

Tightbeam 305

February 2020



Fairy Sword by
Angela K. Scott

Tightbeam 305

February 2020

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Regular short fiction reviewers Greg Hullender and Eric Wong publish at RocketStackRank.com.

Cedar Sanderson’s reviews and other interesting articles appear on her site www.cedarwrites.wordpress.com/ and its culinary extension .

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Editorial

Happy February!

Once again, we try to present reviews and articles of interest on a wide range of sf/fnal topics. Anime! Novels! Short fiction! Videos! Computer games! Interviews! SerCon biographies! And, of course, Food of Famous Authors!

Your contributions will be most welcome! Send them to phillies@4liberty.net.

As a specific request, we could really use more novel and film reviewers. We have a small group of fine writers, but more would be of value. In particular, reflecting the lack of complete civic harmony on the political front, I would like to have reviewers whose reviews echo gently a full range of political opinions. That might tend to get us reviews of a broader set of sf/fnal topics.

Yes, we would publish fanzine and manga reviews if we received them.

Letter of Comment

Heath Row
4367 Globe Ave.
Culver City, CA 90230
Dear Neffers:

This is a letter of comment on Tightbeam #303, dated December 2019. Overall, it is an excellent issue, and I am slightly frustrated that I now have so much more that I want to read! Definitely one of the best problems to have.

The credits page alone recommends at least seven Web sites that are worth checking out—I'll have to spend some time with them. We should consider them when coming up with nominations for the 2020 Neffies if there's a Web site category.

Bob, your letter of comment mentioning your public library brought my heart warmth. I am delighted that the librarian obtained several titles that you'd expressed interest in. Thank you for helping to diversify and improve your local library's collection—for yourself as well as other patrons.

I also appreciated your comments on Tom Godwin's short stories "The Cold Equations." While I haven't read Chris Nuttall's examination of the story, your letter alone makes me want to read it.

Jessi, I appreciated your review of Carole & Tuesday, as well as the mentions of GalaxyCon and Anime Central. I'm sure you have plenty of projects on your plate, but the club would welcome and benefit from anime convention reports. I'll do my best to include those two in upcoming

convention calendars.

Tamara's interview with J.F. Holmes intrigued me: "an elite Special Operations Unit... that has been fighting supernatural on the battlefield since 1777"? Holy cow. Joint Task Force 13 stories would be worth tracking down!

I also got a kick out of the Mike Baron interview. I've been reading Baron's comic books since Nexus and Badger first saw print. I had no idea he'd written so much other stuff! Banshees and the Nexus and Badger novels have been added to my reading list.

Jon, thank you for the mention of Jack Williamson's dissertation on H.G. Wells. It was published as H.G. Wells: Critic of Progress. Relatively inexpensive copies are available, and if you have access to ResearchGate or a similar service through an academic institution, you can access his original thesis paper. Another one for the reading list! His comic strip Beyond Mars was collected by IDW as recently as 2015. Great news that that's still available for reading. Also fascinating that Williamson coined the terms "genetic engineering" and "terraforming."

David Boop's anthology Straight Outta Tombstone sure had an all-star crew of writers: Phil Foglio, Jim Butcher, Alan Dean Foster, Kevin J. Anderson... usually such a collection might not interest me, but with writers like that contributing, I'm curious. Is it a shared world book like Thieves' World or Wild Cards, or just a collection about supernatural cowboys?

Finally, Jim McCoy's review of Jason Rennie's anthology Forbidden Thoughts also piqued my interest. One might expect that such a collection would contain message fiction, and the combination of fiction and nonfiction sounds worthwhile. I laughed out loud at McCoy's advice to Milo Yiannopoulos: "You've got time to write fiction when your appearances get cancelled." Ouch.

So many good reading recommendations. Thanks, fellow Neffers!

Sincerely yours,
Heath Row

Anime

Keep Your Hands off Eizouken! Review by Jessi Silver

Streaming: Crunchyroll
Episodes: TBA
Source: Manga

Episode Summary: From the moment she saw some episodes of Future Boy Conan as a child, Midori knew that she wanted to tell her own stories through animation. Her sketchbooks are now filled with concept artwork and environmental layouts, inspired by the incomparably weird architecture of her high school. Midori's friend Kanamori, ever the shrewd realist, doesn't have much of an interest in anime, but she knows what a potential cash-cow looks like and gets the feeling that Midori's aspirations may not be just a child's fruitless and unrealistic goals.



The pieces begin to drop into place when Mizusaki, a classmate and part-time fashion model, reveals her love of anime (and her willingness to disobey her parents to work in the industry). With her character artwork and Midori's background layouts, their collective creativity really has the potential to shine. Kanamori detects a potentially advantageous situation, and suggests that they ditch the school anime club entirely to form their own club focused around their goal of creating anime together.

Impressions: I've loved animation almost as far back as I can remember, but the point at which it dawned on me that the cartoons I loved so much were somehow the product of human hands was when I was watching old reruns of classic Warner Brothers cartoons and realized that some of them had some aesthetic similarities with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and *The Phantom Tollbooth*. It was, of course, primarily the influence of the great Chuck Jones, whose contribution to the landscape of American animation is undeniable.

While I've never been someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of animators and directors like some folks with a talent for it, just coming to the realization that hand-drawn, moving pictures were human-made and had consistencies among them is a revelation that I continue to carry with me into my anime fandom.

Nowadays I have a small stable of creative minds I follow, and while some, like Osamu Kobayashi, are considered more controversial (limited animation is art too, and I will fight to defend that opinion), there are others, like director Masaaki Yuasa, whose work is finally starting to get the widespread acclaim it deserves; a fact that I could only dream of when *Mind Game* was nothing but a weird, obscure fever dream of avant-garde animation. *Keep Your Hands off Eizouken!* is Yuasa's most recent directorial foray, and if producer and long-time associate Eunyoung Choi is to be believed, part of the reason it exists as animation in the first place is because Yuasa did a search for his name on the internet and discovered that fans of the manga were throwing his name around as someone who would do a good job adapting the material. Whether that's true or just a funny story, the fact is that Yuasa's loose, atypical animator-influenced style really does seem like the perfect fit for a story that seems reliant on its visual inventiveness.



The girls embark on a new adventure in creativity. Screenshots from Crunchyroll.

Unlike most anime, this episode's beauty isn't in how its characters look; the three girls (yes, even the model) are almost the polar opposite of any bishoujo or moé visual ideal. The girls are cartoonish, with sideways grins and rough voices. In essence, they are cartoonish as is fitting for



the quirky reality in which they exist, and their limber, expressive bodies transition perfectly into the dreamy imaginary world that Midori and Mizusaki produce when their minds meet and start forming sparks. The world in which they live is as fantastic



as a real-life environment can be, and its charm is that it's so poorly-conceived from a city planning perspective that its bits and pieces awkwardly connect together and build on top of each-other almost like a competition. It's rich and weird and wonderful.

As someone with a love of art and animation, as well as an unapologetic Yuasa fan, I was so, so looking forward to this. Part of me dreaded that the episode wouldn't live up to my own astronomical expectations, even though I honestly didn't know exactly what to expect. What I was presented with was somewhat less bombastic and silly, but more heartfelt and raw than I anticipated. Seeing young Midori's eyes light up as she watched Conan was the simplest, most straightforward and powerful connection I could have made with this episode. With each new Yuasa anime, I suddenly transform into that little girl in the chair, eyes sparkling with wonder at the power of animation.

Pros: Captures the feeling of becoming enthralled with animation. Visually-inventive. The character designs are quirky and have tons of personality.

Cons: I want to watch the rest of it right now!

Content Warnings: Mild slapstick humor.

Grade: A

Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, So I'll Max Out My Defense Review by Jessi Silver



Streaming: Funimation

Episodes: 12

Source: Light Novel

Episode Summary: Kaede isn't really into video games, but when her friend Risa begs her to join her in the newest VR game Kaede breaks down and buys it. While Risa's busy studying for her exams, Kaede decides to log in and set up her character. She applies all of her initial allotment of skill points to her defense stat since she's afraid of getting hurt. Of course, that means she can't move quickly and has zero attack power, but at least she's having a good time watching baddies bounce right off of her.

