

The **N3J**  
**Review of Books**  
**Incorporating Prose Bono**  
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor  
April 2020

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# Editorial

The typeface experiment was not well-received. The nice people we heard from were not fond of it, so we are back to Times New Roman.

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. We are always grate to new writers to elt us consider their reviews.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row and Tamara Wilhite. Jagi Lampighter and Cedar Sanderson 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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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:

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# Novels

Drakon by S. M. Stirling  
Review by Tamara Wilhite

## Introduction

“Drakon” by S. M. Stirling is an alternate history series finale, though it can be read as a stand alone book as well. This book gives you a look at the world several centuries after “Stone Dogs” by Stirling as well as an interesting extrapolation of what would happen if a Draka super-human was dumped on Earth.

## Strengths of the Book Drakon by Stirling

This Stirling book rivals “Lilith’s Brood” by Octavia Butler in giving you insight into the mind of a post-human character. You understand her thoughts, her moods, her background, and her relationships.

The plot foreshadowing in this book is not nearly as bad as “Stone Dogs”. The explanations of the technologies introduced are reasonable and well-thought out. The plot twists and turns are not out of nowhere; the progression is logical, unlike some alternative history books.

Forget neuro-leashes, drugging people a la “Brave New World” and pain-inducing implants. If you want a slave race, you do it by genetically engineering the population into being servile. Add in some improvements like removing genetic diseases, and you could roll something out like that today if you didn’t tell them it would make their kids more apt to obey a super-being’s orders.

The pheromone controls are mentioned in “Stone Dogs”, but the explanation of how they work and their effect on people is better fleshed out. And unlike many science fiction novels, there isn’t a pert hand waving explanation but a thorough one, through altering of the scent receptors in the brain of the “servus” slave race as well as the master race.

Drakon is not nearly as bad on the invented words problem as some of the other Stirling novels. Mole-hole instead of wormhole and life partner instead of spouse are used, but it is nowhere nearly as bad as faber for fabricator, compuplague for computer virus and the host of other made up words that littered “Stone Dogs”. Unlike other Stirling books such as "Under the Yoke", "Drakon" can be read standalone.

## Weaknesses of the Book

Adding cat-like eyes to a character for night vision and feline traits has been a staple of science fiction for years, including TV series like “Dark Angel”. A genetically engineered character is expected to have a lot of enhancements, and this one has tons. However, some traits strain disbelief even for a book with time travel and inter-dimensional travel, such as having a spare heart. The book becomes a trope in and of itself when the Drakon is chasing its enemy, becoming as inhuman as possible while all the animal traits come into play.

The Samothrace operative and his world are scantily outlined compared to the Drakon, though they are of somewhat greater interest.

## Observations About Drakon

For a bisexual character, it is rather prudish to only focus on lesbian sex for the main character. There is one mention of the Draka's dead husband, with only brief mentions of a relationship with a male human the Draka domesticated. That the seduced male is homosexual is an interesting twist, mostly used to say that we're all bisexual and can be manipulated both ways. There is, in addition, one rape scene by the female super-human of a young human thug.

Another Draka novel, another pregnancy by rape/embryo implantation. In a timeline with money and desperate people, why should we believe the Draka couldn't hire a surrogate mother or find a willing employee to do it for the money? The idea of the Draka having engineered their DNA so that implantation into a host is a relaxing, pleasant experience that rewires the brooder's brain to adore the baby and forget/ignore the rape implantation is a stretch of dubious consent / rape porn. If this idea is triggering for you, don't read the novel or the prior one in the Draka Domination series.

## Familiar Tales by Alma T.C. Boykin Review by Pat Patterson

I don't comment on covers unless they are particularly good, or particularly bad. This one is GOOD! The crystal ball is fascinating. It contains an owl, that's for certain, but I can't QUITE make out what else is in there, but I'd LOVE to spend some time studying it. There is a great fireworks-explosion of colors and smoke in the background, but the delicate font shows up (at least in the Kindle download of the book; not sure you ever get good detail in the thumbnails). The artist is reported to be one Cloudy Chais of Self Pub Book Covers dotcom. (I have to write it that way due to Amazon rules about external links.)

Anyone who writes ANYTHING other than those pesky checks to the orthodontist every month for six years learns quickly that mistakes happen, and in all kinds of ways. It used to be pretty much limited to remembering how many double letters we needed on words like assassin or counselling, but not any longer. TECHNICAL language and coding brought new opportunities to go bughouse nuts. And I do believe automated spell correction has resulted in a significant amount of family discord, along with some degree of hilarity.

And it's a pretty severe problem when the spell checker spell checks a spell. High speed idiots, that's what they are. Hand out the textbooks to the class, and before you can even tell them to make corrections, Heath and Eliott have discovered that the words for 'interpret' and 'intubate' were switched, and they have plans on seeing how well Dr Cwmrymwymrnllgh is going to be able to teach Gaelic and Welsh with a tube sticking out of his throat.

Well, that's the predicament - one of them, at any rate- that our heroes find themselves in. It's aggravated by the fact that when things go wrong, a simple traffic grumble turns into a spectacular scene of nasties coming up from the ground and look out, there's one behind you!

The real heart throbs here aren't the humans. It's the animals. Not restricted to the Bell, Book, and Candle set up, where Pyewacket the familiar was a standard boring black cat, we've got wolverines. Ferrets, who won't stay still long enough to be reliably enumerated (and they change their color-coded colors, too. An insecure, but quite endearing, hundred-pound skunk who loves to study, but who also is fully equipped with stank sacs, and the startle reflexes of her regular size kin. Not that absentminded wizards

aren't interesting. Not that rabbits in possession of a rum cake that makes birds fall out of the sky are commonplace. No, nothing like that.....

But they just can't compete with a catfish with access to the internet.

A delightful, lovely romp, plenty of ha-ha, a bit of mwah-ha-ha, and not much, really, in the way of boo-hoo-hoo, and that only because even magic animals tend to have life spans shorter than humans. It's something that we who are loved by animals live with, and mostly we solve it by absorbing and emanating all the love we can, every single day.

Buy it!

### Firebolt by Adrienne Woods Review by Chris Nuttall

Firebolt was recommended to me by someone who read *Schooled In Magic*, which is why I was reluctant to pick it up. There are, I should admit, some surface similarities between the two books, but thankfully both the plot and background are very different.

The series takes place in a world – it's more of a hidden country, rather than an alternate world – called Paegia, where humans and semi-dragons co-exist. Dragons are capable of shifting between human- and dragon-form, to the point where a dragon isn't always recognisable as such when in human form (and can even have human children). Each dragon is supposed to have a human rider, who bonds with them and helps keep them stable. The fact that one particular dragon – a very powerful dragon – has no rider is a major plot point. Dragon children (teenagers, really) go to a school where they study with humans who can become riders (or pay the fees). Ideally, they will bond with their riders before they grow too old to be easily controlled.

The heroine of the story is a fifteen-year-old girl, Elena Watkins, who has spent most of her life following her (dragon) father as he moves from place to place, trying to avoid an unseen threat. She has no idea her father is a dragon until they are attacked, leaving him dead and her badly injured. When she recovers, she finds herself at the school – and expected to take lessons, which she finds very hard, while she tries to find her place in her new world. As you might have expected, Elena finds herself drawn into a plot against the entire kingdom ...

Overall, I have mixed feelings about the book. While *Harry Potter* can be read by all ages and *The Worst Witch* is clearly for children, *Firebolt* is very definitely for teens. There is a considerable focus on teenage romance, which is about as hideously cringe-worthy as you might expect. (Most teenage romance novels are cringe-worthy because most teenage romance is cringe-worthy.) At the same time, there are more adult elements that are hinted at, even if they're not brought into focus.

There are some elements that are quite neat, in my opinion. The world itself is a jumbled mess that is actually quite fascinating, although we don't learn as much about it as I would have liked. (An appendix discussing the various types of dragon would have been very helpful.) Elena does not become an instant expert in anything but has to work to learn how to do everything from learning to fight – with swords and axes – to cast spells. She's quite intuitive, as a person, but I would unhesitatingly describe her as 'book dumb.' But then, this is actually quite realistic – very few people in our world learn Latin in school, which means she effectively needs to learn a new language right from the start.

On the other hand, there are problems. Elena is pretty much a stereotypical teenager, although one who

has been though a nasty rough patch (and is trapped in another world, to boot.) She spends a great deal of time whining, crying, admiring boys and generally acting like an idiot – and some of her so-called friends aren't much better. She gets feted for solving a number of riddles, but none of them are particularly complex – and one was lifted directly from *The Hobbit*. I'm even surprised she made the connection towards the end of the book ... because, given what she knew, plenty of other people should have been able to make it too. Really, I don't find her a very likable person, which is something of a weakness. Perhaps she gets better.

A more meta-point is that *Firebolt* is not a complete story in itself, unlike *Harry Potter* or ... well, *Schooled in Magic*. I'm not generally fond of starter-books that don't leave me feeling satisfied at the end, even if there are threads that can be picked up later in the series. I tend to feel short-changed when that happens, particularly if there are more than two further books to come.

Overall, I'm probably not the target audience for this book. But it was a fairly light read for an hour or so.

### For A Few Credits More: Four Horsemen Anthology Review by Pat Patterson

This book bothered me, a LOT. I've read everything in the series and loved it. I was EXPECTING to love this as well, but I didn't. In fact, had it not been for the fact that I read the LAST story in the collection FIRST, that being Kacey Ezell's warped and wonderful "The Start of Something Beautiful," there is at least an outside chance that I would have tossed the book midway, and moved on. And that truly, truly bothered me.

It really wasn't so much that I thought the book was bad that bothered me; rather, it's that I have an almost 100% track record for loving the stories in this series, and then I found myself turning pages with distaste.

If you read my blog, you know I've had some health challenges lately. In addition to the physical body stuff, I've had to grapple with some profound issues of life and death, and my ability to stand, when there are forces trying to make me fall. It's been one of the worst periods my family has had to go through.

My question was: had I allowed the personal struggles to taint my ability to read and review a story on its' own merits? I had to ask for help.

And seventeen friends, new and old, responded. I explained my dilemma: I wasn't sure I could trust my opinion on these stories. I asked THEM to read the stories, come to their own conclusions, and then take a look at what I had written; then, tell me if my review was on target or not. (I hope some of them wrote their own reviews, but that wasn't a requirement.)

Here's what I got back: some people had the same problem with the same stories that I did. Some liked best, the stories that I liked least. However, in the end, it seems that it was just a matter of opinion, and not a systematically warped perspective, that accounted for my distaste. At their request (and I think it's a good idea as well) I'm not going to thank any of the Review Review Crew by name. The opinions I publish are my own, and I take full responsibility for them.

It seemed right to me, at the time of writing the review, that I identify science fiction (or other) tropes

that show up in the stories. And, in those cases where no pre-existing trope existed, I made one up. In addition, I gave a plus '+' rating to stories I liked, and a minus '-' rating to stories I didn't like.

A general note about the anthology as a whole: One of the other reviewers points out that an appendix which provided the names and traits of alien races would be helpful. I endorse this suggestion highly.

And another general note about collections of short stories in general: they are MUCH harder to review than books.

