

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
May 2020

EDITORIAL

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Editorial

We welcome to our ranks reviewer and new N3F Member Samuel Lubell, who also writes his reviews for the WSFA Journal. I hope you enjoy his reviews and encourage him to write more for us in the future. And how do you encourage our writers? You send us letters of comment on the reviews.

Of unusual sorts in this issue: Jim McCoy gives us his Memorial Day special, reviews of a series of novels all written by veterans of the Armed Forces. Chris Nuttall reviews, not entirely favorably, a piece of political propaganda disguised as a Clancyesque pot-boiler.

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 grateful to new writers to let us consider their reviews.

Among our reviewers, we must be especially grateful to Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Heath Row, Tamara Wilhite, Heath Row, and Samuel Lubell. Jagi Lampighter and Cedar Sanderson give us peerless writing on creating and marketing sfnal prose, art, and marketing. Their articles are an invaluable contribution to the future writing efforts of every reader.



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

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

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

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

Tamara Wilhite also appears at LibertyIslandmag.com

Robert Runté is Senior Editor at EssentialEdits.ca

Cedar Sanderson: <https://www.cedarwrites.com/>

To join the N3F: <http://N3F.org/join>. Submit articles to the editor, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net as text files, MSWORD files, or .odt files. The N3F claims no ownership on published submissions beyond the nonexclusive right to distribute the Review and its articles in all formats, including archival sites.

Novels

Deathangel by Kevin Ikenberry Review by Jim McCoy

(Fair Warning: Deathangel is a book in the Four Horsemen Universe and I'm the Public Relations officer for The Mercenary Guild: The Official Fanclub of the Four Horsemen Universe. I'd like to think I'm being objective here, but honestly, I'd like to think of myself as rich and good looking too.)

Every Memorial Day weekend, Jim McCoy gives us reviews of authors who are also members or former members of the military. This year we have five such reviews, each from a different author, all thoughtfully reviewed by Jim McCoy.

Anyway...

Today's victim is Kevin Ikenberry, a retired Army Lieutenant Colonel, having served as an armor officer and in Space Command. He says he got to play with a lot of cool toys as a member of Space Command. I wanted to ask what they were but I didn't because I don't need to be arrested for espionage if any of it is classified. I mean, I love the vets and I love my readers but I love my kids too and if I get busted for espionage I don't get separated from them.

I hear you out there....

But Jimbo, what about the book?

Kevin Ikenberry's Death Angel makes me want to break out into song. I mean think about it. You've hear Earth Angel right? The oldies track. Dig this:

Death Angel, Death Angel,
Will you be mi-ine
Bounty Hunter
Shooting all the time
I'm just a fool
That loves to read 'bout you...

Or maybe you're a fan of Aerosmith and their song
Jamie's Got a Gun
Tara's got a gun
Tara's got a gun
What did the villains do
It's Tara's last IOU

They say when Tara finally caught them
She lit them all up like a flame!...

Or sumfin'

Look, I dunno where I'm going with this. It's just a thought I had but it was a fun one.

Now, I did something I neeever, eeeeever do. I uh...

looks over right shoulder

looks over left shoulder

Uhh...

I read a book out of order. I haven't done that since junior high back about thirty years ago. (Wow, all the people I went to junior high with are thirty years older than they were then. It sucks to be them.) Let's face it though, Ikenberry is a vet and this is Jimbo's. I do my best to take care of my vets and if that makes it necessary to read things out of order I guess I'll survive.

I'm glad I did too because there is some seriously good stuff here. I read this entire book in a day. That's quick for me. It actually took me away from a Harry Potter marathon on SyFy and that's not easy to do. So props to Ikenberry for creating a book of such amazing distractivity? Distractiveness? Distractnisi-tude?

Ah, screw it. The Colonel wrote himself a good book and should be proud. There that at least makes sense.

SIGH

Anyway...

This is the story of a commanding officer, the aforementioned Tara Mason and a unit she is attempting to build. At the beginning there is no joy in Mudville. She's got one dude he desperately needs a collision of shoe leather with his third point of contract. He's a basic malcontent knowitall type. She has a mission and a team of four. Her life is not quite impossible but it could be a lot easier for sure. And when she goes somewhere to find more people, things get ugly.

Of course, this is the Four Horsemen Universe and these are not romance novels. Things go boom. This go blast. There may or may not be a rather large thump involved somewhere and I'm telling you that it read like it hurt. Like bad. I'm not saying what but I will say I'm glad it wasn't me.

One of my favorite things about the Four Horsemen Universe novels has always been the technology and Ikenberry did not stint on that. We've got the space ships and the CASPERs and the MACs and probably something else I'm forgetting about. We've definitely got medical nanotechnology that's really impressive. The beauty of it is when modern day tech gets added in as well. In one moment, we've got an almost Artificial Intelligence and the next you've got a person with a semi-automatic pistol. It's a mixture of the fantastic and the familiar on par with Firefly.

Once again, we have a military man writing mercs. If you read my review of Chris Kennedy's Asbaran Solutions you know that worries me. Mercs don't work like a real military. Once again though, this is an author that gets it right. I wonder how much help he got from Chris on this. I guess I'll never know, but the atmosphere works. The mercs in the book act in a reasonable manner, and there actually is something approaching a normal military. The fact that Ikenberry got that right is, perhaps, a bit less

surprising but he got it right, so I guess I can do without the surprise at this point.

Of course, Tara and her crew are neither regular military or mercs. They're bounty hunters working under the auspices of the Peacemaker Guild. The Peacemakers are basically the police of the Galactic Union, which has a lot less laws than your average modern day American would probably expect. Honestly, they have more of a Texas Ranger vibe and less of the feeling of a uniformed officer in a patrol car, but I like that about them. They're hardcore and they get the job done.

There is a lot on the line in Deathangel. Possession of an entire planet for one. Being a work of military fiction (or near enough anyway) there are many life and death moments. Things need to be seized, meaning that they must also be defended. No one is quite sure why or what's going on but that's accurate to the real world. The Confederate Soldiers at Gettysburg were looking to forage shoes. I've often wondered if the Union Generals learned that at any point during the battle and whether or not they would have changed their tactics if they did. Tara and friends aren't really sure what to defend at one point and it shows. She ends up making a lot of adjustments to make up for that lack of knowledge.

I only have one complaint about this book and I'm probably just whining. The Epilogue is there solely to set up the next book and for being an epilogue it is loooong. I've never been a fan of prologues or epilogues in general and well, this one didn't add a whole lot to the actual story that I was reading. Now, I am a bit behind in the series compared to where Deathangel comes and maybe a bit more knowledge would have helped, but as it sits I don't see a whole lot of need for it.

Something I always do when I review a book that comes late in a series is to share my thoughts on whether it works as a standalone or not and this time I'm not sure. You definitely don't have to have read all of the books before Deathangel to enjoy it because I haven't read them all and I do enjoy it. That much being said, this is a well developed and rich universe and there are a lot of concepts that might not be understandable if you're coming in cold. I mean, I understood it all, but I've read the first ten-ish books in the series. That's different. So, I dunno. Maybe start with Cartwright's Cavaliers and just look forward to this one. I know I already can't wait to re-read it in context once I get there.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 MAC rounds

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.

I'm publishing the review in two versions. Here, in my blog, I'm making known my opinion on ALL of the stories. In my Amazon review, I am ONLY reviewing those stories I liked, and I point that out in the review.

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 like, 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 provides 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 previ-

ously 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 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.

Forged in Blood, edited by Michael Z Williamson Review by Pat Patterson

With this review, I am ALMOST caught up with where I should be in reviewing books. Maybe three months ago, a passel of real-life events stampeded down the canyon and ran over me; I believe the correct terminology is 'they stomped a rut into me, and then walked it dry.'

This review of "Forged in Blood" is long delayed, because I got an Advanced Reader Copy from Baen Publishing, without noticing the 'Advanced' part. I was therefore frustrated in my routine policy of reading and reviewing IMMEDIATELY, because the book wasn't released yet. That's happened to me a

couple of times, and I have even 'lost' some books for a while. However, in this case, it did permit me the guilty pleasure of re-reading a book I enjoyed.

I am not a blade or firearms collector. I use a term borrowed from the blade genius Hank Reinhardt: I'm an 'accumulator.' Like many others of such habits, I have on numerous occasions looked at a particular item and thought: "I wish you could tell me your stories." I've got a Mosin-Nagant 91/30, a 1934 Tula hex with matching serial numbers, and I wonder: did you drive back the invaders at Stalingrad? Or maybe something a bit nastier? But (fortunately), I don't get a response.

Williamson, who IS a collector of sharp, pointy things, has, in this volume, also collected authors. They share in these pages the stories of a finely crafted bit of steel, whispered in the hearts of warriors, over centuries in time, and light years in space. Each story is linked to the next by his brief narratives, which are essential to understanding the book as a whole.

Although the cover states that these are stories in the Freehold Universe, I don't think that is precisely true. They just pass through that neighborhood, picking up hitchhikers on the way. Most of the stories were written this year for this volume, although one appeared in slightly different form in the novel that named the universe, "Freehold."

The stories:

The Tachi by Zachary Hill. In addition to providing great stories of combat and perseverance, the stories can also provide a novice with instruction in the construction and naming of blades. The tachi is one of the more ancient Japanese designs, and it is in this form that the sword appears. On display as part of a household shrine, it does not see use as a actual weapon until the very end of the story, because the young mistress of the manor does not find herself worthy to touch it. The sword is only slightly self-aware at this point, and joins with the young wife to create new legends. Due to one of those freakishly unexpected biological accidents that happen to humans, the author did not live to see publication of his work.

Musings of a Hermit by Larry Correia. Whether it is true that a man is a product of his time, I do not know. I do know that things which may be accepted standards in one age are rejected in another. Hatsu Kanemori was known for having a fiercely independent streak, which was only tolerated by the overlord because he was also known to be fierce in battle, as well. Unfortunately for him, the battles came to an end, and with it, toleration. The multi-great grandson of the lady of the manor fled, bearing only the sword of his ancestors. His troublesome reputation remained, though, and he was both sought out, and rejected, by the peasant community. If you consider this as a small slice of "The Seven Samurai," you won't be too far wrong. The sword, now in the form of the more modern katana, waits; and serves when needed; and waits some more.

Stronger than Steel by Michael Massa. 'The battle doesn't always go to the biggest army, but that's the way to bet.' Superior technology changes the balance of war, and after much time has passed, it seems that the only thing that will surpass a charger-fed bolt action rifle is a belt-fed magazine gun. The Russo-Japanese War is a horribly efficient destroyer of humans, between the technology of small arms and artillery, and the diseases faced by soldiers who are cold, wet, and poorly fed. Even so, cold steel has it's place. The Russian counterpart to the Japanese katana now carried by Major Tanaka is no less endowed by legends. The Kladenets legend is of a self-swinging sword, which cannot break if drawn with honor. However, metallurgy gets a vote, too, as do physics and luck. In the end, when two superior swordsmen face each other, don't bet on either side.

He Who Lives Wins by John F. Holmes. The 132nd Infantry Regiment was one of the first American units to go to war. Just six weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the regiment sailed from New York. Later that year, they were inserted into combat on Guadalcanal, which is where this story takes place. The katana is carried by Japanese Lt. Shizuka, and represents the last remnant of his samurai heritage. Unfortunately, Lt. Shizuka has almost no other aspects of the warrior, besides the sword, and he commands his squad of starving, diseased troops mostly because of they have been brutalized by training to follow orders. On the other side is slacker and all-around screw-off Chicago punk Private Tony Montero, who uses his enterprising talents to swap his weapons for booze, and make himself scarce when there is work to be done. Then, combat happens. It is truly amazing to observe unsuspected reservoirs of moral character emerge, when people begin to die. HOWEVER!!! I have a question about the dialogue. The action takes place in 1943, and at one point, Montero compliments fellow soldier BAR gunner Erik Nilsen for an excellent grenade throw, by comparing him to Babe pitching one across home plate. Now, while it is true that Babe Ruth was primarily known as a power hitter, he got his start as a left-handed pitcher, and was highly successful in that role, so that's the most likely reference. However, Ruth retired in 1935; he essentially retired as a pitcher after 1919. A more likely candidate is Babe Adams, a control pitcher who played for the Pittsburgh Pirates until 1926. But why would a boy from Chicago mention either of those players?

Souvenirs by Rob Reed. A story about lessons, and sacrifices, and losses. There is a generation that learns the lesson, and makes the sacrifice. That is followed by a generation that learns the lesson, because it is told of the sacrifice. That is followed by a generation that is not told of the sacrifice, and does not learn the lesson. Then, the lesson must be taught again. Now, that is not EXACTLY the message of this story, but it's a corollary. The message of the story is that you must be prepared to do what is necessary; and I THINK that the additional message is that you must be prepared to make the sacrifice, even if it is forgotten. And the sword is passed from the line of warriors and scholars, and into the hands of the ignorant.

