The N3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

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

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Editorial

Our N3F Zines are faulted for looking too much like each other. Yes, they do use different trim colors. The N3F Review of Books uses scarlet. The National Fantasy Fan uses green. Tightbeam uses brown. This magazine uses no illustrations. TNFF uses bits of artwork. Tightbeam has full-color front and back covers and color illustrations of book covers, manga stills, and, of course, food.

We are now trying a typeface experiment. This line is in ITC Bookman Light..

We are now trying a typeface experiment. This line is in Times New Roman.

We are now trying a typeface experiment. This line is in Baskerville Old Face.

We are now trying a typeface experiment. This line is in Century Schoolbook.

We are now trying a typeface experiment. This line is in Gentium Book Basic.

This issue is in ITC Bookman Light. Please give opinions.

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.

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

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The N3F Review of Books is published by the National Fantasy Fan Federation, POB 1925, Mountain View CA 94042. and distributed for free to N3F Members and archival sites. Editor: George Phillies, 48 Hancock Hill Drive, Worcester MA 01609, phillies@4liberty.net. Proofreading support provided by Jean Lamb. Regular contributors include Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Robert Runté, Tamara Wilhite, and Heath Row.

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/

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Novels

An Unproven Concept by James Young
Review by Jim McCoy

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

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

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

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

Young's heroes aren't always heroic in the sense a lot of other writers' heroes are. That's because he portrays them as doing what's necessary instead of what feels good. Young's characters are not James

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

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

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

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Gas Giants

Apollo by Thomas A. Farmer
Review by Pat Patterson

Apollo is a retired assassin in a far post-apocalyptic world. He makes primitive firearms for people who need them, or want them, and sustains himself on the proceeds.

He has no friends. The few friendly acquaintances he permits are customers in the formal black market outside the fortress city of Londonsberg.

In this future, nothing that we would recognize as a country exists; instead, smaller areas are ruled with an iron fist by demagogues, who evidently spend most of their time thinking about how they want to kill each other. The worst of these is Duke Charlie, autocrat of Londonsberg, supported by his killer subordinate Alexander.

While Apollo doesn't like anybody, he especially doesn't like Alexander. We are gradually exposed to bits and pieces of their shared history, but it is the bitter hatred between Apollo and Alexander that drives the plot.

Above the dukes and kings, there exists a shadow organization known as the Immaculata. They evidently administer the technology that is indistinguishable from magic.

The nature of Londonsberg makes it almost a character in its own right. Surrounded by an impenetrable wall, the activities of the city dwellers are rigidly governed and patrolled by the secret police; it's a nasty, nasty hive.

Plenty of unresolved plot lines and characters with more work to do, I expect we will see more of the world. Frankly, though, unless a real alternative is presented to the repressive nightmare of life in Londonsberg, I'll take a pass. (There MAY (!) already be a solution in place!)

Artifice by Liane Miller
Review by Jim McCoy

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

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

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

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

Miller manages to do something few other authors have attempted and even fewer have pulled off, at least without multiple books to do it in. The book's early villains are Eliza's allies at the end. Her most hated antagonist ends up being someone very important to her. It's a slow process to be sure, but Miller

makes us want to like them and she manages to get us to do it. If it takes a Big Bad to make it happen, then so be it. This is fantasy fiction and all great fantasy fiction has a great villain who is equal in skill and cunning to the heroes. Shashenka is not only that, but he also has access to more resources than our heroes and it shows. As the master of several covens of vampires he has greater numbers on his side as well. He's not the largest of the cast physically but he is far more powerful than mere size would indicate.

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

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

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

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

Bring the Jubilee by Ward Moore
Review by Heath Row

I’m not usually much of one for alternate history as a subgenre, but I read a bundle-bent paperback copy of this 1953 novel, expanded from a 1952 Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction novella, and enjoyed it mightily. If all alternate history is like this, consider me a new fan. It was included in the 2001 anthology The Best Alternate History Stories of the 20th Century, so that collection might be worth checking out for some, ahem, historical context.

In the novel, the Confederate States of America emerged from the War of Southron Independence after winning the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 and the United States of America surrendered. The resulting United States is rife with unemployment and corruption, a poor stepchild to the thriving and expanding Confederate States, which is at war with the German Union. In the late 1930s, Hodgins “Hodge” McCormick Backmaker moves to New York City as a teenager, hoping to go to university but falling in with members of the Grand Army, a nationalistic—pro-United States—domestic terrorist organization.

Working in a bookstore for six years, Backmaker becomes aware of a Spanish currency counterfeiting operation involving the Grand Army and his employer, and befriends Rene Enfandin, an emissary of the Republic of Haiti, the only remaining independent country south of the Mason-Dixon line. He also applies to study at Haggershaven, a small cooperative learning society.

Backmaker moves to rural Pennsylvania to Haggershaven, where he meets Barbara Haggerwells, a research scientist investigating time travel. She succeeds in inventing a time machine in 1952, and Backmaker—now accepted as a resident scholar and historian—travels back in time to witness the Battle of Gettysburg. There, he mucks up his timeline and is unable to return to his original timeline—living out his life in our own.

The portrayal of the Grand Army, its political idealism and radical fervor, as well as its economic manipulation and violent actions is quite interesting. The book contains quite a bit of political philosophy. The bookstore owner for which Backmaker works is also a pamphleteer of sorts, and that was fun. I also enjoyed the portrayal of the protagonist's relationship with a wealthy young woman and Enfandin, which addressed the remaining explicit classism and racism of the time—and the heart and intelligence of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, or class. But the best parts of the book were set in Haggershaven, an egalitarian learning utopia focused on the furtherance of knowledge of all kinds. It reminded me of the correspondence networks featured in Neal Stephenson's Quicksilver. An excellent, excellent read.

City by Clifford D. Simak
Review by Heath Row

Every single Neffer should read this book, if you haven't already. It is awesome. A fix-up novel collecting eight previously published short stories with newly original interstitial explanatory notes and an editor's preface, the book is ostensibly a collection of oral histories passed down over the generations among a race of sentient, talking dogs about the way the world came to be the way it is. The intertextual connections between the stories—and the added fictional value of the notes and preface—lend themselves well to a fix-up. There's occasionally a sizable number of years—and sometimes, light years—between each tale.

The first tale, "City," originally published in Astounding Science Fiction in May 1944, details the end of large urban areas. Personal aircraft, inexpensive atomic energy, and large-scale hydroponic farming contributes to the dispersion of the human population on Earth, and the resulting abandonment of cities and suburbs, which leads to political irrelevance. John Webster is introduced, and his family—the Websters—will eventually become a stand in for all humanity. "Huddling Place" first appeared in Astounding in July 1944. Jerome Webster, living with his robot butler Jenkins—who also plays a later, important role—realizes that he cannot bring himself to travel to visit a Martian friend, resulting in the loss of an important philosophical work.

"Census," the third tale (Astounding, September 1944), introduces the emerging importance of dogs, as well as ants. A census taker encounters a talking dog that can read—engineered by a Webster, no less—as well as a human mutant who catalyzes the evolution of ants. "Desertion," originally published in Astounding in November 1944, is a bit of an outlier. Human beings develop the ability to transform themselves into—or embody—an indigenous species on Jupiter and, once they do so, do not return. That story is resolved in "Paradise," (June 1946 Astounding) in which a Jupiter explorer decides to return to Earth. The government tries unsuccessfully to block the dissemination of the knowledge he

gained, leading to a further dispersal of humanity.

The sixth tale, “Hobbies,” (November 1946 Astounding) details the efforts of dogs to bring their peaceful civilization to other species. A member of the Webster family returns to the family homestead to find Jenkins cohabiting with dogs. “Aesop” (December 1947 Astounding) shows how the understanding of history fades over time. Dogs no longer remember humans, but “websters,” and continue their efforts to bring peace to other species. And “The Simple Way,” (Fantastic Adventures, January 1951) set 5,000 years later, challenges the fictional canine literary scholars. Dogs are assisted by robots. Ant civilization is spreading. The dogs are left with the ultimate question: To kill or not to kill.

City is a meaningful and impressive history of the future, written over almost a decade, showing tremendous creativity and organization by the author. Simak captures the voice and mindset of the dogs well. There are moments of sheer beauty and wonder in these pages. If you only read one book this month, read this one. You won’t be disappointed.