Butch and Sundance by Peter Cawdron

A routine snatch job is a set-up. The protagonist has to figure out what is happening as the events unfold. As far as I know, I hate stories like this. The object of the snatch knows more about what's going on than the mercs doing the snatch. You might like stories like this, but I found it to be grim, complicated, and unsatisfying, and the fact that it is the lead-off story rather soured me against the entire book. Betrayal of mercenaries, check. Rating: -

Where Enemies Sit by Rob Howell

Lt. Frazier MacKenzie was a freshly-minted officer in command of a detachment of a particular mercenary company. Either I have a nasty mind (a possibility) or the name of the outfit was designed for purposes of potty humor. I found this story to be one of the best possible portrayals of the "second lieutenant goes into combat" situation; he knows what he doesn't know, he defers to the experience of the experienced warrant officer under his command, but he ALSO has the command ability to recognize that this action is a set-up, and attempts to save his troops, while preserving evidence for post-action evaluations. Betrayal of mercenaries, check. Redemptive self-sacrifice on behalf of others, check. Rating: +

Boss by Scott Moon

I don't know that the environment is mentioned in this story; even so, I'm left with the impression that it all takes place in the dark, with a cold, wet, drizzle coming down. The mercenary Ogre Fist Company is out of money, their equipment is substandard, and the commander and his executive officer are, literally, about to kill each other. Furthermore, one of their troopers has been arrested for stealing a computer tablet and killing a cop. This is a linked story, so that just when I thought that I was done with the characters, they crop up again in the next story. Mercenaries scheming against each other, check. Rating: -

Leverage by Josh Hayes

This is a dirty-cop story; it's always seems to be dark and rainy in this story as well. It's linked to the previous story through the follow-up on the activities of the accused copkiller. The tie-in to the Four Horsemen universe is that Macintosh Sacobi, an apprentice Peacemaker, quits because his training officer is a bad cop who cares nothing about collateral damage and beats suspects in handcuffs. He returns to his original position as a community-based cop, but another encounter with the (now) escaped cop-killer brings him back into contact with his former Peacemaker trainer. Bad cops beating up prisoners, check. Falsely accused prisoners dying to save their captors, check. Rating: -

Luck of the Draw by J.R. Handley & Corey D. Truax

Ivan Petrov is a worthless loser, working sporadically as a bounty hunter to get gambling money. His loan shark/bookie is in the process of having him beaten to death, when he gets a reprieve, in the form



of a job offer. The new employer is a Level 4 Peacemaker Hunter named Boudicca, a dog-like Zuul. She has disconcerting puppy-like characteristics, and in addition to a life-saving job, she offers him some potentially life-changing advice:

“I know what it is to lose your pack,” she said. “We can only honor them with our future actions.” It's an interesting concept for Petrov; he hasn't had the slightest interest in honoring anyone for quite some time; only in ending his existence in the way designed to aggravate the maximum number of people. Loan sharks with incredibly stupid business plans, check. Pawns selected because of their faults, check. Rating: -

Contract Fulfilled by Tim C. Taylor

Sisters Midnight and Solara command a merc company which is under contract to Oriflamme, decadent governor of a mining world with suspicious sources of income. They kidnap a suspected spy, and on the way to cash him in, things happen. One of the sisters, Midnight aka Blue, has so interfered with her nanite load that her pleasure centers are always turned on, and are particularly stimulated by danger. Hint: never, ever place a person with this condition in charge of anything. It seems to be an excuse for writing soft porn without having to resort to descriptions of body parts. Also, if there is not a limit on the number of times you can throw a flashback into the story, there should be, and the limit had better be one; perhaps one per character, at the most. Otherwise, it comes across like a kindergartner telling a story. Booty call, check. Betray the employer, check. “Oh, I forgot to tell you,” check. Rating: -

Emancipation by Mark Wandrey

Cartwright's Cavaliers are one of the original companies making up the Four Horsemen, although their survival was almost negated by the subsequent action of she-who-is-better-off-forgotten. Jim Cartwright has rebuilt the company and provided it with the leadership it needed more than the equipment. He has bad taste in music, though.

As they are dropping into a hot combat zone, he plays “Radioactive,” by Imagine Dragons. I was previously unfamiliar with this music, and so I researched the band and listened to the song. If they had played it for me when I was dropping into combat, I would have frantically searched for another channel; heck, even talk radio. Admittedly, the hot zone is that, literally; in addition to the fire from hostiles, the area is, well, radioactive. So, the song is, perhaps, appropriate. Still, the music is an acquired taste, and does not pound the blood like 'Days of Elijah,' or even 'Seven Spanish Angels.'

Apart from that, however, Cartwright demonstrates the best of the admittedly limited options left to the human race. Forced into an undesired role, they not only perform focused violence with elan, they exploit the system better than anyone else, by actions not directly related to their own self-interest. Great story in the tradition of Four Horsemen, check. Rating: +

Forbidden Science by Terry Mixon

An advanced graduate student can see the Promised Land clearly, but also understands that there is an impenetrable barrier to entry: approval by a faculty committee. In this case, Jeff has been handed an assignment which cannot possibly work out well: he has been ordered to take part in forbidden research into anti-matter, while simultaneously serving as a spy for the administration, which decidedly does not wish the research to succeed. Although only peripherally related to the main narrative of the Four Horsemen universe, several goofy elements make this an excellent read for me, a surviving post-grad

student. Kill your faculty advisor with a meat-ax, check. Rating: +

Change of Command by Thomas A. Mays

When you are young and inexperienced, you want command because it's fun to tell other people what to do. Then, at some point, you learn about responsibility, and things change. Unfortunately, humans found themselves with an expanding need for military organizations, and not enough time to grow the leaders.

That is precisely the situation the Terrible Texans faced when the simple garrison duty contract turned hostile. The very few competent leaders died fast, and officers who had some specific technical skills found themselves unprepared. And as is always the case, the poor bloody infantry foots the bill.

Betrayal by REMFs, check. Science rocks, check. Rating: +

A Family Tradition by Ian J. Malone

Wow. This is one you have to read for yourself, because it's a gimmick story. It's a GOOD gimmick story, and well within the traditions of the Four Horsemen, but everything I want to mention as a hint gives the whole thing away. I only had a slight tickle while reading it, but once I finished, everything tied together. Tribute to departed, check. Rating: +

Go for Bait by T.C. Bucher

The title is a pun, and it's the only thing that's funny about the story, although there might have been humor involved in setting up the original scene. It IS intriguing, though: how fast can you adapt to an enemy who is coming in an altogether unexpected direction? I can see this emerging as a thought problem in an after-con discussion. Bad intelligence from the REMFs, check. Sacrifices for comrades in arms, check. Rating: +

The Kra'daar by Chris Winder

An unknown something is setting fires for some reason on a planet where that is particularly bad, for reasons that are partially revealed. No, you aren't going to get much more description than that. I'm not fond of stories that leave out significant details. Primitive world exploited by Galactic Union, check. Former savage despises roots, check. Rating: -

Blood of Innocents by James Young

At best, a second-tier merc company can expect second-tier jobs with second-tier pay. When a truly lucrative contract appears, it's because no one else will take it. So far, so good.

But then, I lost the story in the middle of the witty repartee being conducted between the leader of the mercs and a sentient owl, representing one group, and a horse-faced Peacemaker, representing...something. I re-read the story, looking for details I missed, but it didn't work. I don't know who the mercs were working for when they hit dirtside. And the story just...stops. No resolution, no hints. I hope we don't die, check. Rating: -

Messenger by Nick Cole

Years ago, there was a saying: "There are no atheists in foxholes." I don't know if that expression still

exists; it's been 42 years since I took off the uniform for the last time, and I'm out of touch. There's a basic truth, though: when you are alone, and facing death, you become very devout.

It doesn't take an actual foxhole to make that happen. For lots of young guys, having the comfort of home stripped away, facing a seeming eternity of wearing a uniform, in what seems to be a consistently hostile environment, those factors are what raise the question of the nature and meaning of life. And, once converted, they become enthusiastic, dedicated evangelists; they burn with a pure fire.

And that's the story here: Sift the messengers as fine as you like; you may find them to be misinformed, they may be ignorant; but their devotion is as pure as clear water and sunlight. Continue the mission, check. Rating: +

Faith by Chris Kennedy

There are a lot of reasons mercs are distrusted by civilians, but one of the most insidious is the mixed hatred and contempt that people in power have for an armed force that isn't under their control. In this story, we find out one of the consequences of a world government: if you use a firearm in the commission of a crime, your sentence is automatic: life without parole. In a cave. On Phobos, orbiting Mars. Pretty bleak, eh?

There are no such things as extenuating circumstances; nobody is concerned about whether the dead 'needed killing' or not. The government would take away all firearms if possible. However, since the economy now depends on mercenaries, that isn't an option. So, they grudgingly ignore the armed mercenaries in their midst, until they have an excuse to incarcerate one forever.

That's the thing about totalitarian authorities: they will go to any lengths to enforce their system on the rest of the universe. And that's why we can NEVER have any truce with kings. Bad intelligence from REMFs, check. Loyalty to comrades, check. Rating: +

Tinkerman by Jake Bible

Another variant on the theme that authority cannot tolerate power not under its control. For a person raised in the exact opposite end of the country, it takes a bit for the incongruity of Oregon as tumbleweed country to sink in, but I DID catch on by the time I read that there was no snow on the mountains. Ancient refugee engineer stymies modern corporate tech, check. High Noon revisited, check. Rating: +

The Start of Something Beautiful by Kacey Ezell

If you want to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast, this story is a good place to start.. It's IMPOSSIBLE not to shudder when thinking of the giant spider warriors known as Tortantulas. It simply cannot be done; we are hard-wired to hate spiders. These aren't just spiders, though; they are gigantic spiders, with lasers. And they eat their prey, and just about anything that exists qualifies as prey. One of the looming events in the Four Horsemen saga is a battle scene involving a gratuitous assault by Tortantulas; why couldn't it be butterflies? Because butterflies, even giant butterflies with lasers, don't produce a visceral reaction, that's why!

To make things even worse, they are accompanied by furry, wile-tempered, bitey riders. We hates them, yes we do, precious, nasty monsters with rats on their backs!

And yet...

...this one is...cute. Sort of.

At least in these circumstances, which frankly seem to be the only way in which such a horrid pairing could be concocted. We assume it follows under the category of imprinting, or symbiotic relationships, or science or something.

If you can't find six impossible things to believe in THAT, here's one more for you: This is the last story in the book, but it's the first one I read. This turned out to be a REALLY GOOD THING, because otherwise, I would not have kept reading; I disliked five of the first six stories, and it was really because of THIS story that I knew there had to be more material I would enjoy.

Women warriors, check. Cuddly monsters, check. Team loyalty, check. Rating: +

And thus endeth the review. Many thanks again to those who helped me verify that my perspective wasn't distorted.

And I'm looking forward to MORE writing in the Four Horsemen Universe.

## The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas Review by Pat Patterson

Redneck Biker reads book, is deeply moved; also sad that it won't appear on school reading lists

Sometimes the limits of the Amazon rating system aggravate me. This is one of those times. I gave it four stars, which means "I like it," and that's just not adequate. I want a rating system that says 'I was moved to tears; I felt the tension and despair of the characters; I admired the writer's craft in capturing the conversations between teen friends and family members; I am deeply regretful that the decision to preserve the authenticity of language means this book will never get the distribution it deserves in school.'

I'd like to address that last issue first. There are a couple of conventions that exist for writing books with the 'YA' market in mind. Those readers are really NOT young adult, by the way; they include the advanced 10-year-old, up to high school seniors, with a HEAVY concentration of mid-teens. It also CAN include retired adults, like myself, IF the plotlines are non-trivial.

There are a couple of things you must do, and a couple you just can't do, and be a true success with this market. First and foremost, the primary characters have to be adolescent, and here, Thomas achieves perfection. Starr and her cohorts are real teens, albeit nothing like an 'average' teen. They are deliberately written to construct the tension that exists between poverty and affluence, ghetto and suburb, and white and black. Thomas does a masterful job of exposing the reality of separation due to economics and living arrangement, without minimizing in any way the truth of racial divisions. Starr is a remarkably well-portrayed example of a young person who feels forced to live in two separate worlds and keep them from contacting each other. The book is worth getting for this treatment alone.

I mentioned the non-trivial storyline, to make a YA novel appeal across age groups. This may be the most significant storyline of the last/next twenty years. Somehow, and I don't understand why, we seem to be determined as a country to rip our guts out in an exercise of self-hatred. It's so easy to be polarized; yet, Thomas gives us a victim of police violence who we MUST have ambivalent feelings about,

if there is any amount of honesty remaining in our hearts. It's that ambivalence that allows us to feel the distress experienced by the community, rather than be enraged mindlessly. It's very well done, indeed.

I also mentioned things you cannot do in a YA work. First, sex has to be strictly G rated, if present at all. The book ALMOST makes the cut on this criteria, but there are two ALMOST sex scenes, both very realistic, and giving us insight into the characters, that cross the line for the YA audience. I'd wager that changing no more than five sentences, total, would drop the level to 'acceptable,' without distorting the impact at all.

Finally, though, the language in a YA work MUST also be 'G' rated. This is a defining characteristic of the genre, and it is repeatedly violated. Thomas' ear for dialogue is exceptional, and there is no doubt that the language she has her characters use is an exact representation of real conversations wherever most teens are gathered; that's not the issue. The issue is that you can't SAY those words in a YA novel, because if you do, you will not be able to get your book included on summer reading lists for middle and high school students. That's shame; the topic and the characters BELONG in a classroom, engendering tons of conversation about differences. I wonder if the f-bombs could be removed, and still leave the authenticity of the communications? I wish I had a chance to see that.

As it is, however, this is a book I want to share with people I love who don't look like me. I think understanding their perspectives would make me a better person.

## The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms by N. K. Jemisin Review by Chris Nuttall

The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms is a tricky book to review.

Like *Sorcerer To The Crown*, which I reviewed earlier, I first heard of it being mentioned by the social justice crowd, which was a little off-putting. My opinion of social justice is not high; it overrides real justice by focusing on groups, rather than individuals. But as *Sorcerer To The Crown* was a better book than I expected, I decided I'd give *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* a try. Overall, I rate it 3.5/5.