Broken Spirit by Michael Z. Williamson and Dale C. Flowers. If you go to a carnival sponsored by the PTA to raise money for an elementary school, you EXPECT there to be spongy animals to be won by matching numbers on floating ducks. It is the appropriate experience for small children. On the other hand, when adults get their hands on priceless relics and spray paint them neon pink, it's disgusting. Your toddler may not understand WHY you don't want them to color in the family Bible, but typically, you don't permit your toddler to be alone with the Bible and a box of crayons. Unfortunately, idiots have access to power tools, and priceless antiques as well. The story has a somewhat happy ending, in that the sword is rescued; however, she wants to be used, not displayed.

Okoyyūki by Tom Kratman. Confession: Because the story SAYS the Japanese makes no sense; and since the best translation I could get for the title is 'snow occurred;' and I know Kratman has a gonzo sense of humor: I just didn't chase down the transliterated Japanese phrases in the story. I suspect that if there is any sense whatsoever in the words, it is related to the fact that there is a two word phrase in English, the second word of which is 'happens' (similar to occurred), the first word of which also starts with 's', but is not snow. I may be completely off base. End of confession! The sword finally has something of a kindred spirit. A certain Captain Reilly is going off to war, and he is bughouse nuts. He and the sword speak to each other, and the sword trains him, and can enhance his perception and reflexes somewhat. It is black humor, and perhaps no person who has not been in the military, AND been a fan of both Princess Bride and Monty Python, can possibly appreciate it. I am a person who can.

The Day the Tide Rolled In by Michael Z. Williamson and Leo Champion. We now move into the (near) future in the narrative of the sword. A distant relative of the last owner is retired Gunnery Ser-

geant James Chesterton, USMC (ret), a merchant seaman in Indonesia. Things go south, battles happen, and he lends his hand to the side of the good guys. This contains some of the better urban battle sequences in the book; true to life, the fight with edged weapons doesn't start until everybody runs out of bullets.

Ripper by Peter Grant. After long years of peace/dormancy/boredom, the sword moves off planet. The Freehold Universe is officially on duty; the action takes place in the early days of settling Grainne. It's an Earthlike planet, and if you like the peaceful and soothing environments of Africa and Australia, you will just LOVE it here. In other words: everything is trying to kill you. I was an Army medic; wouldn't have been a combat engineer not no way, not no how. It's worse than being a medic, because at least as a medic, you had some hope that after you dragged the bleeding casualties back behind the lines, you could take a break after dealing with the sucking chest wound. Not the engineers: these guys are trying to build things, even while smart animals are trying to eat them. The sword has been reconfigured, and lost some length, and is now a wakizashi. Tom, the bearer, is the grandson of Gunny Chesterton. He has been brought up to respect the blade, and is proficient in its use.

Case Hardened by Christopher L. Smith. Yet another planet, yet another war. The sword's bearer dies in an ambush in the opening moments, and is accidentally dragged away by being snagged on a rifle strap. The new bearer is a certain Private Cook, the errant son of a prominent military man. He runs, leaving companions behind. Whether in shock from this violation of the warrior code, or for some other reason, for the first time, the sword manifests visibly to the bearer, as a young Asian woman. He stops running.

Magnum Opus by Jason Cordova. Rowan Moran is a deadly young man, and he uses anything available as a tool to accomplish his job. On this night, his job is to protect the Ambassador from attack, and gather as much information as possible. He doesn't LIKE the job, though, because it requires him to use his race and sexuality as camouflage to his real role as an Operative. His relationship with the sword is an art form; the flows through prescribed routines like a dance. There is always something just a little bit off, though.

Lovers by Tony Daniel. Lisa Riggs had always known the sword would be hers one day. She just didn't realize that her parents would sell it to her, in anger and rejection because she chose the life of an enlisted member of the service, not a commissioned officer. She bore up under the rejection, and was successful in her career despite their low opinion. And that's how she got sent to Mtali, the worst place in the universe. It didn't seem to have much potential to be a paradise, but the behavior of the assorted religious factions toward each other made it an open cesspool. She never liked the place, but she didn't hate it until they killed the one good thing she had found.

The Reluctant Heroine by Michael Z. Williamson. The oldest story in the book, this tells how Kendra Pacelli and the sword picked each other, and how she used it in the desperate battle to save Grainne.

The Thin Green Line by Michael Z. Williamson. A new Kendra Pacelli story for the book. Invited back to the cesspool that is Mtali, Kendra goes out of a sense of duty. It's supposed to be in support of a peace settlement, but on Mtali, that can degenerate quickly; and it does. Her counterpart is Aisha Rahal, also a woman in the service of her planet, in this case, Ramadan. Forced by her culture's gender models to take a back seat, Lt. Rahal is nonetheless eager to serve. As must Kendra.

Family Over Blood by Kacey Ezell. Wayne Carreon tells the story, but he is not the bearer of the sword. That honor goes to his commander, Captain Naomi Aiella, who may not be as crazy as prior sword bearer Captain Reilly, but she will do until something else comes along. Humanity has a new enemy, and there appears to be no negotiations possible. The Cutters are expanding their territory, and

attack whenever they come into contact with humans. It's exactly the sort of situation that calls for cool and crazy, and it seems to fit nicely for Captain Aiella. Unfortunately it's not THAT nice fit that has Wayne's attention; during the fight for entry into the Cutter ship, their power armor has been disabled, and they have to carry on in their composite underwear. Wayne LIKES the way Captain Aiella looks in her composite underwear. Now, some may theorize that it is the after-effects of the concussion he took on ship entry that have scrambled his neurons, but I think not. I think he's just normal. It just takes a while to work out the kinks on the job when there are beautiful women and handsome men involved, and when the jobsite involves the possibility of sudden death, it takes a little longer. That's all.

Choices and Consequences by Michael Z. Williamson. Without this chapter, I don't think the book works; at least, it wouldn't work as well. Through SCIENCE, the new sword bearer is provided with the information about the history of the sword. There is evidence to document owners going back to Lisa Riggs, and proof that the sword was much, much older than that. And then comes the question: what is the highest and best use of the sword? To be treasured and placed on display, for all to see? Or to be returned to battle? Hint: It's a Mad Mike book. What do you THINK the answer is going to be?

The Good, the Bad, and the Merc: Even More Stories from the Four Horsemen Universe Review by Pat Patterson

As long as they keep writing books in this series, I will keep reading them. I like the fact that with the anthologies, we get to read the works of LOTS of authors, and I hope this is a trend that will continue. It might even help to bring back the short stories as published in the Golden Age, and hook new generations of 14 year olds.

Overall, this book seems grimmer to me than prior books. Lots more good guys get killed. Cliff hangers with unrevealed horror. That sort of thing.

Notable stories:

The Beach by Phillip Wohlrab. It's good to see medics get some respect. I've wondered if the wonder-world of advanced technology and self-administered nanobots would leave any room for the field medic. The answer is YES, and an even greater need exists. Since the weapons are so deadly, an assault requires a LOT of medics. Everything has to be done right now, and too many are DRT. If we can get you stabilized and on the medevac, though, you are probably going to make it.

Velut Luna by Chris Smith. I love this story, in every different set of clothes it wears. Snotty street kid, given a chance to do some good before they die or get sentenced for hard time. A family is forged out of the mild steel and hot flames. Particularly good scene here about the teaching taking place over slicing vegetables. I REALLY liked that scene!

Keep the Home Fires Burning by Jason Cordova. Tribalism in space, rotten intel, stupid team members, loyalty, and hope for the future of the clan. It's told in a series of flash-backs, but I had no problem following the story.

Vremya Mark Wandrey. Down-and-out team risks it all on one last throw of the dice. Some authors delight in doing horrible things to their characters. Is the Horrid Little Planet going to produce treasure? Make sure you read the fine print before you sign the contract !

The Last Guardsman by Stephanie Osborne. He's the very last of his bloodline, but that's not a problem, because he just has this one tiny job left to do, and then he retires, marries, and has lots of kids. He's very mindful of the need to leave a legacy.

Unto the Last - Stand Fast by Robert E. Hampson. Unless I am mistaken, this story calls upon the memorable resistance of Swiss mercenaries who died protecting members of the French aristocracy in 1792 during the French Revolution. Somewhere around here, I have a picture of myself standing in front of the Lion Monument in Lucerne, Switzerland. Beside the appeal of this aspect of the story, I liked the combination of humans and aliens into a more-or-less unified church, complete with schisms.

Under The Skin by Marisa Wolf. The Depik are a race of assassins. They have the ability to become transparent to all forms of detection. In fact, they are TOO perfect; like Superman, they need Kryptonite. That appears to be contained in their aggressive family structure, which appears to serve driving them apart, rather than uniting them. And, they are cat-like, at least in this: they like to play with their prey.

Angels and Aliens by John R Osborne. Pastor Jim wants to know about God, and how aliens fit in with people in God's creation. That could be a real problem for a mercenary company, but Jim also has an uncanny ability to read people, and thus provide comfort in the format they need. Is there room for a theological discussion in the middle of a firefight? I would argue that there is no better time to discuss the meaning of the universe. This was truly a superb story.

Life by Chris Kennedy. Zeke is a slave. He was captured during the first Earth mercenary wave, known as the Alpha Contracts, although Zeke never heard that term. Instead, he's been doing slave work. After a gladiatorial contest gets the attention of his new master, he gets to work on biological solutions to life and death. He's a little bit weird, though; decades of hard labor captivity will do that to you.

Lessons by Kacey Ezell. To the best of my knowledge, Kacey Ezell finds it impossible to write a bad short story. In fact, she can't do mediocre, or even good. Everything of hers I've seen has been brilliant; she finds a way to put us into the person of the universe's most frightening and loathsome beasts, and makes them something that we want to buy as fluffy toys for our grandchildren. "No, Elliott, don't pull on that string just yet. That makes her fangs grow, and she might bite you by accident. You can pull that string when you wear your welder's gloves, okay?" If I am not mistaken, this is another tale of the Depik race, the super assassins of the galaxy. In an attempt to weaken his rival, a semi-rogue Depik steals the newborn cub of his clan leader, and abandons her to die. Ezell makes us EXPERIENCE the physical and emotional pain the newborn feels at being abandoned. Instead of conveniently dying, however, the cub finds food, and a mentor. And she not only survives, she thrives. I don't know if the Depik have archived legends, but if so, there is likely a body of work dealing with the appearance of a savior/destroyer, who will transform the race into something unimaginable.

For one reason or another, these are the stories I found noteworthy. There are others that you may enjoy as well.

My one suggestion for improvement: include a Bestiary (or whatever term describes sentient aliens) with each volume of this series. I'm not obsessive enough to remember the characteristics of each race, just based on their name. My PREFERENCE would be a hypertext link whenever an alien race is on stage. And, if you REALLY wanted to blow us away, give us a picture along with the descriptions. And print up trading cards for sale. You KNOW there is game potential here, so you are going to have to do it sooner or later.

Gunboat Diplomacy by Jason Cordova and Jamie Ibson
Review by Jim McCoy

Welcome to the final installment of Jimbo's Fifth Annual Memorial Day Weekend Event. Yes, this was supposed to be four books instead of five, Yes, it was supposed to have ended two days ago. Honestly, though, if you wanted someone who knew how to count and could have handled both of those issues...

Crap. I used to be a chem major and I'm actually good at math.

HELP! I NEED ANOTHER EXCUSE!!!

I should have stuck with chem, it would've paid better than the history degree I got instead.

Anyway, this is it for the Memorial Day thing until next year. I purposely saved this book for last because today I get to honor two veterans instead of one. And, of course the only thing better than honoring one veteran is honoring two veterans. So I saved the best for last.

And for the record, yes, I know that Memorial Day is about the people who didn't make it back and not veterans but I have yet to find an author of Science Fiction or Fantasy that was killed in action.

Jason Cordova was a member of the United States Navy. He finished his service as an uhhh

Some kind of mate third class. He was a Cryptologic Technician and I don't have a rank table for that. He served in Israel and Greece and maybe some other places. *wink*

Jamie Ibson was one of our allies in the Canadian Forces Infantry. He joined in 1998 and was a corporal when he mustered out. He was in Bosnia on 9/11 and came home a few weeks later. Maybe someday I'll buy him a drink and find out about that one. The historian side of me is curious.

Two of his friends were killed in Afghanistan by an improvised explosive device. It is my sad duty to recognize Sergeant Robert Short and Corporal Keith Morely for their sacrifices in service. Please pray for their families. This is a Memorial Day Event and they were our allies.

He say he didn't get to play with many cool toys, just guns like the M240. I would like to point out for the record that the M240 sounds like a pretty cool toy to me. He has a few books coming out this year. We Dare: Semper Paratus, has been turned in and will be out this summer. He has a novel in the This Fallen World Series (which I totally intend to read. I already have the the first book on my To Be Read pile) coming out, to be title Pacific Shogun He is also planning a novelization of Myrmidons Inc. from an earlier anthology.

