.

The Case of the Displaced Detective: At Speed
by Stephanie Osborn
Review by Pat Patterson

This is the second volume in the 4-volume omnibus.

Ah-ooo, and Yay-o-lay! The awful cliffhanger at the end of the first volume is resolved! As I knew it would HAVE to be; otherwise, the names of the subsequent parts of the omnibus would have been "The Case of the Displaced Detective: Still Dead"; "Even Yet Dead", and "No kidding, Dead." While that might be amusing, it is NOT the sort of joke Stephanie Osborn plays upon her readers.

Skye Chadwick does not die, although it is close. In fact, she and Sherlock spend a significant fraction of this book recovering from being shot and beaten and bitten, all of which makes their conjugal exploits a bit tricky. In fact, I was a bit concerned that their first post-surgical frolic was taking place a bit too early. Certainly, there are gentle ways in which a devoted couple in such circumstances can demonstrate physical affection to each other, as long as one (or both, in this case) isn't suffering from a great deal of pain. However, they seem to throw themselves into each other's arms with utter abandon, mutually determined to wring every last trembling quiver from each other.

At which point, they rest for the minimum amount of time, then do it again.

And again.

And Again!

Until someone knocks on the front door, and they have to put on robes and eat brunch or tea or whatever.

Meanwhile, there are dark doings they have to solve; an evil plot by evil plotters and figuring out the goal of the gang is the toughest point.

Worlds stand in the balance!

But, for THIS long-time fan of the Baker Street detective. there is a much more significant issue which has to be resolved:

How do we go from the intensely cerebral thinking-machine, to the man deeply in love, deeply involved in a relationship?

Fortunately, here Osborn takes the bull by the horns. Sherlock has to ask himself the question, and forces himself to come up with an answer. And, although it's not QUITE expressed in terms of his famous formula, it's very, very close: when you have exhausted all of the impossibilities, what remains, however improbable, is the truth. In this case, Sherlock must....

...no, I'm not going to do it. I was going to tell you how he reasons his way to a clear solution, but that would be telling. Find it out for yourself. It's core to the story.

I do want to make this point: In the canon, Irene Adler is The Woman. The Benedict Cumberbatch Sherlock also has a special place in his heart for her, although that is HIGHLY flavored with her physical attractiveness. I believe, however, that it is strictly the intellectual prowess and the sympathetic osition she demonstrates in "A Scandal in Bohemia" that is the basis for the place she holds with him. Dr. Skye Chadwick also is the proprietor of a first-class brain, as well as an excellent ethical standing, AND she is a fellow worker. The dots connect, logically; this isn't a violation of Holmes' personality; instead, he is forced to learn a new skill set.

I leave the rest as an exercise for the reader.

Deus Vult: Saint Tommy by Declan Finn
Review by Jim McCoy

Remind me never to take a trip with Saint Tommy. Not ever. This guy has all the bad luck. I mean, it's not that I don't want to serve God. It's more like I don't want to be eaten by something along the way. Seriously. Being shot or blown up is one thing, but some of the stuff this guy faces...

Oi

Anyway...

I'm not going to identify the big bad in Declan Finn's Deus Vult: Saint Tommy NYPD Book 6. It's not obvious from the title, so that makes it a spoiler. I will say that I enjoyed it. I was legitimately worried this time. Wow. That's a rough one to face down. I think I'd just poop my pants and run as fast as I could in another direction. I'm not worried about which direction, just one of them. This is one of those times when you want to cross universes and have Scotty beam you up so you can warp out of the system. Well, unless the Doctor is in town. That would work too, and one can't be picky while being attacked by something that they can't handle.

Some of you are thinking I'm exaggerating right now. I'm not. Some forces are just not to be trifled with. I think that just might be one of them. If you haven't read the book you're wondering what I'm talking about. That's good. Turn your ads on for my blog only. There will be a link at the end of the re-

view so you can go buy it.

Of course, something that Finn has done consistently over his entire Saint Tommy series is to mix in elements of horror. None of the later books can match the first novel, Hellspawn for being true horror. That one had me shaking in my shoes and, while I absolutely loved it, was a lot closer to Stephen King or Dean Koontz than my normal fare. Deus Vult, however, has some real elements of horror to it. Finn mixes it in really well.

I may never go into a haunted house again.

Then again, I might. IF I can get my daughter to read this, just so I can see the look of terror on her face when she walks into it having read it. Deus Vult definitely has some nightmare type sequences and that's awesome. You never know what's going to happen or how things are going to go when Saint Tommy gets himself in trouble. Finn always finds new and inventive ways to torture his characters.

I love it. Then again, I'm a Dungeon Master who as been known to steal ideas from time to time. I think maybe I shouldn't let my players read this one. There are a few things here that I could use that they wouldn't have seen before and there's nothing like dropping something new on a veteran gamer to remind them that they don't always know what's up my sleeve.

We get to see a bit more of Tommy's family this time around than we did in past books and I really like that. Deus Vult starts with the family away from home and so Mariel, Tommy's wife, and the kids are not just around, but involved in ways that they haven't been before, at least for the kids.

The supporting cast is, of course, bigger than just Tommy's family. His NYPD parter Alex and Father Pearson are both back as well. Alex is a good guy and is someone good to have at your back. He's kind of a modern day Samwise Gamgee, but taller. Father Pearson is both a good guy and a bit of an enigma. It's like he's a basic decent dude but he has a back story we don't know everything about yet. "Combat Exorcist" is a good title but even that might not cover everything the guy can do. He also appears to have some high level contacts that we may not be aware of. I'm watching that guy. Something more is coming from him. I'm just not sure what yet.

It's weird, but it was kind of good to welcome back an old enemy as well. Sometimes as fans of Speculative Fiction in general we can forget about the old bad guys who aren't quite dead yet. Or more to the point, the authors can. I can think of one particular series that was a collaboration between John Ringo and David Weber...

Nevermind

This time around though, we get to welcome him back with open arms and a deep desire to see things end the way they should have before, but it's not just that. Finn gives us a look at another side of the dude and shows that sometimes even the slimy types have a code. It might not be a good code. It might not be one we'd agree with. A code is a code nonetheless and it adds a lot to a character when it hadn't been revealed previously.

I had heard that Finn originally intended for this to be the last book in the Saint Tommy series and the last few pages show that. It really felt like he was tying this thing up to put it to bed. That was a bittersweet thing. Of course, it's always good to come to the end of a saga and find out how it ends. Who can forget the scene at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters or the party on the Forest Moon of Endor as ends

of their respective tales? Then again, who was happy that we wouldn't be getting any more Harry Potter or Star Wars? (And yes, we've had more Star Wars, but who knew that would happen at the time?) In this case though, I'm happy to report that there are more books planned. I should even know how many but I don't remember right now. I'll just be glad to see more. Maybe we'll get to find out more about Father Pearson. I'll be waiting with bated breath.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Wicked Teeth

Deus Vult: Saint Tommy, NYPD Book 6
Declan Finn
Silver Empire, 2019

Fanglith
by John Dalmas
Review by Pat Patterson

Two days ago, the writer known as John Dalmas (actual name: John Robert Jones) passed away at the age of 90. I first encountered him in works he published with Baen, and in tribute to him, decided to review this book.

This is listed as a 1985 publication, which means it wasn't his FIRST published work, but it does appear to be the first published with Baen. He had prior work serialized in Analog magazine, going back at least as far as 1969.

Fanglith is an excellent adventure story for young people, although this 64 year old also found it quite enjoyable.

The protagonist is Larn, a 16-year-old boy, on a somewhat out-of-the-way planet. He lives a quiet life with his parents and slightly younger sister, Deneen, although he knows they are refugees from the central government.

Nice touches: 1. Larn and Deneen have a respectful relationship. That means we don't have to put up with a lot of sibling squabbles; it's also clear that the reason this condition exists is that his parents won't tolerate anything otherwise. They don't interfere with discussion, but they also don't permit the nyah-nyah from happening.

2. The family unit also contains members of two other sentient species: the catlike Cookie, and the dog/wolflike Bubba. Bubba is also possessed of an ability to detect / read minds, with the accuracy decreasing with distance.

3. When the parents are suddenly alerted that the bad guys are on their tail, they leave clues that won't mean anything to their pursuers, but that Larn and Deneen are able to decipher, based on logic and their experience of the way parents operate. This was very nicely done.

4. It's a slow reveal (I didn't get it until the 4th chapter), but the primitive planet that they escape to is Earth, in the 11th century. (I would have marked this as a spoiler, but it's revealed in the blurb.)

5. Although the advanced technology DOES provide Larn's family with advantages, it doesn't destroy the conflict needed for a good story. On the one hand, Larn is reluctant to be ruthless in the application of his weapons; on the other hand, when he DOES have to use them in combat, his stunner runs out of juice, and his blaster malfunctions.

6. I have no idea whether the society depicted is actually similar to that found in France of the 11th century. However, the story WORKS, and the characterizations are consistent. He admires some people he encounters and doesn't ever give the feel that 'these people are primitive, so we are superior.'

This is the first story of a relatively short series, closely defined. However, Baen lists it as a part of the Regiment series, which is more extensive.

Fort Dinosaur
by Pam Uphoff
Review by Pat Patterson.

I don't know who did the cover, but it features a big honking T Rex with a pleasant smile, and the font for the title and the author's name is a great choice: clear, doesn't obscure the artwork, etc. You can actually see what is likely to be the skyline of the Fort in the background. But, you had me at 'Dinosaur.'

Alas. The simple plot of a previous series, which is just landing on planet and blowing everybody into smithereens because they are wretched, nasty mass murderers, has been abandoned.

Instead, we get THAT, plus love, intrigue, and the smashing of faces of bullies. And dinosaurs. Big, stompy ones, big eaty ones, quick ambushy ones, and a couple of cutie-pie babies. LOVE the babies! They are the size of adult housecats, and they get in the way of the work, just like my fat black Manx cat SugarBelly is doing right now. And they are more than just a throw-away inclusion of cuteness.

Okay: the scientists are hyper-focused on getting their science done, and can't be troubled by details, EXCEPT! their leader actually CAN be reasoned with, and he understands what he knows and doesn't know. This prevents this from being a tiresome tale of brilliant morons being eaten until only one is left.

The alleged 'guards' are hostile rapey bullies; you want to smack them as soon as you see them. It would be a bad idea for US to do it though, because they have combat skills and weapons. Fortunately, Ebsa can stomp them into the ground, and does. With restraint! That's important, because he is TRYING to make the mission succeed. Because of their prior relationship, he is able to prevail on the truly Ferocious Dude, Ra'd, not to kill them; that's a good thing for the success of the mission.

The wicked, wicked people from the wicked, wicked planet appear, and do wicked, wicked things. Guess how many ways they get killed? NOT TELLING! Read it for yourself! You will be glad you did.

I encountered one problem with this ebooks, that dead tree books don't have: a visual/kinesthetic clue that I'm almost finished. YES, I could have gone to the indexing function, and seen the little dot on the progress graph, but I was so engrossed in the story that I didn't want to stop. I am SO glad Pam Uphoff writes like the wind. Because I want more. Please.

Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War
by P. W. Singer and August Cole
Review by Chris Nuttall

This is the second-rate book, if I may steal a line from Brian Aldiss, about which there has been a great deal of third-rate talk.

Ghost Fleet was billed, not to put too fine a point on it, as the spiritual successor to Tim Clancy's Red Storm Rising. Unfortunately, it lacks the effortless balance between the overall war and the individual characters caught up in the fighting that made Red Storm Rising such a great book.

As it was, I came close to simply giving up and returning Ghost Fleet to the library on more than one occasion. The only thing that kept me going were hints of a greatness that never truly materialised.

For one thing, Clancy humanised the Russians even as he made them (or at least their leaders) the villains of the story. The reader can follow why the Russians feel that war with NATO is their only hope for survival. Ghost Fleet, however, does not present a convincing reason for war. The Chinese seem determined to start a war … why? Nations generally do not risk war, certainly not with nuclear powers, unless they feel there's something significant at risk. But in this book, China already appears to be on the ascendant before triggering a war with America. Indeed, the Chinese leadership seems to spend too much time dueling with lines from Sun Tzu instead of actually plotting a war.