*The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* follows the adventures of Yeine Darr, the daughter of a woman who ran away from her aristocratic roots to marry a barbarian man from a barbarian tribe. After her mother's death, Yeine is summoned to Sky – the home of her Grandfather, who is effectively the ruler of the world – and declared his heiress. Or, rather, one of three potential heirs. As may be expected, Yeine is promptly drawn into a maelstrom of family secrets that may save her – or damn her forever.

The secret of Sky – the power that makes its ruler the ruler of the world – lies in a number of captive gods. These gods, the losers of a war fought in heaven, were bound to human service, making them both powerful weapons and jackass genies. (They have to do what they're told by their masters, but they are perfectly capable of interpreting a careless command to suit themselves.) Using the gods, Sky has become the master of the world and one of the most hideously corrupt governments in history or fiction. Everyone in Sky is part of the family, but those who are pure-blooded are more important than those who aren't. This should probably have tipped Yeine off, right from the start, that her promotion to heiress comes with a nasty sting in the tail.

At its core, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* is a story of two families; a human family and a god family. Yeine finds herself digging up the secrets of both as she struggles to make sense of her new sur-

roundings, then discovering how she fits into a scheme that goes back millennia. It's a tangled backstory that doesn't quite make sense – Yeine, the narrator, is keen to point out that she's explaining things in human terms – but it holds together reasonably well. Both families are reflections of one another, each influencing the other. There's a great deal of very good world-building within the story.

And Yeine herself is a very likeable character. The conflict between the two sides of her nature – the highborn aristocrat and barbarian warrior woman – is very clear. She's a child of both worlds and belongs in neither, which gives her insights that are not shared by either. On one hand, she understands the burdens of power; on the other, she understands the frustrations felt by those who are more capable yet pushed down by people with better breeding. This is hardly a unique insight, but it stands out here.

At the same time, Yeine actually has very little agency. She is strong and determined, but she only makes one real decision in the whole book. It's probably the best choice she can make, under the circumstances, but it is still odd. Honor Harrington has much more agency in her first five books than Yeine ever shows .

That said, there are several points that should be addressed.

Yeine does show, at several points, what I would call moral myopia. On one hand, she's horrified at the treatment meted out to everyone who isn't on top of the social order; on the other, she doesn't seem to be aware of how barbaric the other side of her family is, with crimes ranging to an initiation rite that boils down to 'rape or be raped' to a nasty habit of stealing men from other tribes and forcibly bringing them into the tribe. This may be deliberate, but it's odd that it doesn't get lamp-shaded in the text. (But it does get acknowledged on the author's blog, so it's probably just a case of unreliable narrator.)

Her main opponent, her cousin, is also stupid. This, again, may be deliberate – she's pretty much the archetypal spoiled rotten bratty princess – but it's irritating. It never seems to occur to her that Yeine can throw the succession to her rival, even though (or especially because) her rival is a drugged-up broken man. Would it not have been better to make a deal rather than engaging in pointless spite and puppy-kicking? (I was expecting the rival to reveal himself as a faker, but he didn't – Jemisin surprised me there.)

Finally, the romantic aspect of Yeine's relationship with the gods is quite annoying. On one hand, it has airs of forbidden or grossly unwise love; on the other, the book includes a number of scenes of divine lovemaking that are awkward to read. (This book is probably not suitable for anyone under 16.) Yeine even admits, at least to herself, that her mortal lover cannot compete with a god. Sexual betrayal is one of the themes driving the whole backstory, along with many other points.

Overall, there's a lot to like in this book. The conclusion wasn't exactly a surprise – I saw where it was going a long time ago – but it seems to work fairly well, following the book's logic.

I'll keep an eye out for the sequel.

**Jacob by David Gerrold**  
**Review by Jim McCoy**

As someone who was involved in a small way in the recent Hugo controversy, I have been looking for an opportunity to read something by the other side. I wanted to get a look at what they considered to be

award worthy. Imagine my sense of surprise when I found out from an anonymous source that David "You Should Never Campaign for Awards" Gerrold had sent out a letter promoting his book Jacob. "Awesome" I thought to myself, "I can finally get a look at what the other side considers to be award winning. Maybe I can learn a little more about how things are supposed to look." Yeah, I was sadly disappointed.

Honestly, if this is what good Science Fiction is, I'll just read drek. I've never been so bored in my life. Nothing happens in this story. It is a conversation that takes place over years between two men. There is no action. There is no hint that action is coming. The vampire in the series spends his time describing things that happened in his life before he was turned. I love a good story in flashback but that's not what this is. It is a conversation in written form. Some would call this artsy I'm sure, but I just call it boring.

The best part about this book was the beginning of the prologue. It had me intrigued. It's told in first person from the part of the vampire and specifically mentions Twilight and The Vampire Chronicles. That's hardly surprising. Combine Bella's whining with Anne Rice's homoerotic touch with her vamps and you get Jacob. You just have to do it badly. And that is probably the most annoying part of the entire work.

I'm not a Twilight fan. I read about the first hundred-forty pages of the first book and gave it to my niece. She and her mother both enjoyed it. I saw the first three movies because my then-wife loved the series. Fortunately I divorced her before I got dragged off to the last two. My attitude toward The Vampire Chronicles is completely and utterly different. I was introduced to them via the Interview With the Vampire. I didn't find out until I bought the VHS that there was even a book that went with the movie, because Anne Rice's work isn't shelved with the SF/F stuff, and I don't usually venture into any other part of the bookstore, but I loved it. I loved all of the books. And so, when somebody does this poor of an imitation of one of my favorite stories, it pisses me off. Anne Rice's vampires did things. They went places. They partied in New Orleans and robbed ancient tombs of their inhabitants. They fought. They cried. They fought some more. They made up. The Talamasca showed up. One of them got turned. Etc.

Gerrold's vampires kind of do all of that but it happens offscreen and the details are left out. It's all talked about later in a "Well, there was a war but I don't want to go through it all." type attitude. There's a bunch of emotional whining, a lot of "Oh, I want to be a vampire and they're all being mean to me by not turning me" and a lot of "Oh noes, the vampire just left. I may never see him again." but, again, no action. Not all action has to be violence. There were a few sexual encounters described but for the most part only in vague terms. Honestly, if Gerrold was going to go into the sex he should have done it. Barring that, he could have left it at the bedroom door. Instead, he decided to half-ass things and it sucked.

Honestly though, the title that comes to mind while reading Jacob is not Interview With the Vampire and it's not Twilight, it's Axolotl Roadkill. For those that don't remember that was a story, written by Helene Hegemann which led to a controversy about plagiarism. She admits to having mixed two other stories together using a technique called "blending." Others said she committed plagiarism. Apparently, Hegemann won the argument because her book is still available on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites. Gerrold seems to have taken lessons from her because he used the same techniques. Granted, all Science Fiction and Fantasy stories are derivative in one form or another.

Jacob is a book with no internal consistency. I'm sorry, but a character can have a background as a male prostitute who got paid to have sex with other men or he can have sex afterward with a boy he is

supposedly in love with and not know how things work, but he can't do both. Likewise, his lover can either be a clueless newbie who doesn't know how things work or he can be experienced with a string of former lovers. It doesn't work both ways. I'm not offended by sex whether straight, gay or some other kind. It doesn't bother me. Being treated like an idiot does. If an author expects me to suspend disbelief, plausibility is key. I simply cannot bring myself to believe that someone who got paid to have sex doesn't know how to have sex. A little bit of continuity editing may have gone a long way here.

Once upon a time, Leonard Nimoy refused to do Star Trek Generations because he added nothing to the plot and was there simply as some type of exclamation point. Nimoy talks about it in his memoir I am Spock. I wish he could have had a conversation with Gerrold before Gerrold wrote the majority of his prologue. After the aforementioned good part, he goes into his writers' group. He lovingly details a bunch of characters (including one transgender person who was doubtlessly thrown in simply for box checking or, if you prefer, "the purposes of inclusion.") who never appear again and have nothing to do with anything. It's a simple exercise in boredom and possibly revenge on people who were in a writing group with Dear Author at one point. It adds nothing to the story and should never have been included.

Then we're treated to our lecture for the day: All writing must be not merely to entertain but to enlighten. That's a fascinating theory but one that falls apart in practice, especially since there is nothing enlightening about Jacob at all. That's all right though, because there's nothing entertaining about it either. Jacob is, put simply, a complete and utter waste of time. There is no reason to read it and my advice would be to save your time and money and spend it on something less painful. A root canal comes to mind.

Bottom Line: 0.25 out of 5 toothpicks (to hold your eyes open while you're reading this.)

## Justice and Juniors by Alma T.C. Boykin Review by Pat Patterson

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program, and that's significant.

When I first discovered Alma T.C. Boykin, this series was not a part of KU. However, her series about Elizabeth of \_\_\_\_\_ (the Colplatschki Chronicles) WAS on KU, and I went there. Then I picked up her other works. Dear Readers, this is one heck of a talented writer. I find I am often amazed and aggravated that sterling work seems to be ignored, and drivel is purchased.

The protagonist is a cat. Sort of.

She is a female, anyway.

Sort of.

You see, she lives in a society of dragons (sort of) in which only males may bear arms. Therefore, she is legally a male, by order of the king.

And she works for a dragon (sort of) who pretends to be her concubine.

Yeah, it's complicated. Fun; no political message that I can discern; plenty of action and intrigue, accompanied by witty repartee.



And the stories are written briefly, but they stretch out over a span of years. It's a good way to tell stories about beings with extended life spans.

This volume deals with challenges to Rada's authority, and how she deals with that; it also delves into some pretty strange technology that allows dreams to be harvested in order to make art. And there are secrets, mostly concerning the origins of the dominant dragon species. What binds the book together, though, is the story of a pair of runaway children. They are fleeing a truly evil stepfather, and are accidentally discovered in the woods by Rada and her dragon 'consort,' Zaba. It's tricky; she has to use the legal system to protect the children, and as anyone knows who has ever dealt with the system, that's not ever an easy thing.

I may try reading this book to my 10 year old girl and 12 year old boy, and see how they react.

## Minutegirls by George Phillis Review by Pat Patterson

I'd truly like you to consider giving this one some splash, since it's an excellent book from a much under-appreciated author, You can do that by writing a review on Amazon, and by voting 'helpful' on my Amazon review.

Kudos to the excellent cover art by Cedar Sanderson on this edition; it's a much better representation of the story than earlier versions.

I just checked: I've been writing Amazon book reviews for over three years, total of 472 reviews (not all of those are book reviews, though). Even so, there is one aspect to the process that still seems to be beyond me: I always fail to look at the book description to see how many pages I've committed to.

It's a hold-over from the decades I spent reading dead-tree books. Those, I learned to judge by heft at a very early age. From my very first days, when a thick book seemed forever over my head, to the point sometime in the 7th grade when I grabbed the thickest books in the library first, sometimes without looking at titles, the physical size of the book was communicated by the way it looked, and by the heft in my hand.

It doesn't work that easily with e-books. Certainly, the file size is (for ME) content-free, since I don't even look at it. Even the number of pages doesn't quite give me the same information.

I'm going to have to figure out a way to adapt to this. I'll get on that, just as soon as I can develop a feel for how far 110 kilometers is, or how 32 degrees Centigrade feels, without translating those into miles and Fahrenheit.

Well, this is for sure: this is a BIG book, at 440 pages. For guys like me, who like to read a LOT, that's a good thing. There have been times when I've pulled a book off the shelves by James Michener, Herman Wouk, or Tom Clancy, and given a pleased, relaxed sigh, even before I turned the first page. It DOES have a disadvantage for me, personally, though: I not only read, but review these things. And I confess to feeling a little bit guilty when ANYTHING puts me off my pace of reading and reviewing a book every other day.

It's still a pleasure, though, and for those who are waiting for me to get off my duff and review YOUR book, all I can tell you is: I'm doing the best I can.

Here's the set-up: in the not-too-distant future, at least one world war gets touched off, and before it's resolved, the United States is an occupied country, with a (somewhat) unified Europe being the primary occupier. Their troops behave very badly, and don't appear to show any remorse for that.

Most of the causes of the war and the following armistice aren't discussed; primarily, this part of the history serves to provide a rationale for the quite functional paranoia that drives diplomatic interactions. In addition, significant technology with war applications was developed by multiple parties to the conflict, and I get the impression that it was the difficulty of continuing the occupation that ended it, not any real change on anyone's part of a problematic policy.

In particular, defense screens have been developed, and these not only stop kinetic and beam energy, they also serve as an effective barrier to observation by spies, on either side, of military and commercial developments.