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

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

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

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

I was a bit concerned about reviewing this at first because I wasn't sure that there was a real Science Fiction/ Fantasy element to it. It was teased a little bit early but it was nearly two-thirds of the way

through the book before there was any explicit SF content. I won't spoil the surprise but I will say that it is there. While it's not quite what I expected, it was worth the wait. Honestly, the story was worth reading as a mystery story even if it hadn't been. It's been a long time since I've really considered myself a fan of mystery stories, but if there were more like this I probably still would be.

Interspersed throughout the story are recaps of real life disappearances referred to as True Cases. Williams has placed them to enhance the story by showing us what real life case she used as source material for a given disappearance in the book. At the end are several more. They add to the X-Files-like aura of the story. I also get the feeling that I was deliberately misled by the author at one point. What I had assumed was happening was not what was happening. Once revealed the secret made sense but it wasn't what I thought it would be. That's the mark of a great mystery writer. A well placed red herring set up the rest of the story brilliantly.

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

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

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

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Lost Hikers

Denial by Lizzie Ashworth
Review by Jim McCoy

What do you get when you cross New Age mysticism, corporate intrigue, a weird wasting disease related to pollution, a psychic cure for it, a string of murders and the development of a man from an upstanding citizen to a gutter bum and back to an upstanding citizen again? I you're thinking it's Lizzie Ashworth's Denial then you're right. If you're thinking of something else let me know, because I'd probably like to read that too.

This is the second book in the House of Rae series, following Salvation which I reviewed previously. I enjoyed the first one and I can't help but think that this one is even better precisely because it came afterward and she had more experience writing SF/F.

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

This book, like the one before it, has a point of view that can only be described as a limited first-person omniscient. This is something I hadn't seen until I read her first book but now that I have a bit more familiarity with it, having read the work of both Ashworth and Daniella Bova, I'm actually enjoying it.

It can be a bit strange if you have to abandon a book mid-chapter but she manages to identify her characters well enough that after a sentence or two you can figure out who you're reading. And wow, do those characters vary.

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

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

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

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

The dark side of the corporate world is here for all to see. Ashworth's millionaires are self-made men who cheated their way to the top. Denial is a good title as most of them have raked in millions while

profiting from dirty dealings and back room bargains. Fortunes are made and lost. One of the millionaires is a flat-out despicable human being. Another regrets his past. All are seen as human beings, warts and all. A major part of the plot takes place when one of the millionaires has to defend his daughter against her asshole ex-husband. They all fight dirty. I approve.

I shouldn't have to write this, but I will anyway. Ashworth's treatment of some of the men in this book is exactly the type of thing that would set off the whiny types that complained about the latest Mad Max being a "feminist movie." Yes, one of them is a dirtbag on his best day. Yes, another can only seem to get himself together when he gets laid on a regular basis. Guess what, there are people like that in the real world.

Yes, some of Ashworth's women are strong characters. If you can't deal with those things you may wish to avoid this book. I'm okay with it though. People have foibles and I don't see a realistic depiction to be a reason to cry into my beer.

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

But that's nitpicking. I find myself wondering at some points if the mosquito drones in her book would be able to carry enough liquid to cause the effect she ascribes to them, but it is SF and I don't really have the technical details down enough to say it wouldn't work either. I'm thinking that the end of this one sets up the next one but I'm not sure if that's a good thing. It's not really a cliffhanger, but it's not really NOT a cliffhanger. Also, conspicuous by her absence is Rae and this IS the House of Rae series. All in all though, there wasn't much to complain about. he good far outweighed the bad.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Mystic Crystals

Directorate School by Pam Uphoff
Review by Pat Patterson

Class, have you all done your homework? Have you all read the 578 previous installments of this series? If not, you are going to have to work extra hard to catch up, you know!

And that's the ONLY possible criticism I can come up with. It's pretty lame, I know; 'the author has written too many great books!' Yeah. Burn her at the stake. How dare she write great books!

The focus on this spin-off is how agents get trained. They are given instruction we might find in any comprehensive state school, along with in-depth training in subjects taught at the surface level in a really good physical education curriculum, and added in: magic (theory and history only for freshmen). Beautiful young people falling in love, unpleasant bullies, and magic. Add intrigue and politics to the mix, and toss in the possibility of interdimensional total war; and don't forget horseback riding. It's more complicated than THAT, of course, but that's the gist of the story.

SPOILER ALERT: Nobody flunks out, but people die. (You already knew that, didn't you?)

Donovan's Brain by Curt Siodmak
Review by Heath Row

Originally serialized in Black Mask in 1942, this novel has also inspired several movies—The Lady and the Monster, Donovan's Brain, and The Brain—as well as two sequel novels by Siodmak: Hauser's Memory and Gabriel's Body. Written in the form of a diary (Sept. 13 to June 10), the book details the experiences of Dr. Patrick Cory, a doctor experimenting on maintaining the lifespan of the brain after the death of the body. A plane owned by millionaire W. H. Donovan crashes in the desert near Cory's home. The doctor is able to save and preserve the passenger's brain, avoiding investigation. Cory continues his experiments, attempting to communicate with the brain and eventually succeeding—to an extent he never expected.

Making telepathic contact with the brain, the strong personality and will of Donovan gradually overcomes that of Cory, effectively taking him over during blackout-like periods that the doctor, later, doesn't remember. Donovan-as-doctor—mentally dominating Cory—continues the millionaire's criminal business dealings, increasingly concerning Cory. The doctor plans to destroy the brain when it's at its most vulnerable.

Many critics consider this book a horror story, but given the scientific content, it's squarely in the realm of science fiction. Writers such as Stephen King praise the work; King even mentions the novel in Danse Macabre and references the poem Cory uses to mask his thoughts from Donovan—"He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts.". At 181 pages, this novel is a brief read, and very good. I can understand the book's ongoing appeal and will have to check out the movie adaptations and, perhaps, the subsequent novels.

Escaping Infinity by Richard Paolinelli
Review by Pat Patterson

The beginning of the book reads like a well-designed bit of mature science fiction, written for an adult audience. 'Adult' is NOT a euphemism for explicit sex, by the way; I mean that it addresses responsibility for actions, friendship, job searches, and meaning-of-life issues, all of which I regard as content appealing to an adult.

The second part of the book strikes me as more engaging to a teen reader. Fast narrative introduced and resolved plot points; the emphasis seemed to be on far-off adventure, rather than character development.

Yesterday evening, I gave my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, a really quick plot summary of the first part: A woman finds herself lost in the desert in the 1850s; a man from today finds himself also lost. They are saved by discovering a luxury hotel, where every need is met. They also both find in each other the fulfillment of their ideal mate. What will they do next?

She said: "GET OUT OF THERE! It's a TRAP!"

I said, 'Wouldn't you much prefer to spend some nice relaxing vacation time with your beloved, eating delicious food and taking it easy?"

"NO!" she said emphatically. "The delicious food is how you know that you are in a trap."

So, she agrees with the author, and thus the book dances down a long path toward a conclusion.
I'm giving the book FOUR stars, because I did like it. In particular, I liked the idea of the mysterious luxury hotel appearing just in time to rescue stranded travelers. I liked the description of the starship commander and his colleagues in emotional turmoil as they realize that their actions have precipitated an event that destroyed the earth, and that they feel compelled to do something about it, and ESPECIALLY that the commander willingly sacrifices himself to make that happen. I liked the concept that each one of the stranded travelers sees the hotel & furnishings as being consistent with their own era. I also liked the detail given to Elizabeth's back-story, although I found the murder of her child unrealistic and unnecessary; there were LOTS of ways to lose baby girls at the time without family murders.

What I didn't like: the extremes in the differences of the descriptions. For example, we are given Elizabeth's back story in loving detail (it really WAS remarkable) but we get nothing about almost every other character. I didn't like the abrupt way in which the tone of the book changes, from the detail in the first three quarters of the book, to the treatment of the events as soon as they step into the fog. I would MUCH, MUCH rather the book had been made into a series: Part 1: explorers destroy earth. Part 2: the Infinity Hotel. Part 3: rebuilding, and return to space.