Before I start the review...

This is a book in the Four Horsemen Universe. I am the Public Relations Officer for The Mercenary Guild: The Official Fan Organization of the Four Horsemen Universe. I'd like to think that I've been objective in this review. I'd also like to think that I'm a world-record holding Olympic athlete. Oh, did someone say review?

Gunboat Diplomacy by Jason Cordova and Jamie Ibson is not your typical Four Horsemen Universe novel. Not that there's anything wrong with being a "typical 4HU novel; I'm a huge fan," but most of the series revolves around humans. This is, perhaps, to be expected when the series is written by a bunch of human authors. I still enjoy the change of pace when we get an alien centered book, and trust me, Gunboat Diplomacy is one.

If you know anything about the Four Horsemen Universe (and hopefully you've picked up at least a bit from your friendly neighborhood blogger) then you know that the Oogar are not the most diplomatic of species. They're a mercenary race and they're good at killing all the things, but they're not exactly what you'd call patient or tactful. I like that about them. I'm a bit on the blunt side myself.

Our main character, Hr'ent Golramm, is an Oogar. He is also a candidate to be a Peacemaker, which is officially the Galactic Union's equivalent of a police officer, while in practice being closer to a Texas Ranger. He is actually a bit on the patient side for his species, meaning that he only occasionally tries to deconstruct a person's body for disagreeing with him. Yeah, he's got the Oogar temper, but also their toughness. What else would you expect from an ape analog? Of course, Oogar are purple and I could make a Grape Ape reference here, but that would be a cheap shot, so I'll leave it alone.

Hr'ent is far from the only alien in the book. I think I remember one human appearing in the book and someone being confused by what it was. I don't seem to remember anyone mentioning if it was a male or female. This is a totally alien centered story and I love that about it. Hr'ent is investigating things on a planet that is primarily populated by two other alien species: The Pushtal and the MinSha so we still get that outsider looking in thing to help clarify like Gene Roddenberry gave us with Spock and Data.

Gunboat Diplomacy is a combination war story, diplomatic story and a mystery all rolled up into a bundle. There is seriously a lot going on here and I'm not sure how the authors managed to get it all straight but they did an outstanding job. The different aspects of the book are welded together so well that you don't really realize that you've just switched subjects. It's like going from history to speech to boxing without realizing you ever left your desk. Ibson and Cordova were pretty champion in their performance here.

It's also worth noting that they seem to have (at least to the best of my knowledge and belief: I haven't gotten to the whole series yet) created a culture for a species known as the Pushtal out of almost nothing. There is a whole backstory created, a method of governing debuted and some fairly serious consequences (to say the least) of a war lost all rolled up into a culture that feels real. I could see these aliens existing somewhere. This society lives, at least for now.

You also get a good look at the way the legal system of the Galactic Union works. Of course, it has its blind spots, but most do. But this is a type of government never seen in reality whose closest cognate in fiction is Michael Z. Williamson's Freehold universe. Law enforcement is minimal because the amount of law is minimal. I find myself like this type of government, even if it would quite frankly horrify some people. Seriously, there is a statement in the book about not calling the Peacemakers if you have a piracy problem, but hiring some mercenaries to take care of it. That kind of personal responsibility is something that would never be allowed in the modern world.

The action sequences in Gunboat Diplomacy are on point. I kind of expected that from a book written by two veterans, and I wasn't disappointed. I would be willing to bet that at least one of the authors has had some fairly intense hand to hand training (the book — and the military — refer to it as "Combatives") because I spent four years taking Tae Kwon Do from a guy who went on to win a

couple of championship belts, and they felt real. (Mr. Kazmikha won the belts, not me.) I will say this much though: These scenes are not for the faint of heart. I grew up on Freddy Kreuger and Jason Voorhees and I'm telling you at least one sequence made even me a little queasy.

Really? A rib? OUCH!!!

Read the book. You'll get it. And yeah, it was every bit as awesome as it was disgusting. Honestly, it was probably as awesome as it was BECAUSE it was disgusting, but ewwwww....

The reactions of Hr'ent's assistants, so to speak, are well thought out and believable too. They're people who got hired to do a mission and ended up doing a lot more than they thought they would. They're not happy. They're bounty hunters who got asked to do the jobs of mercenaries. At the end of the day, they do them well, but they're not jumping for joy and celebrating, at least till it's over. I would imagine that the celebrations at the end of the mission were legen -wait for it- dary. It's too bad nobody saved me a round. I could have used one too. Keeping up with Gunboat Diplomacy had me worn out, but in a good way.

Of course, whenever I read a book that's deep into a series I comment on whether it makes a good stand-alone. Gunboat Diplomacy is awesome dipped in awesome sauce on a stick, but I would not start the series here. There is a lot going on in the background and the relationships of these species to each other and to the galaxy at large are complicated. Ibson and Cordova really did do a good job of explaining the job of a Peacemaker though. All in all, I'd still start the 4HU at the beginning and come to this with some background of the universe the story is set in.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Magnesium Bars

King's Champion by Peter Grant Review by Pat Patterson

Excellent cover by Cedar Sanderson, who demonstrates once again her ability to take story elements and produce a character that we will recognize.

Let me explain something to you about the protagonist, Owain: this is a guy who only uses a mirror to make a promise to the person he sees in it. He's not fretting over the scars on his face. He doesn't worry about a receding hairline. He just looks himself in the eye, and says, I am the King's Champion.

He is aware that others won't like that.

He doesn't care.

He is aware that his duty will take him into danger.

He doesn't care.

He has a crystal-clear purity in his heart, because he wills ONE THING: he is the King's Champion. It's not even a duty, to him; it's just who he is. And he makes the promise to himself, perhaps not formally, but nonetheless implacably, that he is the King's Champion.

His responsibility to that role transcends his duty to the King, because it isn't derived from the King. It is derived from his service to the God of Light. His worship consists of being prepared.

In his youth, he and brave companions fought off monsters. Some fell. Others are about to fall. But while his land has been at peace, in other lands, the evil sorcerers have been training up an army, and preparing troops of dragon-like beasts known as gruefells, who have both magical and physical power. I'm not certain, but I THINK the key question the book poses is the issue of expediency in the service of a good cause. Is it permissible to break the rules, in order to combat evil?

The Last Champion by T.L. Knighton Review by Jim McCoy

Today, we have T.L. Knighton, who served as a US Navy Hospital Corpsman. That's what the Navy calls medics. He says he never really deployed anywhere, but he was in Chicago and that was scary. I call shenanigans though! I've been to Navy Pier and I loved it. The Ferris Wheel was nice, I got a gold necklace made, and the cotton candy was good. We won't talk about how long ago that was. Let's just say FAO Schwartz and the Viacom Store were both still on the Magnificent Mile back then.

Anywho....

Today's review is The Last Champion by T.L. Knighton. I was really happy to crack this one open (even if I actually opened the Kindle file instead of actually cracking the book open) because I was in the mood for a really good epic fantasy, after I thought the last book I read was epic fantasy but it wasn't. I never even dreamed of being disappointed once I cracked this open.

I hear a lot of people talking about not liking tropes. If you want to be an avant-garde lich-ra-choor snob that is your right, but I'd rather read something in the vein of what made the genre of the book I'm reading popular in the first place. I mean, populist fiction is what lasts. Shakespeare was a popular playwright whose stories sold out the Globe Theatre in London and most of what he did wasn't really all that original. It was just really well done.

So what tropes did Mr. Knighton use for The Last Champion? I count at least three:

- 1.) The fallen kingdom/exiled prince.
- 2.) The Prince's protector/trainer out to restore the kid to the throne.
- 3.) The spoiled princess turned warrior.

There are probably some other ones, too, and that's awesome. Things become tropes because they're good story elements. And actually, I just thought of two more but that would be spoiling. Seriously folks, there's lots of good stuff here.

Of course, a good use of a trope often involves putting a new spin on it, and Knighton uses one well here. Korr is the main character. He's the guy training the prince, not the prince himself. That seems opposite of what I would expect but trust me, it works. Korr is not only a good man and a strong warrior (he's not just issued the name Champion willy-nilly. He earned it) he's also a very nuanced and entertaining character.

Korr is the kind of guy most guys want to be but aren't. He's not only a good warrior and warrior-trainer, he's also a skilled carpenter. He's loyal and brave. He is literally The Last Champion of his country. Of course, he's also tempted by pretty ladies and may not be the purest at heart, but that's all

part of the package. People are people and nobody's perfect.

He's also caught between two societies and I wonder how this will work out for him as the series goes along. Having been raised in one culture, he moved to another. At the beginning of the story he is forced to head back to where he is from, but he's not the same guy he used to be. He's kind of torn between cultures and roles. There is the role he wants to play, the role he thinks he is playing and the one he seems to be destined for. Any of these would make for a good story, but all of them added together is amazeballs awesome and leads to a lot of questions that really helped me get into the character. There's a lot of depth here. That much is obvious. We don't get to see all of it, but that's okay. There is more coming, I'm certain of it.

Although one of his friends comes close. I don't want to get too spoilery, but warrior/craftsmen are a rare and wonderful thing. It doesn't hurt when they have a bit of piety either. I like this guy. I can't wait to see where this character goes in the rest of the series because there's a lot of potential here.

Of course, every good fantasy story needs a good villain. I count at least two here. There is actually a possibility of a third character from The Last Champion rising in the next one but I'll have to see if I'm right there. I'm kind of wondering why Sir Doucheus Baggus hasn't been shortened by a head, but I guess I'll find out at some point because I will be reading further in the series once this event is over.

Of course, we all know I'm a fan of action and The Last Champion doesn't stint there. There's this fight, and that fight and maybe not as many explosions as I'm used to in a David Weber type space opera, but I find that an axe to the chest fills much of the same need and has it's own grotesque charm. (Hey, was that a Siskel and Ebert moment or what?) So I was most definitely happy with the level of violence in the book. Korr is a madman in combat, and while I'm not certain that all of his decisions were the right ones, they worked. At the end of the day, if it's stupid and it works, it's not stupid. And, ya know, I kind of wonder if Knighton is a closet Insane Clown Posse fan. I mean, I'm an open fan and he had me sitting there like "So, if I gotta chop, then I guess I gotta chop, if I chop then I gotta chop chop..."

And you all think I've lost my mind now...

The key is not letting you know how right you are.

Because you are right. Only you don't know it yet.

Ain't I a genius?

Actually though, the real genius here is Knighton himself. I've read far more epic fantasy than is technically necessary and this is one of the best conceived worlds I've seen. We've got the super-civilized side, the barbarian side, the guy stuck in the middle, the kid who needs help from both (I don't want to spoil too much here, but I definitely see shade of Daenerys Targaryen in Prince Davros) and so much more. There was some good fighting in The Last Champion but we have, in my opinion, yet to see the fecal matter truly hit the rotary air impeller.

Oh, and I didn't even mention Davros or Laurana or...

Ah nevermind. Just believe me when I tell you that there are lots of characters here that are very important to the plot that I haven't brought up because I am, at heart, a lazy reviewer who only thinks about the health of his poor little fingerses. I'll shut up now. Just buy the book already.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Freshly Built Cupboards

The Mortal Word by Genevieve Cogman
Reviewed by Samuel Lubell

The Mortal Word is the fifth book in The Invisible Library series about universe-hopping, book stealing librarians who act on alternate worlds as spies, diplomats, and whatever else they need to be keep worlds in balance between chaos and order in the face of dragons, the fae, and steampunk technology by acquiring and keeping books from the alternate worlds. Librarians can use a form of magic, the Language, which forces inanimate objects to obey the speaker, and has some smaller effects on living beings.

The main characters throughout the series are Irene Winters, a junior librarian (although one with an increasing amount of experience), Kai Strongrock, a Dragon noble who was Irene's apprentice at the library, and the great detective Peregrine Vale. In The Mortal Word, Irene and Vale are asked to investigate a mysterious death in the middle of peace negotiations between the Fae and the Dragons. Naturally, everyone is keeping secrets and trying to blame the other side. Even the Library itself is not above suspicion as there is some evidence that a very rare book is involved.

After a summary of the previous book, in the form of a letter from Kai to his father, the dragon king, the book opens with an action scene in which Irene has to escape a locked torture chamber on a charge of witchcraft in 16th century Germany, in order to steal a rare book for the Library, and free all the other prisoners on the specious rationalization that they would be a big distraction. Returning to her home base, a steam-powered Victorian England analog, Irene is with Kai and Vale when another librarian hires Vale to investigate the murder of the second negotiator on the Dragon side, before the peace talks turn into a war.