Kaede slowly gains levels by being able to hold out longer than the creatures who attack her, and soon she's developing more obscure abilities and adding to her collection of functional skills. She continues to focus on her defense stats exclusively, and eventually gains enough confidence to attempt a dangerous dungeon trek on her own. After defeating a hydra, gaining immunity to poison, and winning a unique set of armor, she decides to log out. But what Kaede doesn't realize is that she and her extremely unorthodox gaming methods have become the talk of the virtual town.



Kaede ends up with some cool new gear.
Screensaps from Funimation.



Impressions: While I know this isn't the case for everyone, one of my favorite things about old-school RPG's was spending time grinding for levels. While I wouldn't tolerate it as a requirement in a modern-style game (mostly because I don't have the time in my day to deal with it), when it comes to the older Final Fantasy games I loved as a kid, nothing beats the satisfaction of front-loading the level grind, then descending on adversaries like an untouchable god without worrying about getting one-hit KO'd into oblivion. Maybe

that's just me. In any case, the danger inherent in starting a new game is almost enough to make me not want to play it in the first place, which is why I can certainly identify with Kaede's instinct to bulk up her defense as a measure against the endless frustration of being constantly killed. That's really all there is to this episode – Kaede gains levels, puts all her status points into defense, gains new skills from enemies harmlessly pummeling her, repeat for comedic effect for 22 minutes. It really shouldn't be as funny as it is.

The charm of this episode comes from the fact that, unlike so many anime protagonists in similar situations, Kaede doesn't have the meta-knowledge it takes to be a cynical asshole about her circumstances. It's been trendy for main characters to loudly profess their self-awareness of their gaming-related situations for so long that it's almost become an expectation. In this case, Kaede doesn't know much about video games and starts off on her own extremely uninformed path to success. Having known people who were so adept at min-maxing their D&D characters that it was no longer fun to play with them, being able to watch a character with almost no applicable knowledge game the system so thoroughly is a sweeter victory to me than perhaps some other viewers may understand.



I found this episode charming, colorful, and funny, but I worry that its major gag will get old quickly. Even though I continued to root for Kaede's victory, every time she had occasion to add more points to her stat pools, I felt myself wishing that she'd maybe put 1 or 2 points into something other than her vitality stat. I imagine that 12 episodes worth of this story will see her confront some kind of challenging situation during which her defense-focused style proves less-than-optimal, and I would love to stick around to see what her new friends think of the spoils from her recent quest, but I'm not sure if I'm compelled enough to do so.

Pros: Colorful and cute. Decent comedic timing. I like the protagonist's unique methods of success.

Cons: Feels like it could be a one-joke series.

Content Warnings: Mild cartoon violence.

Grade: B-

Novels

The Harbinger Trilogy by Diane Duane Review by Tom Feller



I should know better. There was a freebie table at a convention where a friend put out some books that he was giving away in the hope that they would end up in good homes. One of them was a novel by Diane Duane, whom I discovered many years ago through her Star Trek books and then moved on to her fantasy. I have always enjoyed her books, so I picked up *Starrise at Corrivale* even though it clearly says on the front cover that it was the first book in a trilogy. I read and enjoyed it so much that I sought out the other two books. However, not only are neither books carried by my local library, but they are out of print. There are not even Kindle or Nook editions available so I ended up ordering second hand paperback editions through Amazon and even then they had to be shipped from two different Amazon affiliates. Those other titles are *Storm at Eldala* and *Nightfall at Algemron*, and they all refer to star systems within human space. Corrivale is orbited by a gas giant named Hydrocus, which in turn is orbited by a jungle moon named Grith. That moon is inhabited by a human colony and an alien species called the Sesheyans, who live in an uneasy co-existence. The Eldala

system is on the fringe of human space and has never been thoroughly explored. Two human settled planets orbiting Algemron are fighting a bitter war.

The books are based on *Star Drive*, a science fiction campaign setting for TSR's *Alternity* role-playing system. It is set in the 26th Century, and humanity has spread out into the galaxy because of contact with the Fraal, the alien species responsible for legitimate UFO close encounters. The Fraal are one of 50 alien species that humans have contacted by the year 2501. Because of a war that lasted from 2346 to 2472, many human colonies lost contact with each other and the Earth. The leading military power is the Galactic Concord, but many human planets are not members.

"Star Drive" refers to the human/Fraal method of faster-than-light travel. A ship equipped with the drive can travel from 5 to 50 light years, depending on the size of the engine, in one jump which takes 121 hours no matter what the distance. The "Starrise" part of the title refers to what an observer sees when a spaceship emerges from the jump. "Starfall" refers to the beginning of the jump.

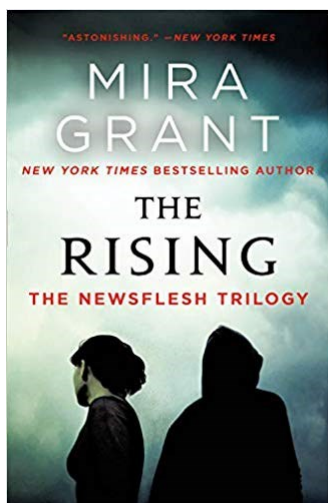
The main point-of-view character is Gabriel Connor. Although he is relatively young, he is already a decorated combat veteran. At the beginning of the first novel, he is a First Lieutenant in the Concord Marines serving on a ship during a diplomatic mission to a system in which the two planets are at war with each other. He is framed for the murders of the Concord ambassador Lauren Delvecchio, several members of her staff, and some fellow Marines, including his best friend. However, because the murders took place in the jurisdiction of an independent planet, the trial took place there. It ended with a hung jury, so he went free. However, he is dishonorably discharged from the Marines, and there is an arrest warrant out for him in Concord

controlled space. He partners with a 300 year old Fraal female named Enda to buy a used spaceship. Their plan is to haul freight and data while he collects the evidence necessary to clear his name. The rest of the trilogy is a series of their adventures, including several attempts to murder him by the same people who framed him in the first place. He gradually accumulates the evidence he needs, but also discovers a conspiracy by an unknown species to conquer known space.

Overall, I found this to be a very entertaining space opera and was glad I picked up the first book.

The Newsflesh Trilogy by Mira Grant

Review by Tom Feller



A few years ago, my wife and I attended a talk by Seanan McGuire at a science fiction convention. She writes fantasy and songs under her own name, and science fiction and horror as Mira Grant. It's not a secret. In one of her Grant books, she quoted one of the songs she wrote as McGuire. A fan, not knowing the connection, contacted her as McGuire to inform her that she should sue Grant for plagiarism. This trilogy, published from 2010 to 2012, combines horror and science fiction and consists of the novels *Feed*, *Deadline*, and *Blackout*.