Galaxies Like Grains of Sand by Brian W. Aldiss
Review by Heath Row

Another fix-up novel, this makes for an interesting read in conjunction with Clifford Simak's City. This American edition of a book originally published in England as The Canopy of Time collects eight previously published stories that span the 40-million-year history of the city of New Union. Each story, published in 1957 and 1958 in magazines such as Authentic Science Fiction, Infinity Science Fiction, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Nebula Science Fiction, and New Worlds Science Fiction is introduced with new, brief, italicized material explaining which millennia they represent: War, Sterile, Robot, Dark, Star, Mutant, Megalopolis, or Ultimate.

"Out of Reach" (The War Millennia) focuses on Dreamery Five, which houses human patients escaping the worries of the world by immersing themselves in virtual reality. One resident falls in love with an alien woman. "All the World's Tears" (The Sterile Millennia) takes place in the year 8300 and concentrates on the cost of isolating from other people. Aldiss addresses the natural state of man—and love—and introduces the idea of the hate-brace—a kind of engineered emotion. "Who Can Replace a Man?" (The Robot Millennia) is a cautionary tale about what might happen when automation goes unmonitored. This story is very, very good. "O, Ishrail!" (The Dark Millennia) takes on mental health, exile, and the toll of disbelief.

"Incentive" (The Star Millennia) warrants a longer introduction—six pages!—and gets a little metaphysical and philosophical. The Galactics have established contact with Earth to admit the planet into the Galactic Federation. A human communes with a Galactic to understand why it's important for humanity to join. Pages 73-78 are absolutely amazing. "Gene-Hive" (The Mutant Millennia) introduces the idea of sentient cells, resulting in a shapeshifting mass of accumulated people. "Secret of a Mighty City" (The Megalopolis Millennia), warranting a four-page introduction, reminded me of Howard Waldrop a little: A filmmaker wants to recreate a lost documentary about the city made by an individualist genius. Aldiss's futuristic portrayals of cinema, storytelling, and history are really interesting and inspiring. And "Visiting Amoeba" (The Ultimate Millennia) documents the end of the world—and the

creation of a new one.

Not as cohesive or interconnected as Simak's City, this is still a wonderful fix-up and history of the future. I enjoyed reading the two books relatively close to each other, which added to the reading experience. Worth checking out. The British edition seems to include perhaps four additional stories not in this volume, so that might be worth exploring, too.

Hell Will Rise By Skyla Murphy
Review by Tamara Wilhite

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

Points in Favor of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Strikes Against the Book

The descriptions can drone on and on. One example of this is obvious when the description is trying to explain the narrator's peculiar psychic sense. Some of this is done to build up the characters, and part of it to increase the drama, but it is still done in excess.

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

The sexual tension is rated R, and there are scenes that border on being X rated. The most annoying fact about this book is that the characters go to absurd lengths to protect a particular character's virginity, despite the fact that doing as much results in nearly costing her that. Still, Hell Will Rise's approach

is not as bad as the way the Chemical Garden books convey the determination to protect the virginity of a character, while playing up the drama. A good example of this is "50 Shades of Gray." Compare the film version's sex scenes to the scenes in the book.

Observations

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

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

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

Martian Aria by L.A. Behm II
Review by Pat Patterson

My body hates this book, with reason. After I got past the first chapter, which I found to be written a bit too cryptically to follow, I skipped meal and beverage breaks, and even bathroom breaks (well, lets' say I POSTPONED those, not skipped them) in order to keep reading the book. And last night, my body and my brain had a fight over what we were going to do: read the book, or go to sleep.

And I couldn't sleep in today, either.

This is NOT a single-incident kind of book. Instead, it relates MANY things that took place during the prep and implementation of the Mars colony. While there is one thoroughly "cowabunga!" incident, it's revealed casually, and is almost anti-climactic. The book does NOT rest, at all, on that single discovery. It's really just a way of tying together some of the threads of the story. It's quite nicely done, and it seemed realistic to me, rather than chaotic. I'm gonna say that again: it's quite nicely done.

Here's what I believe: IF (big, big if) we can get the technology to cooperate, the Mars colonization will come about in the manner described. I should add: and IF (maybe a bigger if) we can get the administrative technocrats to cooperate, it will happen this way.

Now, BOTH of those issues are addressed in this book. The science is described from the perspective of the person with a wrench, and it is very satisfying. The issues of development, interference by outside agencies, procurement, and so forth, are realistically laid bare. I have no reason to believe that any of that is going to be transformed in the next million years, barring an extinction-level event. What makes it possible for these colonists to make a go of their situation is their determination to find a work-around when the inevitable problems crop up, NOT some new handwavium discovery every few pag-

es.

NOTE: There IS some handwavium and unobtanium in the story, but it's kept to a minimum. You will appreciate that; I know I did. (Actually, the unobtanium is given another name.)

As a reviewer, I don't think I'm supposed to talk about the 'Why' of a story as much as the 'What.' However, I do happen to know from reading other work by this author, notably 'Dusk at Tikrit,' that he has plenty of boots-on-the-ground experience in doing technical/wrench turning things in a hostile environment, far away from his tech base. I think that's why these characters, and the things they do, ring so true.

I LIKED this book. I am SO glad that I hung on past the first chapter, and found what a feast awaited me. True, there were a few more typo errors than I would have preferred, but they didn't rise to the point that the text was unreadable. And the story itself was flawless.

Memorials, Winged Hussars by Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson

And here's the review of "Winged Hussars," by Mark Wandrey:

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

When the aliens made contact, the Earth was dismayed to discover that they really didn't have anything to trade in exchange for the advanced technology available through the Galactic Union. Fortunately, before we dwindled into insignificance, it was discovered that we could fight. Since this was a rare condition among the vast majority of the alien races, good mercenaries were always in demand. Details are, at this point, somewhat sketchy, but we DO know that there was skullduggery involved; of the 100 mercenary companies to head into space with a contracted mission, only four came back. Coincidentally, all four featured a horse on their unit flag, and thus began the story of the Four Horsemen.

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

Alexis Cromwell commands the Winged Hussars, as well as their flagship, the EMS Pegasus, which is the ship recovered by the original contract team. It has unusual characteristics, which she is careful to hide from enemies. And allies. And crew. She's widely regarded as filthy rich, drop-dead gorgeous, and ruthless in business negotiations as well as in combat. Some of that is due to her secret weapon.
Rick Culper is a gentle giant. I KNOW THIS GUY, because I have a son just like him. He rarely has to resort to violence because he is somewhat physically overpowering. As a young boy, he befriended a pudgy klutz, just out of a desire to see fair treatment and stop a bully from getting his way. When he discovered the klutz was the designated heir of the senior of the Four Horsemen, he figured he had found his place in life. He would become a mercenary, go to work for his buddy, go to exotic places, meet interesting beings, kill them, and get rich. Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way. The nasty plot running in the background bankrupted the Cavaliers, and Rick had to go elsewhere.

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

Other items of note:

1. Beside the standard, contract violence, some person or corporate entity has the agenda of destroying the Winged Hussars. This is absolutely forbidden by law and custom.

2. In Interlude sections, we get clues as to what drives Captain Alexis.

3. Winged Hussars uses aliens as mercenaries in every position, including having them hold command over humans. Anyone who can't deal with that doesn't get accepted.

4. The aliens are treated as people, with complex motivations. The best example of this is the gigantic spider Oort. Although her species is known for battle ferocity, including feeding on the bodies of the dead, Oort has had repeated near-death experiences. It's caused her to attempt to determine The Meaning of Life. When not engaged in a duty assignment, she is reading books by some horrible 19th century German philosophers. Now, I have ATTEMPTED to read some of the works mentioned, and they are so impenetrable as to be frustrating. I think the only way to get through the works would be to have a time machine, go back to a beer hall, and demand that these people explain what they are talking about over beer and sausage. Even Soren Kierkegaard is impenetrable, even if you already know what he's going to say. Frankly, I think that class set back the study of the meaning of life by at least 200 years, by muddying the waters so badly. But this is the sort of thing the spider reads right before going into combat.

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

BUY THE BOOK!

On a Planet Alien by Barry Malzberg
Review by Heath Row

Charles Moll’s cover illustration to this paperback edition offers a sense of what to expect from this 144-page novel. The kaleidoscope-like imagery combines technology, erotica, and psychedelia, and the front cover also features a blurb from Harlan Ellison: “...makes what the rest of us do look like felonies.” It’s not that Malzberg writes so well it’s a crime, but that the quality of his work suggests other sf writers aren’t trying hard enough.