When Irene reports to her superiors, already on site in pre-Revolutionary Paris, they tell her they may need a cover up and that some Librarians, including her parents, are being held hostage by both sides. She learns that the murder may have political implications in the Dragon court, that one of the Senior Librarians wants the Library to exert more control over the worlds in the Multiverse, and that the notorious Blood Countess may be involved. Irene must confront assassins, impostor policemen, anarchists, kidnappers, old enemies, and mind-controlling Fae. The Fae have the power to cause real life to fall into archetypes from fairy tales so everything becomes more dramatic than necessary.

The whole series is a lot of fun. Irene is an engaging heroine, very competent in both magic and unraveling complex situations. Her relationships with Kai and Vale are not the cliché romantic triangle as the three act as a team without the growing romance between Irene and Kai getting in the way.

The Mortal Word works as a mystery as well as a fantasy novel. It probably will not stand alone to those new to the series. Although the author does an excellent job providing information from previous books to remind the reader, since this is the fifth book in the series, there's just too much past history with the characters. Readers should start with the first book, The Invisible Library.

P.S. from Paris by Marc Levy
Review by Pat Patterson

This book has 20 times then number of reviews as the two most popular books in my favorite genre.

My gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, obtained this book for me through the Kindle Unlimited program. She gave up on it, and it lingered until I picked it up.

I found it MILDLY enjoyable. Not so much that I would say 'I liked it,' but enough that I listlessly stuck with it through to the end.

A somewhat interesting, not-very-successful American author living in Paris meets a very successful actress, who is travelling incognito to get away from a loveless marriage. Meanwhile, we have the mystery of why his books, which appear to be slices-of-life, have only limited appeal, except in Korea, where they sell like pajeon. Boy meets girl, boy meets another girl, boy loses second girl, boy loses first girl, boy finds second girl again. Lots of cute dialogue, a few running jokes, a couple of interesting ethnics.

This is NOT a book I would have chosen. My preference is military sci-fi, with bravery, loyalty, and exploding spaceships. (I also like some lawyer books.)

But you want to know what?

This book has 2,442 reviews posted (before this one). The last super-smash book by a best selling author in my preferred genre has 56 reviews posted. That's not the last book I read and reviewed; no, that's the last book I read that was in the shooting star category. Then, I flipped through my reviews, back to the last book I KNEW had been nominated for a major FAN/READER-BASED award (NOT an industry award, but one based on popularity), and you want to know how many reviews were posted for it? 67.

So, smash-up, whiz-bang adventure, with lots of bravery and worlds on fire and great plots and good authors and character development out the wazoo, and TWO of those books combined have 5% of the reviews that this mildly entertaining bit of fluff carries.

Please understand that this is not a criticism of the author, not a reflection of the fact that I proposed to my first wife in Paris in one of the stupidest moves I ever made, and most especially not a commentary on a degenerate western civilization.

I think most people will find it interesting. It's just that it seems so easy to write this stuff.

Psychic Wanted (Un)Dead or Alive by Amie Gibbons
Review by Pat Patterson

I don't understand the shoe thing. Maybe it's because I went to an all-boys high school. Or maybe it's because I really, really don't want to know certain areas of knowledge. I'm not sure. But whatever it is, I don't know why women wear these ridiculous shoes, and then give them obscene names. Yes, I do

know that short women like to appear taller for some reason, but 'high heels' seems like perfectly good nomenclature. Alas, the opening scene has Ariana and friend Kat preparing for a Halloween night out, and they are BOTH wearing shoes with nasty names. I query: Does wearing the shoe style serve as a notice of availability, or advertisement? Certainly, it can't be construed as an invitation.

Regardless, their shoes are uncomfortable, limiting, and are referred to as ... never mind. I'm not going to say it. I ignore the sex scenes in these books as well; just not my thing. I DO caution you that there is somewhat racy material included as part of the storyline.

Having gotten that out of the way:

Ariana's bright and bouncy persona endears her to me, but frankly, the kid has had some issues. And, they were getting to the point where I felt like I might need to invite her out to the range, and have a heart-to-heart with her.

It's not the affection for vampires, per se. I mean, kids have to make their own decisions about who they associate with, and if their intended is not my cup of tea, well, that's why they have menus in restaurants, because different folks like different things.,

It's certainly not her choice of careers that is the problem. Yes, it's dangerous, but that's really NOT a good reason not to use your talents. She has an investigative mind; she is a high energy person; strong sense of justice; to all that, add the fact that she's a psychic, and I think her carer choice is highly appropriate and emotionally remunerative.

No, the problem is that she has a crush on her boss, and just hasn't been able to let go of it. In the first place, workplace romances are BAD ideas. In the second place, her boss has made it clear that he doesn't want her mooning around him; when the feelings aren't reciprocated, MOVE ON!!!! And don't be such a baby about it!

And it is with GREAT delight that I discover that she matures in this area, although 19 men have to die first in order to get her attention.

I'm okay with that. It takes different things for different people, and after all, it's growth; we expect progress, not perfection.

The events unfold over the course of a Halloween night, much of it in the party district surrounding the colleges. I only spent ONE Halloween in Chapel Hill, NC, and it's bizarre in a college town, so I felt that I fit right in with the narrative.

A particularly garish death by defenestration draws attention first, then Ariana's intuitive sense and her deductive abilities spread the investigation wider, and we soon discover that men are being killed because they done somebody wrong (or at least, somebody thinks they did). It's not quite that simple, and there are variations on the actual betrayal, which makes it a much more realistic story.

There are also some bits of wisdom that get tossed out, but sometimes they conflict with each other.

The most important conflicts are over things like 'How much crazy is too much?' and 'Can a person who acts deplorably in one context be trusted in another?' We don't really know which side the characters are going to come down on, on any of the issues, but they DO recognize the fact that there are

problems, and MAYBE, just maybe, they will also recognize that there are some questions you just can't answered in a short time.

There is getting over a heartbreak, and there is getting through a heartbreak, and the two are not the same. I tend to think that only MINOR problems can be gotten over. The big stuff, you just have to get through. Here's a witty statement: Time heals all wounds; time also wounds all heels. If someone is a consistent jerk, that will become apparent. Until that time, people need space. Which is why workplace romances are a problem.

Psycho (and Psychic) Games by Amie Gibbons Review by Declan Finn

Amie Gibbons' *Psychic Undercover* (with the Undead) was a law enforcement UF novel that really makes Laurell K. Hamilton look like an amateur (okay, LKH does guns better, but since LKH has even managed to make Edward a useless character, I'm not feeling charitable).

And now, we have *Psycho (and Psychic) Games* (The SDF Paranormal Mysteries Book 2)

Psycho (and Psychic) Games is ...

Well, let's just say this is what happens when southerners make a Hannibal Lecter.

And they thought catching the serial killer was difficult...

Psychic Ariana Ryder just completed her probationary year and is now a full agent in the FBI's Special Division Force, a semi-secret branch that investigates paranormal crimes. She's got a great, if strict and strictly yummy, boss, a vampire for a boyfriend, and yeah, that has its issues and politics, but overall, life's lookin' pretty good.

The director, in a bid to score political points, puts Ariana on interrogating famous serial killer JB Truck, aka The Puzzle Master. Truck's been in prison two years and the authorities still can't figure out who all his victims were or where his vast resources came from.

Ariana's mission is simple, get visions off the psycho until they get the information they need.

But nothing's ever simple when there's magic afoot. The vampire queen's gunning for Ariana, there's a mysterious new shifter in town who needs a psychic's help (and is way too flirty considerin' she's a lady with a boyfriend), and Truck's got a few tricks of his own.

And he didn't end up in Nashville by chance.

Frankly, this book already has a very nice summation of the novel:

"This isn't *Silence of the Lambs*, it's freaking *Nightmare on Elm Street*."

I think this sums it up nicely.

I would say that this is as good as the first novel, though there are some minor issues. You don't "sick people" on others. There were one or two moments where I was concerned we were going to enter into squicky Anita Blake BS. Don't worry: while the sex did get heavier into detail, it's still better (and easier to skip) than the Hamilton books. In fact, it's more like how I with Hamilton would write her books.

Maybe I could get back into them.

But as I said, this was just as good as Gibbons' first novel in the series. It has elements of fantasy microbiology (which was my favorite parts of Grimm, and I would like to see more of that in fantasy in the genre in general).

And Gibbons' does some cute bits of business with the psychopath du jour. There was a good deal of 3D chess going on that reminded me of the Joker. And then he turns into Deadpool (from before he became a popular character)

This one even solved a lot of my problems with the first one. Because this was the book where our heroine is a full agent, and it was time for her to just grow the hell up.

And then she ends by setting up book three.

I've only got one noticeable problem with the series in general so far and this individual book in particular.

With the book, it's a bit unbalanced. About 75% deals with the serial killer. Then we have a break and we switch tracks, where it turns into a relatively good variation on an Anita Blake novel (a bit of soap opera, a touch of melodrama, and let's talk about feelings -- though that was in service of actually FURTHERING THE PLOT, so it gets a pass).

With the series. I don't have a really good sense of place. This is something that is occasionally a problem with even Jim Butcher. I don't get a sense that this is Nashville. I like to get an idea of where the heck I am. But aside from some of the accents, this could be almost any city and state in the union.

To be perfectly honest, this is still a 5/5. The problems in the book are easily overlooked and forgiven. If I were being more nitpicky, I'd penalize the overall score. But I'm not. And the book was still enjoyable.

So if you're interested into a nice mystery, something that harkens back to the days of Anita Blake before it became Penthouse letters, you're going to want to read this one.

In Death's Shadow by Kal Spriggs Review by Declan Finn

This book has so many fun entertaining elements to it, it is hard to know where exactly to begin.

You have Metallurgy on bullets that I have not seen since the first Monster Hunter novel.

It brings in Creative elements that would make Jim Butcher want to take notes.

And frankly I also believe that there is a Quantum Leap reference just thrown in for good measure. (When you have an entity that no one else can see except our protagonist and he is called Sam I try to remember back to Quantum Leap to remember which character was played by Dean Stockwell — Al or Sam.)

Welcome to In Death's Shadow.

Ari lives in the shadow of death.

Ari is a combat veteran who has chosen to leave the military behind and live a quiet, normal life. He's got a few problems though. For one thing, the cops think he's a serial killer. For another, a vengeful politician has put Ari in his crosshairs. To make matters worse, Ari has a guardian angel... and not just any angel, Ari's protector is the Angel of Death. When his life is in danger, people start to die, and Ari's guardian can sometimes be indiscriminate whose life he takes when protecting him.

That's not even the worst problem. Death wasn't assigned to him by mistake. An ancient werewolf wants Ari dead and even with death on his side, Ari might not survive.

Ari needs to find a way to stay alive, to clear his name, and most importantly to get out from under the shadow of death and live a normal life... even if it kills him.

Yes, a reaper playing guardian angel. I appreciate how Kal has avoided making our hero utterly indestructible by giving him a guardian angel who is akin to a weapon of mass destruction.

Also appreciated? The execution and showing us the point of view of how at this reaper operated within his rules and regulations.

Overall the book is so much fun I didn't put it down from the moment I picked it up. Right now I am only waiting for book two to come out (and I suspect book 3) so I can just buy all of them in hardcopy and spread them among my friends and family.

Kal brings a lot of wonderful little touches to his writing style. He has one of the better opening lines I've seen since "the building was on fire and it was not my fault." The very off-hand casual easy descriptions and backstory feels effortless -- largely executed with nice sharp background notes that leave a nice little sting and then move on with the rest of the story, easily throwing them out... But boy, does the reader feel them.

There is also a lot of very easy humor such as how Sam (our Guardian Reaper) chooses to protect our hero. Sometimes to laughable degree — that though Kal never resorts to a Rube Goldberg mechanic. In terms of little touches, there are lines like "I'd managed to avoid ruining this set of clothing with blood at least."

As I said, it's the little things.

Due to the nature of the Guardian reaper, Sam's protection has led to him having more than a few run-ins with the police.

Kal even manages to have to make use of the old canard

"Do you have plans for the day?" "No, I can't make plans, then they can throw around words like pre-meditation."

I've been waiting for someone to use that in a novel for years. He just slid it in like a nice stiletto and moved on.

And no, even though Sam is very thorough about his job, he never turns into a deus ex machina. Never.

That's freaking impressive.

I even like the little bit about how Sam really enjoys the 24 hour news cycle as "like an athlete staying up on sports news". Also, Sam's commentary on CNN is beautiful.

Great one liners include:

"Are demons common in Detroit?" "Clearly you haven't been to Detroit lately."

"Angels are the police of the Supernatural world" "What does that make Sam?" "Designated sniper."

There are several elements that almost feel like nods to other genre novels. For example one could be forgiven for thinking that Harry Dresden's werewolf / Terminator scene is slipped in this one, or having supernatural beasts encountered in Afghanistan feels a little bit like Monster Hunter. And again, little touches like casually mentioning a werewolf and "how thermite grenades work wonders."

As I said above, some of the metallurgy is so good, I intend to steal a lot of it. Including silver and mercury rounds, as well as electrum.