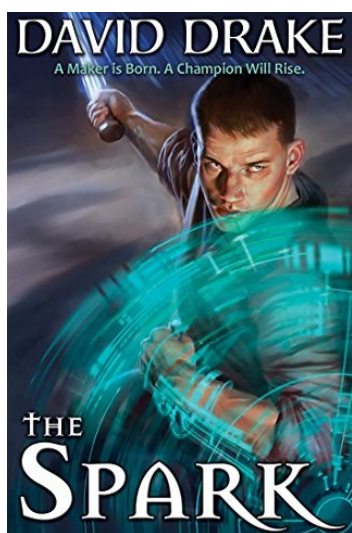
The premise is an event called the "Rising", a zombie virus created by efforts to cure cancer and the common cold that infected the world's population in 2014. Although everyone is infected, the virus normally remains dormant until the person dies and comes back as a zombie. For this reason, cremation is mandatory. There is also a risk of becoming a zombie spontaneously, a process called "amplification", so most people take blood tests every day and it is legal to kill anyone who tests positive. Because "only" 30 percent of the population of the United States was killed off in the Rising, our civilization survived. The first novel begins in 2039, and people have learned to live with the zombie threat. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are now more powerful than the Defense Department, the C.I.A., or the United Nations. The vast majority of people in the U.S. live in secure, gated communities, they have become mostly vegetarian because the virus also affects other mammals larger than 45 pounds, new houses have tiny windows so that nothing can break in, large gatherings for sports events, political rallies and concerts are a thing of the past because of the danger of amplification, but there is still an Internet. The story centers around Shaun and Georgia Mason, a brother and sister leaders of a team of bloggers who follow a presidential candidate around the country and discover a conspiracy to assassinate him. There are still U.S. presidential elections, but only 49 states, because Alaska has been overrun by the zombies. Shaun and Georgia are not blood relatives and were born around the time of the "Rising" before being adopted. They do not remember a world without zombies. Georgia is a Coca-Cola addict while Shaun prefers coffee, but neither seems to have any difficulty obtaining a supply. The sister does most of the writing while Shaun is an "Irwin", named after the late Steve Irwin, someone who actively seeks out zombies so that they can write about them.

The second two novels take place in 2041, and the Masons uncover more conspiracies, connected to the assassination attempt, to suppress research into a zombie vaccine, grow clones, and

introduce another strain of the zombie virus that is spread by mosquitos. Grant's world building is excellent, and the cast of characters in addition to the Masons quite interesting. They include Buffy, a fiction writer and techie who assumed her pseudonym from the TV series about a vampire hunter, Mahir, a practical, London-based writer, Alaric, who wants to become an Irwin like Shaun, Becks, a female Irwin, Dr. Kelly Connolly, a researcher who discovers she has been lied to, Dr. Shannon Abbey, a "mad", but friendly scientist, Maggie, a fiction writer and heiress, and Dave, a writer and techie. Not all of them are still alive by the end of the third book. Surprisingly, the zombies themselves rarely appear directly on the page, but stay mostly in the background. I had a hard time putting the books down and highly recommend them.

The Spark by David Drake

Review by Pat Patterson



The cover art is by one Todd Lockwood, with whom I am not familiar. I think it does an excellent job of representing the science-magic in the sword and shield being wielded, and the font chosen is a great fit. While I didn't have a clear picture of the protagonist in mind, the figure here displayed reminded me too much of a youngish Arnold Schwarzenegger; YMMV.

The HIGHLY significant introductory material is listed in the TOC as "A Map of the Territory." It's NOT a literal map; it just explains things that I found to be important. Don't automatically skip it.

In that introductory material, he discloses that he is using "The Matter of Britain," known to most as the stories of King Arthur, as the basis for this series. Thus, here we have a mix of non-magical themes of people brought into conflict with other people and the environment, but with strong elements of skills we would call magical. NOTE: it may just be sufficiently advanced technology! (I'm gonna call it magic, though, and let it go at that.)

The tragic core of the story of King Arthur is the romantic love between Arthur and Guinevere, between Guinevere and Lancelot, and the brother love between Arthur and Lancelot. As depicted, all of these relationships are true, and therefore desolation is inevitable.

For the person of wisdom and understanding, it's a ridiculous set-up, as it supposes that both Guinevere and Lancelot possess the fidelity virtues that commend them to Arthur, and simultaneously the complete LACK of fidelity virtues that would permit them to ignore their attraction to each other.

So, a great deal of the interest of the mature reader (i. e., someone older than the eight-year-old reading Disney's "Sword in the Stone") has to examine the skill in which the author breathes reality into an utterly unreal set-up. In "The Spark," Drake manages this by admitting the infidelity of Guinevere (the Consort Jolene), and MOSTLY ignoring the character of Lancelot (Lord Clain). It works, for the purposes of the story.

Instead of banging on about that worn-out drama, Drake gives us the character of Pal. He's a bumpkin, raised somewhat incompetently by a couple he discovers to be his foster parents, who do manage to instill in him a profound respect for others, and a code of behavior that the

greatest Southern Gentleman would envy.

The fact that his mother (surrogate) can't boil water without burning it does have some value eventually, in that he can accept the rudest food without dismay. However, it's his chivalrous conduct, even as a bumpkin, that sets him apart.

Another trait that sets him apart is his ability as a Maker, one who can manipulate reality at the atomic (or at least molecular) level by mental processes (one of the magic bits). Despite that ability, what he intensely desires is to become one of the Champions of the Leader Jon (the Arthur figure). So, he sets out for the court of the Commonwealth in Dun Add, with great virtue and inadequate weapons, to join Jon in his unification of the scattered elements of the Here.

The Here is another of the magic bits; it being the reality that people can perceive. There is also the Not-Here and the Waste, and don't worry about it. Nobody else understands it, either; they just live their lives in what they have. And YOU must accept that as an element of the story, else you'll get flummoxed.

A brief seduction attempt, exposing a left breast, and an attempted act of necrophilia, interrupted by the lethal punishment of the wrong-doer, makes this NOT the right reading material for the aforementioned eight-year-old who is looking for something after Disney. However, there is NOTHING at all erotic about the corpse-raping scene, and with appropriate guidance about the nature of the depravity, I might offer this to my 15 year-old son. You be the judge on that; there are also gory fighting scenes.

I found it to be a fast read, and I'm immediately starting on the next installment.

The Storm by David Drake

Review by Pat Patterson



I picked this book up from the Baen website over a year ago, and I am dumbfounded that it has taken me this long to read and review it. Truly, there is no excuse for this. I most humbly apologize.

This is volume 2 of Drake's retelling of "The Matter of Britain," a term he explains in the prefatory material to volume 1, "The Spark." It's a classical reference to Arthurian legends, and is linked with "The Matter of Rome," re stories of Alexander the Great, and "The Matter of France," for stories about Charlemagne.

In my review of "The Spark," I praise the way Drake avoids rehashing the tedious and ridiculous premises of the Arthur/Guinevere/Lancelot triangle, a situation that is based on the emotional reactions of middle school age children, not mature adults. He continues to sidestep this goofy issue in this volume, while presenting a most interesting tale of magic, character, and

adventure.

Disclosure: I am NOT an authority on the Arthurian legends. Those fragments I have likely

come from listening to Robert Goulet singing when I was 10 years old, supplemented by watching a community college musical performance when I was 23. I also picked up a bit of the legends from reading C. S. Lewis, notably the last of the Space Trilogy, "That Hideous Strength." Therefore, I am POSITIVE that I have missed some of the subtleties in Drake's work, as he is nothing if not a scholar.

Even so, I am aware that part of the legend involves 1) Merlin being trapped in a cave, and 2) a mysterious woman of power. And those bits are the primary themes in "The Storm." Guntram, the Merlin figure, has vanished, and a nameless mysterious woman of power shows up to contact Pal, the protagonist. Things follow.

(I can rather imagine Drake reading this, and pulling out his hair, screaming, "NO, it's not MERLIN, you idiot! This is the WINSTON CHURCHILL figure, you dolt!")

Other delightful elements:

Semi-delightful: May, Pal's lady love, starts to act stupidly, accusing him of disloyalty. As that is decidedly NOT one of Pal's failings, he can find no way to counter her criticisms.

Semi-delightful: Pal sponsors a young man with family connections to be enrolled as an Aspirant for Champion status. The young man promptly demonstrates his ability to be a lazy drunken lout.

Semi-delightful: The boat that Pal and Guntram were able to restore to pristine Ancient working order asks Pal NOT to similarly restore the boat belonging to Jon, the Leader (and Arthur figure). Pal complies with his boat's request, knowing he can probably get away with it because Jon can't talk to his boat the way Pal can.

VERY delightful: Pal's mongrel dog & fighting companion Buck was injured in his climactic battle in "The Spark," and can no longer serve as a fighter. As a great sign of favor, Leader Jon offers one of his own collie's offspring as a fighting companion.