Leaving that aside, the book does offer some interesting insights into future war. The authors warn of the dangers of using computer chips from China, some of which (in real life) have backdoors built into the hardware for later exploitation. This gives the Chinese an excellent chance to cripple the United States, force America out of the Pacific and land troops on Pearl Harbour.

However, at this point, the book fizzles. The United States introduces new weapons of its own, including spacecraft and railguns, yet the war is not over by the time the book comes to a conclusion.

Furthermore, while Clancy effortlessly wove his POV characters into the story, Ghost Fleet fails to do it anything like as convincingly. The only character of real note is an USN Captain who is haunted by his father's failures as a father, while repeating the same mistakes himself. A female marine turned assassin offers some interesting colour to the story (as does a Russian officer attached to the Chinese forces), but neither of them are particularly memorable.

The book does make note of social chances between now and the war. On one hand, it has a naval officer make a passing reference to his husband; on the other, it illuminates the danger of forced and ultimately pointless 'diversity.'

Racial tensions within the future United States have not abated in this book, a problem made worse by Chinese sleeper agents. As in real life, the people who pay for these problems are rarely the ones who started them in the first place.

Overall, Ghost Fleet really has too many problems to earn more than three stars from me. Red Storm Rising is still the king of modern war stories.

Harry Potter Series by J.K. Rowling
Analysis by Chris Nuttall

Pushing an Allegory Too Far

A couple of posts popped up recently in my Facebook feed, asking the same question. Is Hermione Granger of Harry Potter fame white? (See here and here.)

The writer of the first article notes, correctly, that 'white' is the default for characters in western novels. Hermione is never given a skin colour in the books, unlike clearly non-white characters, and 'Hermione Granger' is very much an upper middle class British name. Indeed, given what little we know about her parents (both professional dentists), they are almost certainly white upper middle class themselves. They are, in some ways, the kind of people Vernon and Petunia Dursley would like to be. We know very little else about the Grangers – they only appear in the books once – but what we hear from Hermione only confirms my first impression. Hermione's own personality, for example, suggests she was given a great deal of autonomy from a very early age (not entirely a wise decision); there may even be a case to be made that she, like Ron and Harry, was neglected by her caretakers.

From this alone, we can be reasonably certain that Hermione is indeed white. But there is another aspect that needs to be exploded.

The Wizarding World is clearly neither racist nor sexist, at least in the conventional sense. We see at least one high-ranking black man in the series and the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts is very definitely a woman. No one shouts racial slurs at any of the non-white characters in the series. This actually makes a great deal of sense; magic, which binds their world together, clearly doesn't discriminate between sex or race.

But it does have prejudices of its own. Specifically, prejudices against muggle-borns (magical children born of non-magical parents, like Hermione), squibs (muggles born of mages), werewolves and some other magical children and – finally, muggles (non-magical people). Having a white character like Hermione exposed to what is effectively racism is a shocker. If Hermione had been portrayed as black, from the start, it would have made the message weaker. Coming to think of it, if the prejudices had been brought into the open in book one, before Hermione became Ron and Harry's friend, they might even have wound up agreeing with Draco. Hermione needed to be established in our minds as one of the good guys before she was faced with open racism.

There is, however, a deeper issue. Racism against black people purely for being black, for example, is never justified. Ask the average person if they should discriminate, purely on the grounds of skin colour, and they will probably say no. However, one should ask if the prejudices of the Wizarding World are wholly unjustified. Historically, muggles burnt witches and wizards. Refusing to allow muggle-borns to attend Hogwarts (which caused the schism between the four founders) might have been a reasonable attitude at the time – muggle-borns might just lead their parents to the school and ensure its destruction. Even in the time of the books, a thousand years after Hogwarts was founded, many muggles who learn of the magical world react badly (not always without good reason). Petunia and Tobias Snape both loathed the idea of having magical relatives, although Petunia may well have a reasonable excuse.

Werewolves, squibs (and Goblins, perhaps) represent another issue. They cannot help being what they are – that's true – but their conditions carry implications that have to be addressed.

There are only two werewolves who play a major role in the books. One of them is pretty obviously a Child Predator, biting young children to turn them into werewolves themselves; the other, Remus Lupin, although a reasonably decent teacher, is staggeringly careless. Not only does he fail to take the potion that will allow him to control his condition, he failed to share vital information when a (supposed) mass murderer with a major grudge against Harry was on the loose. It is quite possible that Dumbledore summarily fired Lupin at the end of Book III (as he should have done) and blaming it on Snape, which Lupin does, doesn't change the fact that Lupin was lucky to escape a charge of reckless endangerment.

Indeed, the prejudice against squibs may be the only truly irrational prejudice in the Wizarding World. Squibs cannot be blamed for their condition, nor do they represent a real or imaginary threat. Prejudices against squibs, alas, may be a representation of the horror many of us feel when confronted with the intensely disabled, or the mentally challenged. Worse, perhaps, squibs are ill-prepared to leave the Wizarding World and yet unable to live comfortably within it.

To portray Hermione as black would undermine any rational analysis of magical prejudices. It is easy to scream 'racism' when someone dislikes a black character or feels they're not suited for a particular role.

But there is also a more personal issue. Hermione is a complex character in many ways – and yet that complexity seems to have slipped past most observers. She certainly is not the perfect good girl. Her early scenes show her flaws very clearly. She's pushy when she meets Harry for the first time, telling him she's read all about him; she's putting herself forward to help Neville even though it isn't clear Neville wants to be helped; she shows off her skills from the start, to the point of rubbing her success in Ron's face. And she might well have lied too – using magic at home is forbidden, yet she was prepared to claim the spells she tried worked. Frankly, Hermione is one step away from becoming a bully.

Hermione doesn't lose any of her flaws even after she befriends Harry and Ron, ending her self-inflicted isolation from her peers. She is often willing – far too willing – to take matters into her own hands. When Harry is sent the latest model of broomstick by an unknown person, Hermione reports it to the teachers, which results in the broom being confiscated for examination. From an adult point of view, Hermione did the right thing, but it didn't seem to occur to her that Harry and Ron would feel otherwise. Later, in fifth year, Hermione puts a jinx to catch anyone who tries to betray the DA to Umbridge, a jinx that scars its victim for life. (It also ensures that any betrayal will immediately become public, rather than allowing her to deal with the betrayer quietly.) And while she is perfectly capable of rattling off romantic advice to Harry and Ginny, she is far less capable of applying it for herself. It's clear from very early on that she's interested in Ron, but she sends him some very mixed messages.

And then she effectively kidnaps and imprisons an adult witch and literally commits mind-rape when she wipes the memories of herself from her parents' minds. By the end of the series, it's hard not to escape the feeling that Hermione, like so many other characters in the books, is nothing more than a Designated Hero. It is a cause of some minor frustration that hardly anyone calls Hermione out on her actions, let alone holds her to account.

The core problem, I think, is that Hermione is an immigrant into a society that is so much like our own, on the surface, that we (and she) miss the differences. Throughout the books, we are confronted with evidence that the Wizarding World operates on very different principles to the mundane world, yet Her-

mione seems to miss them. It is absurd, for example, for a headmaster in our world to be, at the same time, Speaker of the House of Commons, but Dumbledore possesses both titles and a whole host of others. Hermione's private crusade on behalf of House Elves seems to miss the fact that House Elves are not human, that they want to be appreciated rather than treated with condescending benevolence. Nor does it seem to occur to her that the interconnections between the different families would create problems; Umbridge has no difficulty whatsoever in finding someone who can be pressured to betray Dumbledore's Army, simply because her mother worked in the ministry. This is particularly unforgivable on Hermione's part because she knows, by this time, that Percy Weasley has publicly separated himself from his family, at least in part to prevent them from being used against them or vice versa.

Hermione is not, I think, particularly clever. She is capable of projecting a facade of cleverness – she admits it herself in book one – but she lacks the spark of genius showed by several other characters, most notably the young Snape. She has learned how to absorb and use knowledge, yet she never really adapts it for herself. The 'half-blood prince' modified potions recipes. Hermione objects heatedly to the mere idea of deviating from the script and is outraged when Harry, following the altered recipe, gets better results than her. And she is not particularly mature either. She tries to project an attitude that adults will find acceptable, but she finds it far harder to get respect from her peers.

In the age of Social Justice Warriors, of people who whine and moan when a female character admits that she regrets being sterilised, having those flaws in a black character would probably be used to batter the author around the head, several times. Writers are trapped between the need to portray non-white characters positively – and, in doing so, create Mary Sues – and deliberately renouncing such needs, by creating non-white characters who are villains. It is a great deal harder to create a well-rounded character, a person who may be seen as good or bad, when one aspect comes to dominate the rest.

Hermione Granger is white because she has to be white. It's the only way her role in her new world can be explored.

Lord of the Dragons: The Golden Horn by Mats Vederhus
Review by Pat Patterson

The author solicited a review, and I obtained my copy through the Kindle Unlimited program on Amazon.

This was indeed fortunate in this case, since the book didn't cost me a penny. If it had cost anything, it would have been too much.

It starts with a confusing origin story. I accepted this as it was, since origin stories are often confusing. However, after much bashing about, we are given a few lines of narrative, and the entire story is repeated again. This time, it is evident, it is presented as a mother telling the story to her daughter. BUT WHY IS THE ENTIRE STORY TOLD TWICE?

I was not particularly put off by some awkward word use in the first telling of the beginning of things; as I said, origin stories are often confusing. However, at the end of the mother's version of the story, she states

"Goluboym and Golubam had filled the night sky with stars. «It is said, » Olivia smiled, «that the last thing Goluboym and Golubam had done before they died, was to expire northern lights over Svalbard."

Wait. What? They EXPIRED the Northern Lights?

And so, I PARTIALLY understood why this book reads like a school assignment by a 15-year-old, who is fascinated with Nordic mystery. True, the author is young (although not THAT young) but he is not a native speaker of English. And it shows. Boy, does it show.

Honestly, I was unable to determine whether there exists within the stultifying structure a story worth telling. I had to quit, after reading the first third of the book. It was just too horrible for me to proceed.

“In the living room, she could not be.” Really, Yoda?

“Linoleum rugs, woven by the Vikings in Norway, covered the hallways.” Yeah. I don't know how you weave linoleum, either.

These are just random quotes, but I could go on and on. Examples exist on every page. I gave it two stars because the descriptor for ONE star is "I hate it." I couldn't muster up the energy to hate this book. It's like the empty box on the highway that I drive around, rather then run over: to be avoided, but not worth destroying.

Don't waste your time with this one.

The Perihelion' Duology by D.M. Wozniak
Review by Tamara Wilhite

Introduction

“The Perihelion” is a book by D.M. Wozniak. “The Perihelion Complete Duology” contains two books within one cover in what could become a full series. What are the pros and cons of this science fiction work?

The World

This book is set several decades in the future. The red (conservative) rural areas have split from the blue (urban core) areas, resulting in two parallel societies on the same continent. We prevented a civil war by having a less than civil divorce. However, people can and go between the areas with a number of restrictions.

The Redlands are mostly rural, very independent, pro-gun, pro-life and quite traditional.

The Blue Cores are following what many big cities have done for years, outlawing guns, discouraging marriage (by high taxes), and a host of other regulations. To distance modern cities from history, they get renamed with letter and number combinations. Chicago became Blue Core 1C.

There’s no magical, technological hand-waving here. The basic cybernetics are realistic. The artificial uterus or “arterus” technology in the book is already under development. The genetic engineering is not far-fetched, nor is the reactions of the general population to the resulting 99ers, though their animal DNA is less than 1% of their makeup. It’s a logical conclusion given the Frankenfood hysteria today.

Military drones, ad spewing floating cameras that double as security monitors, and implanted tracking devices are integral to society. Micro-reactors that produce nuclear power are tightly regulated but universal technology. All of these technologies are integral to the plot, and they are well explained in a science fiction book that is strong on the science.