The European Union is dominated by the French as the executive arm, with the Germans serving as an administrative element. Other countries are allowed to contribute unskilled or semi-skilled labor, but certainly are in no position to make or influence policy. The French and Germans appear to regard their forfeit of rulership of all they survey as an aberration, and all of their actions seem to have a return to domination as the primary goal. However, their ideology has massively crippled their ability to wage war or to administer peace, and they cannot even perceive the problem. They have rigidly controlled the economy, and innovation is discouraged. Furthermore, in the interest of producing a worker-friendly society, the work-week is restricted to 32 hours per week, even under emergency conditions. On the other hand, they clearly have had some technological advances over the Americans, and have made contact with non-human races in their space program. Could those two be related, I wonder?

The Americans, meanwhile, have radically transformed their society as a reaction against the atrocities committed during the Occupation. One of the more striking transformations has been in the physical characteristics of women, most likely a direct result on the number of casual rapes committed against the population under the Occupation, when the citizens were treated as chattel. Through undisclosed means, bone density and musculature differences have been eradicated, and the long-standing advantage men had in upper body strength has been eliminated as a factor. Prominent female Resistance leaders during the Occupation established a new set of norms for women warriors, the Minutegirls. They constitute deadly combat troops, and contain nested secret societies, all designed to prevent any future attempt to subjugate the US from being successful.

There are some marvelous other adaptations, as well. For one, anyone in the National Command Structure MUST, by law, be accompanied by a bodyguard, whose job it is to execute their principal if it appears they will violate any of a set of rules stipulated as a part of the new form of government adopted by the US. No secret meetings; no standing army; nothing restricting the right of an individual to keep and bear arms. And the original idea of fleeing from the power of despots remains a fundamental part of American policy.

Excellent battle action; complex characters; very well thought out societies, with appropriate humor slashes at all the right places: all these combine to make this a good book for a nice, long read.

The Morning The Earth Shook by J.L. Curtis  
Reviewed by Pat Patterson

Delightful cover by Tina Garceau, who has done other covers for books by Curtis. The style exhibited here and on the other covers is nothing like the style exhibited in the 'Gallery' section of her website, which absolutely proves I understand nothing about art and artists.

I'm horridly paraphrasing something Larry Niven said about how he writes: take a single bizarre thing, make it happen, then write a book about the consequences.

This is what Curtis has done in the book, and I think he's done a great job. The single bizarre thing, in this case, is the exit of California from the US. I can almost, but not quite, swallow the premise. It's because it is presented as an accomplished fact, without explanation, that I assigned a four-star rating, instead of a five star. It really needs more exposition, because the holes are too big. (If you want to read something with these holes plugged, try Tom Kratman's 'State of Disobedience.' It's a LITTLE bit dated, but not fatally.)

Get past that, though, and you get the best combination of personal, street level, action, and the grinding, deplorable detail of making a military action take place. Bullets and beans, and everything has to be in the right place at the right time. None of that sort of thing was ever my job in the military, but I DO know that the greatest of plans will founder because some PFC doesn't get a file turned in when it is needed. And that comes across in the writing.

This is a fun book. Good guys do good guy things, and bad guys do bad guy things, and the good guys win.

Nocturnal Rebellion by Amanda S. Green  
Review by Pat Patterson

For those of you who come here in order to read my latest philosophical or theological struggles, I warn in advance: this is a book review about a police detective who is also a reserve Marine officer who can shape-shift into a jaguar. Don't anticipate passion and depth, beyond that found in story dealing with the line-of-duty loss of fellow police officers.

This book was released on August 15, 2017, and with great anticipation, I obtained my copy through the Kindle Unlimited program on August 17. I hear you mutter, 'but this is OCTOBER 2! What happened?'

Well what happened was a trip to the hospital for a small bowel obstruction, which resolved well. That was followed by multiple trips to the dentist, for major dental surgery, and a few major family health issues, and, well, just LOTS of things. My output of reviews and blog posts suffered. It's aggravating.

As for the book: There are two different groupings of shapeshifters. One group inherits, and can pass on, the ability to transform; the other has to get bitten, first. The first group, the Pures, tend to be more powerful and they are in a role somewhat resembling that of aristocracy. The second group, the lycans, tend to be less controlled and are generally more likely to prey upon humans.

There is a question debated among Pures: when shall we reveal ourselves to the world at large, if ever? And there is also a faction that wants to reveal themselves so that they may finally exert control over the mundanes or exterminate them.

While appearing to work within the system of government of the Pures, the Conclave, there is a rogue element that seeks covert control, and it really seems to amount for a desire for personal power more than a desire to influence policy. At least, their actions seem to be of the 'burn it all down' nature.

Now, it's one thing to write about secret operatives exposing plans to bring down civilization by introducing an Ebola variant into spray containers at trade shows across the USA. As it happens, I've read and enjoyed those stories as well; at least, I've enjoyed the stories where the good guys win and the bad guys lose.

It's another thing entirely to present the tragedy in such a way that we can feel and empathize with the loss experienced by the hero. And that's what sets apart this book; Mac, and others, had a deep relationship of trust and loyalty to the group of officers who were killed in an ambush, and yet, they MUST shut up, suit up, and show up if there is to be any justice done.

It's really very well executed.

It does not bring the dead back to life. That loss must somehow be endured, which is precisely the treatment that makes the fantastic tale of shapeshifters something that we can relate to. Without kryptonite, we cannot care for Superman, because he is untouchable. It's the weakness of the heroes, not their strengths, that makes them real and allows us to care for them.

And Amanda S Green does it AT LEAST as well as anyone in the field.

Get the book; you won't regret it!

## Peacemaker by Kevin Ikenberry Review by Pat Patterson

Today, I'm adding the supplementary blog content at the end of the Amazon review, which follows:

Jessica Francis simply will not accept that she is overmatched. Although her choices haven't been perfect, it's the actions of others that keep dumping adversity on her, and she seems to have been born without the ability to quit.

She's a former mercenary. While she was good at what she did, her incompetent, manipulative husband managed to wreck the company, killing off friends and comrades-in-arms while doing so.

She gets a chance to become the first Human Peacemaker, thus becoming part of the thin team that provides what little galactic security there is. Since Humans are a newcomer to the Galactic Union, they encounter all of the standard prejudice of the old-timers, some of whom have the desire and ability to eliminate the species. Her first mission, in fact, as a Probationary Candidate, is to stop exactly such a project.

She succeeds. And because of her actions, the Earth is not depopulated.

Sorry, that's not good enough.

So, they give her another project, and maybe this time, if she succeeds, she'll get to join the team.

Maybe.

All she has to do is solve the puzzle of three races fighting over turf, when there should BE no problem. It is pathetically obvious that there is at least ONE behind-the-scenes manipulator, because the original set-up should have produced a good environment for the three races, separate from each other, at a nice profit to the merchant-engineers behind the deal. The mission has FAILURE stamped all over it, in glowing letters. But hey, if you don't play the game, you can't win, right?

Somebody in the hierarchy likes her, though, because he arranges for her to have some support. Admittedly, it's in the form of an under-strength mixed unit of armor and CASPERS, composed of raw rookies and redliners, but at least she has a bit of a reaction force.

Except she's not supposed to use it.

And she has one especially hostile individual assigned as her Mediator.

Secrets. Everybody has secrets. And what you don't know probably WILL kill you deader than Fergus' goose.

Expect plenty of action, and the elements of a detective story. It's a great read!

As the original title of my Amazon review, I used the Lazarus Long quote about the game being rigged, but how you can't win unless you play. There are, however, other options.

You can not play the game.

You can cheat.

And you can pull out your trusty Browning Hi Power and blow 15 tiny holes into the serpent trying to suck you into a losing set-up.

Then reload, and make more holes.

Now, the only reason I can see that Jessica doesn't use that third option is that she really DOESN'T have a 'Quit' function incorporated. This is not a feature; this is a bug.

For whatever reason, she thinks she can win the game, but all the evidence suggests that isn't the case. It's going to take some significant deus ex machina for her to have a chance, and that's not something you can count on. It makes sense to sacrifice yourself, IF you are standing between your loved home and the war's desolation, but she clearly states in the beginning of the story that the Earth is no more her home than her CASPER unit. Maybe she's just running on automatic, and that's NOT a long-term survival strategy. True, in a stressful situation, you let your training take over, but that's not the way to plan out a campaign.

NONE of these aliens are our friends. None of them respect us; we are, at best, cannon fodder. At worst, we are alien fodder, literally.

So: when is it time to hoist the black flag, and start slitting throats? Hmm...I think I might see the Jolly Roger on the horizon!

## The Starhawk Chronicles II: Rest and Wreck-reation by Joseph J Madden Review by Jim McCoy

Stop me if you've heard this one before: The gang, tired from it's recent (mis)adventures wants to get away from it all. They journey to the greatest vacation spot since ever and there they proceed to... watch the world fall apart around them. First it's something small, then it's something else then it's "Oh my Gawd we're all gonna die." Or maybe this time, it's Joseph J Madden's The Star Hawk Chronicles Book II: Rest and Wreck-reation. Because honestly, what's a few explosions and a corpse or two between friends?

We're all familiar with the basic tale but Madden puts a spin on things that just makes it work. Things start off kind of slow. There is a meeting with the boss of the vacation spot. Things look good but actually aren't. Things are alleged. Things are denied. The crew of the Starhawk gets sucked into something they wanted no part of, and it takes blood, sweat and tears to, hopefully, get out of it.

The planet may be named Utopia, but it's not one. Trouble is everywhere and things are rotten at the core. Our heroes stumble into things and if it takes a little ass-kicking to fix things well... This is the Starhawk Chronicles. I'm half tempted to believe that Madden decided to call his series that because Epic of Ass-whooping just wouldn't have looked right on a cover. I doubt that he'd admit to that even if it were true, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were true. Jesse and his crew can't go anywhere without getting into a good scrape. It makes for a good time.

Once again, Madden transports us to a world where hijinks and hilarity abound. Just like the first book (entitled simply The Starhawk Chronicles) this is classic Space Opera in the Spaghetti Western mold with a bit of comedy to lighten things up. This time it feels like he tossed in just a dash of Scooby Doo as well. I had a lot of fun with the detective work angle of this book. I kept looking for Velma to walk in like "Jinkies!" It didn't happen but there's always the sequel, right? And there is a lot right with a starship captain that would fit perfect in a ten-gallon hat. Madden may have watched a little bit too much Firefly but that's not exactly a bad thing.

All games aside though, Madden does do a very good job of mixing genres. Mystery and science fiction just work when done right and he does it right. Granted, they get a bit of help from an unexpected source but that happens in many mystery novels and TV shows as well as, probably, real life.

The fight scenes in this tome were pretty epic. I always feel like scraps are going to be pretty small with a crew the size of the Starhawk's but not this time. They may be small but they are mighty... and they bring friends. Also, Jesse is smart enough to know why he should bring an artillery piece to a pistol fight. He doesn't play and neither does anyone else on his crew. When the balloon goes up they know how to react and it's usually effective, but seldom pretty.

The crew has trouble dealing with their newfound celebrity at first and that adds a bit of a realistic touch to a book full of faster than light spacecraft and aliens. Even though not all of the crew are human in a biological sense they are human seeming in their response to something that effects their lives but is out of their control. If they live it up a little, well, who wouldn't? And if an invitation to dinner with an important person results in unforeseen circumstances and a bit of foreshadowing that's all the better.

I don't think Madden consciously wrote this from a political point of view, but his view on crony capitalism shines through. In this case, it's more of the view of a business owner who IS the government,

but it can't be missed. In an election year this is a strong reminder that businessmen don't always have everyone's best interests at heart and that too much government interference in the economy is a bad thing. I really should've read this thing before The Donald started running for president because I can't help but picture the main villain as wearing a bad toupee. Maybe that's just me though.

I will say this for the victims in Rest and Wreck-reaction though. They're not passive. When their chance comes, they do whatever they can to get back at those who have wronged them. If one in particular goes a little further than I thought she would, well, good. It makes sense from a character point of view and I think it helps bring something home. Mistreatment changes people and the meek victim you thought you had may in fact be someone totally different. Poke the wrong beehive and you will get stung. And when that bee stings, you'd best hope its sting isn't toxic.

All of that being said, this is not a perfect work. Aside from the fact that the vacation gone wrong is so commonly used there was one character in particular missing and I'm pretty bitter about it. Madden knew that those complaints were coming and put something in an afterword, and it makes sense but I wanted her there. Parts of this book were a bit predictable as well. A massive change in attitude from one of the crew members was probably necessary and is understandable but it just feels weird. Not so much wrong as, umm... too quick maybe? It was a full reversal of an earlier opinion and it went a hundred and eight degrees in like two sentences. Then again, it's combat and sometimes things have to happen quickly. All in all, though, those mistakes were minor and I really enjoyed the book.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Missile Launches

## Taming Shadows by Fiona Skye Review by Jim McCoy

Imagine, if you will, a world where the Preternatural existed. In this world it had always been hidden. Now further imagine that something occurred which forced its acknowledgement. The world became aware of things that it had scoffed at only a day previously. What would it take to make that happen? What would the effects of simply acknowledging the existence of something that had always been mocked be? What if not everything was known about and brought forward? What if the still-unknown wanted to stay unknown? What if Fiona Skye wrote a book named Taming Shadows and explored these same topics. Well, she did and I enjoyed it.