That said, the novel itself is occasionally a trying reading experience. Regardless, it’s worth reading—and trying to figure out. It’s not always clear, and that’s partially the point. At it’s most simple, On a Planet Alien is a book about colonialism and the ethical responsibilities of the colonialists, or colonists.

A quartet of astronauts have traveled light years from home to explore a “planet of intelligent life at stage three of sophistication, still bound to the ecology but at the beginnings of a crude technology.”

The four, led by Hans Folsom, the captain, are there on behalf of the Bureau, the organizing body of the Federation, to establish communication, orient the natives on philosophy and technology, and offer them a place among the other civilized planets.

Despite slow going establishing contact with the natives, the group succeeds—and then things start to go wrong and get weird. Folsom discovers and unearths a rock inscribed with symbols not consistent with the native inhabitants. After that finding, his emotional and mental state begins to change. His colleagues are as disinterested in the artifact as he is in their efforts to communicate with the natives—until he learns that they've already planted the seeds of Christianity among the population, already prone to a monotheism inconsistent with their societal development, perhaps resulting in the natives mistaking the colonialists for gods.

That leads Folsom, who's beginning to lose his grip on reality—and rapport with the support team back at the Bureau—to stop their work and take matters into his own hands. The book combines flashback and narration, and it's increasingly unclear what precipitated the dissolution of Folsom's sanity and the integrity of the expedition.

Did something happen to the colonists before their ship even landed? Did the artifact somehow alter Folsom, perhaps via a "very highly subtle and sophisticated bacteriological attacking system?" What is real and unreal? Memory and recollection becomes unreliable. In the end, it is clear that Folsom has become the kind of traitor the mission administrator warned him about. The colonists are all dead, and the natives are left with a binder of documents and a handgun.

We are all colonialists. We have all been colonized.

Path of Angels by Dawn Witzke
Review by Pat Patterson

Depending on where you are on your spiritual journey, and where you live, you are either going to love this book, find it implausible, or stop reading it after the first chapter.

My own radical conversion to Christianity took place in an Army messhall in Germany in 1973. It was a time when many of the evangelical churches were seriously preaching end-times messages. I read every book like this I could get my hands on. It was TOUGH, being a Christian in a barracks filled with hash smoke and beer fumes. Outside the barracks, the civilians had to pay a church tax, unless they declared themselves atheist. A few hundred miles away lurked the most atheistic regime we have seen in modern times. I knew, and supported, Bible smugglers back then. There was no question about it; in Eastern Europe, Christians were persecuted, and we were all pretty much convinced we were next. At that time, THIS is the kind of fiction I read, if I read fiction at all; THIS was the kind of fiction I sought out.

Forty-four years later, I don't think this scenario is going to come to pass in America. The book is all about the violation of First Amendment rights; the people have lost them entirely. I am a STRONG supporter of the First Amendment, MOSTLY through my support of the Second Amendment. In the most recent national election, I think it was the unified support of the defenders of the Second Amendment that made the difference. I'd have to stop and count them to know how many firearms I own, and I have no idea how much ammunition I have, or even how much powder and primers and brass and lead I have on hand (but it's a lot). And I have three college degrees, and a career in public education. Here's

my point: there is no way, not no how, for any foreseeable government to be able to strip us of our First Amendment rights. The blood will flow in the streets, and we have LOTS more armed civilians than we have armed government agents, and I'd bet you the majority of the armed government agents won't go along with the governmental policies portrayed here. The National Guard sure as heck won't. Most county sheriffs won't either. Thus, at my current station in life, I find the book implausible.

For those who have no interest in spiritual things, I don't think they will be invested enough in the story to go beyond the first chapter. It is, after all, about spiritual journeys, and about the persecuted/ underground Church. I just don't think they are the target audience.

A side note: the book would have profited by another run-through by an editor.

I almost forgot: The cover depicts a beautiful stained glass window of the butterfly, a sign of the resurgent church, against the backdrop of a shattered building. It's quite lovely, seen up close. But at the distance I'm seeing it now, about three feet as I recline and type, it looks like a big blue eye, and it's kind of creepy.

Phule's Company by Robert Asprin
Review by Heath Row

It should come as no surprise, given that this was written by Asprin, author of the MythAdventures series, that this comedic military science fiction novel (big on the comedy, just enough military sf to say so) is a lot of fun. A lot of fun. Not only is it very, very funny, but it's also extremely big hearted, and that warmed this reader.

Willard J. Phule is a rapscallion, the dashing, dissolute heir to an arms manufacturing fortune, and a bit of a bumbler, when his heart's not in it. He is court-martialed by the Space Legion after a great mistake. Seriously. It's great. As punishment, he is given command of the Omega Company on Haskin's Planet, a mining world at the edge of inhabited space. The Omega Company is a group of misfits who don't fit in anywhere else—either because of body type, proclivity, or disposition—and Phule's reassignment signals much the same. The group of legionnaires have been parked, hopefully far away from where they can make any trouble.

Phule makes plenty, regardless. He funds new living quarters, equipment, and uniforms for the company and turns his attention, time, and energy to training them, intending to whip them into shape as an elite fighting force. Given his flair for public relations, the company attracts local media attention, and the bulk of the book depicts the increasing cohesion of the team as a fighting force and Phule's dawning realization that he can benefit substantially—not just economically—from making others happy and successful. Along the way, the company wins a competition against a group of elite troops, in part because the elites are too by-the-book, and makes First Contact with an alien species. That, in the end, benefits Phule economically.

There are five further books in the series, four written with Peter J. Heck before Asprin's death, and I look forward to reading them all. In fact, I think this would make a great movie or TV series. It's got it all: Footloose's scenes in which Willard learns how to dance, practically any summer camp movie's campwide games, a bit of The Bad News Bears, and Men In Black-style aliens. Casting directors take note: I recommend Will Arnett as Phule.

Rimworld — Into the Green by J. L. Curtis
Review by Pat Patterson

I dearly love this author's other works, which are set in the contemporary western US. This - isn't.

It's a thousand years in the future, and some things haven't changed. The Poor Bloody Infantryman is still the basic unit of diplomacy, and is still trying to take care of stupid officers while getting kicked around by certain factions in higher command. And the Flying Tiger Scrounging Club is still running back-channel operations to make sure things get done.

There are SO MANY good plotlines to develop! This is going to be a great series. If it's NOT a series, it better be due to the SMOD.

Ethan Fargo is about to launch on his third military career, much to his dismay. For reasons unknown, but related to some higher up covering his behind, he was booted out of the Terran Marine Corps as an officer, and is serving as a senior NCO in the Galactic forces. Exciting things happen, and he gets set on the beach with a secret mission.

Monsters try to eat him.

The bad guys, who are also monsters, show up and they also try to eat him, but it isn't personal.

The governor is a nasty person with nasty staff members. They try to eat him.

His sister is a maneater, but she just fusses.

There are a couple of cuties who have caught his eye, but he is indecisive.

Did I mention he can read minds?

Yeah, you need this book. Just buy it, okay?

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

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

As someone who has a passion for this kind of thing, I'm going to start off this review by praising Ms Sanderson for the hard work she put into not just the writing of this book, but the research. She shows a lot of knowledge about various myths. We could argue all day long about whether or not things would

shake out the way she thinks they would (and we WOULD and probably WILL because we're nerds and that's what we do.) but she has obviously done enough work to at least make an educated guess. If her version of Fimbulwinter isn't what I always expected, it works within the story and displays the concepts in her novel better than just about anything else could. Oh, and just for full disclosure, I'm an Irish lad myself and seeing some of the mythology of my ancestral isle probably did add to my enjoyment of the work.

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

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

I don't want to add too many spoilers because that's not what I do, but Sanderson does a very effective job of mixing magic and technology and, indeed, showing how the magic in her book is actually technology. We all know the adage about "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." from Arthur C. Clarke. Sanderson illustrates that concept with the use of nanotechnology. She also manages to include enough to make the concept known without going too far into it and boring the reader. This is a hard line to walk and she does it well.