The Strengths of "The Perihelion"

The book fleshes out its characters, their motivations, their reasoning. And yet it manages to share surprises and depth even up to the very end.

The plot is strong from the very start, and it doesn't let up. There are twists and turns from the very start of this murder mystery, as the Hummingbird or drone-based reporter tries to find out not only what happened but why.

It continues as seemingly unrelated characters are tied into the story and new mysteries and challenges arise. All the strands literally tie up at the end.

You see the little cultural adaptations that technology brings, and you see the ways that life doesn't change at all. Women who use artificial uteruses no longer have a baby bump, but they buy jewelry designed to show off the same thing – publicly marking how long their baby has been growing.

Cutting edge technology is developed, but few end up adopting it (Hummingbirds) or there are failures along the way (the 99ers). Guns are pretty much illegal, but criminals can still get them. Even in a surveillance society, people find ways to spy on others and make illicit payments.

The ending of the Duology could stand as an ending if nothing else is written. It is certainly better than the books written in the hope of sparking a series ending in a cliffhanger that never gets resolved.

The Weaknesses of "The Perihelion"

This is a duology, two books in one print edition. That alone would make it long. However, the 750 pages could have been trimmed to 600 or fewer pages. This isn't because of a long, winding plot but long-winded descriptions of every aspect of the environment.

The couple of pages with the planet's point of view were utterly irrelevant. The meaning of the term perihelion was already explained early on in the text, and the relationship to the start of a shift in society should be obvious to any reader.

Summary

I give "The Perihelion" book four stars. It loses one star for the long slog of reading a richly detailed world where the little details in every scene slowed down the story. With regard to the story itself, I hope there is another novel by Wozniak.

Polly's Summer Vacation At Excentrifugal Engineering: 2nd Edition by James Snover Review by Pat Patterson

I don't know who did the artwork! This is some bodacious artwork!

Polly Madison is a delightfully normal 13-year-old genius. She lives on an Earth that has lost its collective mind, with every sort of political splinter faction running around to do things for the Good Of The People, because they alone know what that Good is.

The WILDEST card in this deck is Rex Mason, the head of Excentrifugal Engineering. He is a certified Mad Scientist, Life Member, with a Challenge Coin, who finds purpose in (umm, what's a good word: periodically? no; too conventional; intermittently? no, that implies a miss every now and then;) SPASMODICALLY saves the world, often by obliterating some part of it.

And Rex has chosen Polly as his very first Summer Intern!

So, she is overjoyed; her parents freak out. She's too YOUNG! She's had too much DISAPPOINTMENT! She's a PARAPLEGIC!

And here, we cross over from the World of Reality into Fantasy Land. In this Fantasy Land, Rex is able to convince her parents that the very things that they are tossing up as obstacles are the reasons he has selected her for the program. Too young? Well, she won't have to unlearn a lot of things, because she is still gulping in great amounts of math and science and engineering.

Too much disappointment? She will have no restrictions placed on what she can learn at E E. Paraplegic? That's PERFECT! She has had to adapt and overcome for her entire life, and THAT skill & attitude set is precisely what will make her a super-nova of success!

So why is this Fantasy Land and not World of Reality? I cheated. It's not a fantasy. Polly has real parents, and I've seen this kind, who are not blind to her impairment, and don't permit her to be blind to it as well, but who also love her so much that they never allow the impairment to destroy her spirit.

Yes, these are real people.

If you move in certain Mad Scientist circles, you will see that Polly's teachers and the staff of EE are all tuckerizations of that special crowd. It makes for a nice touch. These are real people, too.

And as to how Polly's summer works out, I cannot tell you without spoilers. I will tell you, however, that it involves a large musical instrument made out of depleted uranium, and the screwdriver blade of a multi-tool. It is not specified whether or not the multitool is a Leatherman, Victorinox, Gerber, or if it's a specialty that includes an AR wrench and EOD tools.

Psychic for Sale (Rent to Own) by Amie Gibbons
Review by Pat Patterson

First, I want to shout-out for the cover. Taken as a singleton, it's merely somewhat pleasant, but since ALL of her books in the series use the same style, she and her artist (Oleg Volk) have clearly established a franchise.

On the surface, the story is the next step in the vampire shuffle Ryder has fallen into. She and her boss have to go to Miami, where Vampire-In-Chief Carvi has arranged a conference to decide on whether their presence is to be revealed to the world, and if so, under what circumstances. However, there are other powers than vamps involved. The Fae appear to be nobody's friend, and although more hidden from view than even the vamps, they have magical weapons.

So: fights.

THE PART I USUALLY SKIP OVER.
Now, Gibbons is known to allow her character to 'fall in love' with more than one person at a time. Although she is a relative neophyte at the physical aspect of male-female relationships, she embraces her role whole-heartedly (puns intended). A large part of her character is portrayed by her cow-eyed mooning over her untouchable boss, Grant, who plays a role in her fantasy, but never in her bedroom. He has explicitly stated to her that he is off-limits to her, due to his age and his supervisory status (he might be married as well, but I can't remember, and it's not important). This doesn't prevent Ariana from picturing him whispering sweet nothings, yada yada yada.

Look, she's a lawyer, right? There never was a chance for her to take a course in anatomy and physiology, much less biochemistry, but the information is out there. She's reacting to physical attraction as if it were T-R-U-E L-O-V-E.

She's not utterly hopeless, though. When she is similarly attracted to the vampire Quil, she commits to fidelity with him, and somewhat subdues her immature sexual flightiness.

Now, I usually skip over all of these scenes in a book, because it just bores the heck out of me. I am decades beyond taking any personal satisfaction in hearing about how other people in other places made the sheets get all sweaty and disarrayed. My own experiences are both HIGHLY satisfactory and INTENSELY private, and whenever it looks like nekkid is about to happen ('Nekkid' being defined as 'naked with intent') I just page forward.

But I found myself to be unable to do that effectively with this book, for two reasons" First, it seemed to me that there were a LOT more of those scenes; second, the dialogue leading up to action was carrying a LOT of conflict. And it all boiled down to this:

"When does 'no' really mean 'no'?"

This is a case in which my own position is firmly established; for years, I delivered sexual harassment training to teenagers. Thus, I'm of the position that 'no' means 'no,' and there aren't any variations.

But Gibbons takes the whole matter of flirtation, wooing, and seduction, and amplifies it hugely by including the mind-control powers of a vampire in the mix.

Let's step it down a bit. Let's say we aren't talking about coitus, but a kiss. The boy picks up the girl, and when he greets her, he presents his face for a kiss. She doesn't want to kiss him, so she turns her head. They go out for a nice dinner, movie, coffee afterward, and he is such a pleasant person, that she finds her initial reluctance to be overcome. So, when he drops her off at her door that night, she decides the time is right, and she kisses him.

Now, this is exactly the situation that Gibbons describes for us, except in this case, it IS coitus (of some technique) that's considered, and instead of being a gentleman, the boy is a cad. Carvi has explicitly stated that he wants to have sex with her, that he won't do so unless she agrees, but that he plans to seduce her until she agrees. And he uses his powers, frequently, to sexually arouse her.

If it occurs, under those circumstances, is it consensual sex, or not?

NOTE: I'm ambivalent about whether or not to give the book four stars or five. I decided to go with four, Yes, it's a good ethical dilemma, but it needs a resolution involving a silver battle-axe; and, I just don't like sex scenes.

The Replicant War by Chris Kennedy
Review by Pat Patterson

Today, I am reviewing Chris Kennedy's "The Replicant War." Now, while this book WAS a Dragon nominee, it was NOT one of the books I reviewed last August. That's because I only review nominees in four categories: Best SF, Best Fantasy, Best Alternate History, and Best Mil SF. "The Replicant War" was nominated in the "Best Media Tie-In" category, and that's an area about which I know nothing.

SO: Why am I reviewing it at all?

First, because it was written by Chris Kennedy. I have been quite impressed by the work his fledgling publishing house has put out, especially the stories in the Four Horsemen Universe. When I think of the long years of drought that was the 1970s and 1980s for guys like me, who grew up with SCIENCE! ROCKETS TO THE MOON! and the few, paltry items we found in those decades; well, the abundance of good writing available now is a delight.

Second, well, umm...mecha saves the world?

So, let me get this out of the way first: as far as I can tell, the qualification for the "Media Tie-in" category is that this story is based on an immersive online game, Worlds of War, which doesn't actually exist (yet). In fact, the tech to deliver the game experience doesn't exist yet. There is, however, a sho-nuff video game, Turbolance, referenced in the story. I don't know anything about it, other than the description given in the text (knights with lances on motorcycles).

Brenda Mihalko and Ricky Ryan are responsible for the cover art; fans of the 4HU will recognize the look and feel of their work. Nicely detailed scary things, etc.

Although we aren't given dates, I think we can assume from other clues that this takes place in the not-too-distant future. The only tech advances I could find is that hardware providing for a completely immersive gamer experience is available to the players, and they are only mildly astonished by the sys-

tem's tech.

Our protagonist is one Ryan Johnson, a senior majoring in Game Design at the fictional Oliver Wolcott University in Washington, DC. We meet him as he is prepping to enter the gamer for the first time, something he has been looking forward to ever since rumors of the game's release hit the internet.

Apart from the immersive experience, he follows a path familiar to anyone who has ever played a game of any kind. Certainly, his early experience is an exact match for a computer-based game, but I couldn't help but be reminded of the time my dad taught me how to play solitaire when I was in kindergarten.

With all the similarities, however, there are enough differences that Ryan begins to suspect that there is more to the game than meets the eye. He's right.

And the review STOPS RIGHT THERE, almost, because spoilers, and I ain't gonna.

Almost: There is nothing about this that would cause a responsible parent from keeping it from their teenager. The language is PG-13; not too gory, no sexual content at all.

Almost: While the story DOES include lots of technology, and much of it gets blown to smithereens, it's the decisions made by the characters that drive the story.

Almost: The Amazon description refers to "The Replicant War" as a "...fast-paced, action-packed LitRPG novel..." LitRPG is not a classification I was familiar with before last year, when I reviewed a book with that classification. That work was awful! It seemed to be nothing but screenshots of a game being played online. THAT'S NOT WHAT THIS IS! This is a correctly put-together story. No assembly required, etc.

So, there you have it. It's a good read, and after six months, I have finally gotten the review done.

Stellaris: People of the Stars edited by Robert E Hampson
Review by Pat Patterson

Some recent history. A few days ago, scientist/author Robert E Hampson, who has aliases known to many, pointed out that he had requested that I review a book. Last August.

Now, at the time, he very graciously accepted the reality that I was in the throes of reviewing the nominated works for the Dragon Award, and couldn’t interrupt that frenzy. No problem, he said. Just get to it when it’s convenient, he said.

Well, neither he, nor I, had any idea that circumstances (armed with a bludgeon) were on the way, or else we might not have been so casual about the arrangement. But that, as they say, is all water over the dam, washing away villages downstream and creating havoc and establishing conditions for disease epidemics. So, we shall speak no more of that, and simply proceed with the review.

What kind of book is this? It’s the kind that will last you a long, long time, IF you are somewhat like me. I know this because a series with a similar format has lasted me for nigh on 40 years. I speak of “There Will Be War,” edited by the late great Jerry Pournelle, and the illustrious (or, wonderful, de-

lightful, inestimable, still alive) John F. Carr (and if I were to allow myself to launch into everything I wished to say about this and them and that, nothing else gets written. So, forcible stop).

More specifically, it's an anthology that addresses a single topic (the future of humanity in space) through a combination of short fiction and non-fiction articles. Now, IF you are somewhat like me, you are going to immediately devour the short fiction first. And then, over time, you are going to return to the non-fiction, and you are going to become involved much more deeply. I tried to come up with a food comparison, as in fast food versus Thanksgiving Feast, but I could think of nothing that will do justice to either component.

Just know this: the short fiction also educates, and the non-fiction also entertains. Also know that the environments being considered for human life are lethal, so that failure to make the right choices, every time, results in extinction.

The content.

Foreword by Robert E Hampson. PLEASE don't skip the Foreword! Not only do you get the story of the genesis of this volume, you also get a brief, interesting review of problems already encountered in real life in sustaining human life in space, as well as the science fiction treatments.