The Revelations (as they're known) were put forth after a massive confrontation was caught on tape. Our heroine, Riley O'Rourke got caught up in some bad stuff and it made the news. Instead of calling the Men In Black she decided to let the world know about her (she's a were-jaguar) and others like her. She stops hiding what she is. I know I don't usually do spoilers, but this all happens in the prologue, so I figure it's okay this time. Riley's entire life and the lives of everyone on Earth all change in mere minutes.

What makes Taming Shadows enjoyable is that it's not a novel built on a grand scale. The story focuses very tightly on the life of Riley. We see her day to day, her love interest and her improved lifestyle. She gets her own talk show and the big house and expensive car to go with it, but there's more than that. We see her dealing with the regular and mundane and with the Preternatural in much the same fashion. For Riley, her exceptional nature is a fact of life that must be dealt with but that doesn't keep her from being her. All this despite the fact that she never asked to be a Critter and was changed without her consent.

The world that Skye builds is impressive. There is an entire hierarchy of Preternatural beings. One of Riley's intimates is the Duke of Tucson. Another owns a bar that caters to the Preternatural. Along the way she meets more people and realizes that the previously hidden world that she revealed. Skye did well here because we learn about the way Riley's world works as Riley does. Sometimes with new fantasy worlds things can be a bit disconcerting but Skye pulled it off. She gets enough details in to make things make sense and keep us interesting without slowing the plot down and boring us all to death. Kudos to her. Surprises abound and I won't reveal too much. One does wonder if Skye may have read a bit of Jim Butcher, however.

Riley is simultaneously near the bottom (as are all the Critters/were-creatures) and near the top (being friends with the local nobility.) She ends up stuck in the middle of a fight between factions that she never knew existed and spends as much time worrying about what effect it will have on her livelihood as she does wondering whether she will survive it. She still has a young woman's natural appetites and she is not afraid to assuage them when she can and if she falls in love easily, well... It works for the plot.

I've remarked before on my love for a strong female protagonist and Riley certainly is one of those. She can scrap with the best of them. She has the personal courage to reveal an entirely new world to the rest of humanity. She goes toe to toe with some seriously scary stuff and the details of how she got Changed... I'll leave that for the book but it's not something anyone would come through unscathed, physically or emotionally. Having said that much though, she's not always sure of what comes next. She doubts her choices and doesn't always know what she should do. In short, she feels more human than most other characters that I've read. Skye really does a good job selling her protagonist. Not only do I feel like I could hang out with Riley and friends, I feel like I already have.

That's actually a really good thing and it's something that gets overlooked by many other writers. The Duke of Tucson, aka Onyx, is a vampire that's been around for several millennia. He makes sense though. Onyx is not the wantonly cruel Count Dracula, but neither is he some Stephanie Meyers spawned sparkly wimp. Riley's boyfriend is a cop. He's not some insufferable hardcore stereotype. Nor is he a superheroic ass-stomper. He's a man with a job and a woman that he cares about. Skye's supporting cast is well thought out and written.

Skye put some research into this book, and it shows. I've been avoiding about what though. Suffice it to say that she seems to have done some reading of non-standard sources but it works. Some of what's in the book is trope based, but the roots are in folklore. If some old superstitions weren't really superstitions in a world where the existence the Preternatural were hidden that makes sense, especially if those old superstitions regard protection against the undead.

My one complaint about the books involves the villains. There are two groups of them, and their motivations are a bit unclear. I mean, on one hand their motivation seems obvious, but maybe too obvious. Riley gets suckered in right on cue, but I wonder... I don't want to give up too much. Let's just say that one of the two groups could have prevented the entire problem by remaining out of the picture and didn't. Given the fact that their intervention drives Riley into the arms of their opposition and creates a problem they would have been better off to avoid, it seems a bit pointless. Then again, no one is perfect and maybe they knew more than I knew they knew or something. That much being said, I really did like this book and look forward to the sequels. It's book one of a trilogy.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 claws



Valkyrie Doll and the Ashen Brotherhood by Adam Lane Smith  
Review by Declan Finn

You may previously remember Adam Lane Smith from his work in *Burrito Avenger* and *Making Peace*

Adam has moved on to Christian Fantasy dystopia.

You have to be pretty flipping awesome to make me get through dystopia of any type. Mostly, you have to be named John Ringo.

If this sounds interesting, then you can get out Adam's main series of *Deus Vult Wastelanders*. The featured character is Gideon Ira -- imagine Judge Dredd as a crusader knight in powered armor.

I wasn't a fan of book one. I blame the poor editing -- It opened with a fight with a demon, then tried to make us care about Gideon Ira, then put us with a fight against random thugs. Which isn't how you do story structure. Book two of *Deus Vult Wastelanders* was better.

The one I really liked is *Valkyrie Doll and the Ashen Brotherhood*. It's a spin-off from the main series, but I think it did a better job of introducing the world through character interactions than the first two books.

The Valkyrie revives in a coffin.

As she climbs from her tomb, she finds the end of the world has come and gone. Demons roam the blasted wasteland of what was once America. Humanity hangs by a thread and she, one of the last surviving Valkyries, is tasked with driving the rampaging legions back into Hell.

As she battles waves of demons, raiders, and mutants, the Valkyrie faces far darker questions: Does a created being have a soul? What does it mean to protect mankind as humans prey upon each other? When she confronts the cult of Moloch hidden beneath the ruins of an ancient abortion clinic, her burning need for justice may just prove more powerful than her orders to protect mankind.

The last survivors of humanity need her. Will she be our protector, or our destroyer?

*Valkyrie Doll and the Ashen Brotherhood* has multiple advantages over the main series.

To start with, the Valkyrie has a personality. She's almost charming in her observations. She has a character arc and development.

And let's just say that she has an inventory system that feels like a very meta comedy about video game systems.

Another advantage this has over the main series is that our heroine is working with a team of various personality types. Adam's already got team dynamics down from *Making Peace*, and it really is one of his strengths.

Overall, this was better than the last two. And if you want better than Larry Correia's *Son of the Black Sword*, and looks like a cross between *Solomon Kane* with a protagonist out of *Nier: Automata* (if *Neir Automata* was, you know, GOOD), then give *Valkyrie Doll and the Ashen Brotherhood* a try.

## The Betrayal by David Gosnell Review by Jim McCoy

As a reader I always, always always give a book a hundred and fifty pages to get me hooked, especially if it's the first in the series. Well, except for Twilight. That got one hundred and forty and when I started praying for the next ten pages to go quickly, I gave up. True story. At any rate, sometimes I really am happy that I did. Sometimes, I'm not. This time, I'm ecstatic that I did (and it only took about fifty) because it took a minute for David Gosnell's *The Wielder: Betrayal* to really take off but once it did I was massively impressed. This book was a lot of fun. I'll get into the whys and wherefores in a minute, but I really enjoyed it. Gosnell can write.

The most important part of any book is the characters and this is where Gosnell really delivers. His main character, Arthur MacInerney, goes through a character arc that is unlike anything I've seen before. His constant companions, who are literally demons that he is able to summon using tattoos given him as the result of a chance encounter, are not only believable they are entertaining. I can't quite wrap my head around the way that Gosnell managed to take demons and turn them into people. His demons (or Arthur's depending on how you view them) feel real. I can almost see myself sitting down for dinner with one of them or having Hjuul, the dog-like one, fall asleep at my feet.

Not all of the characters are friendly, of course, and Gosnell does a good job of making Arthur's enemies believable. He even manages to straddle the line with some of the enemies actually being the good guys. I don't want to give too much away here but there is definitely a time when Arthur finds out that things are not what they seem and that he needs to trust the people that he thought were out to get him. The fact that this makes sense to the audience is a compliment to Mr Gosnell and his ability to build a three dimensional universe. When one of the good guys..err... girls spit in Arthur's face, I didn't hate her for it. It made sense for the character and Arthur had it coming. Of course, sometimes the bad guys are just bad.

Maldgorath is our main antagonist, pure evil type. This story really is an epic fantasy masquerading as an urban fantasy and we need that pure evil villain. What makes Maldy work though is that he's not just evil for evil's sake. He doesn't kick puppies just because he can. Dude is evil because he is obsessed. He is a collector of beings. He enslaves things not for the work they do, but for the sheer joy of doing so. He really is a sick, twisted sadist. He enjoys toying with the beings he has acquired, but what collector doesn't enjoy playing with his toys?

The action sequences in the book are both well done and integral to the plot. I found myself wincing at all of the appropriate moments, cheering when I was supposed to and basically just caring about what happened. It was more than just that though. When Arthur stalks a man through a building I'm right there along with him. It feels immediate as does the following battle. When a fight erupts in a parking lot I find myself wanting to be in there swinging. Some parts of this book felt almost cinematic because of the way I could see them playing out in my head.

I'm going to guess that Gosnell has done some gaming. Not only does Arthur feel like Warlock from World of Warcraft at times, but some of the demons he uses feel similar to the demons in WoW. A couple of the fight scenes have the feel of a Battleground from WoW too. I don't know if Gosnell plays for sure but I'd be surprised if he didn't. (And David, if you see this and you do play, hit me up in game. I'm AKA Capellini, Undead Lock on Nesingwary. My guild is named Harmonious Death and we're always recruiting.) That's okay though. What he wrote makes sense whether you've played the games or not, but parts of it added to my enjoyment. Ok, seeing Arthur go from warlock one minute to priest the next was a little weird but it's all good. I enjoyed it and seeing the enemy react in an appropriate

manner made me smile.

This book goes through some major twists. It would be easy to get whiplash if they didn't make so much sense. Gosnell does a good job of getting us ready for what's coming without letting us know what's coming. I don't know if I said that quite right, but what I meant is that he foreshadows things well without telegraphing his next move. There were a few times where I just didn't see what was coming but once it happened it made sense to me. This is something I struggle with in my own writing but Gosnell does it well. I'll have to go back through this book and see if I can break down how he did it.

It's true that this was not a perfect book. The first fifty pages just drag. I mean, I know it's the first book in a series and sometimes things take a minute to set up, but damn. The book starts at a funeral and wallows in it. Granted, the funeral sets up the rest of the book but things just kind of wander with no real sense of what's going on until something terrible happens and we're off and running. Once things do get moving though they don't let up.

There is also a moment near the end where Gosnell does something I've seen in a lot of games that irks me. It's when you FINALLY get to the big boss and you're beating the bejabbers out of him but he gets away and you have to hunt him down again. In games it's so you'll keep playing. In this book it's so that you'll read the rest of the series. That makes sense. Logical or not though, it's still annoying. That much being said, it was well foreshadowed and it's a cliché because it works.

Bottom Line: 4.25 out of 5 Tattoos

## Literary Criticism

### The Anti-Christ Handbook Vol. 2: The Horror and Hilarity of Left Behind by Fred Clerk Review by Chris Nuttall.

There is little I can say about Vol. 2 of this masterwork that I haven't already said about Vol. 1. This is both an elaborate takedown of one of the most absurd series of books in the world and an excellent primer on what to avoid in writing. If you want to be a writer, read this book – and learn from it.

Perhaps the most interesting – and horrifying – part of the book covers the growing relationship between Buck Williams (the so-called Greatest Investigative Reporter of All Time (GIRAT) and Chloe Steele. Actually, calling it a 'relationship' is rather absurd – Buck comes across as a stalker, a far more creepy version of Edward Cullen. But when Bella's father worries about Bella, Rayford seems inclined to push his daughter into Buck's arms ... even though I suspect that any self-respecting father would be seriously worried about a guy whose behaviour is staggeringly inappropriate. And yes, it is inappropriate.

But perhaps this is unsurprising. Rayford's attempts to reach out to Hattie – the girl he kept telling himself he could have at any moment, if he wanted her – is almost worse. There is page after page of cringe-worthy conversations between them ... indeed, there is a strong case to be made that Rayford

pushed Hattie into the arms of the Antichrist himself! Rayford is pretty much the textbook Creepy Older Guy you don't want your daughter to meet, the person who is superficially charming ... until you refuse him. At that point, he turns nasty ...

The book goes on to discuss the growing absurdity of the Antichrist's rise to power. Precisely why anyone would pay attention to a Romanian politician after the Rapture is never really answered, but as the Rapture took place without the characters noticing ... well, maybe it's all part of his spell. Except even that tends to take away the sense of free will.