We have great action, dark humor, easily executed backstory that is all relevant to the plot, along with some great world-building at a pace Mickey Spillane would have loved.

I will also admit to highly enjoying Kal's version of werewolf mythology and lore. He does some nice variations that I personally have never seen before. And he comes up with perfect reasons and rationale for werewolves to be 100% pure evil all the time. After all, one of the enemies is literally a soul sucking werewolf from Hell.

And these are some of the lesser problems our hero will have to deal with. Because on top of a wonderful first novel, Kal has effortlessly set up a sequel without any actual sequel baiting. There is no Empire Strikes Back level BS. There is no "to be continued." And there is only an ending that would have worked perfectly well with the final line of a comic book movie. I mean a good one.

Spriggs is such a good author that it was nearly halfway through the book before I realized how many tropes and cliches that Kal had made good use of without them feeling at all like cliches or tropes. Including: a dead fiance, memory loss before a certain age, et al. However it feels more like the sort of mash up that brought us something as brilliant as Jim Butcher's Codex Alera novels.

At the end, we even get a little of the "hero of the borrowed heart."

Anyway, 5/5. This book was excellent. I look forward to the next one. Hopefully, it comes out soon.

Shadow Lands by Lloyd A Behm II Review by Jim McCoy

Welcome my friends to the Fifth Annual Jimbo's Awesome Science Fiction and Fantasy Reviews Memorial Day Extravaganza, where we will be honoring the veterans of the United States Military (any branch) by reviewing their work. We love our vets here at Jimbo's and we wish we could do more for you, but hey, I'm a book reviewer. Ya'll are stuck with what I can do rather than what I wish I

could do. You folks deserve it.

Up first, we have Lloyd A Behm II. He served as a Machinist Mate in the United States Navy, rising to the rank of Machinist Mate First Class before leaving the Navy for civilian life. He served no deployments while enlisted, but became a civilian contractor in support of the US Marine Corps. He worked in various places in Iraq, eventually rising to Senior Logistical Coordinator for City Services in the Green Zone. Color me impressed.

And, now that MMIC Behm has been properly introduced...

Have you ever been totally mistaken about the nature of a book until you read it? I know I was. I purchased *Shadow Lands* awhile back and never got to it. I was kicking myself because I was dead certain, in the way only a person who is completely ignorant of a situation can be, that this was a high-fantasy, elves, dwarves, trolls kind of book. That's all it ever could be, right? I mean, do you play video games? I do. I've been to the Dreadlands, the Dire Lands, the Firelands, and probably some other lands somewhere. This was high-fantasy and I was going to love it. Loving high-fantasy is what I do. But uhh...

That whole, "thought I knew everything thing?" Yeah, I was wrong. This isn't epic fantasy. It's somewhere in between urban fantasy and horror. Don't get me wrong. It kicks ass and has a Correia-like feel to it, but it's not high-fantasy. I got over that fact quick. If you give the book at least one hundred words (WORDS not pages) you should too.

Our hero is Father Salazar, a priest lately of the Marine Corps. The good Father is what makes this book. There is just something endearing about a hard-swearing clergy-man. I mean, it's kind of funny but that's not all there is to it. As a devout Christian myself who is looking to go into a prison ministry, I find myself using words that I really shouldn't. I feel Salazar's pain on this one, and I really identified with him, even though I've never been a combat exorcist.

Wait, did I just say combat exorcist?

I think I did.

No, I'm SURE I did. As a matter of fact, Salazar is really good at this whole combat-exorcist thing. He has a tendency to overdue things at times, but when it's his life and everyone else's on the line, I think we can forgive him just this once or twice or...

Well, let's just say that Christians believe that God is forgiving and Salazar and his mouth probably both appreciate that. I know I do.

The enemy throughout *Shadow Lands* is a group of demons. Given the nature of the main character that works like a champ. Salazar knows his stuff and knows how to use it. Something that people sometimes forget is that faith makes a potent weapon. Behm doesn't and neither does Salazar. Nothing will put some steel in your spine like the belief that the Almighty is looking out for you. I know, because I've been there. I really enjoyed this part of the book.

Now that's not to say that *Shadow Lands* is some kind of religious treatise, because it's not. It is, at heart, an action novel with an urban fantasy flare and a touch of horror thrown in because, why not? It works. I'm pretty positive that Behm has a giant cauldron somewhere and that the manuscript for the tome originally started with the words "Double, double, toil and trouble." (Don't worry Lloyd. I don't know how that security camera got pointed at your garage either.)

Oh, and Salazar pretty much pwns at the whole “combat” part of combat-exorcist. If some of his weapons are things that wouldn't work against a more common Earthly foe then so be it. He's not fighting common Earthly foes. Some of this stuff is pretty bad-ass and I'm somewhat suspicious that Behm has played World of Warcraft at least up until the part when a particular monster shows up, but what do I know? I've only killed a million of them (give or take).

I did mention a Correia-like feel to Shadow Lands and let's face it, a lot of it comes from both gun- and bomb-porn. Behm seems to be a member of the school of thinking that any problem can be solved with a sufficient amount of high explosive. I'm not one hundred percent sold on that theory, and I may have to read the sequels to get more input but I like 'splody things and I like fiery things and I like lots of dakka and big rounds and...

Yeah, one gets a feeling that perhaps Behm spend a bit more time around Marines than is suggested by the Surgeon General's RDA. That's a good thing though, because he learned something doing it.

At any rate, things get moving in this one quickly and they don't freaking stop. They do slow down for about five words here and there so that Behm can get us all relaxed and feeling good before he blows things up, but that's kind of necessary, even if I am a bit of a Michael Bay fan.

Yes, I know, I like story, but I mean BOOOOOOMMMM!!!! (And no, Michael Bay couldn't tell a story with J.K. Rowling and Robert Heinlein coaching him, but Behm can.)

Somebody should let me hang out with some Marines and blow some stuff up sometime. Seriously.

Listen, I'm babbling. It's been a long day and I had planned to be in bed by now, but know this: Shadow Lands is a book worth buying and Lloyd A. Behm is an author worth reading. I mean, unless you're into boring, angsty teenage girls who like vampires that sparkle, or you're a peacenik or something. If that's your thing, maybe you should buy a book on crocheting, or daisies, or crocheting daisies or sum-fin'

If, however, you like good stories about competent people doing important things and perservering, with a side of gratuitous violence and maybe a couple of gross-out moments (and are willing to forgive the possibility of some wasted pork chops) then pay your money and read the book. Actually, I'm pretty sure it's on Kindle Unlimited (I straight up bought the thing a few years ago and just got to it) so if you've got that, you can read it for free. And seriously folks, if this isn't your thing then I'm not sure why you're reading my blog.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Holy Water Sprayers

Shiva's Whisper by David Burkhead Review by Jim McCoy

Welcome to the fourth Day of Jimbo's Fifth Annual Memorial Day Weekened Event! Now, it was supposed to be over yesterday but due to extenuating circumstances (I accepted four books when I only meant to accept five and I fell asleep before writing a review on Saturday) it's going until tomorrow. Yeah, that whole counting thing, who needs that?

And for the record yes, I know that Memorial Day is for those that don't make it home, but I don't know

of any Science Fiction or Fantasy authors that have fallen in the line of duty.

Today's book was written by David Burkhead. Burkhead David was a Cryptologic Linguist in the United States Air Force from 1981-1987. After leaving the service, he went back to school and got a degree in physics in 1997. He currently works for Atomic Force Microscopes and is a single father of a sixteen-year-old girl, four dogs and two ferrets. Also, after you buy his book you should read the author bio at the end. It's even more impressive.

As for the actual Review...

looks over right shoulder

looks over left shoulder

Hey...

Hey you, wanna know a secret? You do? Guess what?

I LOVE SPACE BATTLES!!!

Oops, that was kinda loud for a secret but I figured all of the people I don't want to know probably already do, so why go all subtle and stuff?

But anyway...

David Burkhead's Shiva's Whisper is pretty amazeballs. But I mean, only if you like action and adventure and by favorite chemical process, blowuptuation, which, I guess can also be a nuclear process but only if you get a chemist to enrich the uranium or plutonium for you.

By the way, don't ingest plutonium. One of the guys on the Manhattan Project did that and he didn't survive it. The only thing worse than having radiation pelt the outside of your body is having it attack you from the inside. That concludes today's Public Service Announcement.

So yeah, I really enjoyed Shiva's Whisper. The thing is it wasn't just the action sequences. Most of the story takes place among an alien species known as the Eres. They have a felinoid feel to them and a culture and especially a way of thinking that is alien enough to make the reader feel out of their element while still being close enough to human to be understandable.

The Eres are a warrior race, who see themselves as a race of hunters. Most of their idioms are related to hunting. This gives the reader a point of reference and is explained in-character by one of the Eres themselves at a couple of points during the book. Don't get me wrong, there are no David Weber type infodumps, but we get enough information to keep us pointed in the right direction.

The amount of backstory that is developed here is amazing. Shiva's Whisper is the first in a series, but I almost felt like I had missed something. There were entire wars fought and alliances negotiated long before the story starts. As much as I loved Shiva's Whisper I really want to read the prequels too. The problem here being that I'm not sure if there are any. Seriously though, it feels like there is. This is a really well thought out universe. I'll be returning to it soon.

I like the mysterious enemy feel to this book as well. We're not sure how the bad guys got their tech or where they learned to fight in space, but they sure do want to tear things up. I can see their reasoning too. If I had been through what they've been through, I'd want to tear stuff up to protect my species as well if that's what it took. I want to know how they learned as quickly as they did though. Something doesn't quite add up here, but I'm sure we'll be getting some answers in the not-too-distant future. Well, the story takes place in the distant future, but hopefully the next book will be here before then...

Oh, and the enemy is believable as a not-so-experienced-but-eager-to-learn adversary. I like the way they improve as time goes on. One gets the feeling that they're just beginning to tap their own potential and that's scary. Especially when you read that one part and realize that they can do that one thing that makes it easy for the other thing to happen.

That wasn't too spoilery, was it?

Of course, that's not the only mystery, but telling more would be spoiling. I am wondering though. I mean why did the _____ not _____ when the _____? Right? Do you get where I'm coming from? If not, you haven't read the book yet. If you skip to the end of the reviews at jimbossffreviews.blogspot.com, there's this link there, and you can click it (you have to have your ads turned on for this page) and you can click it and go get the book and I'll get a cut of the money and it won't cost you anything and maybe I can buy a bigger bottle of Coke or something.

Yeah, I'm babbling. I do that. How have you not realized that by now?

At any rate, not all of the action takes place in deep space either. There's just something satisfying about a hunt conducted on foot with a boar spear. It really appeals to my atavistic side. There's another hunt too, but that would be spoiling. And, after all, what's better than a race that conducts a hunt before a meeting? I can't get enough of those guys.

On, and since I mentioned space battles I have to talk about them a bit. Shiva's Whisper features a ginormous furball bigger than pretty much anything I've seen or read outside of the Honorverse and probably just about equal in size to the Battle of Manticore if you're familiar. It was epic. The details of the universes are different and Burkhead's universe plays by different rules than Weber's but both are really well thought out and easy to follow. And if you've got a degree in history like little ol' me, Burkhead doesn't put as much of the math on the page and you don't have to go scrambling for a physics text and a calculator to try to parse it all out.

Indeed, one of the strengths of Shiva's Whisper is that it really is easy to follow. Burkhead treats his audience with respect and like adults but he doesn't like to talk down to us by making things hard to pronounce or adding unnecessarily contorted language. I mean, he's got all of these concepts that don't exist in the real world and instead of making up crazy words for them, or trying to translate easy to understand concepts into some crazy made-up foreign language just to make himself look cool (I'm looking at you Mercedes Lackey) he just tells you what's going on. I really like that.

So yeah, buy the book. Read the book. Love the book. Enjoy the comfortable, easy to follow language. Just don't get too comfortable. You don't know what might be coming next.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Bared Fangs

Witchy Eye by D. J. Butler
Review by Pat Patterson

The author came with HIGH recommendations, and so I grabbed the book, even though the genre of magical fantasy isn't my favorite.

If I read many more books like this, though, I may find myself opening up my selection criteria a bit. It's immersion history. We discover what the world is like by being placed in the middle of a market day, with hucksters and pot-bellied farmers swinging loads of cured tobacco, and stray dogs running between the mules' feet. And noise, and conflict.

A person with more expertise than I possess in early American history would have a BLAST with this book, highlighting all of the points of divergence. I was not able to identify the exact point in history where this line splits off from our own, but there are delicious clues sprinkled in like chocolate chips in a cinnamon cake. Ben Franklin was a bishop, as well as an inventor; Voltaire was a defender of the Faith. Oliver Cromwell is referred to as the Necromancer. And Andrew Jackson's body is suspended in a cage following his death (or execution, not sure which) after an attempt to set himself up as King.