Burn the Boats by Sarah A. Hoyt. They say Sarah A. Hoyt is a real person, but I'm not so sure. I'd say that she might be a cyborg, but for two things: she writes about cats in a way only a human could; she also ALWAYS respects the science in a story, but her stories are incredibly perceptive studies of the PEOPLE who interact with the science. The people in this story must accommodate themselves to changes they had NEVER considered, or go extinct. And they have children.

Bridging by William Ledbetter. At first, I thought this was a Norse fantasy, and I recoiled; I mostly don't appreciate fantasy. It's NOT, though; it just incorporates names (and maybe themes) from that mythology into a science fiction. There are two groups of space colonists living in close proximity, but one lives under a gravity field much stronger than that of Earth, while the other lives in free-fall. They hate and fear each other, because of ancient stupid acts, but if they can't find a way to join, they both are at risk of going extinct.

The Future of Intelligent Life in the Cosmos by Martin Rees. The first non-fiction article in the collection, this one is particularly wide-ranging. (First impression? It's more of a concept dump than I prefer.) Advances in bio-tech, AI, and space propulsion are all essential. A significant point: if the exploration is funded by the government, can the level of risk needed to progress be accepted? He thinks not.

Stella Infantes by Kacey Ezell and Philip Wohlrab. There is a tiny sub-plot in one of James Michener's massive works (I THINK it's "Hawaii," but am not sure) about the missionaries who were sent on long voyages to set up missions on potentially hostile shores. Despite their reputation of being sexual prudes, almost all of the young couples had their first child SIGNIFICANTLY before nine months had elapsed after reaching their destination. If it was like that on long sea voyages, what about long space voyages? There is plenty of discussion here about medical implications of space pregnancy, and for that, I feel certain we can thank Wohlrab. Ezell, once again, utterly fails to disappoint in her ability to make a person in crisis come alive.

Maintaining Crew Health and Mission Performance in Ventures Beyond Near-Earth Space by Mark Shelhamer. With respect to long-term residence in space, it doesn't even appear that we know what it is

that we don't know. Shelhamer examines the current process of assessing the risks, and then moves forward. The ability to simulate living in a gravitational field appears to be essential, but there is no way of controlling for everything that MIGHT happen.

At the Bottom of the White by Todd McCaffrey. Although there is some nifty tech in the story, most especially the technique of using people in re-entry ships to 'bounce' cargoes up and down (just read the story, ok?) what really makes this story pop is the evolved culture of a long-term trader, journeying between star systems, which have developed on their own, in isolation.

Pageants of Humanity by Brent Roeder. Tee-hee! Roeder has captured the brainless chatter of talking heads, providing commentary on a beauty pageant in which the outcome determines whether a far-flung system still meets the requirements for humanity. It contains some well-conceived rationale for making the determination, but it's such a yock to read it presented this way. Loved it!

Homo Stellaris — Working Track Report from the Tennessee Valley Interstellar Workshop by Robert E. Hampson and Les Johnson. Ummm...this is the report. It's PACKED with info, and if you have any interest in people in space, read this. It's a summary of a LOT of work, and I can't further distill it.

Time Flies by Kevin J. Anderson. If you have chosen to travel, but not to arrive, how do you manage to do it? These are people who trade information and goods between far-flung star systems, and they have the technology to go into a super-slow time. Every so often, they shift from slow to normal time, to check on ship functions, and when approaching a planet. If you were able to, essentially, live forever that way, would you do it?

Our Worldship Broke! by Jim Beall. Although NICELY presented, I had to ask for help on this one. Fortunately, my son-in-law, Sam Blackstone, used to be one of the guys who run the nuclear teakettles on a submarine (and that's all he can tell us). So, I had him read this one, and he said: a person without some engineering background might struggle with how some of the concepts work with each other. He really liked the accuracy of the article "speaking directly about the success of nuclear power and how the Navy organized it from the very beginning;" the people, places, and things Beall references are all as described. Sam also suggested I'd find reading up on Hyman Rickover, the Father of Naval Nuclear Power, to be interesting. Thanks, Sam!

Nanny by Les Johnson. The POV swaps between Angela, beginning when she is age nine, and Manuel, an adult crew member on an interstellar voyage. Soon we begin to wonder: how did all these kids wind up with no adults? We find out.

Those Left Behind by Robert E. Hampson. Melisande, bka "Mace," and her older brother Sandy are dedicated space people. Besides having the brains to do the science, they were highly motivated to get away from home essentially destroyed by Dad's alcoholism and Mom's fluttering from cause to cause. So, they both opted for some physical changes, to make their bodies more adapted to working in space. A final home visit for a Thanksgiving meal became explosive (or nearly so).

Securing the Stars by Mike Massa. You cannot allow sabotage, or even sloppiness, to interfere with spacecraft systems; there are no convenient repair shops. Massa identifies some similarities between the isolation and hostile environment on a space mission with some Earth-based environments; the conclusions are inescapable: a space mission isn't a democracy.

The Smallest of Things by Catherine L. Smith. Just because SOME things are similar in our exoplanets, that doesn't mean they are really Earth-like. Smith shows us the challenge of alien strangeness,

compounded by human goofiness.

Biological and Medical Challenges of the Transition to Homo Stellaris by Nikhil Rao, MD. Before we go, while we are going, and once we get there: what can kill us? What can just mess us up? Well….lots of things. Here are some of them.

Exodus by Daniel M. Hoyt. (Okay, if Sarah A. Hoyt ISN'T real, then they are doing a really good job of covering that up.) Ginny is a science geek born to parents who "Only know of physics like Ex-lax," and are proud of it. She devotes all of her efforts to get away, but it turns out not to be that easy, because, evidently, a LOT of people want to get away, and then she finds there are some things hard to leave. This story does an EXCELLENT job of showing the results of alternative, and competing, research tracks: if the other guys make it work, all that you have done may go into long-term storage.

Afterword by Les Johnson. Nicely reflective on What It's All About.

Tennessee Valley Interstellar Workshop, by Joe Meany. A further explanation of the group, and how to join them in the goal of becoming People of the Stars, Homo Stellaris.

Well, there you have it. Grab a copy of the book, and read it for the next forty years.

Straight Outta Tombstone edited by David Boop
Review by Pat Patterson

Okay, we need to talk about the cover. It's by Dominic Harman, and I've seen his work before, BUT:

It's never sold me a book before.

As a matter of fact, I can't think of a time as an adult when artwork has ever sold me a book. Maybe when I was a kid, browsing the paperbacks on sale at Dorsey's Pharmacy in Macon, but even then, I'd mostly buy because it was by Ian Fleming. Yes, I was reading James Bond in the sixth grade. What's the problem?

But, the zombie cowboy with a pair of ...(stop right there.)

A pair of WHAT?

Six guns? Revolvers? Cowboy pistols?

No, those are sho 'nuff Colt Single Action Army. I hate it when authors make gun mistakes, and I LOVE it when they get it right. And I REALLY love it when the artists get it right. Listen: I just pulled one of MY Single Action Army Model 1873 revolvers out of the gun cabinet to verify. Dominic nailed it! He got the grip right, he shows the groove on top of the chamber because there are no rear sights on SAA, and in the gun held in the zombie's left hand, you can even make out the loading gate.

And before some smarty-pants critiques trigger discipline, these are SINGLE ACTION revolvers. It makes NO difference that the trigger finger of BOTH hands is in contact with a trigger, because the firearm in his left hand has the hammer down. It will NOT fire, until he points it at you, pulls back the hammer, and applies a certain amount of pressure to the bang switch, see?

So I'll SEE yer Four Rules of Gun Safety, and RAISE you a ZOMBIE COWBOY, okay?

And yes, the end of that barrel has a bore size perhaps best described as ...prodigious. Because that's what a .45 Colt (or .44-40 WCF) looks like when it's in yer face, pilgrim. My pair are chambered in .357, and THAT'S enough to make ya whimper.

Sigh. I now leave off discussion of the cover art, which in my opinion is THE best story in the book, to consider the words which are written down. All of them, in some way or another, deal with CTOW, Creepy Things Out West. There really isn't a 'best one!' story in this collection, in my opinion. Many different styles, of course, but even Waffle House has more than one item on the menu.

Not that I ever need to use the menu at Waffle House, but it's nice to have choices.

BUBBA SHACKLEFORD'S PROFESSIONAL MONSTER KILLERS by Larry Correia. Ever since Owen got to throw his boss out of the window, his fans have been clamoring for more. And, by going into the past, we can get a LOT more Monster Hunter stories. Some things stay the same: not all monsters are evil; chicks with guns are WAY cool; and NOBODY ever said "Dang, why did I bring all this ammunition?" Oh, yeah, and the government is mental.

TROUBLE IN AN HOURGLASS by Jody Lynn Nye. Well, her name isn't REALLY trouble. Beauty may, perhaps, be only skin deep, but mischief goes right down to the bone. Mom tends bar with a shotgun, daddy builds time machines in the shed.

THE BUFFALO HUNTERS by Sam Knight. What do you get when you go hunting buffalo with a giant Russian count and his daughter? Well, you get buffalo, for one thing. Not much sport to it, but this sort of thing really happened. In this case, though, it's not the buffalo that are the biggest threat.

THE SIXTH WORLD by Robert E. Vardeman. This story combines mad scientists, native spook stuff, and little grey men. The most sympathetic character gets killed first, but he was sort of a wimp.

EASY MONEY by Phil Foglio. Nasty, nasty man writes a story with a punchline at the end. It's a HECK of a good cowboy story, too.

THE WICKED WILD by Nicole Givens Kurtz. This could ALMOST not be a Wild West story, but it's the wicked ways of the Wild West that make the people possible. Umm, I didn't mean to do that much alliteration. Anyway, bad guys use to be able to get away with stuff until they got shot. Or something.

CHANCE CORRIGAN AND THE LORD OF THE UNDERWORLD by Michael A. Stackpole. Nicely steampunk in nature, a classic tale of the poor & downtrodden being taken advantage of by the owners of the mine.

THE GREATEST GUNS IN THE GALAXY by Bryan Thomas Schmidt & Ken Scholes. After the Big Shoot-Out, there's always some kid who thinks he has to prove himself. Usually, the story ends with a pimply 15-year-old staring up at a blue sky. Sometimes it ends in zombies. Or not.

DANCE OF BONES by Maurice Broaddus. When you take a man's money, you do the job he hired you to do. And if that means you have to do a little extra? Well, that's a risk you take.

DRY GULCH DRAGON by Sarah A. Hoyt. Would you want your sister to marry a dragon? There's really NOTHING I can say about that concept without the risk of offending a brother-in-law. Really.

I've got some responses, but I think I may have gone a bit far already.

THE TREEFOLD PROBLEM by Alan Dean Foster. Mad Amos Malone and his trusty steed, Worthless, are not the sort you want to aggravate. Amos walks into a foreclosure situation, and, well, they just blow the competition away.

FOUNTAINS OF BLOOD by David Lee Summers. It's rather a creepy title, but I don't know what I'd come up with to replace it. A hired gun goes beyond the necessary minimums to provide true service to the man who hired him; and there are vampires, and a bodacious lady marshal who rides a motorcycle called Wolf.

HIGH MIDNIGHT by Kevin J. Anderson. The Shamblin' Zombie Private Eye encounters the ethics of the Wild West through time travel. Sort of.

COYOTE by Naomi Brett Rourke. This particular story has just as much non-natural events as the others, but it reads truer. Some of the other stories NEED a volume like this in order to exist; this one doesn't. The story of the old man and his granddaughter could appear anywhere from Boy's Life to Playboy to Good Housekeeping. Maybe not Popular Mechanics.

THE KEY by Peter J. Wacks. Sorry. Didn't get this one. It has lots of famous people in it, though. And there is whiskey involved.

A FISTFUL OF WARLOCKS by Jim Butcher. Everybody said Wyatt Earp was a tough lawman. He says, in this story, that he can't leave just because the bad guys want him to, or pretty soon everybody will be pushing him. Seems like a good philosophy for a Wild West lawman to have.