Indeed, the only people who resist the Antichrist are Buck – who has just converted to Real True Christianity – and – oddly – the powerbroker behind the Antichrist. (And here Fred offers thoughts on why that may be so, thoughts that far outshine anything you see from the authors.) Just why anyone would embrace the Antichrist is beyond me – and it is beyond the authors too, because they offer no explanation. It is merely a done deal for them.

Bad theology or bad writing? Personally, I'd bet on the latter.

But there is one point where I feel compelled to disagree with Fred and it's on the subject of peace.

Fred points out, repeatedly, that there are strong factions that are instinctively suspicious of anyone promising peace. He's right – but I think he misunderstands the reasoning behind it.

The problem with 'peace' is that it isn't 'freedom.' There are plenty of places in the world – North Korea, for example – which may fairly claim to be at peace, but would you want to live there? Peace is merely the absence of war! There is no shortage of people who will offer peace in exchange for servitude.

In the years before World War Two, the West – Britain and France – made a number of concessions to Hitler and the Third Reich, all in the name of peace. There were elaborate justifications for giving up territory, ending arms limits, throwing innocent civilians under the bus ... All that happened was that Hitler grew stronger and his demands grew more and more unpleasant. By the time France and Britain finally went to war in 1939, the Nazi beast was simply too powerful to be slain easily. Would the world have been a better place if Hitler had been stopped in 1936?

We have not learned these lessons. President Obama's much-touted deal with Iran has already proved itself not to worth the paper it is written on. Iran has merely grown stronger; it already has more demands.

And, while Fred condemns the reluctance to make peace in Palestine, it must be noted that 'peace' is not security for Israel. Why should Israel give up a tactical advantage for a vague and nebulous promise of 'peace?' Beware the peacemaker because he may throw you into the jaws of the beast, just to purchase a little extra time for himself. Preparing for war is a far more effective guarantee of peace than signing pointless treaties or making concessions.

But overall, this book is well worth your time.

## Deconstructing Gwen by Christopher Nuttall

WARNING! There are spoilers here for all four Royal Sorceress novels, including *Sons Of Liberty*. Read at your own risk.

Looking at Disney's *Mulan*, I was struck by just how well the movie represented the twin faces of oppression facing young girls, both in China and other time periods; Regency England, for example. On one hand, we have the menfolk automatically dismissing the womenfolk as little more than property; fathers married their daughters off to best advantage, rather than for love. And it was devoutly hoped that their daughters would bear sons. The birth of a boy to carry on the family name was celebrated; the birth of a girl, who would leave the household once she was old enough to marry, was hardly worth mentioning. This was open, overt sexism.

But there was another angle. The main enforcers of aristocratic gender roles were rarely husbands and fathers, but mothers and mothers-in-law. These were women who were winners, by the standard of the time; the ones who set the rules for everyone else, everything from what clothes were in fashion to how courtships should be carried out. Young women who were growing into adulthood were expected to be guided by their elders, who would react very badly against women who bucked the trend and sought their own paths. As always in such societies, control of female sexuality was important; women who had sex before marriage, or outside marriage, were ostracized, even though their male counterparts rarely received more than a slap on the wrist. Indeed, as in many other 'honour cultures,' female 'misbehaviour' had to be harshly punished. It was the only way to restore the family's honour.

[This is why, in *Pride and Prejudice*, everyone is so relieved when Lydia marries Wickham, who she eloped with. It gave the whole affair a legitimate gloss, instead of disgracing the family so badly that Lydia's sisters wouldn't have a hope of finding suitors themselves. And yet, by our standards, this is appalling.]

Women were not expected to look after themselves, either. The idea of an aristocratic woman actually fighting was absurd. (Men generally believed that women needed to be protected from Bad Things, seemingly unaware that women were often the victims of said Bad Things.) Women in Regency England knew the rules – a slap would warn a man that he'd gone too far, a scream would bring other men to assist – but they also knew they weren't meant to fight themselves. Defending their virtue was a task best left to the men. Is it any surprise that women in these societies were regarded as property? Indeed, unless the bridal agreement made specific provision for it, everything that came with a woman when she married became the property of her husband.

It was into this world, an alternate Regency England, that Lady Gwendolyn (Gwen) Crichton was born.

Gwen was the second child of Lord Rudolf Crichton, an aristocrat who made money in trade (not something he would necessarily have been applauded for) before becoming the Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Her mother, Lady Mary, did her duty as an aristocratic woman by giving birth to two legitimate children – David Crichton and Gwen. It should be noted that there are actually eight years between David and Gwen – Lord Rudolf believed, originally, that there was little to be gained by trying for a second child. A prospective second son would not have inherited much until Lord Rudolf became quite successful in trade (among other things, building airships.) Much of the family's wealth was quite thoroughly entailed and would go to the firstborn son.

Gwen's early life was shaped, at least in part, by maids rather than her parents. Like most aristocrats, Rudolf and Mary had a number of servants living in their house and they were the ones who raised Gwen from babyhood to childhood. Mary did, of course, spend time with her daughter, but not as much as might be expected. (This was perfectly normal in the aristocracy; indeed, at this point, David would have been sent off to boarding school.) Gwen would have been groomed for eventual marriage to someone her parents chose, more for their benefit than for hers. Her introduction to the ton would have marked the start of her parents' quest for a suitable husband.

Matters didn't work out as her parents expected. Gwen manifested magic at a fairly young age, using it so blatantly that there was no hope of suppressing the scandal. Young women with magic were expected to refrain from using it, although it wasn't uncommon for families to find ways to covertly use their talents. Gwen was marked out as something special, even though most people knew nothing about Master Magicians. Her magic made her unmarriageable. Young girls her age heard the rumours and were frightened of her. It was the start of a long period of isolation.

It is to Rudolf and Mary's credit that they didn't simply abandon or lock up their magician daughter. Gwen was home-schooled (like most young girls of her class) by a number of tutors, few of whom stayed very long. The servants were scared of her; even her parents, despite having given birth to Gwen, wanted little to do with their daughter. David was less scared of her, but because he was considerably older, he couldn't be the playmate she wanted.

This isolation, from both the accepted role of a young woman and the use of her magic, spurred a forceful personality. Gwen experimented with her magic despite her parents forbidding her to use it. She wanted – needed – to find a place for herself, so she thrilled to the stories of magicians in combat and prayed for a chance to join them. This was, of course, thoroughly unladylike by the standards of her time. Her magic ensured that she would never be considered truly respectable.

As an aside, the true nature of the original Irene Adler's victory over Sherlock Holmes makes perfect sense in context. Irene didn't just want to get the King of Bohemia off her back, although that was obviously necessary. Irene wanted to regain her respectability as a married woman. This may make little sense to us, but by the standards of the time an opera singer and a former king's mistress would be far from respectable. Marrying Geoffrey Norton gave her respectability as well as creating a MAD-scenario that would ensure she, as well as the king, had something to lose if she talked.

But as she turned sixteen, Gwen found herself coming to grips with the fact she would probably never be truly independent, let alone meet the social expectations of her class. Her behaviour grew worse, she pushed against her tutors out of growing bitterness at the hard life she had dealt her. She knew she was smart, she knew she was capable ... and yet she was denied a chance to shine, denied even the traditional role of a woman. By the time Lord Mycroft and Master Thomas made the decision to recruit her – they knew what she was, even if she didn't – she was reaching the end of her tether.

Gwen leapt at the chance to train under Master Thomas. The frustration of her previous life wouldn't have allowed her to do anything else. Her natural intelligence and genuine aptitude for magic pushed her forward. Given a chance to shine, she was damned if she was going to do anything else. She was not going to let any of the junior (male) magicians deter her from doing her very best, particularly as she knew she was unique. Gwen is unquestionably both brave and ambitious.

And yet, she was also naive and sheltered. Her introduction to the seedier side of London – both from Master Thomas and Jack – shocked her. She found herself uneasily sympathetic with the rebels

(because she'd been mistreated herself) and yet reluctant to throw her lot in completely with Jack. Unlike most young girls of her class – and young men too – she regarded the working classes as human, yet she also had that insight about the high-ranking aristocracy. Caught between two extremes, she had the courage to stand up and propose a compromise that prevented greater bloodshed – it helped that Master Thomas had broken his oaths so spectacularly – and then succeed him as the Royal Sorceress.

It was her own experiences that prompted her to adopt Olivia. Gwen knew what it was like to be looked down upon, or be regarded with fear, because one possessed dangerous magic. She wasn't blind to the dangers of allowing a necromancer to live, but she didn't see possessing such magic as a good reason to kill a young girl. Adopting Olivia made it harder for her to be killed out of hand by the government. Gwen was less able to be friendly, though; her inexperience of being a mother (she had a poor role model, by our standards) made it harder for her to approach the younger girl.

It was not an easy role to assume. Gwen was both young and female; Master Thomas might have known where the bodies were buried, but she didn't. Many of Master Thomas's political enemies assumed that his death was a chance to take power for themselves, altering the balance of power that dominated the Royal Sorcerers Corps. It was hard for them to take a young girl seriously, even if she was a Master Magician. Gwen was driven forward by the urge to prove herself as well as secure her power base, perhaps pushing herself too hard. It actually weakened her, in some respects, as she kept uncovering more and more secrets.

The discovery that her mother had committed adultery – and then had an abortion, a far more hazardous exercise in those days – made Gwen angry, rather than shocked. Lady Mary had acted like a perfect aristocrat for so long, keeping Gwen firmly under control; the discovery that her mother was a hypocrite was infuriating. Her anger propelled her into Sir Charles's arms, awakening her sexuality as they made out for the first time. This, unfortunately, was at least partly an attempt by Sir Charles to manipulate her. By showing that he was not scared of her – and not inclined to try to usurp her power – he wormed his way into her heart, but he was planning to betray her. Gwen was distracted long enough to miss the clues that he was the murderer she was searching for; luckily, she caught on before it was too late.

Her upbringing does give her some unusual strengths. She has little trouble in posing as a maid, despite having to cope with a barrage of orders from her 'mistress.' (And the ever-present risk of starvations, beatings or sexual assault.) And yet, the experience of being a maid gave her some eye-opening insights into their lives. Anything bad that happened to a maid would be considered their fault. (Sir Sidney claimed to have kissed Gwen, but Lady Standish still blamed it on her 'maid'.) By the time Gwen returned to London, she was privately committed to social reform.

Gwen's great weakness, alas, is one she can't help. She is not just a woman in a male-dominated world, but a woman with power. Her position is odd; she cannot claim the status of a ruling queen (like Elizabeth), yet she can fight on her own. And this is not enough to keep men from trying to take decisions for her, decisions they think she would have made if she were not hampered by her sex. She has no doubt that she would be replaced, if another suitable magician appeared; this drives her to prove herself, which sometimes leads to foolish or dangerous behaviour.

And yet, in many ways, she is still the daughter of the aristocracy.

She wasn't expecting to find herself making love to Bruce, when they met openly for the first time.

That was at least partly the result of their powers interacting, something that had never happened before. (She was attracted to Jack, back in the first book, but they never had time to start a relationship.) She had no way to anticipate the surge of emotion, yet the aftermath forced her to come to terms with what they'd done. It was possible that she would become pregnant, presenting her with the same dilemma that had faced Lady Mary. Keep the child, knowing that it would make her a social pariah, or do something to get rid of it.

An upper-class girl becoming pregnant out of wedlock would be a major scandal in Gregorian England. While young men had considerable sexual licence – George III and William IV both had illegitimate children – there could be no doubt over the paternity of a wife's child. (This is why female adultery was considered far more serious than male adultery.) Gwen dared not become pregnant without being married – but she had already gone too far to avoid the danger. She needed to come up with a way to marry Bruce, if necessary, that would ensure their child would have a legitimate father.

Her solution, by our standards, was cold-hearted. She had already laid the bones of an agreement between the Sons of Liberty and the British Government. Her proposal to Bruce would solidify it, ensuring there was a blood-tie binding the factions together. (And providing an excuse to marry quickly, if necessary.) It would also have the added benefit of linking a second Master Magician, who was desperately needed, to the Royal Sorcerers Corps. Bruce considered the advantages and disadvantages, then agreed.

She had the advantage, to be fair, that Bruce was not entirely aristocratic in outlook, despite his father. He was not inclined to be insistent on a tough marriage contract – one that would have made Gwen his property or given him rights over her possessions. And he was just as unwilling as her, for different reasons, to abandon an unborn child. (Bruce is descended from William Franklin, who was himself the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin.) His father agreed to the match quite quickly, once he got over the shock.

Being married is one thing all women of that era were expected to do. But for Gwen, it's only part of her life. The remainder is very different.



# Prose Bono

## Wright's Writing Corner: The Foil! By L. Jagi Lamplighter

The Foil: Use other characters to showcase the strengths of your main characters and to show how they are extraordinary.