The language is beautiful. The heroine, Sarah, is coming to terms with her hidden identity as well as with her magical powers. She encounters the Mississippi for the first time, and is amazed at the power of the magical aura of the river. (Earth magical power is revealed in 'ley lines'.)

"Its color, too, was distinctive. It was multicolored like the Natchez Trace ley line, but the Trace ley was predominantly white, whereas the river ley luxuriated in shimmering deep green. Was that... river energy? The spiritual tracks of thousands of years of catfish?"

Is that not glorious? 'The spiritual tracks of thousands of years of catfish.' That's just not a phrase you will find in just any book. And, if I had any remaining reservations about whether I was a fan of the book, that line eliminated them.

Sarah and her band of supporters set off on a Grail-like quest, while being tracked by nasties, both earthly and ghastly. Along the way, she has to get settled in her own mind about the kind of marriage she wishes to make. In the process, she transforms from a semi-trashy hillbilly type to a queen, with regard for her duties and responsibilities to her followers. They also find transformation in the process; a drunkard thug becomes a knight; a hooker becomes a lady. That sort of thing.

Plenty of plot items are resolved, so it's not REALLY a Grail-like quest, even though I said it was earlier. However, it's clearly the beginning of a great story arc, and I have no idea how many more volumes will follow. Hopefully, the number of chocolate chips has not been exhausted.

Zero Sum Game by S.L. Huang
Review by Samuel Lubell

The heroine and narrator of Zero Sum Game is really good at math. While this is a useful ability for a mathematician or accountant, it may seem less than useful for a violent criminal and retriever for hire. Not so. Cas has the ability to understand angles and lines of force and momentum so she knows exactly where to throw something, when to duck, and how to kill. So when she is hired to rescue a client's drug

smuggling sister from a Columbian gang, she is able to kill 19 of them before being stopped by the only person she trusts. Courtney, the rescued girl, calls her a “freaky weird feng shui killer.”

But it turns out the client is even weirder, a telepath with the ability to cause people to agree with her. And the whole rescue was a test, not of Cas but of her best friend Rio. Cas teams up with Arthur Tresting, a private detective who has been investigating the telepath’s organization and together (after a lot of friction) they resolve to bring it down. But there’s another secret organization created in opposition to the first who are worried that Cas’ efforts will expose them.

The book is mostly all plot, like a summer action adventure. There is some friction between Tresting and Cas, mainly around Cas’ tendency to use violence and kill everyone who gets in her way. Several times he tries to end their relationship but she keeps saving his life. In fairness, she does try to tone down her violence but this just goes from killing to extreme mayhem. And Rio, Cas’ friend, may seem like a sociopathic thug, but he recognizes his lack of a conscience and has adopted Christianity as his moral compass and became an instrument of God’s vengeance which allows him to continue hurting people.

Fans of action movies and adventure stories will have a lot of fun with this. Those who like superpowered antiheroes will too. People who want deep philosophy will need to find something else to read.

2017 War With Russia by General Sir Richard Shirreff Review by Chris Nuttall

Evidently, General Shirreff has been reading *The Fall of Night* <evil grin>.

Not unlike *Ghost Fleet*, *2017 War With Russia* has been billed as the successor to Tom Clancy’s *Red Storm Rising*. And, also not unlike *Ghost Fleet*, *2017 War With Russia* does not live up to the claim. But, once again unlike *Ghost Fleet*, the importance of *2017 War With Russia* lies in its attempts to outline the potential consequences of constantly slashing one’s military forces to the bone while an aggressive power lies on the border. This power, as you will probably have guessed, is Russia.

2017 War With Russia is not a literary success. The characters are either hackneyed stereotypes (the President of Russia could pass for a bad James Bond villain) or instantly forgettable. But that isn’t the point. The true success of the book lies in its expose of Russian strength (and will) contrasted with NATO weakness (and irresolution). NATO, pledged to defend the Baltic States, is largely unable to do so, if the Russians aren’t kind enough to give us several months worth of warning. The Russians can invade the Baltic States pretty much whenever they want – using mistreatment of ethnic Russian populations as their excuse – and then ... well, what then? This is the question to which the characters in the book struggle, pretty much in vain, to find an answer.

The book is largely concentrated on Britain, which isn’t too surprising. Cuts in the UK’s defences – and the insane reliance on reservists to fill holes in the army when the UK goes to war – plays a major role in the disasters that sweep over Britain. The book is scathingly critical – with good reason – of politicians who play games with Russia, unaware or uncaring that the Russians are prepared to play for keeps. Losing an aircraft carrier because there was only one escort ship available to protect her from enemy submarines is the sort of mistake that would have Churchill, Nelson, and Percival rolling in their graves. And yet it seems frighteningly plausible.

Our nuclear deterrent can and does keep an enemy from landing on our shores. But are we prepared to use it – and accept the destruction of our country – to save the Baltic States? It needs to be paired with a strong conventional fighting force if we are to have any influence at all on global politics.

The major point made by the book is just how quickly matters can run out of control. Even the Russians, holding the whip hand for most of the book, discover to their chagrin that events can change the situation in an eyeblink. But the Russians have the strong advantage of a united command and control, something largely denied to NATO (now, in Afghanistan, and later in the book). Wars cannot be run, certainly not in real time, by committee.

Indeed, the sole true disappointment in the book lies in the ending. Having set the stage for a geopolitical disaster, General Shirreff allows NATO a neat trick that permits it to turn the tables on the Russians. One may argue that he cheats (particularly as the ending comes with a suddenness that leaves the reader unsatisfied). It would be better, I feel, if the war was played out to a NATO defeat, which is – of course – the ending of *The Fall of Night*. It would certainly have a stronger impact.

The book does have its flaws, apart from that. There is a strong over-reliance on acronyms that can be intimidating to the uninformed reader. There are hints of romance that – thankfully – never really go anywhere. But it does serve as a warning, a warning we would do well to heed.

Prose Bono

Wright's Writing Corner: Adding Senses L. Jagi Lamplighter

Next in our reboot of my Writing Tips article is:

Senses: Add two to five senses to every description.

Hot and tasty! Two senses at once!

When I started writing, I used to swap the pages I finished that week with two writer friends. We would read each other's work and send back comments. My friend's comments were almost universally the same. They constantly complained that I had not included any sense impressions except for sight.

"What does it sound like?" They would ask. "What does it smell like?"

At first, I added additional sense impressions at their urging. Then, with time, I began to remember to do it myself—but it was an artificial process. I had to go back after my first draft and deliberately add them in.

Now, the majority of the time, I remember as I am writing the scene the first time.

Why? You might ask. What's the big deal about sound and smell, and maybe taste or feel?

The answer: The more vivid the description, the more real the experience of reading about it feels.

Imagine you had someone in a virtual reality suit, and you wanted to convince them into believing your program was the real world—not necessarily to delude them but to entertain them. No matter how realistic your visuals, if they heard and smelled their living room—the old sock their son left by the rocking chair, the odor from where their daughter had not properly cleaned up after the dog, the sound of their neighbors arguing—they would never be entirely swept away by your vivid waterfalls and grand vistas.

But what if you could make them hear the roar of the water and smell the pine resin? That would go much farther to convincing them that they were truly in your scenario. What if they could feel the cool breeze? What if they could taste the icy water?

Because, when it comes right down to it, how do we tell where we are? By the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feel of things. Those are the methods we use to bring in information. So, if those senses were fooled, we would “correctly” draw the conclusion that we were somewhere else.

Our real senses are the most convincing, of course, but we have a second pair of senses, too—our imaginary senses. We can imagine seeing the warm green and brown walls of our local Starbucks; hearing the percolating liquids; smelling the roasted coffee; tasting the hot sweet liquid (after we added six types of syrups.); feeling the heat of the cup between our hands.

With enough imaginative pointers, we can get a pretty vivid mental image.

Which brings us back to writing. Basically, we writers are trying to befuddle the reader—to draw them away from their actual life, until the life on the page seems almost as vivid as reality. Or more so. The more successful we are at this, the more the reader forgets their surroundings and is drawn into the story...making it more likely that they will keep reading.

And that they will enjoy the experience more.

Adding sense impressions to a description—even a description of just a single sentence or two—goes a long way to help ground the reader and make their experience more immediate. It also helps broaden your readership. Some people, like myself, might think visually—in images. Other people may be more aware of what they hear or what they feel.

Adding these details helps ground readers across the perception range.

So, how do you actually do it?

You picture your scene in your head and then cast about your imagination/memory for what that place/time might look, sound, smell, taste, or feel like. And you add this to your description. Not only does this make the experience more vivid for the reader, it forces the author to think about the scene in more detail.

Often, when pausing to figure out what a character might be hearing or smelling, authors discover that there are aspects of the scenario that they had not considered. Maybe, they forgot to take the loudness of the waterfall into consideration, or they forgot how cold a mountain top would be in late November.

Sense impressions can be added two ways: directly, where the sentence is just about the sense—the seat

was hot. The air smelled like peppermint. Or indirectly, where it is mentioned as part of the ongoing narrative—he reached for the cold shovel. A hint of peppermint mingled with the smoky air.

Given a choice, I prefer the latter. But even a direct mention evokes the sense.

Each of the senses is important. For sight, you want to pick objects to describe that convey the mood of the surroundings. If possible, it is useful to do so in order: left to right, or up to down—the way a camera would pan over the scene—because, really, isn't the camera just copying what our eyes naturally do when we move our head?

“He had red hair, a green shirt, and long black boots” is a bit easier to picture than “He had a long black boots, red hair, and a green shirt.”

(This is not always possible, because sometimes, for emphasis purpose, one needs to end a description in the middle. But it is a useful tip.)

Hearing is often the easiest second sense to add, because if there is nothing interesting to hear up close, there almost always something farther away. Up close, I hear the computer and the kitten snoring. Farther away is the hum of the heater. Beyond that a bird cawing outdoors and occasionally a plane leaving Dulles airport. So the author has a choice. Either include the sound of something up close, to add vividness to the surroundings. Or mention a far away noise, something that reminds the reader of the larger world around your characters.

The third easiest is smell. Scents are both easy and hard. Sometimes, there really isn't much to interest the nose. I can't smell anything interesting at the moment here at my desk. Even when I stuck my nose in the wrapper of the mint protein bar I had for breakfast, most of the minty goodness had already escaped.

However, when smells are present, they can be hard to ignore—especially bad smells. Adding dank laundry or a hint of pine-scented cleaner can immediately bring vividness to an otherwise lagging description.

Feeling come in two kinds: what objects feel like and what your body feels. From the point of view of the writer evoking the readers' senses, these are almost two different experiences. If I write “Colleen shivered from the bite of the icy breeze,” it evokes a different mental experience from, “The table had not been sanded. The wood was rough and splintery.”

Both of these kinds of descriptions are valuable in writing. You can even put both in the same paragraph.

And finally taste. Frankly, it is hard to find places to use taste—unless your hero is a dog or a snake who can afford to go around licking ordinary objects. But if the opportunity arises, seize it!

Experience has shown me that adding all five sense impressions usually makes your description too top heavy. Two is a good start. Three strikes me as idea. If I can find a place in a descriptive paragraph or early in a scene to include three sense impressions, the scenario both feels more vivid and is not bogged down by too much description.

This is not a hard and fast rule. Sometimes, I just use one or two. Sometimes, more than three. But three seems to me to be what makes a scene come alive.

The neat thing, for a writer, is that stopping to think about sense impressions makes you more aware. I probably would never have noticed that I can feel the weave of my sweater or hear both the regular whir of my heater and the gentle mrrr of one of the cats had I not paused to pay attention.

Even if we are not aware when we start out, we become more aware in retrospect when we sit down and work our imaginations, trying to piece out what a particular time and place would sound and smell like.

It's great fun. You should try it.

Inktail: Preparing Art for Print by Cedar Sanderson

This article arises from Cedar Sanderson's earlier review at madgeniusclub.com/2020/04/04/inktail-preparing-art-for-print/ That article, however, has the pretty pictures and links that do not work here, so it is worth working there if you want more information.

In this second part of my series where I am making mistakes in public, I'm getting a coloring book print-ready. I'm using the new-to-me program Affinity Publisher to lay it out, and I am using Affinity Photo to get the hand-drawn art ready for layout. Something I learned last time I did this, with Inktail & Friends, is that it's not as simple as getting a good scan or photo of the art. What you need is just the black lines, saved with transparency (I've been saving to png files).

And again, last time I did this I made a lot of mistakes. I'm hoping to avoid those this time, and wind up with a cleaner product. I was dreading this process, to be honest. That's part of why it took me four years to get back around to it. The last one was so much work (and honestly not a lot of profit, not like a novel). However, I have dedicated fans and that makes me happy. So again, this is a labor of love!