Pal is HIGHLY honored by the gift, recognizing it as a direct measure of the value Jon places on him. He then replaces it with another mongrel. He has a REASON, of course, and it's a good reason, but he never, ever, gives a hint that he might be concerned that his act could offend Leader Jon.

Delightful: Guntram also has an animal that helps him see the Road and get through the Waste. It's not a fighting dog, though. It's a hedgehog, and it sleeps in his pocket. Small children like it, and name it "Arthur."

Some of the combat scenes and contexts might be a bit too creepy for a 10-year-old, but this one wouldn't require any prep work on my part for my 15-year-old-son to read, or my 13-year-old daughter, either. In fact, my daughter might get a kick out of reading of the clumsy attempts by one of May's fellow ladies-in-waiting to seduce Pal while May is away.

Otherwise, recommend without reservation.

Short Stories

Monster by Naomi Kritzer Review by Hullender

Appeared in *Clarkesworld* issue 160, published on January 1, 2020
Five Stars -- Overwhelming

Pro: We have a couple of stories here. First, of course is Cecily's search for Andrew. Remember that he's of Chinese descent, so China is a good place for him to hide. It takes a while before we learn why she's looking for him, though.

Separately, we get the story of Cecily's teenage years, which makes it clear just why Andrew means so much to her. And why she was so happy to get in touch with him after 20 years of silence. And why she was so devastated to learn from the FBI what he did.

So when she finally meets him and confronts him, the result is shattering. She does what she has to do—that makes logical sense given what sort of person she is—but it clearly hurts her terribly.

Of small interest: From the fact that Cecily and her friends watched *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986) in high school, we can figure she's about 40 years old in this story.

Con: Once you know something is possible, it's a lot easier to do it. It's not clear that Cecily is really going to be able to keep this from the government, even if they believe her.

The Refraction of White Lies by Meredith Lozada Review by Robert Hullender

Appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*
Four Stars -- A Nice Puzzle and a Bit of Excitement to Go with It.

The narrator's wife is an android, but she doesn't know, and he's at pains to keep her from finding out.

Pro: The story does a great job of building up the situation with the android mom and the adopted daughter. The mom has a few problems, but it's a surprise that the dad is having health issues.

The twist is very nicely set up. By the time we realize what's really going on, it makes perfect sense. The tension in the final scenes is intense, and the resolution is quite satisfying.

Con: It's hard to see what the point of designing such a robot would be, nor why you'd need to try to hide its nature from it.

Videos

Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker Review by Tom Feller

I am old enough that I saw the first Star Wars movie the summer it was originally released. At the time, it struck me as being old-fashioned yet new and fresh at the same time. This was because it combined state-of-the-art special effects with a swashbuckling adventure story that we had not seen in movie theaters for a long time. Now it just feels old-fashioned, and the story basically recycles the original as director and co-author J.J. Abrams plays it safe after the controversies over *The Last Jedi* (Episode VIII). The recycling felt the most obvious during the moments when I listened to the musical score by John Williams which mostly seemed to use music composed for the first two films. Nonetheless, he was once again nominated for an Oscar in the Original Score category.

The central characters of Rey (Daisy Ridley), Finn (John Boyega), Poe (Oscar Isaacs), and Kylo (Adam Driver) return, and they are joined by Leia (Carrie Fisher, using footage from the previous two films), Chewbacca (Joonas Suotamo, Peter Mayhew having passed away), the ghosts of Han (Harrison Ford) and Luke (Mark Hamill), Sheev Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), C-3PO (Anthony Daniels, the only actor to appear in all nine movies), R2-D2 (now completely computer generated), BB-8 (also computer generated), Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran), and Lando (Billy Dee Williams). There are also new characters such as Zorii Bliss (Keri Russell), who has a history with Poe, Storm Trooper deserter Jannah (Naomie Ackie), who for a time appeared to be a love interest for Finn, but this story line is never developed, and the android D-o (computer generated).

Besides the war between the Resistance and the First Order, aka the Final Order, the main conflict is the love-hate relationship between Rey and Kylo. I found its resolution satisfying, especially their light sabre duel on the ruins of the Death Star from *Return of the Jedi* (Episode VI). The space battle scenes are quite good, as you would expect. Not surprisingly, the film was nominated for Academy Awards in the Visual Effects and Sound Editing categories. The loose ends from the previous two films, such as the identity of Rey's parents, are tied up in a way that are emotionally although not necessarily logically satisfying.

Doolittle Review by Tom Feller

This is the fourth movie based on the Dr. Doolittle books by Hugh Lofting. Robert Downey, Jr. now joins Rex Harrison and Eddie Murphy as actors who portrayed the veterinarian who can talk to animals. This version is set during Queen Victoria's (Jessie Buckley) reign. While the specific year is unspecified, it appears to be before she married Prince Albert, and she is suffering from a mysterious malady that Doolittle believes can only be cured by the fruit of something called an Eden Tree. He must embark on a voyage to find the tree, which involves retracing the voyages of his late wife Lily (Kasia Smutniak) and meeting up with Rassouli, his pirate

king father-in-law (Antonio Banderas).

The animals are all computer-generated, and they include Chee-Chee, a timid gorilla (voice of Rami Malek), Poly, a parrot (Emma Thompson), Tutu, a desert fox (Marion Cotillard), Betsy, a giraffe (Selena Gomez), Yoshi, a polar bear (John Cena), Barry, a tiger (Ralph Fiennes), Plimpton, an ostrich (Kumail Nanjiani), Jip, the dog (Tom Holland), and Dab-Dab, a duck (Octavia Spencer). One major anachronism takes place when an ironclad battleship fires on Doolittle's ship. Downey and Banderas are good, as usual, but Michael Sheen and Jim Broadbent are largely wasted as the villains. Overall, the film is mildly amusing.

Musings on Star Wars Analysis by Chris Nuttall

When he devised Star Wars, depending on which version of the story you believe about how much Lucas planned before he started making movies, George Lucas set himself an unusual challenge. Deliberately or not, he opened in the middle of the story with A New Hope and followed up with The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi – episodes 4-6 of the overall 9-movie story. This had both advantages and disadvantages. A New Hope started with no fans and no following, so Lucas could afford to paper over the cracks in the backstory without upsetting the more nit-picky amongst the audience. The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi had the relatively simple task of building on A New Hope. The disadvantages, however, were two-fold.

First, the prequel trilogy had to build up to the original trilogy.

Second, the sequel trilogy had to build on both the original trilogy and the prequel trilogy. This was not an easy task. A New Hope is a relatively simple story, centred around the power trio of Luke, Han and Leia. Lucas established their characters in broad strokes, either leaving the other characters to the side (Vader, Chewbacca, Wedge, the droids) where they served as plot elements rather than characters in their own right, or killing them off to suit the story (Ben Kenobi, Tarkin). The Empire Strikes Back allowed more focus on Vader, as well as introducing Lando and the Emperor, because the power trio were already well established and both Lando

and the Emperor were relatively minor characters for most of the movie. Return of the Jedi culminated this trend by bringing the Emperor front and centre, allowing him to drive Vader's plot and giving Lando a much bigger role. It also introduced a handful of minor characters that loomed large through the Expanded Universe/Legends canon.

Luke himself served as our viewpoint character for most of the trilogy. It's important to realise that Lucas painted Luke as a simple farm boy, dangerously inexperienced as he crawls into a wider universe. His character and skills develop as we watch. He makes mistakes, from getting into a bar fight to abandoning his training to save his friends, but his mistakes are understandable. Han and Leia have less



development – Leia certainly comes across as far more mature, even older, than her twin brother – but what little we see makes sense. Han grows into a hero, almost despite himself; Leia takes control of her surroundings and, when she is put in chains by an alien slug, uses them to strangle him. Leia is a feminist icon for a reason. Neither she nor either of the other two are Mary Sues.