The best example of the idea of a “foil”—in fact the place that the term comes from—is Hal from Shakespeare's King Henry IV Part One. In what is probably my single favorite speech from Shakespeare, Hal says:

Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,  
That, when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.  
If all the year were playing holidays,  
To sport would be as tedious as to work;  
But when they seldom come, they wish'd for come,  
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents.  
So, when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised,  
By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;  
And like bright metal on a sullen ground,  
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I'll so offend, to make offence a skill;  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

For those of you who are not Shakespeare literate, this basically says: I'll pretend to be bad, so that when I turn out to be good, I'll be all the more wondered at. Everyone will be much more amazed and impressed than if I had been good all along.

Bad Hal of the Past is what makes Good Hal of the Future look so impressive. He is performing The Trick—the technique of making something more surprising by raising expectations of the opposite. In this case, he first inspires dread in his future subjects and then proves to be a very good king, which they notice and appreciate more than if he had been a good lad the whole time.

Or at least that is his hope.

In this case, Hal was his own foil over time. Normally, however, a foil is one character bringing to the fore the strengths or weaknesses of another character. This technique can be done two ways.

The first way is to have the “foil” characters act one way so that the character being showcased stands out. If everyone is dumb, then the one smart guy stands out. If everyone is corrupt, the one man with virtue stands out. It can be done subtly, too. If everyone is intelligent but not a genius, the genius character who has all the wonderful breakthroughs can still stand out.

The degree of emphasis depends upon the result the author wishes to achieve. A smart character often looks smarter against the background of fairly intelligent sidekicks and an intelligent villain than against a group of goofy yokels.

The second way is to have the “foil” characters comment on the main character directly. The observations of the secondary characters can tell us a great deal about the main character.

A good example of this is the movie *Nausicaa and the Valley of the Wind* (which is one of my top three favorite movies.) *Nausicaa* takes place in an alternate world with gigantic insects and poisonous jungles. Princess *Nausicaa* is a brave and spunky young woman who wants the neighboring kingdoms to live in peace. She is devoted to peace but is not afraid to fight whenever it is needed.

*Nausicaa*'s spirit and courage is emphasized by the reactions of the down-to-earth working men of her kingdom (which is a small valley kept fresh and away from the poison of the jungle by a constant wind.) For example, in one scene, Princess *Nausicaa* is in an air vehicle trying to help folks in a second damaged plane. The two planes are over the Toxic Jungle. The men driving the second plane cannot hear her. In order to save them, *Nausicaa* takes off the breather mask and shouts out instructions. Her people exclaim in awe, amazed that she would take off her mask.

The reaction of these secondary characters communicates to the viewer very quickly both that the air in this place is poisonous and that *Nausicaa* is extraordinarily brave to be willing to endure it in order to help them. These men are used throughout the film, helping the viewer see what a courageous and wonderful person *Nausicaa* is.

The technique is used almost in reverse in the story/movie *Cold Comfort Farm* (another of my top three favorite movies). In this story, an ordinary young woman, *Flora Post*, goes to stay with relatives on their cursed farm. Someone else, arriving at this gloomy place, might be daunted, but *Miss Post* merely asks cheerily, “Why doesn't Cousin *Amos* just sell this and buy a farm that doesn't have a curse on it?”

Because *Flora* is so normal, the eccentric qualities of her relatives on the farm are doubly emphasized. Her calm modern outlook acts as the foil, making the many quirky and bizarre characters vastly more entertaining.

The technique can be used through work. It can also be used in short doses. Any character can offer an opinion about any other character, in order to bring out qualities that might otherwise not be emphasized. As human beings, we are often interested in seeing one person through another person's eyes. The Foil provides a way to clarify differences between characters, as well as an easy way to emphasize qualities about a character that the reader might not have noticed.

This is particularly true the juicy tidbit being shared introduces qualities about the character being discussed that might be new to the reader. Having someone have a different opinion of a given

character than the reader has been shown so far can be quite refreshing.

Is Guido big and strong? An older relative who remembers him as a baby and still thinks of him as young and vulnerable reveals a whole new aspect. Is Sarah mean to all? A character who knows her backstory can explain about how she was such a cheerful child, before she lost her family in that flood.

Or, going the other way, is Tara kind to everyone? Maybe another character doubts her good intentions, accusing her of sinister motives. (This would reveal new aspects of both characters involved, even if the claims were not true.)

People love gossip (whether or not they should.) Getting Joe the Fry Cook's opinion of Jessica, who comes to his diner every day, is like hearing the latest gossip. It is a chance to let the readers feel as if they are being let in on secrets not everyone knows—what Joe thinks of Jessica, what Jessica thinks of Thom down in accounting, etc..

To sum up, characters react to each other the way real people do. Taking advantage of these reactions can bring additional depth and clarity to any story. They can be used to emphasize unusual characteristics, to make a character stand out from the crowd, or to showcase aspects of the character that the reader has not yet seen.

If you take advantage of The Foil and showcase your characters in this fashion—using the reactions of other character to help them stand out “like bright metal on a sullen ground,”—your final story, like Prince Hal, will be all the “more wonder'd at.”

## Inktail: Preparing for Print by Cedar Sanderson

I'm doing something a little dangerous. I'm going to be making mistakes in public. I should probably wait, do all this privately, and then report back when I'm done, but... This is what I'm working on as a writer and an artist this weekend. You're stuck with it. And, truthfully I'm going to give you more links to the resources I am pulling from than I am of my work itself this week. I'm simply not far enough along in this project to show my work. Although it shouldn't take me long once I get plugging and playing with Affinity Publisher.

Now that you are wondering if I have entirely lost my mind, here's a summary: I am preparing a coloring book for print and publication as a printable PDF (not the same formatting on those two!). Because I know folks have asked me about formatting a children's book for print in the past, I'm going to futz through the process for others to see what I've done and possibly learn from my mistakes what not to do. For this, you would need Affinity Publisher. I am also using Affinity Photo. I will probably not be using the vector program, Affinity Design, since I am mostly working from artwork I have drawn, and not vectorized, although of course that would be ideal for graphics... I'm not taking that time. As of writing this blog post, all the Affinity programs are on sale 50% off due to the pandemic, making them an unbeatable \$25 each to own (not lease, not subscribe, own). I was happy to pay \$50 each, since they freed me from the monthly subscription model of Adobe, but for this price, really, you can't go wrong. They are powerful tools. Especially for the Indie publisher on a budget. There's also a free 90 trial if you are hesitating.

I originally bought Publisher for novels. I may never use it for that. I am working with someone on in-

terior formatting and that would be one thing off my plate – I’ll report on it in due time. However, this is, as you’ll see, a very flexible program. Not quite InDesign, but also not quite the steep learning curve of that program.

For a more text-based introduction, there’s a pricey workbook (it’s hardbound, and as much as the software is) or tons of tutorials on their forums and blogs elsewhere. I found this one useful for going over a very simple graphics layout that was similar to what I wanted to do. It also shows you some tricks for setting graphic files onto the pages. This blog has a layout that would be suitable for novels, but it’s older and talks about the beta version – the current version has a lot more features. Examples at the forum level, like this one talking about laying out a children’s book, can be helpful for the little things you might get hung up on, like bleed and printer’s marks. I haven’t yet participated in the forums, but they are searchable and that is being very useful.

Youtube is, of course, where a ton of resources can be found. I find video a little annoying, as it is slower than I can read. On the other hand, I can see what they are doing, and that can sometimes be clearer than a text description of where on the screen a tool is found. And that is important because this is what the initial entry to APublisher looks like!

The first thing I realized what that I needed to know a lot about my project up front. Size of paper, margins, bleed, color profile (although I am going to be setting this up entirely in black and white. More on that in a minute)... I hied myself off to KDP print. Yes, this is the walkthrough for setting it up in Windows, but the nitty gritty remains the same. I opted to keep this book the same size as my last one. I’m not creating a coloring book for adults, although those are all the rage and I do have the illustrations for something like that... this one is primarily intended for ‘kids of all ages’ and bigger is funner. So I’m going with the default letter size pages. The DPI (dots per inch) is important – everything in this must be at least 300, or the print setup at KDP (used to be Createspace) will choke and spit it back at you. I’m opting for a portrait layout, although I may have landscape pages. You can get away with that in a coloring book! I did change the image placement policy to embedded, even though it will make the file huge. You may wish to leave it linked. Having tinkered with it, I learned that arranging pages horizontally feels more intuitive. Starting on the right is traditional for Western reading style. The color format needs to be CMYK and if you are doing a color interior, the default for color profile can be left as seen unless your printer indicates otherwise.

I set my margins up custom, using KDP Print’s guidelines. I am not using bleed for the interior of my book, as the coloring pages can have delineated margins and it won’t bother me or the colorists. If I were setting up a full color children’s book I would use bleed.

There are page thumbnails for quick navigation. The top, blank appearing page, is what is called a master page. This is a powerful tool that allows you to set up everything from page numbers to much more.

One thing I am being careful of with this book, versus the last one I laid out in Word, is that KDP print seems to have done away with the ability to insert blank pages. Last time with my coloring book, I put a coloring page, then on the back side, it was blank. That allowed the use of media that bleeds through the thin paper, like markers. Which brings me back to something I talked about above. I am going to be having these printed with black and white interiors. Not only does that make more sense from a cost standpoint, the paper for color interiors is coated, and very unsuitable for coloring. The white paper choice is thinner than I would like, but by putting either a blank backside, or some text there facing the coloring page, you can allow for bleed through of color. If you are laying out a picture book, you will want the color (well, ok, maybe not, but in most cases, yes!) interior with the slick pages.

# Author Interviews

## An Interview with Charlie John by Tamara Wilhite

I reached out to Charlie John, a screen writer and ghost writer specializing in novel to screen adaptations for fantasy and science fiction works. I asked him about his work and for advice for writers who may want to create a screenplay based on their short stories or novels.

Tamara Wilhite: What are the demographics of people who hire you to create scifi and fantasy screenplays? How many are authors hoping to shop a script, and how many are theaters or producers who want to put a work on the screen?

Charlie John: My work has been primarily for independent producers who buy the motion picture rights to novels, develop them, and then market them to the industry. I love the personality types that are drawn to this type of work. They're real go-getters who know how to take initiative, trudge through adversity (with a smile), and find creative ways to make big things happen. I have worked directly with a select few authors over the last few years. People like Dakota Banks and her *Mortal Path* series. The market for motion picture production has changed radically and anything is possible now, so I've invested some time into getting on board early with projects that are doing something totally new, are fascinating, and have a lot of depth in terms of their story world and characters.

Tamara Wilhite: What makes one novel easier than another to translate to a screenplay?

Charlie John: I go through my entire screenwriting process on all of my adaptations, so it's sort of a long hard journey regardless. But it definitely helps when a talented author has written their story in a way that naturally feeds the things I look for in my work. A motion picture audience wants to know, "What are we moving toward and why should I care?" So right from the start I'm looking for storytelling tools that I can give the audience as access points to invest themselves personally in the story's events as they're playing out.

The *Nostradamus Mission* was probably my hardest to date. Not because it didn't have good storytelling tools. The author had done a great job with that. The challenge was that it was conceived and written so deep that there was no way to tell the whole story in a feature film as it was written in the novel. And it was aiming for a wider audience than the novel had. Sean Stone brought it to me. Sean grew up inside the workings of major motion picture production, so he has a strong instinct for recognizing, not just what is going to engage audiences, but also what it will look like making that happen with production boots on the ground and how that will translate to the editing room and ultimately up on a big screen. The novel had a lot of serious gravity, which I liked. But the movie was supposed to be a big budget summer blockbuster, so I looked for moments of levity and changed some of the specific conspiracy theories to nameless, faceless composites that everyone could enjoy rooting against.

I've adapted some novels that had almost everything I needed just sitting there in the novel like low hanging fruit. I ghost wrote one from an Australian novelist who has had several things turned into independent films and miniseries. Having had novels adapted and presented to audiences already, she had a knack for including things she knew would be audience pleasers. That was probably the easiest.

But I'm not sure how easy or hard the novel is to adapt really has much to do with how many audience members are going to embrace the motion picture product adapted from it. Something interesting that we haven't seen in movies and series before tends to rule the day, however hard my job is adapting it.

Tamara Wilhite: What advice would you have for writers who may want their work to end up on screen one day?

Charlie John: I would say think in terms of visuals, which most talented writers do naturally. Visual events that give information and move the scene forward are going to have high odds of ending up in the screenplay. Sounds that move the scene forward will have high odds of being written, shot, and edited into the final product. Motion pictures have an entire soundscape that is unique to the art form and most people have their experience of movies and series enriched by it without ever giving it a single thought.

Multiple possible outcomes are big access points for a motion picture audience to engage in your unfolding story – for the scenes and for the larger story. New assets that come in and make one or another outcome seem momentarily more likely to prevail can keep an audience riveted. This includes burdens that hinder competing possible outcomes.