Here, I have photographed a page from a sketchbook, and imported that into Affinity Photo. You can see the shadow on the page has translated to 'gray' in the image. If you were doing this properly, you would ensure that you didn't have any shadows. I have said I make a lot of mistakes? But don't worry, it can be done away with. Removing shadows just takes a little longer. Why don't I scan the art? Well, my current scanner is crap. And I don't feel like spending the money to replace it. In fact, if you squint at the top of this screenshot, you'll see that I took this photo with my cell phone (I'll also note I bought my phone for the high megapixel camera, you couldn't do this with most cell snaps).

The next thing I'm going to do is eliminate much of that shadow, and get a nice crisp black. I'm going to do this by going to the 'adjustment' tab, and then sliding those brightness and contrast bars over to the right – usually about +25 is good, but that's something which varies. I eyeball it. Doing this allows for a better pixel delineation and when you do the next step, it's simpler. One thing I usually do here is to merge the photo layer and the adjustment layer, for pixel selection with the selection tool. I'll also go ahead and create a new layer, and fill that with the bucket tool, in a solid black. This layer goes under the photo layer.

My preference for selecting all the white pixels is to go to the dropdowns at the top of the screen, choose 'Select' then 'select sampled color' and you will see the box (captured above in screen shot) pop up. Click on the area of photo you want (white space!) and then adjust the tolerance. I found that for my purposes, 20% was usually a sweet spot. You'll find that if you slide the bead back and forth, the 'dancing ants' will move, which may help with the right selection. And you can always ctrl-Z it

away if you choose unwisely!

And now that you have what you want selected, hit the delete button. Poof! I like Affinity Photo's way of doing this better than Photoshop, I don't have to rasterize and smart object... I just do. What you should see, now, is black on black. This is why we put the black layer under the photo. You won't see that cleanly, but what it will help with is that gray shadow I pointed out at the beginning.

Now you can see all the flaws. I'll use an eraser brush to get that white line off to the left side of the image – it's the edge of the paper. I'll use select by color again (at most, I'll have to do it 3-4 times, 1-2 is more common) to eliminate the gray pixels. At this point, I'll hide or delete the black layer. Sometimes, for images with delicate lines, I'll duplicate the image layer, and then set the top one to 'multiply' to make darker linework. And then I'll save it as a png file, checking the box to not save any hidden elements.

There are a few ways you can port over your images into Affinity Publisher for layout. I usually just go to 'file' then 'place' or Ctrl-Shift-M to bring in the images I have cleaned up and saved in their own folder related to this project. Here, I've put Inktail sipping tea with Foxglove on a page for coloring, and the other page is the back of the image before, left mostly blank in case of coloring with markers, or, as you can see, as an activity page for the colorist.

I realize most of you will never need this tutorial. However, if you happen to want a nice graphic for a book, and you wind up needing to clean it up? This is not the method you would use for a logo, by the way. That is a vector graphic and it's a whole 'nother process. I was very relieved to discover how much simpler and faster this process was than the last time I'd attempted it in Photoshop. I had been planning on digitally re-drawing every single image for this book. Which was a daunting chore.

Inktail, Too! isn't quite print ready. I have to finish up with the text on 'back pages' before it's ready to be sent off to the POD publisher (I'll be using KDP Print) and I will be creating a color cover flat for the printed version. Plus a single cover for the ebook version, which will be published on my website for downloading and at-home printing. I'm hoping to have the time to get it done before next week, but if not, then it may be two weeks before I finish up this series. I'm in no hurry – I have a sneaking suspicion that printing and shipping proof copies of projects is waaaaay down Amazon's list right now.

Any questions?

Literary Criticism

'Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy'

Tamara Wilhite

Tamara Wilhite is a technical writer, industrial engineer, mother of two, and published sci-fi and horror author.

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a rich vein for philosophers. It presented two robots debating

the fate of humanity. It has shown us competing moral systems in literal conflict in “Civil War”. The Avengers “Infinity Saga”, the combined “Infinity War” and “Endgame” movies led to a collection of over thirty philosophical essays by the publishers of the “And Philosophy” series.

About "Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy"

Chapter 1 presents the ethical conundrum of the return from the snap ranging from the risk of starvation to property rights disputes. Chapter 2 applies existentialism to life after the Snap. The author suggests Iron Man can best be understood through Sartre’s worldview, Bruce Banner by Camus and Captain American via Levinas. Hawkeye is relegated to Nietzsche’s nihilism. I suggest brushing up on Nietzsche, because he’s cited often in this philosophy book.

Chapter 3 analyzes the nature of grief in the post-Snap world and the psychological impact of collective trauma. It presents Thanos as the God of Death. Natasha is presented as his counterpoint. Chapter 4 asks why grief hurts so much.

Chapter 5 seeks to define the logic of time travel in Endgame and points out the contradictions in the plot. It tries to offer a solution via multi-verse theory. Chapter 6 discusses Nebula’s time travel paradox, killing her earlier self. It then tries to solve the paradox via subjective timelines. Chapter 7 asks us to define “genuine” time travel. Then we’re back to defining the rules of time travel in the MCU.

Chapter 8 asks why Dr. Strange would withhold knowledge and compares the amount of knowledge he has on potential outcomes with a God. Chapter 9 presents a philosophical analysis of Captain America versus Tony Stark, a conflict that goes back to “Captain America: Civil War”. The author suggests Tony Stark is a consequentialist and Captain America is a deontologist. It argues Captain America is right given the concept of the multi-verse, because those who act based on the likely outcome of their actions are paralyzed by the Butterfly Effect.

Chapter 10 compares the narratives of Gamora and Natasha’s sacrifices. It also discusses the ethics of each as well as how Natasha’s self-sacrifice met the criteria for getting the Soul Stone. Plato’s Symposium on the Nature of Love is invoked. Thanos’ sacrifice of Gamora is described as a futuristic, utilitarian trolley problem.

Chapter 11 focuses on population ethics. It breaks down the ethical weight of the Snap using totalism, averaging and what is called “person affecting view”.

Chapter 12 discusses the nature of sacrifice. It presents examples of literal blood sacrifice in various religions. It loses points for intellectual dishonesty when having no problem comparing Natasha’s Christ-like sacrifice to save the world to Christian tradition but refusing to link Muslim suicide bombers to Islam. Chapter 13 uses examples in “Endgame” to explain the concept of abduction and adductive reasoning.

Chapter 14 is one of the first essays addressing the moral system Thanos is using. This one draws parallel from Japanese warrior culture. It then argues the Avengers only succeed by embracing death. Strange probably had to die so that Tony was alive to do the reverse-Snap. Natasha literally sacrificed herself. Tony died to save the world.

Chapter 15 links death and humor but avoids gallows humor. Instead, it looks at Loki’s repeated efforts to cheat death. Chapter 16 outlines the four philosophies of death and how Endgame parallels Christian narratives. Chapter 17 dives into the environmentalist doomer mindset. It begs us to believe the greens’

predictions of the end of the world, so be the hero and sacrifice quality of life so we don't all have to die. Chapter 18 is an analysis of Tony Stark's life, and more importantly, death.

Chapter 19 compares Abraham and Thanos and concludes he's no Abraham. Chapter 20 argues Thanos was the hero of the movies. This isn't a unique view, because I've read others who outlined how Thanos' journey in the "Infinity War" movie perfectly matches the classic hero's journey. "Endgame" in theory deconstructs it as well as reverses its outcome.

Chapter 21 spells out the differences between Thanos in the comics and Thanos in the Avengers movies. Chapter 22 compares Daenerys Targaryen in "Game of Thrones" to Thanos. It argues they are both made evil by nurture, nature and messianic destiny. Chapter 23 states that Thanos was moral but lost his compass, thus he committed evil acts with good intentions.

Chapter 24 analyzes the critical moment where Thanos says, "I am inevitable" and Tony Stark says, "I am Iron Man." It compares this debate to the Christian tradition of "I am" statements. Chapter 25 outlines why Thanos was a good villain. (If you want terrifying, look at the sheer volume of dialogue arguing Thanos is right in concept and even in action.) It also takes a look at Ultron's worldview and similar end goals. Chapter 26 argues that Thanos is a hero through the lens of Nietzsche's philosophy. It says his failure was using master morality on what is arguably a slave universe and missing the need for internal controls like those naturally regulated systems have.

Chapter 27 suggests Thanos is the modern version of Thanatos, the god of death. It then analyzes Martin Heidegger's "Being and Time".

Chapter 28 asks us what makes Steve Rogers good. What did he do and believe that made him capable of wielding Mjolnir. Chapter 29 studies the transformation of Tony Stark from his introduction as a billionaire playboy to heroic savior.

Chapter 30 is the second climate doomer essay. It argues that we need to follow Socratic ethics to literally be good and save the world from destruction. Chapter 30 is slightly better, since it has Nebula arguing with Socrates. Chapter 31 concludes the set and asks if Hulk had a soul separate from Bruce Banner.

Summary

The MCU is funny and thrilling in equal parts. The Avengers Infinity Saga gave us amazing parallel arcs, philosophical debates and logical puzzles that will be debated for decades while the Marvel Avengers movies themselves will be taught in theater class as the gold standard in how to tell stories, develop characters and keep the fans and general public equally thrilled about comic book movies. "Avengers Infinity Saga and Philosophy: Go for the Head" is a great read for those who want to mine the philosophical and ethical issues behind the busy action scenes barring the few obvious conflicts like Iron Man versus Captain America in "Civil War". © 2020 Tamara Wilhite

The Zero Blessing by Chris Nuttall Commentary on Chapter 1 Analysis by Chris Nuttall

I was challenged to write a DVD Commentary – a set of notes expanding on what I'd written – for one of my works. After some thought, I decided to try The Zero Blessing and see how things went.

Comments welcome, of course. In the following, my remarks are in italics.

Chapter One

When our father wishes to punish us, he sends us to school.

It probably won't surprise most of my readers to know I hated school. 'The schoolboy trudging unwillingly to school' was me. Caitlyn/Cat's sisters definitely agree.

Or so my sisters say, after spending four years of their lives in the classroom. They complain all the time, whining and moaning about having to walk to the school and learn about everything, but magic. Most magical children are homeschooled, but we had to go to school and learn. Alana hates it because she's not learning about magic; Bella hates it because she's not allowed to get away with not doing her work.

And me? I rather like it.

Of course she does. It's the one place she can actually shine.

Not that I would have admitted it to them, of course. Alana blames me for us having to go, even though Dad was the one who sent us there. She thinks that my lack of magic is why we go to mundane school. Dad can't teach us everything, can he? Mum taught us how to read and write, but they don't have the time to teach us maths, history and all the other things normal children learn as they grow up. And while I could never work a single spell, I enjoyed studying magic and magical history. I wanted to be a historian before I grew up.

Cat is actually the most studious of the three sisters – and, in many ways, she's the smartest. She spent a lot of her life just soaking up information she might be able to use ... or she would be able to use, if she had magic.

The school itself was a relatively small building, playing host to the children rich enough to afford an education, but lacking the magic or family connections they need to get an apprenticeship with a magician. Half of our classmates would leave at the end of the year, instead of going on to the upper school. My sisters would leave too, now we'd celebrated our twelfth birthday. This was their last day. They would be going to Jude's Sorcerous Academy, where they'd learn how to turn their already-impressive magic into real sorcery. Dad had already booked their places. I envied them, even as I looked forward to being without them. Having two powerful sisters is a nightmare when you can't even sense magic. I kept blundering into traps because I couldn't see them.

A point which I hope is clear – within the first chapters or so – is that Cat is effectively disabled, by the standards of her society. As far as they are concerned, she isn't just blind, she's deaf and dumb as well. Many people raised in high-magic environments actually think there's something creepy about her, something wrong. Her peers are often repelled, often without realising why they are repelled.

The teacher, Madam Rosebud, was a middle-aged woman who eyed my sisters and I with dire suspicion, mingled with envy. I think she probably wanted to be a sorceress in her youth, but she lacked the talent to get some real education. She envied us for our easy magic – I don't think she realised I didn't have magic – and didn't hesitate to point out our failings in front of the class. Dad had told us, in no uncertain terms, that we weren't to use magic at school, but my sisters were good at intimidating their classmates. Hardly anyone dared to laugh.

Madame Rosebud is pretty much the picture of a teacher I disliked at school. I still don't recall her with any fondness.

“The difference between an Object of Power and a Device of Power is that Objects of Power last forever,” Oz droned. He was thirteen years old, kept back a year for failing the last set of exams. He was handsome enough, I suppose, but his voice was so boring that it put the class to yawning. “They simply do not fail.”

Having to listen – and pretend to pay attention – as my fellow pupils tried and failed to come up with new ways to say the same thing isn't something I remember with much fondness either.

I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes as Madam Rosebud's baleful eyes moved from face to face. Oz was right, but really ... I'd learnt about Objects of Power from Dad and Dad's lessons were far more interesting. Dad's apprentices are very skilled at making Devices of Power. And yet, nothing they make lasts longer than a year. I'd heard of swords, charmed to cut through anything in their path, that needed to be charmed again within months. Dad's clients found it a constant frustration. Some of them even think Dad does it deliberately, even though everyone else has the same problem.