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

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

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

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Nanobots

The Immortal Unknown (Perry Rhodan #13) by K. H. Scheer Review by Heath Row

Even though this is the first Perry Rhodan book I've ever read, I find the series—and that it even made it to the United States—fascinating. The longest-running science fiction series in history is a fine example of the popularity of serialized novels (Romanhefte, or digest-sized booklets) in Germany—and was brought to our shores by Forrest J Ackerman and his wife, Wendayne (Wendayne translated them, and Forry edited them). In Germany, 3,000 Rhodan booklet novels have been published since 1961, with Scheer writing more than 70—and writing synopses for the first 650. Between 1969 and 1978, Ace Books published the first 126 novels in English translation. After the series' cancellation, Wendayne self-published the next 19 for subscribers.

This book, the 13th in the American series, is a good example of what readers are in for, even if it might be better to start with #1. Given the long-running nature of the series, and what was known about future editions at the time of publication in America, the book is peppered with interstitial self-promotion: "10 adventures from now you will meet the amazing Fleet of the Springers," "25 adventures from now it's a case of The Men and the Monster," "500 adventures from now you'll discover The Secret Empire," and so on, reminding me of the endings of Hardy Boys novels propelling you to the next. Given Ackerman's involvement in publishing fanzines and magazines, the paperbacks are practically fanzines themselves. In addition to the fiction content, there is also other editorial: A "Scientifilm World" column about forthcoming genre movies such as The Brides of Dr. Phibes, The Colonization of the Planet of the Apes, and Bigfoot; and a letter column titled "The Perryscope" featuring correspondence from readers. (You can take the man out of the zines, but you can't take the zines out of the man!)

Plotwise, I enjoyed the fiction component thoroughly, but was occasionally at a bit of a loss. What I understood was this: The Stardust reaches Vega just as its sun is about to go nova. Rhodan speculates that he won't be able to find the wandering planet of the "immortal unknown" once the system is destroyed—so he hurries onward, pushing his ship to the limit. Once the crew reaches the planet Wanderer, they discover it's a flat, terraformed disc covered by a protective energy dome.

Rhodan faces a number of humans brought to the planet from Earth's past and John Marshall determines that the immortal unknown is perhaps the collective consciousness of a disembodied alien species—which extends an olive branch to the human race in the form of an AI-driven android that alters Rhodan and another crew member physically so they can resist aging—but need to top that off every 62 years. (Maybe 62 is the answer to life, the universe, and everything!)

It's a bit of a muddle taken out of sequence, but, man, what a beautiful muddle. Reading Perry Rhodan is like ingesting a tablespoon of condensed or evaporated science fiction. I'm not entirely sure what I just read, but it's sugary sweet and I loved it—and I'll read more soon.

The LawDog Files by D. LawDog
Review by Pat Patterson

I am almost positive that my first contact with the LawDog came from Peter Grant's blog, the Bayou Renaissance Man.

I am similarly under the strong impression that said introduction came in form of a squee.

And thus, I have a bit of cognitive dissonance I must overcome, because to the best of my knowledge, Peter Grant has never been known to squee.

Maybe it was in the comments section. Maybe it was a guest post. Maybe it was Dorothy.

Maybe I'm mistaken.

But I don't think so.

At any rate, the squee was to the effect that the LawDog had agreed to write a book, or was going to re-activate his blog, or was within driving distance, or was going to be at a convention, or some combination of all the above. At any rate, the news prompted a squee. Who it was who squeed, doesn't really matter anymore, because I arrived at SqueeSource.

If not quite of the same status as an imprimatur, a Foreword written by Larry Corriea has at least symbolic value to the hordes who shamble after him, holding out cash and begging for something else to read. In this case, though, it serves to tie in the current work with an experience that many of us (at least those of a certain level of maturity of years) have shared: finding a bright ray of light in the early days of what has become the Internet. Long before pictures of cats were available, text-based bulletin boards gradually evolved into text based fora, where grim knowledge was exchanged, along with the occasional insult. LawDog injected some humor into the wasteland, and thus won a following. (Note: I am a member of that same forum, dating from about 10 years after LawDog started posting. Sigh. Had I only started earlier, who knows? Perhaps I would now own a mountain.)

The stories are a selection of the material LawDog has posted over the last 20 years. Prior to each story, he provides some of the background material that lead up to the post. For those of us who LOVE back story, this is exactly the sort of icing on the cake that makes us feel like we are part of the inner circle.

The very first story he posted, sometime in the late 1990s, had a drunken, lovestruck armadillo as a main character. What makes the story stand out, however, is not the armadillo, but LawDog's ability with language to poke fun at himself. He describes hanging upside down in a thorny hedge, while fellow LEOs and other emergency service people are standing around, helpless with laughter, in such a way that we are brought into the event. With talent like this, and material to work with with, failure to amuse was NOT an option.

LawDog kills Santa Claus. He falls on the ice, and uses that as a tool to catch a miscreant. He introduces us to characters we NEVER hope to meet in person, including various members of Big Mama's family. He also gives us insight into the times when the solution to a crime problem DOESN'T involve an arrest, and the times when sitting in silence is the very best choice that can be made.

It's the latter, I believe, that keep the LawDog from that edge of cynicism about the human condition

that grinds so many cops into the ground. If you want a beautiful picture of human compassion, then read "Going Home," a story about his search for an elderly man missing from a nursing home.

He gives us delicate and tasteful advice: "If you're going to Say It With Saliva in Texas, make sure your boyfriend can take a whuppin'."

He describes the brilliance and utter stupidity of inmates who publish their crimes on social media, and who are able to recognize legitimacy of reports based on the type of language and ink used.

And, of course, the should-be-deservedly-so famous story of the Pink Gorilla Suit. It's so famous, it's INFAMOUS. Like El Guapo.

Be sure of this: unless you are ill, incarcerated, or have very little sense of humor (poor soul), you will find something to love in the LawDog Files.

The Long Loud Silence by Wilson Tucker
Review by Heath Row

This relatively early example of post-apocalyptic and pandemic fiction might be of interest to readers who enjoy Michael Crichton, Robin Cook, and Henry Sutton. Not only does a nuclear holocaust and biological warfare destroy every urban area in the eastern United States, survivors carry the pneumonic plague—which is contained geographically by a military perimeter along the Mississippi River. The protagonist, Corporal Russell Gary, is a soldier who awakens hungover in an Illinois hotel room. The attack has just happened, and the town is full of corpses. He pairs up with another survivor, a teenage girl, and heads west to realize that they can't cross the Mississippi.

After parting with the girl, he joins up with a man and woman, going to Florida to subsist as poly-amorous fishermen. When she becomes pregnant, Gary heads toward Canada, where he rescues a young girl from cannibals and joins her family as a farmhand. Later, he decides to go to Washington, D.C., to see if the government is still functioning. On the way, he commandeers a military truck and heads west to get across the Mississippi. He succeeds, carrying the plague with him regardless of his natural immunity. As you might imagine, that doesn't go well for anyone in the west.

The slim novel—192 pages—is a fun read that reads quickly. At times, the gender relations and sugges-tive age differences are a bit dated and problematic, but the writing is gripping and entertaining. Con-sider it a saltine for when you need to cleanse your palate.

Tomb of The Old One: Heaven's Damned by Maxwell Zain
Review by Jim McCoy

When Maxwell Zain sent me a copy of his short story, Tomb of the Old One: Heaven's Damned, for review he remarked that it was his first published story. I went into it knowing that and well... I kind of got what I expected. That's not to say it's a bad story, just that it's a little rougher than what I would typ-ically expect. Max has some good ideas, but honestly, it feels like they just weren't developed enough. I usually start with the good though, so let's go there first.

Max's world seems to be pretty well thought out. There is a balance of power between vampires, who see human beings as a source of fear, and angels who protect humanity. There has apparently been a

war going on for quite a while between the two. There is room for a lot of intrigue here. I mean that. I once wrote an alternate campaign setting for the Palladium Fantasy RPG and the beginnings of my notes sounded a lot like the beginning of this short. There is some real potential here. Vampires versus angels is something that hasn't been done to death as a concept. It is also something that has some interesting implications from a religious angle that could be used to great effect.

The action sequences were fairly well done and one particular sequence made me cringe. Zain definitely has the potential to turn into someone who can write a rip-roaring good times page turner. I like the way he thinks. I really do.

There are three problems with this story. One, he's got a couple of info-dumps in there. I don't usually mind that. I'm a David Weber fan. That much being said, this is a forty-five hundred word short. An author needs to wrap a story around the info-dumps and there's just not much here. Zain obviously wanted to do some serious world building. I can respect that, but an author needs more room than this to do that kind of world building. There's just not enough room here for what he's doing.