The movie series might have worked better if Lucas had moved straight to crafting the prequel trilogy. Instead, Star Wars lay fallow for a few years before giving birth to the Expanded Universe/Legends. This ranged from the extremely good – the Thrawn and X-Wing books – to the shockingly poor and problematic *The Courtship of Princess Leia* and the deeply weird *The Crystal Star*. The canon grew into a colossal universe set between *A New Hope* and massive interstellar wars deep into the post-ROTJ era. This was both good and bad for Star Wars. On one hand, it kept the flame alive and gave birth to all kinds of source material that could be mined for the later movies. On the other, it created a fandom that had emotionally invested itself in the Expanded Universe/Legends canon, which would be very hard to please when – if – the next set of movies were made. The real problem facing Star Wars Aftermath was not the gay character, but the simple fact that the book was competing with the brilliant *Heir to the Empire* and lost badly.



Bird of Prey — Angela K. Scott

Lucas eventually did make the prequel trilogy. However, to some extent, his vision was competing with the Expanded Universe/Legends canon too. (Notice the version of the Clone Wars presented in *Heir to the Empire*, which has little in common with *Attack of the Clones*.) This alone might not have been a major problem. *The Phantom Menace*, however, had too many weak spots to please the fandom. Jake Lloyd, like most child actors, couldn't live up to the demands placed on him. (Personally, I'd have started with an older actor and declared Anakin to be in his early teens.) Add this to a comedic character who isn't funny – Jar-Jar – and a plot that makes little sense (although it does in hindsight) and you have a recipe for trouble.

These flaws spread into *Attack of the Clones*, which had a bad guy of little impact (personally, I like the Darth Jar-Jar theory) and cast a baleful shadow over *Revenge of the Sith*. The third of the trilogy is the best, but the actors were unable to cope with the script's demands they play the doomed romance as true love rather than two young people making a series of mistakes and being unable to cope with it. That said, the movie does wonders for the Emperor and the trilogy as a whole shows why the Jedi were falling to the dark side long before the Emperor effectively wiped them out. (If they were stupid enough not to realise that bringing 'balance to the force' was probably bad news for them, as they hugely outnumbered the Sith, they probably deserved to lose.)

Still, the flaws in the prequel trilogy didn't overshadow the original trilogy. The important characters were amply justified (save Jar-Jar) and relatively few of them survived into the next series. Those of us who disliked the movies could afford to ignore them. Not everyone did, of course. Lucas might have recovered from the problems of *The Phantom Menace*, but his stock had slipped. He was no longer seen as a genius by his fans. Star Wars, in a sense, had outgrown him. His decision to sell the rights to Disney was, generally, taken as a good thing.

I still don't understand how they managed to mess it up.

I do understand one part of it. They were trying to please both the fans – some of whom became known as the Fandom Menace – and new viewers. The latter would not be steeped in Star Wars to the point they'd understand elements that grew out of the Expanded Universe/Legends canon. If they'd gone with a movie version of the Thrawn books, they would have had to explain a lot to new viewers. And yet, they wouldn't need to do that much explaining. Luke, Han and Leia are known characters; Mara Jade, Thrawn and C'baoth could be introduced relatively easily (Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman as Thrawn and Pellaeon). It wouldn't have been that hard to go through the Expanded Universe/Legends canon, take whatever they wanted and discard the rest. The Marvel Cinematic Universe did that and it worked very well.

Instead, they discarded practically all of the Expanded Universe/Legends canon. That was, for me at least, the point where I decided I wasn't going to get invested in the Disney Wars canon. I was already irked that some of my favourite comics were being steadily rebooted, time and time again. I wasn't going to read the books unless the new post-ROTJ canon really grabbed me. I'd thought the original Expanded Universe/Legends canon did well enough. But even that wasn't the real killer.

The sequel trilogy had to build on the original trilogy, at the very least. Instead, *The Force Awakens* proved to be – largely – a beat-for-beat reprise of *A New Hope*. There is a Rebel Alliance – the Resistance – fighting the remnants of the Empire (aka the First Order.) The First Order has an even bigger Death Star, plus they're searching for a droid with a map to Luke Skywalker's hiding place. (And why did someone who wanted to hide go to the trouble of drawing a map?) The overall story arc is very much like *A New Hope*, with Han playing the role of Ben Kenobi (his death was easy to predict).

The characters had potential, but that was largely wasted. Poe didn't get enough screen time to be a really developed character. Finn, the best of the new characters, had too many cowardly lion moments for my tastes. He comes across as weak, where Han looked cocky in the original trilogy. And Rey is very much a Mary Sue. She's too good, given where she started from (Mara Jade, by contrast, had her awesomeness very clearly explained from the start). The movie denies us the chance to watch her grow, as we watched Luke grow in the original trilogy. I sometimes feel that the writer gave all the pratfalls to Finn, who isn't the type of character who can handle it. In conclusion, *The Force Awakens* is good for nostalgia, but bad for character development. It's tissue-thin and falls apart when you look at it too closely.

Leaving aside *Rogue One*, perhaps the best of the Disney Wars movies, we move on to *The Last Jedi*. Again, it draws heavily from the original trilogy – in this case, unsurprisingly, *The Empire Strikes Back*. However, it is unable to justify itself as well as the original. The plot makes little sense, practically assassinating all three of the main characters as well as both Luke and Leia. (Kenobi and Yoda hid from an entire empire. What was Luke hiding from?)

Worse, it lacks the original's compact storytelling. Instead of a united plot that diverges and then recombines, there are three separate plots. The power trio are split up – after having been separated at the end of *The Force Awakens* – and sent on different missions for various plot reasons. One of them should really have been eliminated, preferably Finn's. As much as I like him, and I do, his plot is the least useful. Finn and Poe should have been kept together, if only because Poe and Finn have a lot more chemistry than Finn and Rose. (Rose herself is complete-

ly surplus to requirements, although she's a better character than her detractors say.)

It's fairly clear the writer knew little about the military, let alone character development. Poe is bashed for being wrong, when it's blatantly obvious he was pretty much right. (If that dread-naught hadn't been destroyed, the Resistance would have been taken out instead.) This bashing continues as Leia is put out of action, which throws command to Vice Admiral Holdo ... who we are told is a great commander, but rapidly shown that she's nothing of the sort. Poe clashes with her repeatedly, ending in a mutiny (hell, the only real charge that can be levelled against Poe is that he left the mutiny too late.) Leia talks everyone down and the plan goes ahead, leading to utter disaster. Finn, in the meantime, is completely wasted on a side plot that does nothing more than lecture us on war profiteers ... a pointless lecture, given that the Resistance couldn't exist if it wasn't being supplied by ... war profiteers.

Rey, in the meantime, continues to develop far faster than either Luke or his father. The movie continues the tradition of not letting her show weakness or taking a pratfall, even after she's yanked into the Dark Lord's chamber and fights beside Kylo Ren. She develops at astonishing – indeed, impossible – speed. This alone might not be a problem, but her development comes at Luke's expense – remember, Luke was the hero of the original movies – and makes her look like she's been shrilled, rather than developed naturally. The temptations she faces are different, but – in a sense – they're the temptations we've already seen in the first two trilogies. It might have been better, from a story-telling point of view, if Rey and Ben Solo had switched places midway through *The Last Jedi*.

As a piece of Star Wars canon, *The Last Jedi* is largely a disaster. It kills off Luke (and effectively Leia, as well as a handful of others) without building a proper legacy for their successors. As a movie in its own right, it isn't any better. Gross incompetence on one side is countered by gross incompetence on the other side (see the *What An Idiot* page for details). Snoke, Hux and Finn suffer negative character development, the former being killed off midway through the movie and the middle turned into a walking joke. What little development it does is soundly wasted by *The Rise of Skywalker*. There were only two good points in *The Last Jedi* – Ren becoming the Supreme Dark Lord and Rey's parents being nobodies – and both of them are thrown away.