Motion picture audiences eat up metaphoric ticking clocks. If you can give the audience a framework for seeing that we are moving toward payoffs - large and small - they're going to be more likely to be on board, rooting for their preferred outcomes.

Having said all that, I think being true to the characters and story world of your novel is always the most important thing an author can focus on. Make something that feels genuine and it will have its best shot at making it to wider audiences in other forms.

Tamara Wilhite: Has the rise of Netflix, Apple TV and Amazon streaming video increased demand for screenwriting services like yours?

Charlie John: Yes! There are so many more places for producers to go with a project than back in the late 1990s when I started learning the motion picture business in Hollywood. I mean places where a meeting can lead to instant funding and a project going into pre-production. On the other hand, independent producers who used to have specific paths to production and distribution are now finding the entire matrix has changed and there might not be a place for them at all at the new production pipeline table. It really is the best of times and the worst of times for this business.

Another thing I've seen change is that many, many more projects are going through all of development and pre-production before getting a distribution deal or even formal funding. There are producers out there raising funds from special interest groups and angel investors to keep the project moving forward and generating good energy around it until someone in the industry takes notice and funds principal photography, post-production and distribution. But it doesn't even stop there. In this modern era of motion pictures, there are quality movies made every year that never come into contact with a household name movie company. Production costs are down, marketing opportunities are up, and distribution is within reach for almost anyone.

Tamara Wilhite: Do you have any idea what percentage of written screenplays actually hit the screen in some form?

Charlie John: The percentage is so tiny that it isn't even worth thinking about. It's much more produc-

tive to focus on, how can *this particular project* find its way forward. That usually involves a tenacious producer who really believes in the project and is determined to see it get shot and distributed, however demoralizing the setbacks along the way. The mathematical odds are still terrible, but more previously unheard-of players are entering the scene every year than ever before in history.

Tamara Wilhite: What do you know about the process that's almost the reverse of yours, writers getting jobs writing novelizations of movies?

Charlie John: I'm actually doing that now with an original script I wrote that has won a lot of admirers among producers, agents and managers but hasn't found a spot in anyone's annual slate thus far. I think it's easier to stay true to your original work doing it that way, because a novel is so much more accommodating than a motion picture. If you've managed to bring your vision to fruition in a genuine way within the confines of a motion picture script, the only difference in the novel is that you're going to be able to elaborate and include things that you didn't have the luxury of doing in the screenplay. If a writer wanted to do that professionally, I would imagine it would be an entrepreneurial thing, where the writer would adapt the project on spec and put it out there for the world to consume. Everyone I know in the 'business of the business' can rattle off the names of five or ten scripts they've read that they love and feel strongly should be presented to consumers in some form. There is definitely the material out there.

Tamara Wilhite: I know you're a ghost writer. Can you talk about what you've personally written? Or what you're working on now?

Charlie John: That subject has gotten me in a lot of trouble, lol. I'll start talking with a new producer and almost accidentally mention a project I worked on, then they'll call the producer on the previous project to ask about my work. That's when I get a strongly worded phone call, email, or letter reminding me that someone else has been out there claiming credit for the work and I signed a contract agreeing to let them do that and not claim credit in any way for myself. Fortunately, they usually give me a good recommendation to the new producer before turning to me with the rebuke. There is one writer/producer who takes leftover footage from other movies that got edited out of the final product and fashions that footage into a new script that can be shot on a low budget. (This is heavy special effects stuff and massive logistical footage that is extremely expensive to get.) He has contractual obligations that prevent him from structuring my writing any other way. He's a great guy who would be happy to talk me up more than I probably deserve (and he does in more broad terms). But he doesn't have the wiggle room to talk specifics about things we've worked on together.

But nothing I'm working on right now is ghost writing. We're teeing up a few different novel adaptations that look promising. I'm adapting my script *'Point Conception'* to novel form. And I'm developing a live music show for a theater in Branson, Missouri. There are always more projects on the back burner at any given time, but these are the ones at the forefront for me right now.

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

Charlie John: Thank you, Tamara! It's always a pleasure talking with you!

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for your time.

An Interview with J. Boone Dryden  
by Tamara Wilhite

I had the opportunity to interview science fiction author, editor, legal expert and activist for artist's rights James or J. Boone Dryden.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to become an activist for artist's rights?

J. Boone Dryden: All art is a form of self-expression and because of that it deserves to be protected. There are a lot of hard-working artists whose work gets exploited on a regular basis, and our legal system is not set up well enough for them to get justice when this happens. I think it's better to be proactive about preventing such exploitation than trying to punish people after they've committed the act.

Tamara Wilhite: What areas do you think writers and other creatives fall short in?

J. Boone Dryden: Contracts are a quagmire, and there is a lot of language that is very jargon heavy. I think artists often breeze through their licensing or other agreements to make sure there's a line in there for how much money they're going to get paid, and they don't do a good job of understanding what can be done with their work after they've signed the contract. On top of that, copyright law is complex, and there are a lot of things you can do with your work. I think folks should be more knowledgeable about their own rights.

Tamara Wilhite: And what advice would you have for them?

J. Boone Dryden: Understand the basics of copyrights. Read Sec. 106 of the Copyright Law.

Tamara Wilhite: You are an author and writer in your own right. Can you tell me about "The Alchemist's Run"?

J. Boone Dryden: That was a fun project I did with L. J. Wright for a campaign setting for Pathfinder called "Pure Steam". I have to give him his due, too, because he really helped finish it up and continued the series after I moved on to other things. It is meant as a very adventure-heavy novel to be a companion to a very adventure-heavy RPG. I think it turned out great.

Tamara Wilhite: What else have you written?

J. Boone Dryden: Most of my work is short fiction and falls into the science fiction realm. I have some non-fiction, too, but I haven't really worked on much in the last few years.

Tamara Wilhite: I'm familiar with your work as an editor. What major works have you edited or put together? I think "When the World Runs Thin" falls into this category.

J. Boone Dryden: "When the World Runs Thin" was a great project. I've done a few things since then. I had some short-lived projects like "Staffs & Starships", and I've been trying to get some fuel into an online zine called "RetroFuture Engine". I've also worked on some legal publications and was on the 2016 Editorial Board for "Water~Stone", which is the literary press for the MFA program I went through.



Tamara Wilhite: What is involved in editing an RPG like GeneFunk 2090?

J. Boone Dryden: Most of my work was to make sure that everything looked nice. Proofreading, clarity, consistency. All of these things are really important in an RPG because the last thing a publisher wants is to have to write up a whole document of errata after they've published. At the end of the day, it really involves a lot of affinity for noticing very fine details like missing periods or things not being in the right font.

## An Interview with Roger Ley by Tamara Wilhite

I had the opportunity to interview British author Roger Ley. He's probably best known for his time travel novel, 'Chronoscape.' He's also a prolific short story author who is taking a different approach to audio books, among other things and has gained both an Honorable Mention and a Silver Honorable Mention in the Writers of the Future Competition.

Tamara Wilhite: Would you say most of your work is science fiction, horror, steampunk or something else?

Roger Ley: I didn't set out to write horror stories, I wanted to write hard science fiction but about a third of my stories turn out horrifying. It's the way my mind works, I guess. I went on a skiing holiday to Austria last year. There was an abandoned hotel at the edge of the village where we stayed, with yard-long icicles hanging from its gutters. I imagined somebody standing underneath and looking up just as they heard one snap off. When I got home, I wrote, 'House on the Hill' and Gloria Bobrowicz at Sirens Call e-zine liked it and published it.

A lot of my stories are about technology that's just over the horizon: robot companions for widowed old men for instance. Two years ago, I wrote 'Pandemic' which is about a flu virus from China that only affects old people. It was first published by Literally Stories in 2018 and then Chris Herron at Tall Tale TV voice acted and podcast it in 2019. Now that I'm living through the real thing, I find the story a little light hearted.

My short stories cover everything from magic to robots to space elevators. They cross genres which isn't recommended if you want to find a niche, but I write what I enjoy and wouldn't want to limit myself.

My latest novella, 'The Steampunk Adventures of Harry Lampeter,' started life a little over a year ago as a flash fiction story on my website. I wrote another nine weekly episodes and the Steampunk community on Facebook seemed to like it. This year I needed a winter writing project so I wrote another 11 episodes and published them all as a book. Great fun, I hope Harry Lampeter will be having more adventures in the future.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to have many of your stories narrated by Chris Herron and posted on your YouTube channel versus published as audio books through a site like Audible?

Roger Ley: Well Chris Herron at Tall Tale TV is an expert voice actor and has all the equipment and technical knowledge needed to run his site. I'm a retired engineer and the technical side of audio doesn't scare me but the TTTV site looks so professional that I'd rather stick to the writing and leave the marketing, graphics and audio to Chris. The expense of publishing on Audible is hard to justify, and

marketing is such a pain in the backside, I much prefer to concentrate on the writing. The advantage of Kindle eBooks is that I can offer my work to readers for the cost of half a cup of coffee.

The other very professional site that podcasts my stories is AntipodeanSF in Australia. Ion Newcombe publishes half a dozen stories every month and broadcasts/podcasts the AntipodeanSF Radio Show every week. I find it pretty exciting to know that my work is being broadcast on the other side of the world. I might even be famous in the Nabbucca Valley thanks to radio station 2NVR. I would love to go there and meet Ion, maybe chat on his radio show.

Tamara Wilhite: What characteristics make a short story ideal for audiobook format?

Roger Ley: In short, keep it short. Both of the sites that podcast my stories regularly seem to like the thousand-word format. A flash fiction writer has to see themselves as a sketcher of cartoons defining characters with ‘a few deft strokes,’ to quote one of my reviewers. Meanwhile, Andy Weir is up in the scaffolding, lying on his back, spending years painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Tamara Wilhite: And how do you choose which ones you have narrated?

Roger Ley: The editors of the sites make that choice; they pick the stories that they think will most interest their listeners. Both of the sites that I regularly appear on are very flexible and don’t seem to have a fixed genre. To get podcast regularly on the internet you have to try submitting to a lot of different websites until you find editors that like your work.

Tamara Wilhite: You have nearly twenty stories on your YouTube channel “Stories by Roger Ley”. How many stories have you had published so far?

Roger Ley: I started writing the short stories to help advertise my speculative fiction books but they developed a life of their own. I wrote fifty over a period of two years, I had no idea where they were coming from, I thought I might have a brain tumour. Eventually they were all published, by about thirty different ezines, so I put them all into an anthology called ‘Dead People on Facebook.’ I’ve listed the ezines that each story has been published on, and some of my fellow authors have found this a useful way to gauge which sites might take their own works.

Tamara Wilhite: I think many would-be writers are familiar with the “Writers of the Future Competition”. But how did you get stories published in the British paper, The Guardian?

Roger Ley: When I retired from teaching Computer Aided Engineering, I started writing autobiographical stories for magazines made from dead trees: Readers Digest, The Oldie, Best of British. It was quite lucrative, but placement took up a lot of time. I got bored with writing submissions so I took all my funny stories and published them as, ‘A Horse in the Morning’ and got on with writing speculative fiction. I’ve never felt like revisiting the newspaper and glossy magazine scene.

Tamara Wilhite: What publication has published the most of your stories?

Roger Ley: There are three ezines that seem to really like my work. I’ve already mentioned them: Sirens Call, Tall Tale TV and AntipodeanSF. I’m not really keen on sites that publish a new story every day because your work disappears so quickly. I particularly like sites that show a counter for the number of reads you get. It’s nice to get that feedback.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you currently working on?

Roger Ley: I've just finished the Steampunk book I mentioned, and I'm happy to say that the first half will shortly be serialised on the AntipodeanSF Radio show, read by Australian fantasy writer Laurie Bell. I'm making notes for a prequel to the book because I like the main character, 'Harry Lampeter' so much. He's an 'anarchic urban adventurer,' a sort of Steampunk James Bond, he represents all the things I'm not but might like to be.

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

Roger Ley: I've probably said far too much already, but I do want to mention that I've used some of the main characters from my novel, 'Chronoscape', in my short stories. I've even managed to get some of them to cross over into other books: the beautiful drone pilot Mary Lee, the scientist Dr Martin Riley (my alter ego), the evil Colonel Wilson. All in all, I've woven quite a tangled web, and it's getting more tangled as the coronavirus lockdown continues.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for your time.

Roger Ley: You're very welcome, and best wishes to all the staff and readers at N3F.

Roger's Website: <https://www.rogerley.co.uk>

Amazon author page: <https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B01KOVZFHM>

Goodreads author: [https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/14211596.Roger\\_Ley](https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/14211596.Roger_Ley)

YouTube playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLporsubtnxtShv0lct6sHIgvhNNTgCDEw>













