Tears of Paradox by Daniella Bova
Review by Jim McCoy

I should wait until tomorrow to write this review, but I'm going to write it now to try to get some of this out of my system. Daniella Bova has managed, in her book Tears of Paradox to write what amounts to pretty much my worst nightmare. The book is entertaining, gripping and relentless. Bova reminds her audience of the need to protect our rights from our government. Tears of Paradox is the first in the series. I have not read the second one yet. I won't spoil the ending, except to say that it's a cliffhanger. I will say that this tome creeps me out worse than any horror flick I've ever seen and I've seen a metric crap-load of them.

Bova's work is the story of Jason Wallace and his girlfriend, eventually wife, Michelle. It follows them from when they first started dating and through their marriage. The two have their trials. They go through good times and bad times. They deal with issues with their extended family. They worship God the same way. They're there for each other when they need to be. And oh my Lord do they need to be. Not only do they have problems beyond what most married couples do in a very important part of their marriage (I won't spoil what) but they are dealing with the descent of the United States into a Marxist abyss. Things start out bad and get worse.

Bova does a phenomenal job of presenting every Conservative's fears in story form and making it entertaining. We see the loss of personal liberty, the persecution of Christians, the slide into moral decadence and the loss of freedom. She details the fall of the Second Amendment and the rise of "doctors"

who quite frankly don't give a rat's ass about what happens to their patients as long as the paperwork is right. The effects of Marxist policies on everything from health care to the economy are exposed and found wanting. Every Rightist who knows a Leftist that has been asked what we're afraid of needs to buy them this book. Every Leftist who would ask the question needs to read this book. Note that Bova doesn't do much with race. That makes sense. Race is not a primary concern for the Right in this country and she did well to leave it out.

There is a strong Catholic theme to this book. It reminds me that I never finished my RCIA and I need to get off my duff and do it, but it's more than that. Bova does an excellent job of portraying Catholics and, by association, Christians in a totally different light than a typical Leftist would. Her Christians are good people with a belief system that they draw strength from. Unlike a lot of authors in the hear and now, Bova portrays her Christians as warm, loving, caring people who know they're not perfect and simply strive to be the best they can be. They don't agree with much of what's going on around them, but they have their reasons and they don't back down. It's not about hatred. It's about their beliefs and a lack of willingness to violate them simply because someone else disagrees with their stance.

Having said that much, you can consider this your trigger warning. If you find a realistic portrayal of religious people offensive you're better off reading something else. If you tend to be the whiny type, unable to read something you disagree with or to be tolerant of someone who disagrees with your point of view maybe you should try something else. I hear there are good vegan cookbooks out there. That's not offensive to you, right? Have fun with those.

Bova seems to have a good sense of the history of Socialism and the existence of informers. In any truly Leftist society they will be everywhere. Family members, co-workers, it's all been documented, especially with opening of the East Germany archives. Bova impresses me with her ability to make everything uncomfortable. The characters in this book know that someone out there is willing to inform on them. Whether it's the doctor, a co-worker at the pharmacy or the idiot nephew they know where the threats are.

As much as I'd like to say otherwise, this book is not perfectly crafted. Even for someone who agrees with the politics of the book, it comes across as a bit on the heavy-handed side. Message oozes from this book like lava boiling out of the top of a volcano. I mean, I get the fact that this is a political book and I agree with its moral, but I do wonder if perhaps a bit more subtlety would not be in order. The characters in Tears are not politicians by any stretch of the imagination, but they do talk politics a lot. They agonize about politics regularly. It affects everything they do. It's not that it's an inaccurate portrayal. It's more the ham-fisted approach to making her point that is the problem.

This is also certainly not a book for the faint of heart regardless of religious and/or political persuasion. There is a lot of loss in this book. There is one scene that is bloody to the point of being slightly nauseating. (It needs to be but that's not the point I'm making here.) This thing has the potential of giving me nightmares. It starts about five minutes from now and that is part of the problem. Even with something like The Hunger Games you can kind of blow it off as being nightmarish but ultimately unrealistic. Tears of Paradox is too realistic to be simply shrugged at.

That much being said, this is still a good book. Bova ends her work with an afterword about why she wrote the book but I don't think it's really necessary. It exists, it reads well and it makes a definite point. I will read this again and I plan on acquiring the second book in the series, The Notice, in the near future. I like to think and Bova has my brain working.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Rolls of Toilet Paper (read the book, you'll get it)

The Year's Best Military and Adventure SF Volume 3
Edited by David Afsharirad
Review by Pat Patterson

The Year's Best ? REALLY?

It took a LOT of reading before I discovered I was a military Science Fiction fan. Old Yeller and Sherlock Holmes captivated me, and the series of Tom Swift books had me reading with a flashlight under the covers until I fell asleep (or passed out from anoxia). My relatives knew that getting me books for Christmas was a safe bet; the glamor of board games or lawn darts was a close approximation to the excitement I felt from getting a hairbrush or a pair of green and orange tube socks. But books? Yeah, books got my attention.

And then, sometime between November of 1972 and March of 1973, I found a battered copy of 'Starship Troopers' in the dayroom of Company Charlie Two of the Medical Corpsman Training Battalion at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and I was hooked.

A few years after that, I discovered Hammer's Slammers, and the adventures of John Christian Falkenberg, and I was committed forever. I doubt my own military experience had anything to do with it, at least not directly; after all, I served my time as a medic in Germany, where the biggest threat was getting a traffic ticket. Who knows?

Through the efforts of some SERIOUSLY determined (and sometime demented) writers, I have had my horizons broadened in recent years, as I began to writing book reviews regularly. Nowadays, you can read my reviews of books about psychic lawyers, wine-guzzling semi-divinities hopping universes, shape-shifting cops and diner owners, pixies, and even grizzled old policemen approaching retirement. But my heart belongs to military science fiction.

And that's why, when I discovered a slight gap in my reading program, I jumped on Baen's "The Year's Best Military and Adventure SF Volume 3".

And here's my main impression, after devouring the book: 1. it's been a sparse year for military science fiction, strongly coupled with 2. authors aren't putting out much short fiction any more.

That isn't to say this volume is a loser! It's not; there really are some really good stories here. But, Best of the Year? That's a reach.

Now, before I get into the specifics, let me back-pedal by saying that I understand that putting together a collection is a thankless job, and one I certainly wouldn't want to attempt, for ANY amount of money under, say, five million dollars. I have no academic or industry credentials as a critic. So, if you disagree with my evaluation, fine. I'm probably wrong, and you are probably right.

I don't even go to cons!

But, that remains my collective impression of the book; now, what about the stories?

David Drake, "Cadet Cruise." It's entirely credible to include this story in the 'Best of Year' collection, since it is a prequel to the phenomenal adventures of Daniel Leary. It demonstrates the talents the

young midshipman had at winning over people, as well as making complicated plans work out. If it WEREN'T for that other body of work, it would still be a good story; but compare it to the visceral punch of 'Under the Hammer' or 'The Butcher's Bill'?' That may be an unfair comparison, but we ARE talking about a high bar, here: Best of the Year. Still, I absolutely will accept this as worthy of inclusion, as it's a great read.

William Ledbetter, "Tethers." It's bad enough when space is trying to kill you; when your partner is trying as well? That's just not fair. This is first class writing; my only caveat is that it is adventure, and not military sci-fi, but the title of the book includes both, so I guess that's no quibble at all.

Eric de Carlo, "Unlinkage." The story of a retired mind-controller of a Brute, Hulk-type human is an ugly read in that it is awfully dark and presupposes an ugly future society. However, the story does stress the values of loyalty to companions, and that's always worth writing about. I can't quite make myself see it as Best of the Year, but I won't complain if others see it that way.

Kacey Ezell, "Not in Vain." This one has my unqualified support. It takes a team of high school cheerleaders and their coach, and puts them in impossible circumstances, and shows how they all rise above their personal interests to put the good of the team first, even BEYOND death. This is written to be a part of John Ringo's Black Tide Rising universe, but you need no knowledge of that storyline to appreciate this selection. (And yeah, not military, but veterans, okay?)

Adam Roberts, "Between Nine and Eleven." This story also gets my unqualified support for a BOY inclusion. It takes the Campbell premise of 'as good as a man, but not a man' and gives it solid form. The story works both as a personal adventure and as a good 'theory/concept' story.

Jack Schouten, "Sephine and the Leviathan." I didn't like anything about this story except that it eventually was over. It took too long to figure out what the heck was going on, and who these people were, and frankly, it seemed too much like an exercise in Creative Writing, and not a story. Dreadfully sorry, and I'm sure I'll regret saying this, but I don't have the slightest clue as to how this was chosen for the book. My apologies for offending with my strongly worded opinion. I feel certain I am mistaken.

Michael Ezell, "The Good Food." A seemingly light-hearted story about a somewhat too-independent scout and his trusty dog, this quickly became a nightmare. It deserves access to the volume for the creepy factor alone. I hate these scary stories (but in a good way).

James Wesley Rogers, "If I could Give This Time Machine Zero Stars, I Would." This is probably the story I enjoyed reading the most. It pays homage to certain of the Golden Age time-travel stories AND gives a hat tip to the reviewing system that takes up so much of my time, and it's funny. However! I don't see it as being EITHER military OR adventure, and I don't know why it's here. It's a great story, though!

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, "Wise Child." I'm not sure, but I THINK this is also another great story that is included in the BOY collection because of the existing body of material in this particular universe. It's very nicely done; however, since I am NOT a close follower of the Liaden Universe, it was missing some of the essential punch to bring it to BOY status for me.

Michael Z Williamson, "Star Home." You don't HAVE to be a fan of the Freehold/Grainne universe to get the brooding, repressive feeling of the reach of the Earth empire. I am such a fan, and I know (sort

of) what's going on behind the scenes, This is a great story, and it's definitely worth reading, but: "I read 'Soft Casualty,' Star Home, and you are no 'Soft Casualty.'"

Robert Dawson, "The Art of Failure." The punchline comes at the very end of the story, and it's thrown away so beautifully, it's a work of art. I endorse inclusion, just for that reason alone (but the rest of the story is good as well),

Allen Stroud, "The Last Tank Commander." No question about it; this story of the ancient, decrepit, rebuilt corporal of tanks leading a bunch of babies into battle deserves a place in this volume.

Jay Werkheiser, "A Giant Leap." A young man falls off his aircraft into the poisonous atmosphere of Venus; his hated father maintains radio contact with him all the way down. Without more exposition of the prior relationship between father and son, the meaning of the final words loses power. And by the way: who in heck designs a system that lets people fall off an airship? Tether cable, anyone? It's an okay story, but I didn't like anyone in it.

David Adams, "The Immortals: Anchorage." The story is certainly powerful enough to warrant inclusion in a BOY collection. Besides the rock'em-sock'em action, there were some great insights into what the three main characters were about to make this a leading candidate.

Paul Di Filippo, "Backup Man." This read like a noir detective story, with the appropriate corporate betrayal included (I'm thinking "Chinatown"). Does that make it a BOY selection? I'm not sure. Considering that the goal is cow flop from a modified children's toy, it might make it in on points. I couldn't make the call.

If I have counted right, that's seven out of fifteen stories that I believe are Best of the Year quality. Seven more were at least good, if not excellent. I definitely think you should buy the book! It's got hours of reading enjoyment for you, and you just won't get that anywhere.

Wraithkin by Jason Cordova
Review by Jim McCoy

So what has eugenics, mecha, aliens, space travel and lots of cool fights? If you answered *Wraithkin* by Jason Cordova you'd be right. If you answered something else let me know. I love this stuff!

I came at *Wraithkin* cold. I think I've read a short or two by Mr. Cordova but I seem to have managed to avoid his novels up to this point. That stops now. *Wraithkin* was a thoroughly entertaining read of the you-can't-make-me-stop-reading-and-go-do-something-productive-if-I-don't-wanna sort. Except maybe I did do some stuff that I had to do, but it was under protest. No system is perfect, I guess.

Speaking of Imperfect...