It also suffered from a desperate case of trying to be all things to all men. 'Shipping' wasn't a thing when Star Wars came out. There wasn't much, as far as I know, debate about who Leia would wind up marrying. (And this died, obviously, when Luke and Leia were revealed to be siblings.) The prequel trilogy had its one relationship set in stone from the start. *The Force Awakens*, however, birthed a whole universe of ships, from Rey/Finn to Rey/Ben Solo and Poe/Finn. Pretty much everyone who cared about this was a little disappointed by the outcome. Worse, perhaps, it gave too much – and also too little – time to minor characters, a mistake neither of the other two trilogies made. For all their importance to the rebellion, Mon Mothma and Ackbar never steal the show. Holdo and Rose try to. It doesn't work.

This led to an odd problem. On one hand, Disney tried to be diverse. On the other hand, it didn't give its diverse characters a chance to shine in their own right. (Finn and Poe got undermined, Rey got everything handed to her on a silver platter.) That undermined the push for diversity, ensuring that Disney would be bashed for both pandering to the SJW demographic and not being diverse enough.

I never watched Solo. But from what I've heard about it, the movie suffers from the same weaknesses as the successor trilogy as a whole. It simply doesn't live up to the source material (and would probably have worked better following a new character, like Rogue One, or becoming a stand-alone set in a different universe).

And now, we have The Rise of Skywalker.

It didn't surprise me that they followed the beat of Return of the Jedi. The return of the Emperor did surprise me, if only because it invalidated everything that happened in both Return and The Last Jedi. The new Dark Lord gave up his position and submitted himself to the Emperor ... why? The one good thing to come out of The Last Jedi and they threw it away? (Not to mention the boneheaded reveal that Rey is the Emperor's granddaughter ...)

I could go on about this for hours. But, really, the successor trilogy had sunk itself.

The biggest problem, as I see it, is that there was no one with the authority to sketch out a story arc (either copied from Legends or newly-devised) and stick to it. There was no real overarching plot – I recognise the signs – and a great deal of hasty modification to the movies that annoyed everyone. Beyond that, there was a simple failure to recognise that Star Wars is not a romance series, but softcore science-fiction with laser swords that had a vast fanbase ... one that would be easily pleased, as long as the producers stuck to the themes that made Star Wars popular in the first place. Instead, the fans felt insulted and decided to withdraw their support. For this, they were blasted as racists and sexists.

The smaller problem is that there were too many new characters and too little development. Rey, Finn, and Poe either take steps backwards in The Last Jedi or progress in leaps and bounds that are not justified within the movie itself. Ben/Kylo does better as a character in The Last Jedi, but this is undone by The Rise of Skywalker. Holdo, Rose, Hux, and Snoke do relatively little for the plot, yet they get too much exposure to be purely minor characters (and the former two get blasted for being 'diverse' without any competence and/or importance).

In short, much like The Last Jedi itself, Disney tried to appeal to everyone and failed.

I've seen this happen more than once in books and it rarely ends well. The problem is that most creative works only have a very limited audience. Very few of them break into the mainstream. (Harry Potter and Game of Thrones are the two biggest examples.) A fantasy book may appeal to the entire world of fantasy readers, but rarely to anyone beyond (and, of course, not every fantasy book manages as much.) The more you move away from your core focus, the greater the chance of losing readers without actually picking up replacement readers. The point is not that you cannot have 'diverse' characters, or open a field for 'shipping' debates, but that you have to remain aware of what you're actually doing. Your 'diverse' characters have to be given a chance to be more than just diverse. If you pull this off, it works wonderfully. Disney did not pull it off. And, from the way things developed between The Force Awakens and The Rise of Skywalker, I don't think Disney ever understood why.

I think it's fairly clear the three trilogies fell into a pattern. The prequels focused on the decline and fall of the Old Republic and the rise of the Empire. The originals focused on the rebellion against the Empire, ending with the Emperor's death. Logically, the successor trilogy should have focused on the rise of the New Republic and the fight against the remnants of the Empire

(like I said, The Thrawn Trilogy covered that very well). However, The Force Awakens and the rest chose to hit the reset switch. Everything important – Han and Leia getting hitched, their kid going dark, Han and Leia splitting up – happens off-screen, leaving us with complete newcomers. This worked in the original series because there were no preconceptions. This (sort of) worked in the prequels, because we knew who Kenobi, Anakin, Yoda and Palpatine would grow into. It didn't work in the successor trilogy because there was an established backstory and the vast majority of the fans wanted and expected Luke, Han and Leia to be the stars. In fact, if you watch the movies in order, you can see the prequel characters giving birth to the original characters (both metaphorically and literally). There's no immediate connection, however, between the original stars and their successors – and when the connection is made, it involves too much shrilling for my tastes.

How would I have done it, I wonder? Assuming simply filming The Thrawn Trilogy wasn't an option – I'd need to hire lookalikes for Luke, Han and Leia – I might skip forward fifteen years or so after Return of the Jedi. Leia would be serving as a New Republic Ambassador, Luke would have his Jedi Academy and Han ... I'm not sure about Han. He could remain in the military, if he wishes, or – if he splits from Leia – remain exploring the fringes of explored space. The new threat would be a revitalised empire, led by one of the Emperor's surviving students. Ben Solo would be one of Luke's students, tempted to fall to the dark side; Poe would be involved in the first skirmishes, giving him a chance to meet Finn and urge him to deflect from the Empire. Rey would remain a desert girl, lured into the dark side by the big bad, or another of Luke's students. The first movie might end with a battle over the Jedi Academy, the second with the Empire seemingly posed to win; the third with a final desperate strike at the big bad before he could win the war. By the time the series ended, the old characters would have gone out in style and the new characters would be firmly established.

In the end, Disney Star Wars will go down in history as something akin to the DC Cinematic Universe. A concept with much great promise, based on a well-known and loved franchise, that was effectively wasted by its owners.

Computer Games

Rise Studio's Atari: Game Over

Review by Jim McCoy

Long, long ago (in the 1980s) in a galaxy far, far away (or maybe right here in the United States, I get confused sometimes) there was a video game company named Atari and they owned the world. Well, not really, but close enough. It came from nowhere, built a HUGE following (Seriously, if you're around my age you played Atari. If you didn't own one, then someone you knew did.) and then it flamed out like a meteor upon re-entry. This meteor, rumor had it, had buried itself and a game named E.T. The Extraterrestrial in a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico in an effort to hide the existence of the biggest flop in video game history. The story is told by Zak Penn in his movie Atari: Game Over in cooperation with FilmRise.

The death of Atari was something that shook the world of one James Ricky McCoy Jr in the mid-80s. The vast majority of my friends had Ataris. I had an Intellivision (I didn't get my Atari until the late 90s, oddly enough) but when Atari fell it took everyone else with it. For a while

there it was assumed that video games had been a fad and would never be seen again. Looking back on it now, we all obviously know the story of the rise of Nintendo and its role in saving the industry. At the time though, no one knew that was coming. I was kind of ticked. I really like video games and I wanted one to play at home.

The story of the rise of the video game industry (in both its coin operated and home versions) is one that has been retold ad infinitum, but what makes Atari: Game Over special is its hook (the search for the lost E.T. games) and the fact that it includes information from so many of the game designers that worked for Atari. Also, the one thing that I don't remember ever seeing mentioned previously is the emphasis on the rise of story-based video gaming after the fall of Atari. Video gaming underwent a change to the basis of its formulation that could only be fixed by the rise of story and the then-next generation consoles that allowed it. To be fair though, that's not the focus.

The story begins with the story of the E.T. game. It wasn't JUST a flop, it was a floptastic flop. I remember one of my friends buying this game back in the day. We hated it. If we hadn't turned it off at one point, our little E.T. character would probably still be falling now, thirty years later. That game was brutal. What I didn't know until watching this movie (although I'm sure lots of other people knew) was that it had been rushed to market after five weeks in development. That's insane. Game design times were shorter then because the games were simpler but nowhere near THAT short.

There is a brief interlude in the movie where Penn makes his case that E.T. was not a failed game and that Howard Scott Warshaw, the designer of the game, has been unfairly blamed for the fall of the company. He makes it well. Warshaw was the only designer to have made multiple games for Atari and not work on one that sold less than a million copies. At the end of the day, he has me convinced.