The second is that he tries to cram too much in here. I don't want to give too much away here, but this story starts with an info dump and probably thirty-five hundred words or so later (I didn't actually count) we're involved in a situation that would be a good ending to a book or maybe even a trilogy. Better yet, it might just work as the ending of a novel that starts a trilogy because Zain breaks out my least favorite character (Cliff Hanger) at the end. There is definitely something here but it's just not developed enough.

The third is a lack of character development. I get that this is a short but even then something should change about the main character. There was an attempt at the end of the work to show a little bit of something but it just didn't go far enough.

Basically, what I'm saying here is that I think this guy has potential. I plan to keep track of where he goes from here, and see what he turns into, because I honestly think that he just needs a little more development, and maybe enough patience to write a novel if that's what is needed to tell his story.

Bottom Line: 3.25 out of 5 Broken Halos

Literary Criticism

Ethnic and Racial Diversity in Harry Potter
Chris Nuttall

I make no pretence that any of this is original. It grew out of a conversation I was having with a friend about authorial politics vs. the unavoidable implications of their settings.

One of the fundamental problems with any rational analysis of Harry Potter is that much of the series isn’t rational. Large parts of the Wizarding World don’t seem to make much sense, even when viewed as a quasi-medieval society rather than a variant on modern Britain. The simple fact that magic has remained a secret from the vast majority of Muggle society – even ‘now’ – implies that wizards are both

extremely proactive in hiding themselves and extremely rare. These points are both supported by the books.

Let us consider, for a start, the problem of getting nations that have interests in common to cooperate. It isn't easy, not in the real world. And yet we are told that wizards remain hidden on a global scale – and not just wizards, but dragons, goblins, giants, centaurs and many other outright non-human beings. This requires a degree of international (magical) cooperation that may be the greatest piece of fiction in the series! Indeed, while witches might have been hunted across Europe (with reason, in the series), other societies respected their magic-users and their wizards couldn't be expected to abandon their traditions and go into hiding without some fairly strong incentive.

This leads to three separate possibilities:

First, there were no non-European wizards, save for the occasional muggleborn. European Wizards followed European Muggles as they swept the globe, setting up satellite communities near Muggle colonies. The handful of muggleborns they discovered were abducted and assimilated. Over the years, these cultures indulged in a little cultural appropriation to give themselves a separate character to their homelands.

Second, European Wizards made a major magical breakthrough (the wand?) that allowed them to invade non-European magical settlements and force them to go into hiding. Groups that agreed to surrender were offered a seat at the table, groups that insisted on fighting were brutally crushed. The British campaigns against the Thugs in India, for example, might have been targeted on rogue magic-users as well as barbaric … well, thugs. Over the years, the newcomers integrated with the original population, a process made easier by the Wizarding World's general lack of racism (at least racism directed against human wizards.)

Third, there were non-European communities that accepted the European belief that wizards needed to go into hiding and worked to make it happen.

Call me a cynic, but I would bet on either one or two.

Now, coming to the issue of Wizarding Britain.

It is a terrible mistake to assume that the racial and ethnic characteristics of the general population are automatically mirrored in a smaller subset. The Amish, for example, are generally white; British Muslims are (roughly) seventy percent East Asian (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis). By this standard, the Wizarding World would count as a small – very small – subset of the population.

In Harry's year in Gryffindor, there are ten pupils: five boys and five girls. Assuming this number is matched by the other three houses, there are forty pupils in Harry's overall year and a total student population (40*7) of 280 at Hogwarts. If we therefore assume that wizards, on average, live around 100 years, we have a rough total of 4000 wizards in Wizarding Britain. The Wizarding World includes a number of others – homeschooled wizards, werewolves, squibs, etc – so we may as well assume that the total overall population is around 5000 in all.

On one hand, there was a major war going on when Harry was born and, proportionally, the losses inflicted on the magical population were probably quite high. But, on the other hand, it's quite likely that the population of the Wizarding World remained fairly stable for centuries prior to the war. The combi-

nation of magical birth control and female emancipation probably played a major role in ensuring that the average birthrate was (barely) enough to keep the population from falling sharply.

Indeed, most of the pureblood families we see in the books have only one or two children (the Weasley family is perhaps the only major exception). Draco and James Potter, for example, were both only children, while Sirius Black had a single brother. I can't recall any mention of a family larger than three children, save for the Weasleys.

This – and a few other factors – have interesting effects on the Wizarding World.

First, nearly every witch and wizard in Britain goes to Hogwarts. Wizarding Britain is thus more of a large town than a giant community. Everyone will speak the same language. The in-jokes will not change. Culture will be near-universal, with no room for smaller subgroups. There will be very few true strangers in Wizarding Britain. Even if you don't know someone personally, you'll know someone who knows them. Indeed, all the students at Hogwarts will probably know everyone in their age group and (probably) two or three years in each direction.

This may not be an advantage. People like Hermione – who has a remarkable talent for putting peoples noses out of joint – may find their reputation follows them after they graduate from school. Something like this may have bedevilled Professor Snape.

Second, most witches and wizards will probably marry other witches and wizards. Non-wizard marriage (i.e. to Muggles) is socially discouraged, even if it isn't formally banned outright. (Even the Weasleys, the most tolerant pureblood wizards in canon, don't marry outside the magical community.) Such marriages may not even last, once the secret is revealed. Indeed, the demand for secrecy may well ruin such matches before they can even begin.

What this means is that Wizarding Britain is a relatively small community with a relatively small influx of new blood.

We know from canon that Wizarding Britain is actually subdivided into purebloods, halfbloods and muggleborns. Purebloods must have four magical grandparents – ideally, they should also be able to claim a pure linage going back as far as possible. This actually provides a strong incentive to marry within the community, rather than embracing new (or non-magical) blood. Harry and Ginny's children will count as purebloods, but Ron and Hermione's children will not. (Note that Ron is the only known member of his family to marry a muggleborn.)

(The disadvantage of this, of course, is that inbreeding will become a serious problem sooner or later.)

Simple logic tells us, therefore, that there will be relatively little racial diversity amongst the older purebloods. There is no suggestion that the vast majority of purebloods, particularly those of older families, are anything other than white. Nor will there be much ethnic diversity, in the common sense. Everyone who enters Wizarding Britain will have gone through Hogwarts and picked up much of the local culture.

There's an additional point here that may have shaped Wizarding Britain. Wizards have a huge superiority complex – and, for much of the last thousand years, they would have been right. I suspect that Wizarding Britain's standard of living was vastly superior to Muggle Britain until comparatively recently. Muggleborns may have had no inclination to rock the boat because they had it much better, amongst the wizards, than they did at home.

How, then, to account for the known non-white characters?

It's possible that the Indian twins and Cho Chang (the name isn't actually Chinese) are the daughters of purebloods from India and China respectively. They would probably be counted as purebloods, even if their parents and grandparents weren't native to Wizarding Britain – I would guess they're actually second-generation immigrants, given that they don't seem to be that culturally different to the rest of the students. Dean Thomas is a halfblood – presumably, his mother was black. Kingsley Shacklebolt is the only one who doesn't seem to fit in – although, again, he may be the descendent of immigrants.

The people who accuse Rowling of portraying an all-white world, without much ethnic and racial diversity, are wrong. The (largely) white population and complete cultural hegemony of Wizarding Britain is an artefact of its social system.

Prose Bono

Writing Tips
By Jagi Lamplighter

[Editor: Lamplighter has provided us with an extended series of articles on writing. Each of the articles comes with a cue and a one-sentence description, all seen below. Most of the articles themselves will appear in future issues.]

Two Strings: Two separate issues need to be going in each scene.

The Trick: Raising expectations in one direction but having the story go in the opposite direction. It sounds simple, but it may be the most useful writing technique of all…the book Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier is just the trick over and over again.

The Foil: The trick applied to people. Use other characters to showcase the strengths of your main characters and to make them seem extraordinary. Example: Nausicaa's guys.

Senses: Add three to five senses to every description.

Interior Dialogue: Readers don't trust dialogue. Have your characters think, and have what they think be juxtaposed to the dialogue, showing a new angle.

Open Active: Start scene changes underway and then explain how you got there…unless change significant.