The society in *Wraithkin* is divided between Perfects, who have had all susceptibility to all diseases bred out of them, and Imperfects who have a genetic susceptibility to one or more diseases. The differences in how society treats the two different groups is huge and really forms the basis of the book. At the end of the day though, that's not all *Wraithkin* is about.

Our hero is a man named Gabriel Espinoza and he goes through a lot. I don't want to spoil too much

here, but let's just say his life is turned upside down in one day and it just gets worse from there. He goes from an idyllic life to the furnace of combat and not all of the transformation is intentional on his part. This is a guy I really like because he takes it on the chin repeatedly and just keeps fighting.

I mean seriously, I remember many moons ago when I was taught the tenets of Tae Kwon Do in a class I took after school. One of them was indomitable will. Espinoza has that in spades. Not all of what he does is, strictly speaking, intelligent or sane, but it's all in service of a goal and he refuses to give up. In the face of some of the worst adversity I've ever seen a character go through (and I've read a Song of Ice and Fire) he perseveres. Espinoza is the man.

Espinoza is a man who has understandable motivations. I'm not saying that everything he does is governed strictly by logic. Gabriel is neither Spock nor Data. He is a complicated man of emotion. The fact remains that you can understand why he is doing what he is doing. That's a big thing for me. I like being able to follow characters as they go through their lives and find myself nodding. The love of a woman is a powerful thing and has inspired many men to do things they maybe shouldn't have. Gabriel is no exception and I get that. I even admire it. He makes the sacrifices that come with the territory in full knowledge of what the consequences are going to be. He inspires his men to follow him with them knowing what they're going to face not just if they fail, but also of they succeed.

His friends are just as crazy as he is. It seems that the Wraith corps, from which *Wraithkin* takes its name, is made up of people who are more than just a little off. They recruit insane individuals on purpose. The reasons for doing so are fairly obvious once you've read the book. Crazy is not just an attitude, it's a mission profile. Wraiths are people that don't matter. No one cares if they get killed. It allows the use of tactics that no real world military would even think of attempting. Seriously, if you could find a lunch table full of ten year old boys they couldn't come up with stuff this whacky. Yeah, I said it. It's to Cordova's credit that he makes it believable and engaging.

Also, I have to take a second out to talk about the Wraiths themselves. No, not the soldiers. The Wraiths pilot mecha called, well, Wraiths. I want one. Actually, I take that back. I want several. These things are fast, maneuverable, well armed and extremely heavily armored. They have manipulator arms and can handle things. I want to take a ride in one and blow some stuff up. I may be a bit too sane, but hey, that's life, right?

Cordova is a veteran and it shows in his work. *Wraithkin* is above all a work of Military Science Fiction. The atmosphere in the book has a strong military flavor as modified for a total lack of sanity. Discipline is maintained while banter is conducted. The chain of command exists and has to be modified at times due to combat losses. The tactics used make sense. In this sense, it doesn't feel like a table full of ten years olds. Well, with the possible exception of one particular landing. I'll leave that to its place in the book though.

Of course, with all of this military stuff going on, I have to mention the action and combat sequences. I loved it. There is plenty of blowuptuation to go around. The enemy is scary enough to be believable and appears to be up to more than what we're told up front. I like that. And Cordova seems to remember a saying I've heard reported often. “If you're short of everything except the enemy, you're in combat.” Seriously, it can get annoying when authors ignore that every weapon requires ammunition. And, if you've ever read anything about military planning, you're always advised to assume that your enemy is at least as smart as you are. Cordova gets that as well.

Wraithkin is the first book in a series and I can't wait to get to the rest of it. There are obvious lead-ins

to what comes next. There is a mystery here. The war is still ongoing. There is something I'm not talking about. In short, there is more to come and I want to know what it is. There is literally no higher compliment I can give an author. I consumed what he had to give me and I want more. I'll be looking for it.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Imperfect Genes

Wraithkin
Jason Cordova
Theogony Books, 2017

Literary Criticism

The Bookworm and the Angry Man: Deconstructing Elaine and Johan
Analysis of His Own Work by Chris Nuttall

One reader, after finishing the draft of Full Circle, commented that the Bookworm series had been a rehearsal for Schooled In Magic and that Elaine was an early version of Emily. I disagreed with the assertion at the time and I still do. In many ways, the ethos of the two universes are quite different and Elaine and Emily are very unalike. I deconstructed Emily earlier, so I thought – in honour of the final book – that I might as well deconstruct the core characters of Bookworm.

Elaine grew up in an orphanage; she was, quite literally, found on the steps. (This was unfortunately quite common in the past; unwanted children would be passed to orphanages almost as soon as they were born.) Like pretty much every other child who grows up in a community with dozens of children and relatively few adults, Elaine suffered from a lack of attention; she learned rapidly not to expect much, if anything, from life. This trait was only made stronger when she went to the Peerless School; she was pretty much on the bottom rung, so weak she could barely be called a magician, and she had no reason to expect she could rise. Unlike a counterpart of Hermione Granger, who could reasonably turn talent into a career even without connections, Elaine knew she was going nowhere.

Her early life shaped the development of a personality that could best be called unambitious. Starved of attention, she turned to books; she found a job at the level she felt she could handle and dived into it. She was friendly, naturally, but she respected the privacy of everyone around her to an unhealthy degree. (She didn't realise that Daria was a werewolf until midway through Bookworm.) Again, this came from the orphanage; orphans, trapped in close proximity, learn rapidly to treasure what privacy they have. Elaine never held any great ambitions; indeed, the best she felt she could hope for was a quiet life.

This changed, a little, after she became the Bookworm. She believed, with good reason, that her days had become numbered. The knowledge in her head made her a danger to the state and it was quite likely she'd be killed out of hand (or exploited) if anyone found out what she'd become. Her behavior became a little wilder, particularly when she started using the knowledge herself; she even thrust herself forward into a brief love affair because she believed she had nothing to lose. Defeating Kane – and dis-

covering her father's identity – undermined her new personality, however, because she was going to live. She pretty much reverted back to type, although being given the post of Head Librarian made it harder for her to bury herself in her shell.

In one sense, Elaine is a solid personality. (I'd actually say, in many ways, that she's a great deal more mature than Emily.) She may not be ambitious, but she isn't unstable either; she rarely loses her temper, even when pressed to the limit. Given time to think and plan, she's actually quite hard to beat; when she's taken prisoner twice in the later books, she breaks free rather than wait for someone to rescue her. She's motivated, in many ways, by duty; she takes little joy in her work (particularly the bits that involve working with people), but she does her best to carry out her responsibilities.

(Light Spinner understood this weakness very well. Part of the reason she appointed Elaine to her Privy Council was to try to encourage Elaine to engage with men and women of considerable influence. She trusted Elaine not to develop an agenda of her own.)

The part of her life that Elaine does enjoy is figuring out how to produce new spells. It was something she couldn't study at the Peerless School because she lacked the raw power to actually do something with her talent. Gaining a unique insight into how magic actually worked (in essence, learning how to program HTML directly instead of through an editor) did wonders for her self-confidence. Where she ended, in the series, is where she wanted to be, except she didn't know it.

And so we come to Johan.

Elaine is solid; Johan veers between near-adulthood and a childlike mentality more suited to someone half his age (he's 17 as of The Very Ugly Duckling.) He can be calm and understanding one moment and raging in fury the next. He's the sort of unbalanced personality that most of us would regard as dangerous even without magic. And his personality, too, was shaped by his early life.

Johan of House Conidian was the second child of parents with staggering magical (hence political) power. However, unlike his six siblings, Johan was (seemingly) born without any sort of magic. He could not hope to defend himself against mistreatment from his family; his mere existence, in many ways, was an embarrassment. Powerless children are generally killed by their own families – the reason for this is discussed in Full Circle – and his elder brother made it clear to Johan that, one day, his own family would probably kill him. (Johan had good reason to believe that Jamal, when he became the Conidian, would make erasing Johan from the family's history his first priority.) Johan grew up in a nightmarish position that only grew worse as he aged.

For one thing, he was effectively a prisoner; he was rarely allowed past the grounds (when they were living on the estate) and the doors, when they were living in the Golden City. For another, he was his sibling's favourite test subject for the jinxes, hexes, curses and other general nastiness. Johan was the ultimate bullying victim – the one who might rant and rave, but could never hope to fight back. Imagine yourself the third son of Superman and Wonder Woman, born without powers. Your life would suck even if your siblings didn't think it was a good idea to fly you up so high you couldn't breathe and drop you.

Making it worse, perhaps, was the awareness he could have a good life, if only he could get away from his siblings. Unlike Elaine, Johan does have drive; he could have joined the engineering crews building the Iron Dragons, joined a merchant skipper's crew, become a soldier … he could have done anything, provided it required no magic. Yet he is alternatively treated as a chew toy or a cripple, either bullied or

regarded as a mental defective. Johan's main objective is to get the hell away from his family. Can you blame him?

There's also, to a very great extent, a considerable degree of sexual frustration. Johan knows – no one made any attempt to hide it from him – that Jamal is fond of having his way with the family's maids – and the maids are quite willing to service him, on the (probably wrong) assumption that sleeping with the young master will be good for their careers. They don't, however, put out for Johan. His isolation and exclusion from the rest of his family is easy to see and none of the maids want to risk the anger of the rest of the family by reaching out to him. Like all teenage boys, Johan wants sex (and has the same issues about not quite understanding what he wants) and is denied it. This is bad enough in the real world; it's worse when one feels one is being denied because of someone one can't control.

This doesn't make Johan look very good, from our point of view. Unfortunately, it's also realistic.

Finally, perhaps, Johan had no way to displace his feelings.

Displacement may or may not be a psychological term (I am not a psychologist). It occurs when the victim becomes the victimiser – but only when the victim takes it out on someone (or something) who is actually innocent. The brother, bullied at school, beats up his little brother; the husband, told off by the manager at work, takes it out on his wife when he gets home. This is neither healthy nor decent behavior, but it is understandable; primal therapy attempts to come to grips with the core problem by encouraging the victim to vent. Johan could neither take his feelings out on the people responsible for his misery or pass them on to someone else.

[The only way to explain how Vernon and Petunia Dursley treated Harry Potter throughout the Harry Potter series is to assume that they're displacing their helplessness onto Harry, even though Harry bears no responsibility for their problems. By any reasonable standard, their conduct is both evil and insane; they're definitely abusive to Harry and spoil Dudley rotten. This makes sense if one realises that they feel helpless to escape their true tormentors – Dumbledore and the magical world.]

So, Johan has anger issues. Actually, that is something of an understatement. By the time we first meet Johan, much of his anger has been buried under tight self-control. Like several other bullying victims, Johan tried hard to suppress his own feelings. To a very large extent, he succeeded; he has far better self-control than many other people. What he didn't do was come to terms with his feelings, which he would have needed to do in order to lay them to rest permanently. Every so often, that veneer of control would crack.

And then he develops his powers.

Johan's reaction to this is surprisingly muted. Some readers have commented that he misses obvious solutions to his problems; simply put, he isn't used to using magic. He may have escaped the worst of the 'learned helplessness' condition, but he still doesn't grasp that he can use magic now. His sole goal is still to escape his family; he clings to Elaine and hides in the Great Library because he is so obsessed with one goal that he cannot conceive of any others.

Elaine is, in many ways, the perfect person to handle Johan. She does empathise with his condition (as a very weak magician, she understands his frustration) and, at the same time, she isn't overbearing or threatening. Johan doesn't cringe away from her, nor does he puff up and try to fight. Elaine's solid

personality provides the stability Johan desperately needs. As she was the first person to show him any real kindness, he probably devotes himself to her a long time before he falls in love with her.

And then his family starts trying to lure him back into their clutches.

Johan is torn between the desire not to have anything to do with his relatives and the prospect for lording it over them. His inclination to lash out at them – accidentally turning Charity into a rat – is mixed with an understandable fear that his newfound magic will vanish, leaving him as weak and vulnerable as before. Their meddling in his life – including an attempt to organise his marriage – only makes him hate them more. And yet, he still has problems comprehending just how much the community is beginning to fear him.