The story is so much bigger than just the game though. Atari HQ was apparently a party place unmatched even by my first bachelor pad. Things were live there. Details of marijuana use and keggers flow freely at the beginning of the movie. These guys were not the way I pictured them at all. I've always figured that game designers would be like my buddy who makes his living programming: Very intelligent, but kind of uptight. I'll say this much for myself: I appear to have at least gotten the intelligent part right. These guys were party animals. I'd love to work in that type of an environment.

Atari: Game Over is a documentary but it's a very well done one. The host has personality, the people he interviews are entertaining and personable. The gaming enthusiasts (I'm not going to say "nerds.") who appear and can't wait to find out if the games really are buried in the desert are just like me. Hearing the history was cool, but watching these people waiting made me jealous. I'll obviously never get a chance to show up at the actual dig, but I don't think I'll ever stop wishing I was either.

The director of the piece, Zak Penn, got the length of this movie just about perfect at just over an hour. Is there more he could have included? Probably. Are there things he could have left out? Well, probably that too. I don't think he could have cut anything without losing something. Nor do I believe that he left out anything I really had to know. This is one documentary that moves well, bouncing from person to person and subject to subject yet remaining coherent in its narrative. I took a writing class in college where the prof told us that "A paper should be like a

woman's skirt: Long enough to cover the subject but short enough to be interesting." Granted this is a movie and not a "paper" per se, but Penn has done exactly that here. Kudos to him.

I won't spoil half of the ending. (The other half being that Atari does indeed fail.) I will tell you that there is a dig in the desert. What, if anything they find (other than sand which they do indeed find in abundance) is something best discovered by watching the movie. Will our heroes discover what they have set out to find or will they go down in ignominious defeat searching for something that never existed? Will they find the Holy Grail of gaming or be laughed at for the rest of their natural lives? Go find out. I'm sure glad I did.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Joysticks

Interview

An Interview of Ken Lizzi by Tamara Wilhite

Ken Lizzi is an attorney who writes fantasy, horror and science fiction. He's had short stories published in a variety of collections as well as publishing them as 30 minute reads on Amazon. He's also had full length works published.

Tamara Wilhite: What is your professional background?

Ken Lizzi: I'm general counsel for a publishing and entertainment company. I've been with the company since law school, many, many years ago.

Tamara Wilhite: How does your legal background impact your writing?

Ken Lizzi: It rarely does. A concept or term might slip in occasionally, but I don't write legal thrillers or police procedurals. A writer's background must have some influence on the content of his work, but I don't consciously include material from the exciting world of the transactional attorney: the thrill of the email, the pulse-pounding conference call, the tension of contract drafting.

Tamara Wilhite: You've written a mix of fantasy, horror and science fiction. What is your best-selling work?

Ken Lizzi: Under Strange Suns, my second novel. It is classified as science fiction, which I suppose is accurate. I wrote it as an homage to Edgar Rice Burrough's Barsoom novels, so I consider it Sword and Planet, or Planetary Romance. But it does read more as straight sci-fi.

Tamara Wilhite: And what do you enjoy writing the most?

Ken Lizzi: I enjoy mingling genres. Say combining swords and sorcery with a crime novel. Or science fiction with a detective story. I like to add my own spin.

Tamara Wilhite: You wrote a short story in the "Noir" anthology that came out in 2009. What other works have you written that fall into this category? And can you explain what crime noir is?

Ken Lizzi: I mentioned a science fiction detective story. I wrote a story called *Murder Extempore* that comes close to noir, though I think murder mysteries, police procedurals, and detective stories are not necessarily noir. Noir involves the seedy underbelly of crime, and is more interested in the losers and failures who get caught up in crime than in any attempt to uncover a crime or achieve what we generally consider justice.

Tamara Wilhite: What is your legal fantasy novel “*Thick as Thieves*” about?

Ken Lizzi: I hesitate to correct you, but I wouldn't consider *Thick As Thieves* a legal fantasy. It is my attempt to answer the question no one has asked: what if Elmore Leonard wrote a swords and sorcery novel? It is a heist gone awry story featuring a cast of ne'er-do-wells, dreamers, scoundrels, and the well-meaning but misguided. I'm unabashedly rather proud of this one, whether deservedly or not I leave to others.

Tamara Wilhite: What is “*Under Strange Suns*” about?

Ken Lizzi: *USS* involves a disillusioned ex-special forces soldier hired to locate the missing inventor of the faster-than-light drive. He discovers that even on a moon, light years from Earth, there is nothing new under the sun. Even under a strange sun. There's a lot of action, exploration, an alien race, and a bit of romance. Guns, spaceships, swords. Good fun.

Tamara Wilhite: Is that your only science fiction work?

Ken Lizzi: *Reunion*, my first novel, is what I consider post-apocalyptic, sci-fi, fantasy, action/adventure. *Murder Extempore* is science fiction, and *Trustworthy*, my story in *Noir* can be considered science fiction, given the gimmick involved. By the way, there is a short student film available that adapts *Trustworthy*. You can find it on Vimeo if you type the title and my name into the search engine of your choice.

Tamara Wilhite: You're the first author I've read that has published short stories in the “30 minute read” category on Amazon, though you've had short stories published in a number of anthologies. How many story collections have you been published in?

Ken Lizzi: I actually had to look this up. I'd never heard of the 30 minute read category. It appears to include *Murder Extempore* and my one comic book story, written for *Star Wars Tales*. I believe I have work in at least eight short story anthologies.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you working on now?

Ken Lizzi: I've had three stories published featuring my character Cesar the bravo. I decided he deserves a novel of his own, so I'm writing that now. Cesar inhabits a fantasy Renaissance-era Rome analog. Swashbucklers and demons. At the same time I am polishing the manuscripts for *Captain and Warlord*, the sequels to *Boss*, my first foray into the baffling world of indie-publishing. Oh, I am also waiting on beta reader comments on *Karl Thorson and Santa Anna's Sword*, the follow up to *Karl Thorson and The Jade Dagger*. (*Boss* and *Jade Dagger* are both available for purchase now. Hint, hint.)

Tamara Wilhite: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Ken Lizzi: Many things, few of them appropriate or likely to amuse anyone other than myself and similarly like-minded juveniles. So instead, I invite readers to check out my Amazon Author page and to drop by kenlizzi.net to catch up on my musings, doings, and nonsense. Cheers.

SerCon

James Blish Bio-Bibliography by Jon D. Swartz, Ph. D. N3F Historian



James Benjamin (Jim) Blish (May 23, 1921 – July 30, 1975) was a science fiction (SF) and fantasy writer. He is best known for his “Cities in Flight” novels, and for his series of Star Trek novelizations written with his second wife, Judith Ann Lawrence. He is credited with creating the term “gas giant” to refer to large planetary bodies.

As a young fan, he corresponded with H. P. Lovecraft, published his own fanzine, and contributed to Tesseract, the journal of the Science Fiction Advancement Association. In 1938, Blish became a member of the famous Futurians of New York. He received a B. Sc. in Education from Rutgers University in 1942. His first published SF stories appeared in Super Science Stories and

Amazing Stories.

Blish wrote literary criticism of SF under his pen name of William Atheling Jr. His other pen names included Donald Laverty, John MacDougal, Luke Torley, and Arthur Lloyd Merlin.

Novels

Jack of Eagles (1952).
The Frozen Year (1957) [aka known as Fallen Star].
VOR (1958).
The Duplicated Man (1959).
A Torrent of Faces (1967) [with Norman Knight].
The Warriors of Day (1967).
The Star Dwellers (1961).
Titan's Daughter (1961).
The Night Shapes (1962).
Mission to the Heart Stars (1965).
Welcome to Mars (1966).
The Vanished Jet (1968).
... And All the Stars a Stage (1971).
Midsummer Century (1972).
The Quincunx of Time (1973).