Measurements by Example: Tall as a man, rather than six feet high, where applicable.

Romantic Tension: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3 To make a character seem attractive to another character (at least to women) list a character trait of character A and an emotional reaction to this trait from character B). (example: she had an air of mystery that intrigued him. Or, her shy retiring manner made him wish he could protect her.)

Payload: Part 1, Part 2 Every scene/fight/sex scene should have some moment that moves the plot along or heightens awareness, drawing the reader into something greater. Villains should reveal something important during a fight, and romantic partners should learn more about each other or reveal secrets.

Every character should have at least one paragraph/scene where the **inner motivation** of that character is revealed.

Dicken's Trick: Using action in description: "There is not just a kettle on the fire, it is boiling over." "Horses at the cab stands are steaming in the cold and stamping. When people enter a room they are sneezing or hiding something in their pockets."

Ping Pong Dialogue: Have some dialogue go back and forth quickly, taking less than one line on the page – leaving white space – to increase readability.

Pink Passages: Add visceral reactions – physical involuntary reactions – to heighten connection with reader…but not too much.

Character Dynamics: To make a character come to life, give him two conflicting goals. Also, add a scene where he shows a trait at odds with his main traits—this has the same effect in print that shading does in an illustration. It adds a sense of three-dimensionality.

Eyes Ahead: To give a sense of motion, and to increase the reader's sense of anticipation, make sure you let the reader know what the character's goal is in scenes and in story arcs.

Long Live Exposition: Use the Long Live the Queen system to evaluate where to put exposition.

Dave Barry Endings: Tie the beginning and the end together — balance satisfaction and surprise.

Checklist: To check every scene:

What does it look like?
Senses…what does it smell/sound/feel/taste like?
What is the character feeling?
What is the character doing to express this? — nonverbal reactions
What Visceral reaction can the character have?

The Two Strings Technique
By L. Jagi Lamplighter

Two Strings: Two separate issues need to be going in each scene.

In art, we create the illusion of three dimensions with contrast. A single line forming a circle looks two-dimensional to the eye. Add shading around one side and suddenly it looks like a ball instead of a circle—as if the light were shining on the one side casting the far side into shadow. Our eye recognizes this contrast as the way 3-D objects look and assumes that the object on the paper is 3-D, too.

What applies in art is also true in writing. Contrast is what makes the written word spring to life: contrast in theme, contrast in plot, contrast in setting, contrast in character.

The same way that shading tricks the eye by reminding us of what we see around us, contrast in stories reminds us of real life. In real life, things are untidy. Very seldom is anything accomplished without some difficulty. You get a new job, but you do not care for the location. You meet a nice man, but he has a girlfriend who lives far away he has to break up with before he can really see you. You love where you live, but you miss your family who live somewhere else.

These tensions, between what we have in life and the way we would like things to be, are what keep us striving, what makes our life dramatic and interesting—interesting to others, I should say.

This is a very important point, and we should get it out of the way first thing. Writing, stories, drama, is about what is interesting to others. What is interesting to read. What is interesting to hear about.

It is NOT about what is best to live.

Having a good life – getting a job in a place you love, meeting a great fellow who is free to date, having your family move to where you are – is wonderful for those who are living it. However, it doesn't make interesting drama. (Unless it comes at the end, after a struggle to achieve it.)

This is why so many romance novel publishers have a rule that the book ends with the wedding (or a short epilogue).

So, this is the first lesson of writing:

Books are never about the way we would really like things to be.

They are never about happy people being happy. They are never about things that are just going well. They are never about creative people producing their art without obstacles.

They are never about Heaven.

You can visit Heaven in a story, as part of the contrast between what we desire and what we have, but you could not set the whole story there.

Drama comes from conflicts, from overcoming obstacles. So what makes an obstacle in a story?

Obstacles come when there is a contrast between desired outcomes. The desired outcomes can be two desires internal to the character, such as I want to go away to college but I also want to be near my family.

Or they can be an internal vs. an external, such as: I want to get medical help to my mother vs. the physical dangers of getting there since the road washed out.

Stories come to life when that contrast becomes apparent.

So, now that we have established that stories need conflict, you may ask: "But how does all this apply to my writing? And what did you mean by 'Two Strings?'"

Have you ever heard writers talking about how they got the idea for their latest work? Often they'll say something like: "I had this idea for the longest time about a band of clowns traveling through the de-

sert. But it wasn't until I came up with this second idea, of a type of sand worm that only eats clowns, that the story really came alive."

Okay…that's a horrible example. But, hopefully, you get the point…which is: it took two different ideas to bring the story to life.

A real example a friend recently shared was: for a long time he wondered about what if one of the tribes who left the Tower of Babel went into space? Then, one day, his little daughter was playing princess, and he thought: Ahat if she really was a princess? What kind of culture would hide its royalty away among normal people?

These two ideas were the seeds for his novel.

A writer can have a really great idea, but until it becomes the intersection of two great ideas, it remains static, lacking in interest. And while it is static, it is hard to write about and not very interesting to read about.

This is why stories that read like travel logs tend to be dull. The author has one good idea: put onstage interesting places and people, but no second idea to tie them together and give motion to the plot.

More often, however, a book has two overarching ideas, but does not necessarily have two strings to every scene. So the book is interesting, but some scenes drag.

Which brings us back to the question: What do I mean by 'string'?

By 'string', in this case, I mean a concept that adds interest to the scene.

Or, put more simply: every scene should have two things going on in it.

It's that simple.

When we make up stories to write, we often start with an idea: I want to tell the story of a Hobbit name Frodo; I want to tell the story of Thomas Jefferson; I want to tell the story of a prince who marries a princess.

Write about them doing…what?

That one idea by itself is never enough. A single idea is like the circle made out of a single line. It may be well-drawn, but it is still flat. Without shading, it does not come to life.

What is needed is a second idea to provide the contrast that brings the story alive: What if a Hobbit were drawn into a war story? What if Jefferson's story were told as journal entries? What if the prince has been turned into a frog?

Note that the story of Jefferson does not necessarily need a second plot idea. Jefferson's life already has events and conflicts. What it needs is an approach. Something that helps the author frame the story, to choose which events to mention and how to bring the biography to life.

(Years after I first wrote the above paragraph, I picked up an easy reader book on Jefferson for my son.

The author chose to tell about Jefferson's life from his interaction with food; food he ate, food he encouraged others to eat, like tomatoes, food he brought to America from France. It was interesting because the overlap between the known figure, Jefferson, and this unusual take, food during Jefferson's time, contrasted to make this short reader fascinating.)

The moment the second idea, or story string, is discovered, the story comes alive. You "pull on the strings," and the events begin to move in the author's imagination. They stop being static and come into motion.

When they come alive for the author, they are far more likely to come alive for the reader.

This is true for a novel. This is true for a short story. This is true for every individual scene.

Ever read a book that has long passages that just don't seem to go anywhere? The characters you like are on stage. They are talking about some interesting subject, and yet the scene seems flat, static? That is a scene with only one string to it. The novel may have two (or many, many more) ideas dynamically contrasting to produce a great story, but that particular scene is only accomplishing one thing.

So, what do I mean by "two strings"?

In particular, I mean that two things get accomplished in relation to forwarding the story. A story is a collection of different kinds of qualities, such as: plot, backstory, description, and character development.

Plot moves the action of the story forward. Backstory is the events that happened before the story opened that have an impact on the events and characters. Description, if done well, makes the story more vivid and alive in the imagination of the reader, helps them picture the location and to feel more immediate. Character development helps the reader know who the character is, which, in turn, leads to a greater appreciate of the character's struggle…i.e. the story.

But any one of these things in a scene by itself, and the scene begins to feel thin—or worse—static, as motionless as a winter pond.

The key, then, is to mix them. Have two things happen in every scene.

Either touch on the threads of two different plotlines, or have the plot motion contrasted with a bit of character development. Or spruce up the description by having a hint of plot or character development come out from how the room is described. Etc.

The key is to have two different contrasting purposes to the scene.

So, how do you do this?

Just go down the list. Can you have a plot twist, something that ups the tension and forwards the motion of the plot, in the scene?

Can you add a description that has something interesting to it? Do a little research about your location or some aspect of the situation and add a few pertinent details to the scene in such a way as to spark interest?

Can you have your character's reactions to the information in the scene be atypical? Can the banter between them give the scene sparkle—perhaps hinting at a rivalry or romantic tension?