It isn't impossible to strip someone of their magic, but for a single magician to do it … Johan, in his attempt to protect and avenge Elaine against a Dark Wizard, terrified everyone. (For Johan, attacking magic is attacking what made his family so much more powerful than him.)

And then Jamal almost kills Elaine.

Johan, believing Elaine to be dead, loses it completely at this point; he lashes out at his brother, rendering him powerless (correctly judging this would be a fate worse than death) and attacks Conidian House itself, depowering his father and ripping the family's reputation to shreds.

If Elaine hadn't talked him down, it is likely he would have done a great deal more damage. As it was, Elaine saw to it that everyone believed Johan had died and made plans to leave the city with him. This pretty much cemented Johan's loyalty to her.

It's important to note that Johan is actually much more respectful of the Levellers than almost everyone else in the series. Johan would probably have joined, if he'd been given a chance; he certainly recognises their value and the simple truth that one doesn't need magic to be dangerous. In one sense, at least, Johan is capable of showing empathy for others, something that prevents him from becoming a monster.

Johan matures considerably over the final two books in the series. Having to deal with a coup in the Golden City (and escaping the Emperor) helps, but so does the slow process of coming to terms with his powers. He is unable to resist the temptation to be unpleasant to his younger sisters – who view him as a terrifying danger, after he tore the house apart – yet he realises he's acting badly after Cass, who he'd come to respect, pointed it out in a post-mortem letter.

Of all the characters in the series, I would argue that Johan was the only one who got what he actually wanted. Becoming an engineer, finding ways to do things without magic, may seem odd, but his perspective is different. Johan will always be a little scared of his powers, a little reluctant to depend on them; technology, primitive as it is at that point in time, offers scope for something more. He never wanted to become Grand Sorcerer, or Family Head, or any other title. All he wanted was to carve a life out for himself.

You could say this is a small aim, if you like, but aims don't have to be big. <grin>

David A. Kyle – A Life of Science Fiction Ideas and Dreams edited by John L. Coker III and Jon D. Swartz, with an extended Autobiography by David Kyle, Foreword by Forrest J. Ackerman, Preface by John Coker, III, Introduction by Frederick Pohl, Afterword by Robert A. Madle, and Bibliography by Christopher M. O'Brien.

Review by George Phillies

David A. Kyle—A Life was published in two volumes totaling 136 pages of glossy 8.5 x 11" paper, including five full—page photographs of Kyle, three in bright color. These two volumes are the First Fandom Annual for 2019. First Fandom is one of science fiction's most exclusive clubs...To be a Dinosaur member of First Fandom, you must have been active in fandom before 1940. Fen active in Fandom for more than 30 years are welcome to join as Associate Members. First Fandom now functions as a historical and honorific organization, publishing an annual volume and a fanzine, and giving the First Fandom Hall of Fame and Sam Moskowitz Archive Awards.

This issue of the Annual is a tribute to David Kyle, published in honor of what would have been his centennial year.

David Ackerman Kyle (February 14, 1919 -- September 18, 2016) was a founding member of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. He was one of the last of our founders to pass on to the next plane of existence. Now only Robert Madle is still with us. During his life, Kyle attended more WorldCons (and, so far as is known, more science fiction conventions) than anyone else in the world. In 1936 he was among the New York and Philadelpia science fiction fans who met in Philadelphia at the first–ever science fiction convention. He met his bride-to-be, the former Ruth Evalin Landis, at the 1955 WorldCon; he survived her by half a decade.

In some sense, this volume has been many years in the making. Parts of the material appeared in an earlier volume by John Coker, a volume that now sells on the internet for thousands of dollars. The authors of the Foreward and the Introduction have long since passed away, while the afterword from Bob Madle was clearly written before Kyle passed on. The first 26 copies of the issue are personally signed by Kyle, the signature being on a sticker that has been inserted under one of his photographs.

Much of the work is from David Kyle himself. Another 22 pages contain O'Brien's Kyle Bibliography, including novels, stories, articles, and reviews of Kyle's books. It is truly amazing that O'Brien was able to generate such a large list of bibliographic items.

The commentaries from Ackerman, Pohl, and Madle are highly laudatory, as befits a commemorative volume honoring the memory of a great fan. Ackerman depicts Kyle as the man who always did good and kind things for science fiction and for the people around him. Coker dwells on Kyle, the man who saw the world of fandom and influenced fandom in needful directions; his list of Kyle's fannish roles – author, editor, printer, collector, cartographer,... – fills five lines. Fred Pohl described the early days of New York fandom, a visit to Philadelphia that became the world's very first science fiction convention, and the history of *The Great Exclusion*, fen being ejected from the world's first science fiction convention, held in conjunction with the New York World's Fair.

Kyle's work is a series of autobiographical notes, memories from David Kyle of a very full life, arranged in fair part in chronological order. The notes say a great deal about SF fandom in the decades surrounding World War 2, including different perspectives on various events of the period. Most of the discussions are short vignettes. Some give insights into the way life was lived in period. As a boy, Kyle had to choose which one SF zine he would buy for the month, because they cost twenty-five cents, and one zine was all he could afford for the month.

Rather later a group of New York fen were seized with the desire to attend the Chicago convention. We are before World War 2. Travel is very different. Flying is for well-to-do people and businessmen. There are no interstates. There are perhaps two-lane highways. They take off, a several day trip with two drivers. Every modest number of miles, a tire blows out. Its inner tube needs to be patched. Then a tire explodes. On the way back, the pavement must have been even worse. One of the car's axles breaks. A return was eventually achieved. Modern driving is a bit less challenging.

A few of the vignettes, for example the description of meeting Clark Ashton Smith, are very sad. One long tale, now going back 80 years, was the great exclusion scandal, in which several prominent fen were ejected from a science fiction convention for something they did not do. Kyle knows the ejected fen didn't do it...he did it. Hiding some leaflets behind a radiator is a peculiar way to disrupt things.

For the most part, the fannish vignettes stop in the 1950s. Comments on the more recent fifty years of fandom are mostly not there. Kyle discusses the three novels he was persuaded to write, set in E. E. Smith's Lensman universe. Kyle approached the writing with some trepidation; Smith had written with the language and attitudes of forty years earlier. He did write, and the books were published. Smith's daughter was happy with the material.

The volumes are a fine tribute to a grand master of fandom. They are being sold by John Coker:

John L. Coker III
4813 Lighthouse Road
Orlando, FL 32808

Send check or money order, payable to Coker, for $60 (includes packing, priority postage, and insurance).

The Exasperating Case of David Weber, or The Slow Death of the Honorverse by John Lennard Review by Chris Nuttall

https://www.amazon.com/Exasperating-David-Weber-Death-Honorverse-ebook/dp/B015TGKWPC/

It should be noted, from the start, that literary criticism is not fan fiction. Fan fiction involves writing stories using characters and universes created by a particular author, while literary criticism involves analysing the works of a particular author. Personally, I have always been skeptical of the value of literary criticism. While any decent author knows the value of a good critic, literary critics tend to be hampered by a belief they should criticise, rather than attempting to form a balanced judgement.

There is an additional problem with The Exasperating Case of David Weber. The literary critic in

question is also, apparently, a fan fiction writer. This alone wouldn't disqualify anyone from writing a piece of literary criticism, but it tends to raise red flags when the author in question, David Weber, has flatly refused to authorise any fan fiction set within his universes. This is not an unwise position. It was possible to guess just where the Honorverse was going, just by reading the early books. (For example, the love triangle that pops up in the later books (more on this below) and its possible resolutions was discussed endlessly on Baen's Bar before it became canon.) A capable fan fiction writer might be able to make some pretty good guesses, write a fan fiction based on them … and then sue David Weber for stealing his ideas. It is for that reason that many professional authors tend to be nervous around fan fiction. His request that his works are not used as fertile ground for fan fiction should be honoured (pardon the pun). There are, after all, no shortage of universes where the original author tolerates or actively encourages fan fiction.

Having read the book, I find myself with mixed feelings.

Some of John Lennard's observations are right on the money. The Honorverse has expanded rapidly, perhaps too rapidly, after War of Honor. The development of two spin-off universes (Eric Flint's Crown of Slaves and its sequels, David Weber's Shadow series) has made it harder, much harder, for a reader to remain engaged, while a number of short story collections have only added to the problem. (Timothy Zahn's Manticore Ascendant novels and the young adult treecat series, being set centuries prior to On Basilisk Station, probably shouldn't be included.) This probably wouldn't be a problem, if readers didn't have to read those books to follow events in the mainline books. A number of characters who become significant, later on, are introduced in the short stories.

This has both slowed down the overall plot dramatically while sharply expanding the number of viewpoint characters. While each of the original books (On Basilisk Station to At All Costs) advanced the overall plot as well as the localised, personal, plot, the post-AAC books have slowed to a crawl. That this is hampering the series is unarguable. Just what effect it is having on sales, however, is harder to say. Lennard assets that sales have been falling, but provides no proof beyond anecdotal evidence.

However, some of his other observations are a little odd, to say the least.

David Weber does have a problem with infodumps. There are no shortage of places within the books where the action stops long enough for the author to tell the reader, in precise detail, just how a newfangled weapons system actually works (not to mention the political infodumps that pervade the text). Even long-term readers such as myself have a habit of skimming over those infodumps, or wishing they were relegated to 'factual' sections at the rear of the book. However, John Lennard also wishes more details on matters of interest to him, creating the odd contradiction between a demand for fewer infodumps and, at the same time, a demand for more of them.

This is perhaps clearest in the eventual disposition of the North Hollow Files (a collection of blackmail material gathered by the North Hollow family, which includes Pavel Young). The collection cast a long shadow over the series since it was first introduced in Field of Dishonor until it was destroyed in War of Honor. They serve as nothing more than a MacGuffin, but John Lennard would like to know the long-term consequences of their destruction. So would I, but it isn't really important to the overall story (and probably best left to one of the Pearls Of Weber posts).

This leads, it should be noted, to another issue. Lennard takes issue with the decision to allow Countess Young to escape to Beowulf, in exchange for the destruction of the files, instead of attempting to punish her for her crimes. One may feel, from an objective point of view, that she deserved punishment,

but trying to punish her would almost certainly have unleashed a political storm. She was, after all, keeper of the North Hollow files. Better to make a deal and stick to it rather than risk a disaster.

The author discusses, in addition, the confused relationship between Harrington herself, Admiral White Haven and his wife, Emily Alexander. (It should be noted that Weber correctly foresaw the public-shaming stunts caused by social media, even though (as of the book in question, the relationship had not begun.) It is not the most innocent of love affairs – Lennard goes so far as to imply it's a soppy 'one true love' story – but it isn't wholly unrealistic. Plenty of people have managed to get themselves into trouble by falling in love with someone who is already married, or while being married themselves. One may feel that the first burst of attraction between Harrington and White Haven is unrealistic, but the sudden recognition that the person facing you is attractive is … well, part of human nature.

Here, the author misses a chance for some more substantive criticism. Having been accused of adultery in War of Honor (and committed against one of the Star Kingdom's most beloved actresses, no less), one might expect some raised eyebrows after Harrington actually joins White Haven and Emily in marital bliss. Even on Grayson, the implications are far wider than Harrington (a noblewoman) becoming the junior wife of foreign nobleman. The proof of naked adultery is there for everyone to see. There should be more substantial repercussions, including from people who might otherwise be on her side, than we see in the text. Nor does Weber really explore the social implications of doubling or tripling the human life span or correcting the genetic flaw that ensures that Grayson women outnumber men four to one. (Although, again, that probably comes under infodumping.)

Lennard asserts, particularly in the scenes involving the incredibly stupid SLN, that such stupidity is unrealistic, that no state could possibly refuse to believe in new weapons that render its entire navy so much scrap metal – and that Weber protests too much by stepping back from the story to explain such stupidity. However, such stupidity is a function both of the limitations of the setting (a point Lennard discusses earlier in his work) and the sheer ossification created when bureaucracies are allowed to grow out of control. The Chinese state that fought the Opium War, for example, truly was unable to comprehend the sheer power of the 'barbarians,' while the Japanese experience in the Russo-Japanese War (which provided a template for the trench warfare of 1914-18) was largely ignored by many in the west. Weber, given a choice between justifying it and leaving it open to the critics, chose to justify it. I don't think it was a bad choice.