Cities in Flight series (1955 – 1962).
 Earthman, Come Home (1955).
 They Shall Have Stars (1956).
 The Triumph of Time (1958) [aka A Clash of Cymbals].
 A Life for the Stars (1962).
 After Such Knowledge series (1958 – 1990).
 A Case of Conscience (1958).
 Doctor Mirabilis (1964).
 The Devil's Day (1990) [published posthumously].

Non-Fiction

The Issue at Hand (1964) [as by William Atheling Jr].
 More Issues at Hand (1970) [as by William Atheling Jr].
 The Tale That Wags the God (1987) [published posthumously].

Awards/Nominations/Honors

1959 Hugo Award for Best Novel, for A Case of Conscience.
 1965 Nebula Award nomination for Best Novelette, for The Shipwrecked Hotel (with Norman Knight).
 1968 Nebula Award nomination for Best Novel, for Black Easter.
 1970 Hugo Award nomination for Best Novella, for We All Die Naked.
 1970 Nebula Award nomination for Best Novella, for A Style in Treason.

Posthumous Awards and nominations

2001 [1951] Retro-Hugo Award nomination for Best Novelette, for Okie.
 2004 [1954] Retro-Hugo Award for Best Novella, for A Case of Conscience.
 2004 [1954] Retro-Hugo Award for Best Novelette, for Earthman, Come Home.

Guest of Honor:

1960 Guest of Honor, 18th World Science Fiction Convention.
 1970 Guest of Honor, Sercon 70.

The April, 1972, issue of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction was a Special James Blish Issue, with a cover by Judith Blish. The issue included Midsummer Century by Blish; a James Blish Profile by Robert A. W. Lowndes; and a Blish Bibliography by Mark Owings. Others who contributed to this issue included Gene Wolfe, Gahan Wilson, and Isaac Asimov.

Virginia Kidd

Virginia Kidd (June 2, 1921 – January 11, 2003) was an American literary agent, writer, translator, and editor, who worked in SF and related fields. She represented SF authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, Judith Merril, and Gene Wolfe. Wolfe modeled Ann Schindler, a character in his 1990 novel Castlevue, on Kidd.

Kidd and Merril were two of the female members of the Futurians, and Kidd was married to Blish from 1947 until 1963. She and Blish had three children together. Kidd edited The Best of

Judith Merrill, published in 1976. Blish and Merrill, along with fellow former Futurian, Damon Knight, founded the annual Milford Writer's Conference in 1956.

Judith Lawrence

Blish's second wife, Judith Ann Lawrence, known professionally as Judith L. Blish, Judy Blish, and J.A. Lawrence, is an American sketch artist and short fiction writer. She is most well known for her work on the series of Star Trek novelizations, published from 1967 to 1978. Lawrence met Blish after his divorce from Kidd, and they married in November, 1964. She moved with her husband to Oxford, England in 1968. Her mother later joined them.

Critical Remarks

Blish's work was released by a variety of publishers in the United Kingdom and in the United States, often with variations between editions and different titles. Blish also expanded and re-released some of his older work on several occasions. His stories continued to be published after his death.

On the work of other SF writers, Blish once wrote: "Science-fiction writers borrow . . . from each other freely . . . that in other fields would be indistinguishable from plagiarism . . . [but] as long as direct quotation is avoided, the resulting story is commonly welcomed as fresh if the borrowing writer succeeds in looking at the old idea in a new light – whether that light be dramatic, emotional, or even simply technological."

Literary critic Harold Bloom has written that several of the Star Trek adaptations, credited to Blish, were actually written by Blish's wife, Judith Lawrence, and her mother Muriel -- who worked as Blish's assistant at the time.

Some Concluding Comments

The short-lived James Blish Award for criticism was named after him; and he was one of the founders of the Science Fiction Foundation.

Imprisoned in a Tesseract: The Life and Work of James Blish by David Ketterer was published in 1987.

Blish was a heavy smoker and drinker most of his life; and in his final days suffered from cancer, arthritis, ulcers, and other ailments.

References

Bloom, Harold. Science Fiction Writers of the Golden Age. NY: Chelsea House, 1995.

Currey, L. W. Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors. Boston, MA: G. K. Hall 1979.

Smith, Curtis C. (ed.) Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers. NY: St. Martin's Press 1981.

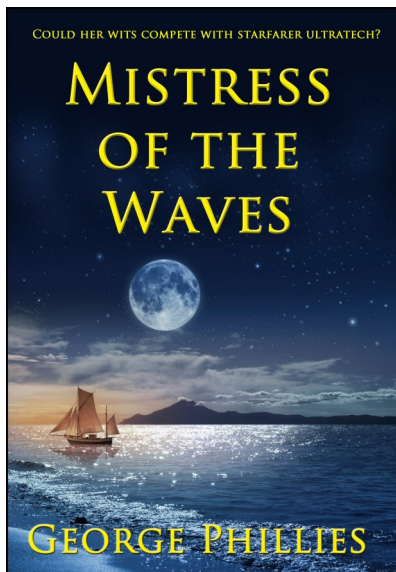
Swartz, Jon D. Pseudonyms of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Authors. Little Rock, AR: The National Fantasy Fan Federation, 2010.

Tuck, Donald H. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume 1: Who's Who, A - L. Chicago, IL: Advent, 1974.

Note: In addition to the above works, various Internet sites were consulted.

Food of Famous Authors

Eat This While You Read That: George Phillies Cooking and Photos by Cedar Sanderson



When I asked George Phillies for a dish and a book, he sent me several. So I had choices! With the juxtaposition of Christmas, traveling, and the kids to help me, I decided to go with his Snickerdoodles recipe. In a fun turn, this was a recipe you really can read while you make it, if you don't mind cleaning a bit of sticky off your tablet screen later! I'm going to highly recommend his novel Mistress of the Waves, a fascinating look at deep world building, economies, and life in a low-tech science fiction setting that somehow manages to take all that and keep it compelling reading.

Something I hadn't bargained for, on the other hand, since I already knew Mistress was good reading, was the fact that I would be baking in a rental cabin. I did bring all the ingredients I needed, but I didn't think I would be in need of a bowl. Or a mixing spoon. Ah, well, I am used to improvisation! A pot works as well as a bowl. Hands and a silicone spatula work in lieu of a proper spoon.

George Phillies' Snickerdoodles

Ingredients

- 1 cup butter
- 2 1/2 cups sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 2 3/4 cups flour
- 2 teaspoons cream of tartar
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- a pinch of salt
- two heaping tablespoons powdered sweet cinnamon.
- one or two packages butterscotch chips.

Instructions

mix flour, cream of tartar salt, and baking soda

bring butter to room temperature. Slice to thin pats. separately Mix butter, sugar and eggs

fold flour mixture into egg mixture. Mix very thoroughly. Add butterscotch chips. mix.

Chill dough in refrigerator.

Oven to 350.

Mix 1/4 cup sugar. 1/12 cup powdered cinnamon. Mix thoroughly. This is the stuff in which the cookies are rolled. The amount is highly approximate.

Summon cookie sheets. 2-4 are good. Oven to 350

Roll cookie dough into 1" or so balls. roll balls in sugar-cinnamon mixture. Please balls on cookie sheets.

Cook cookies for 11 minutes. Remove promptly from cookie sheets, because they keep cooking and become too dry.

Makes many cookies.

I wound up using one bag of butterscotch chips, that was enough. This made about 3 1/2 dozen cookies, I lost track and everyone was eating them as they came out of the oven!

Roll the chilled dough into balls, then roll them in a cinnamon sugar mixture. No need to flatten the balls when you put them on the cookie sheet.

While you're sitting there rolling the balls out and putting them in sugar, you can read at the same time on a tablet. I know. I tested it.

Give your cookie balls some space to spread out as they cook. I was using smaller pans than my normal, since this was a little oven.



As you can see, they look perfect with no smooshing needed. I could have cooked them a minute or two longer but we like chewy cookies.

Plateful of Christmas cookies going, going... gone!

My son didn't care that they break when still warm. He wanted to nom!



Mandalorian Soldier
Jose Sanchez