Can you slip part of your background situation into the dialogue in such a way to surprise the reader?

A brief aside: writers are often told to avoid flashbacks and info dumps about background info. But this does not mean 'don't include background info'. It means: don't include it up front. What you want to do is wait until the reader is curious enough about the situation and the characters that what would have been an info dump becomes revelation—exciting insight into the characters and their motivation. When you reach this point, adding background revelations become a great way to add a second string to a scene.

One of the easiest ways to bog down is with character development. You write a scene, perhaps a conversation, where amusing conversation happens. You love the scene. It shows you how funny or compassionate or over the top your character is.

But it drags.

The reason, usually, is that nothing in the scene affects the overall flow of the story. If you took the scene out, you would miss the cute bits you wrote, but the reader would never know it was gone.

The best way to bring life to this kind of scene is to add a plot thread. Have some revelation in the dialogue that unexpectedly moves the plot forward. That way, you can save your delightfully written character scene AND not bore your reader.

Another pitfall is the scene that reviews what the character knows to date. Donald Maass calls this something like "the dreaded cup of tea" scene…claiming that these kind of scenes usually happen when a character is driving from one place to another or sipping a cup of tea…and they stop to ruminate on what they know.

It can be important to review what the character knows and to show the character's reaction, but there are also ways to make that more dynamic.

The first trick to that, of course, is conversation. Put it in dialogue. Another trick might be to put it in an unusual setting. If the character is not drinking tea, but is wandering through a museum of strange objects or crawling through a cave…some situation that, in and of itself, brings interest and tension…it will be easier for your reader to stay engaged.

Description alone, however, is another pitfall. A common mistake for fantasy writers is to invent a background that's really neat, but not really have much happening in it. So the reader is treated to a travel log about this intriguing place, but soon loses interest because nothing is happening.

The reason this is such a big pitfall for fantasy writers is that having something happen often means ruining and tearing up the very place you were so proud of inventing.

My husband recently shared a scene from a book he was reading that makes a good example. The main character walks into his office and is questioned by his boss. The boss asks him all sorts of questions about his background…because they have discovered that there are alternate worlds, and people from those worlds are impersonating people from our world. The boss wants to confirm that it is actually

him.

This scene had three strings: the plot string of introducing the alternate realities, background info string of putting on background info about the main character…through the questions that his boss asks, and the character development string of showing how the main character reacted in the tense situation of having his identity questioned. These three strings, working together, turned what could have been a very dull scene—we find out a bit about the character's history—into a compelling scene.

Books that really shine have an interesting contrast in every scene, sometimes even every page or paragraph. (Donald Maass claims you can even do it with every line.)

The same way a good artist can learn to draw all figures with proper shading and perspective, if we writers can master the technique of Two Strings, we can bring our works to life.

Your Reputation Precedes You
by Chris Nuttall

Never do an enemy a small injury.
-Machiavelli

I got asked to give some writing advice, so here is a story for you.

A year or so ago, I wrote a short story for a collection. The organiser was kind enough to accept it. Everything went swimmingly until I saw the proofs and discovered - horror of horrors - that he'd spelt my name wrong. It was an outrage! It could not be born!

I knew what I had to do. I unleashed a wave of outrage on him. I summoned the mobs of Twitter, the faces of Facebook, the yahoos of Yahoo, all devoted to punishing him for daring to spell my name wrong. How dare he? It was a blatant insult to Lancastrians everywhere! We howled and we raged and we wore him into submission. We sure taught him a lesson, didn't we? We sure did.

Actually, I did none of those things.

Being a reasonably mature person, or at least someone capable of pretending to be mature (strictly in the privacy of my own home, naturally), I simply dropped him an email. And our discussion went something like this:

Me: Hi, you spelt my name wrong. Please could you fix it?

Him: Sure thing. Done!

Me: Great! Thank you!

Him: You're welcome.

No fuss, no muss and, best of all, no lingering bad feelings.

It should go without saying - but probably doesn't, these days — that a person subjected to the kind of assault I described above is not going to be happy. People make mistakes all the time. Believe me, my

name gets misspelled a lot. If you treat someone with a degree of respect and courtesy, even if you're annoyed with them, they generally respond well. (And if they don't, you can claim the moral high ground when outsiders say you're overreacting.) However, if you treat someone like an enemy who needs to be smashed flat for a minor mistake, you'll make an enemy for life. Worse, you'll make outsiders see you as the bad guy.

And if I had treated him like that?

Well, he could have made an excuse and dropped me from the project. If I lacked the self-awareness to realise that I'd jumped well over the line, I might even have accepted whatever excuse he devised at face value. It isn't that uncommon for someone to withdraw (or be withdrawn) from an anthology, particularly before the contacts are finalised. Or, if he couldn't kick me out, he certainly would have refused to publish me again. Why go to all that hassle? People do not like working with jerks. There aren't many authors I'd tolerate — if they acted like that — in exchange for a story.

And even if he didn't do that either, he'd certainly badmouth me to everyone else who came along. He might have a discussion like this:

Famous Author: I'm thinking of offering Nuttall a slot in my latest collection, which will boost his career into orbit.

Him: Nuttall is a total jerk! I accidentally misspelled his name and he raised a hue and cry against me!

Famous Author: Blimey! Lucky you warned me. I'll cross him off the list.

The thing you have to bear in mind, at all times, is that people talk. And people listen. And watch silently. If you come across as a reasonable sort of guy, people will want to work with you. If you come across as an asshole who makes other assholes look bland by comparison, they won't. It's true everywhere. You'd better be a really great [whatever] if you act like an asshole all the time or you'll be fired. Why would anyone tolerate you if you're not?

Indeed, one of the dirty little secrets of the writing business is that there are a number of authors who are shunned — to some extent — by their fellows. Not because of politics or social ineptitude or whatever, but because they treat their fellow writers poorly. Smart people know that friction is common and that, with a few diplomatic words, you can sort the problem out without causing future headaches. Others are too self-centred to realise that they're coming across as the bad guy. In days of yore, people talked: if you were an ass at a convention or came across as a blowhard, people quietly excluded you. Now, the internet never forgets.

It's odd for me to lecture anyone on social conduct. I'm not good at being sociable. I tend to fade into the background if there's more than three or four people in the group. But even I understand that I have to get on with people who can (or might be able to, later on) influence my career. If I give a publisher a hard time, he'll drop me; if I treat an editor badly, he'll tell the other editors that I'm a pain in the butt. I'm not saying - obviously - that you have to suck up to them, or ignore mistreatment, but you do have to be reasonable. Give them a chance to fix the problem first, before you start screaming. You'll be surprised at how far it goes.

Humans - even geeks and nerds like myself — are social creatures. We have an instinctive revulsion towards the betrayer, the one who weakens the group. Most people respond badly to tattletales and

sneaks even if they understand — intellectually — that the sneak did the right thing. They also severely dislike people who demand massively over-the-top punishment for small offences, particularly ones that don't look like offences to outside eyes. If you do this, even if you feel perfectly justified, a great many people will regard you warily. They certainly won't feel comfortable in your presence. Why should they? You crossed a line.

If you react badly to reviews, people won't review your books (or write sardonic pieces that make you look an utter fool.) If you accuse another author of stealing your title, people will be wary of you. If you use stock images for your covers and accuse another author of stealing your image, people will roll their eyes at you. If you bash your fellow authors for any reason at all, people will inch away from you; if you do things that harm their careers, no matter how justified you feel yourself to be, people will do everything in their power to stay away from you. A person who damaged another author's career would not make anyone feel safe at a convention.

I'm not saying you can't have opinions. There's nothing wrong with having a different opinion. I'm proud to say that I have friends from all corners of the political axis. But if you act in a way that damages social cohesion, people will draw away from you. How many opportunities have you missed because you treated people poorly? You don't know. You'll never know.

The thing is, most people want to get along. They want to keep their relationships with other people. Most people will be quite happy to fix a minor mistake if you point it out to them (or be very apologetic if it's too late to fix the mistake.) But if you treat them badly — if you jump to the conclusion that you're under personal attack — you'll make enemies. People may not say anything to you — you've already proved you're immature, that you can't take criticism — but they'll remember. And, in this day and age, nothing is ever truly forgotten.

And your career may be over before it has fairly begun.