On the micro scale, meanwhile, it is important to remember that characters in a novel lack the information available to us, the readers. Weber therefore needs to explain a stupid decision – overlooking Nimitz, for example – as we know the cat is extremely dangerous. One might argue that this isn't always done well, but it has to be done. The limitations of the format demand it.

Baen's editor also comes under heavy fire. Quite apart from the slow advance of the plot (and various minor errors), Baen is taken to task for allowing Weber to literally reprint sections from one book in another. On one hand, the author has a point; this is annoying, particularly when it fills no substantial role. However, he takes it too far; many of these sections have to be reused because of the limitations of the format. Weber, again, had a choice between putting the same scene in two books or leaving it out of one, even though it would annoy readers who would then see the disconnect. I think it would have worked better if the various sub-series books were completely separate from the mainstream books, or if the scenes were rewritten to show a different point of view, but given the decision to allow them to intertwine, Weber probably had no choice.

A good editor can offer suggestions, but he or she will also know when to let the writer have his head. One may question the value of some of the twists and turns in the series, yet very few decisions are

praised by everyone. The idea that Baen should have vetoed any given shift in the plotline undermines the more practical editing issues – the massive infodumps, the slow progression towards an ending, the problem of finding a meaningful role for a main character who has simply risen too high, as Weber himself put it, to go on death rides any longer. It might well have been better if the series had had a time-skip after At All Costs, which would have allowed the next generation to reach adulthood and made the MAlign a more plausible enemy. But that was Weber's call to make.

That is not the only point where Baen is attacked directly. Weber may well have reached the hallowed – and feared – point where he is editor-proof. A stronger editor might well have streamlined the books, making it easier to please the fans. (Lennard also claims that Weber published the Safehold series through Tor because he had a dispute with Baen (perhaps over concluding some of the open series), but from what I heard, Baen simply didn't have the slots to publish additional Weber books and Jim Baen himself helped arrange the deal with Tor.) However, Baen has good reason to want as many Weber books as possible – they sell. One cannot blame Baen for wanting to get as much as possible out of a successful series.

However, a worse problem, in Lennard's view, is that of politics.

Baen has an unfair reputation as a right-wing publishing house (a glance at the politics of both Eric Flint and Lois McMaster Bujold, as Lennard notes, should put the lie to that) when, in reality, Baen goes looking for a good story over the author's personal politics. Lennard asserts that David Weber is guilty of inserting his own politics into his works, ranging from the 'caricature' of the Republic of Haven's Legislates to 'damnations' of eco-nuts, techno-illiterates and pre-space Greens. Such charges have little justification in the Honorverse. The characters in the series have ample reason to know that such policies are stupid at best and dangerously insane at worst. The founders of Grayson, who intended to set up a tech-free paradise and found themselves forced to rely on the demon technology to survive, serve as salutary examples for the universe's inhabitants. How Weber feels personally about such issues in the real world is beyond my ken and, quite frankly, his fiction writings should not be taken to serve as an indicator of his politics. There are, quite simply, too many different types of government in this universe alone.

Furthermore, history is replete with examples of stupid decisions made by governments for domestic policy reasons. Bush41's decision to allow the Iraqi Army to escape Kuwait in 1991 ensured that Saddam would survive and retain power until 2003. Obama's decision to withdraw American combat troops from Iraq in 2010 ensured that the gains in Iraq, bought at a huge cost in blood and treasure, were simply thrown away. One can question the wisdom of these decisions, but it cannot be denied that they – and many more – were made by people who were confident they would not be made to pay for their decisions. The High Ridge Government of War of Honor was equally convinced of its own security, that Manticore would retain a decisive military superiority for the foreseeable future.

Lennard goes on to note that the insertion of 'American' politics into books sold internationally is harming non-US sales. Speaking as a British reader, I haven't stopped reading David Weber (or John Ringo, Tom Kratman, etc) because of 'American' politics being inserted into the books. (I do not know if politics are important, but if my experience is any guide, America is certainly the largest single market for Weber and Baen Books by a very long shot.) He then goes on to slam the 'Sad Puppies' as a 'campaign to game Hugo nominations with an aggressively anti-left agenda' and asserts that 'authors hoping to be taken seriously across the political spectrum might think very hard about seeking publication by a house saddled by such a reputation.' I think I speak for most authors when I say that publication by Baen Books, which has a reputation for treating authors as human beings, would be a dream come true.

Nor do most readers really care who publishes the books. Baen, in fact, is about the only science-fiction publishing house with, in my opinion, a firm track record of picking winners, authors I actually like. But this is getting away from the point of this work. David Weber was not, I believe, a Sad Puppy. Even if he had been, the wider issue of politics in SF (which is given a very slanted view) is immaterial to a book focused on literary criticism.

And, as a work of literary criticism, this book simply tries too hard.

Many of the points Lennard raises are good ones. The hodgepodge that is Storm From The Shadows, Mission of Honor, A Rising Thunder and Shadow of Freedom, to say nothing of Caldron of Shadows is a chain of events that really should have been condensed down to two volumes at most. Excessive infodumping causes readers to just skim over large parts of the book; contrived coincidences, like Harrington's pregnancy and the death of Giancola in At All Costs, stretch credulity to breaking point.

However, some of his other points are quite poor. David Weber is well within his rights to determine how his universe functions. He is also within his rights to determine problems for the characters to solve (who wants to read a book where nothing actually happens?) and to allow them to experience a growth pattern that ensures, for example, that a character who is sexually repressed in the first published volume has no less than two reasonably satisfactory romances by the sixteenth.

Furthermore, the relationship between Harrington and her mother is not as odd as Lennard suggests. My reading of the relationship, at least in the early books, is that Alison Harrington was never quite sure how to approach her daughter, while Harrington herself felt overshadowed by her mother. (Shades of the relationship between Deanna Troi and her overbearing mother come to mind, but Lwaxana Troi has the advantage of being telepathic, which Alison Harrington lacks.) By the time of Ashes of Victory and onwards, the relationship has definitely improved as Harrington matured emotionally as well as physically.

Leaving Weber aside for a moment, bringing the Sad Puppies (and politics in general) into the book was a bad move, as was an honest-to-god assertion that Weber's increasingly large volumes represent a cost in trees! I have no idea if Baen ensures its paper comes from ecologically-managed sources or not either, but what does that have to do with David Weber?

He also misses a number of chances for genuine literary criticism. Giancola's death, for example, represents a huge missed opportunity, at least for character development. So too does the assertion, at the end of Crown of Slaves, that the ex-slaves need a monarch, as states built by former slaves have always failed (this may have been Eric Flint's work, but Weber's name is on the book). This attitude could have been challenged, even unsuccessfully – and really should have been challenged.

Finally, there is a strong tendency in almost all of Weber's work for the 'good' bad guys to eventually join the 'good' good guys. Weber has yet to create a sympathetic bad guy who remains bad. There is no Grand Admiral Thrawn in the Honorverse.

Overall, this is an interesting read. But in its attempts to focus on the weaknesses of Weber's work, it dampens its overall message.

2019 Index

We present here an index to the books reviewed in the 2019 issues of The N3F Review of Books, sorted alphabetically by title. The format is

Title of Book by Names of Authors by Name of Reviewer reviewed in Issue Number, the format of the issue number being the YEAR (four digits) followed by the month (two digits)

In Conquest Born by C. S. Friedman Review by Tamara Wilhite reviewed in 201910
Insurgents by Margaret Ball by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Jacob by David Gerrold by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201908
Jinxers by Sabrina Chase by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
Justified by Jon del Arroz by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
Kingdom of Souls by Rena Barron by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201909
Lies Sleeping by Ben Aaronovitch by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
Like A Mighty Army by David Weber by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
Magic Casement by Dave Duncan by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
Marine by Joshua Dalzelle by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger by Adam Lane Smith by Declan Finn reviewed in 201909
Memorials and Winged Hussars by Mark Wandrey by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Minutegirls by George Phillies by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Mistress of the Waves by George Phillies by Tamara Wilhite reviewed in 201910
Night Shifted by Kate Paulk by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
Nocturnal Rebellion by Amanda S Green by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Operation Flash by Nitay Arbel by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Order of the Centurion by Jason Anspach & Nick Cole by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
Overlook — by by Declan Finn reviewed in 201911
Peacemaker by Kevin Ikenberry by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Penny Dreadful and the Clockwork Copper by J.M. Anjewierden by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Promise of Blood by Brian McClellan by Heath Row reviewed in 201908
Psychic Undercover by Amie Gobbins by Declan Finn reviewed in 201909
Record of a Spaceborn Few by Becky Chambers by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
Red Queen: The Substrate Wars by Jeb Kinnison by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
Refugees by R.A. Denny by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Riding the Red Horse by LTC Tom Kratman and Vox Day by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201910
Slow Train to Arcturus by Eric Flint and Dave Freer by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
Snow in Her Eyes by Cedar Sanderson by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
Somewither by John C Wright by Declan Finn reviewed in 201909
Sons of the Lion by Jason Cordova by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
Space Traipse: Hold My Beer by Karina Fabian by Tamara Wilhite reviewed in 201909
Spinning Silver by Naomi Novik by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
Star Marque Rising by Shami Stovall by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Sweet Alice by Sarah A. Hoyt by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
Sword and Blood! by Sarah Hoyt by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
The Arrival by Stephanie Osborn by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201911
The Black Chamber by S M Sterling by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
The Black Prism by Brent Weeks by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
The Boogey Man x 3 by Tom Rogne by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
The Calculating Stars by Mary Robinette Kowal by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
The Case of the Cosmological Killer: Endings and Beginnings by Stephanie Osborn by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
The Case of the Cosmological Killer: The Rendlesham Incident by Stephanie Osborn by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
The Chaplain's War by Brad Torgersen by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
The Chaplain's War by Brad Torgerson by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
The Curse of Arianrhod by Michael Hooten by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912

The Darklings vs. Spark series by James Alan Gardner by Robert Runté reviewed in 201910
The Dragon Republic by Rebecca F. Kuang by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201911
The God's Wolfling by Cedar Sanderson by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201911
The Golden Horde by Chris Kennedy by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201910
The Iron Codex by David Mack by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
The Killing Moon by N. K. Jemisin by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201908
The Kitsune Stratagem by David A Tatum by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201909
The Known Universe versus the State Universe of Larry Niven by by Tamara Wilhite reviewed in 201908
The Last Roman by Edward Crichton by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201910
The Lawyers of Mars by Pam Uphoff by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
The Light Brigade by Kameron Hurley by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
The Long Black by J.M. Anjewierden by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
The Midnight Sun by Tim C. Taylor by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201908
The Municipalists by Seth Fried by Heath Row reviewed in 201912
The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman by Heath Row reviewed in 201912
The Raven Tower by Ann Leckie by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
The Shadowed Sun by N. K. Jemisin by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201908
The Sky Suspended by Laura Montgomery by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
The Space Between by Scott J Robinson by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
The Ugly Knight by Elizabeth A. Lightfoot by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201912
The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908
Trickster Noir by Cedar Sanderson by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201910
Uncompromising Honor by David Weber by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
Underground Episode One: Lost Beginnings by Ryn Lilley by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201908
Valor's Child by Kal Spriggs by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Vengeance from Ashes by Sam Schall by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201910
Victoria: A Novel of Fourth Generation Warfare by Thomas Hobbes by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201912
We Dare: An Anthology of Augmented Humanity Edited by Chris Kennedy and Jamie Ibson by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201909
When the Gods Fell by Richard Paolinelli by Declan Finn reviewed in 201909
White Magic Academy by Emily Martha Sorensen by Chris Nuttall reviewed in 201912
Wielder: The Betrayal by David Gosnell by Jim McCoy reviewed in 201908
Winter Glory by J.M. Ney-Grimm by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201911
Year's Best Military and Adventure SF by Volume 5 Edited David Afsharirad by Pat Patterson reviewed in 201908