My sisters snorted rudely as Oz took a bow and returned to his seat. He flushed angrily, but he didn't say anything. Strong as he was – he was the biggest boy in class – he was still helpless against magic. My sisters could have hexed him before he could even take a step towards them, if they wanted. There were some desultory claps from the front row – the sneaks and swots who were working desperately for a scholarship – but nothing else. Half the class was trying hard not to fall asleep.

Cat doesn't say it, but Oz isn't quite as helpless as her. He could sense a spell coming at him or lurking on his chair, waiting for him to sit down. For that matter, he could master a few protective charms if he worked at it. Yes, Alana and Bella have an advantage, but it's not insurmountable.

It may not be clear here, but – in most places – this world is actually gender-neutral. A woman can be just as powerful, in magic, as a man.

“Caitlyn,” Madam Rosebud said. “If you will come to the front, please?”

I picked up my essay and headed to the front row, ignoring the quiet snickering from behind me. For once, I was actually looking forward to reading my work to the rest of the class. I'd been told to write about the history of the Thousand-Year Empire and the Sorcerous Wars, a subject I found fascinating. Hundreds of secrets were lost in the wars, including the technique used to make Objects of Power. My father had so many books on the period, including some that couldn't be found anywhere else, that I'd been spoilt for choice. Boiling it down to a couple of pages had been a headache.

Cat's relationship with her sisters is best described as unpleasant. Alana, the ambitious one, sees Cat as both a target (and test subject) and a major embarrassment. Bella is less unpleasant, but willing to go along with Alana more than she should.

My sisters were smiling as I turned to face the class. In hindsight, that should have been a warning. My sisters spent as little time with me as they could. I rustled the paper for attention, then opened my mouth. Words came tumbling out ...

They weren't the right words. “Madam Rosebud is fat, fat, fat,” I said. My hands, moving against my

will, started to clap. “Madam Rosebud is fat ...”

This is, in many ways, the illustration of precisely why Cat is in such a dangerous situation. She’s vulnerable in ways few of her peers share. This may be a little joke, by Alana’s standards, but the implications are horrific.

The class stared at me in stark disbelief, their faces torn between an insane urge to giggle and an overpowering urge to flee. No one, absolutely no one, mocked Madam Rosebud. Fat she might be, ugly and smelly she might be, but no one dared mock her. I tried to clamp my lips shut as word after word spewed forth ... the spell collapsed, far too late. Alana was covering her mouth to keep from laughing out loud, her eyes sparkling with malice. She must have hexed me on the way up, I realised ...

A hand caught my arm and swung me around. “I have never experienced such disrespect,” Madam Rosebud thundered. Her face was so close to mine that I could smell the onions she’d had for lunch. I cowered back, despite myself. “You ...”

She marched me into the naughty corner, muttered a cantrip and then left me there, staring at the wall. My feet were firmly fixed to the ground, held in place by magic. I struggled, but I couldn’t lift my shoe. Madam Rosebud’s voice boomed in my ear as she silenced the class, ordering my sisters to take a note to my father. I hated Alana in that moment, Alana and Bella too. Not content with going to Jude’s, not content with being able to escape their hated zero of a sister, they’d ruined my prospects of entering the upper school. Madam Rosebud wouldn’t let me stay in her class, not after everything I’d called her.

And dad wouldn’t let me tell her the truth, I thought, numbly.

Someone who read the first draft commented that they didn’t find the above scene realistic, that Madam Rosebud should have known that Cat had been enspelled. To which I replied there were at least four explanations: she honestly didn’t know that Cat had been enspelled (particularly as she knows this is Cat’s last day at school even if Cat herself doesn’t know it); she knew that Alana cast the spell, but took the coward’s way out by blaming Cat (because Alana would be very important one day); she thought that Cat was to blame by not resisting the (very simple) spell; or, finally, Alana had made promises of future favours. Pick the one you like <grin>.

I’d never been able to cast a single spell, not one. Even the basic cantrips are beyond me. It isn’t uncommon for children to be unable to cast spells until they reach a certain age, but most authorities agree that magical talent shows itself by eleven. If it doesn’t show itself by then, it isn’t there. And I was twelve ... a zero. No magic, no sensitivity to magic ... my father had forbidden me to tell anyone, but rumours were already getting out. Alana and Bella, showing off their spells whenever they wanted, didn’t help. People were asking why I wasn’t such a show-off.

Magic is pretty much the same as music in this universe. Anyone can learn to tap out notes on a piano or sing a song, but you need real talent to compose new tunes or sing for your supper. Alana and Bella have an advantage because they started very young (akin to children of musicians picking up music from a very early age.) Cat is odd because she literally cannot cast a single spell.

I stood there, helplessly, as the class filed out for the day. Madam Rosebud was making me wait, then. I crossed my arms and waited, hoping that Dad would be in a good mood. But I knew he was probably going to be unhappy. Sir Griffons was visiting and that always annoyed my father. I don’t know why he didn’t simply tell the knight to go to another enchanter. It wasn’t as if Sir Griffons was more important

than my father. Knight or not, he was no sorcerer.

Sir Griffons is someone who may be important later on, so I tossed in the mention here.

It felt like hours before the door opened and I heard my father's measured tread crossing the room. I could feel his gaze on my back as he spoke briefly to Madam Rosebud, cutting off a bleat from the harpy before she could work herself into a frenzy. I tensed, despite myself. I was going to pay for that, next term. Very few people would pick a fight with my father – and no one would do it twice – but Madam Rosebud could mark me down for anything ...

“Caitlyn,” Dad said. He heard him walking up behind me. “Free yourself. We have to go.”

I twisted my head to scowl at him. The cantrip was simple. My sisters wouldn't have had any trouble escaping when Madam Rosebud's back was turned. But for me ... it was utterly unbreakable. My feet were firmly fixed to the ground.

My father scowled back at me. “Now.”

He was a tall dark man, dressed in black and gold robes that denoted his status as the High Magus of Magus Court. His dark eyes normally sparkled with light, particularly when his daughters were around, but now they were grim. I knew I was in trouble, even though it was Alana's fault. Dad ... had told her off, more than once, for casting spells on me, but he also expected me to learn to counter the spells. And yet, without magic, it was pointless. I could say the words and make the gestures, yet I always ended up looking stupid. Sure, I know the words to turn you into a frog, but without magic the spell is useless.

When I was designing the characters, I rather pegged Samuel L. Jackson as Cat's father.

I knelt down and undid my shoes, then stepped out of them. The shoes themselves remained firmly stuck to the floor. Dad eyed me for a long moment before sighing and cancelling the cantrip. I picked up my shoes, pulled them back on and followed him towards the door, not daring to look at Madam Rosebud. My sisters wouldn't be back, next term, but they'd ruined my life anyway. Any hopes I might have had of a life without them were gone.

This is, of course, Cat's attempt to overcome her disability. She's cunning and uses a LOT of trickery to try to keep ahead of her siblings (and everyone else). Unfortunately, there are limits to what she can do.

“You have to work harder,” Dad said, as soon as we were outside. The summer air was warm, but I felt cold. “Your magic needs to be developed.”

I didn't look at him. “Dad ... I don't have magic,” I said. “I'm a zero.”

“No daughter of mine is a zero,” Dad said, sternly. “You have magic. You just have to learn how to access it.”

When I was designing the universe, I decided that 'zero' would be the common term for someone who couldn't cast many (or any) spells. It isn't exactly the same as 'muggle' or 'squib' because of the prevalence of magic, but it does have a certain sting. I was rather annoyed, afterwards, to be told about

'The Familiar of Zero.' Thankfully, save for the name, TZB has little in common with the manga.

I felt a wave of despair, mingled with bitter guilt. My father had expended more money than I cared to think about, just trying to undo the lock on my magic. I'd used tools designed to bring out even a tiny spark of magic, brewed endless potions in the hopes of instinctively using magic to trigger them, undergone rituals designed to put me in touch with my magic ... the only thing we hadn't tried was left-hand magic. Dad had been so furious, the moment it had been suggested, that no one had dared mention it again. And nothing had worked. I was as powerless now as I'd been on the day I first picked up a focusing tool and tried to use it.

"I can't," I moaned. If I hadn't found magic by now, I didn't have it. "I don't have any power."

Dad gave me a sardonic look. "And what about Great Aunt Stregheria? You broke her spell."

I shuddered. Great Aunt Stregheria was a witch with a capital B, an ugly old crone somehow related to my mother. She dressed like an evil witch from a fairy tale and talked like everyone else, including my parents, existed to do her bidding. And she hated kids. My sisters and I had done something to offend her – I forget what, now – and she turned all three of us into frogs. We'd been ten at the time. It was the first time any of us had been transfigured against our wills.

Dad was utterly furious. He literally picked Great Aunt Stregheria up and threw her out of the grounds, then reset the wards to deny her admittance ever again. But, for all of his power, he couldn't unravel the spell she'd placed on us. Neither he nor mum could undo it. We'd feared – even Alana, who'd got on best with the witch – that we would be stuck as frogs until the end of time, or at least until my father swallowed his pride and asked her to remove the spell.

But the spell on me had worn off in an hour, leaving me human again. My sisters had been stuck that way for a week when they returned to normal.

This is actually the first clue to Cat's true nature. But her father and mother saw it as proof that she actually did have magic, even if she didn't know how to access it.

My father said, afterwards, that I must have used magic instinctively. He insisted that I had somehow broken her spell and freed myself. He even cast spells on me himself to encourage me to develop my talent. None of his spells lasted as long as he had intended either. But it was never something I could do consciously. If I had a talent – and he seemed to think I had something – it wasn't one I could develop. My sisters sneered that magic was allergic to me.

"Dad, I don't have magic," I said, finally. It had taken me long enough to come to terms with it. "I'm just a zero."

Cat spends a lot of her time battling despair.

Dad sighed as he walked on. I trotted beside him, looking around. Normally, I would have enjoyed the chance to spend some time alone with him, but now ... now I just felt tired and bitter. I'd never backed down in front of my sisters, I'd worked hard to find ways to extract revenge for their humiliations, yet there were limits. They would get better and better at magic, while I ... the best I could hope for, I suspected, was theoretical magician. And even they tended to have magic. They needed it to prove their theories.

There were other options. I wasn't a bad forger, even though I lacked magic; I was smart, capable ... I could have found work easily, if I hadn't been born to House Aguirre. The family name is a blessing, but it is also a curse. I was expected to be a powerful magician and I couldn't even light a spark! There was no way I could work for anyone without magic, even the king. They'd all expect great things from me.

I sighed as we walked down the street, other pedestrians giving us plenty of room. It was just growing busy as more and more people finished their work and came out onto the streets to shop or merely to chat with their friends. A shopgirl was using magic to sweep dust out onto the streets, a blacksmith was chanting spells as he hammered metal into its shape ... a street magician was showing off, but hardly anyone was paying attention. Shallot has a larger population of magicians than anywhere else in Tintagel, as well as Jude's and a couple of magical universities. You had to do more than swallow fire and breathe water to impress this city.

But that clown has more magic than I do, I thought, feeling another flicker of bitter resentment. Illusionist or not, he was still a magician. And he can do something else with his life.

This is, really, another illustration of Cat's problem. Magic is as common in this society as technology is in ours. Cat cannot do anything with magic, which makes it hard for her to hold down a meaningful job.

Outside the city, as will be explored later, there are other options. But Cat doesn't know about them.

We crossed the bridge from Water Shallot to North Shallot, the guards on the gates saluting my father as we walked past. North Shallot is the richest part of the city, home to merchants and traders as well as sorcerers, alchemists and enchanters. I'd often wondered why Madam Rosebud and her superiors hadn't opened their school in North Shallot, although the costs of buying land in the north are much higher. No doubt someone in Magus Court had objected, loudly. Magicians rule North Shallot. Everyone else lives on their sufferance.

"Things are changing, Cat," my father said. I shivered. He only called me Cat when he was worried. "House Rubén has been making advances in Magus Court. My position may be under threat."

Magus Court is responsible for ordering magic within the city limits. Holding a post on the council is not something to be surrendered lightly. Cat's father may not be the mayor, but he's definitely one of the powers behind the throne.

I looked up at his dark face. He was worried. House Rubén was our family's great rival, our only real equal in Shallot. I'd grown up listening to horror stories about how they treated their friends and so-called allies. It would be hard for them to unseat my father, I thought, but they could undermine him. Stepping down from his post was one thing; being unseated was quite another. The other Houses would back away from us.

"He can't do that," I said. "Surely ..."

"He's trying," Dad told me. "House Rubén has wanted to win power for generations. Now ... they might have a chance."

"Because of me," I said. "Because I don't have any powers."

Magic is stronger, I have been told time and time again, if children are twins or triplets ... there's even a legend of a witch who gave birth to five magical children. My parents, with three daughters, should have been powerful indeed, their bloodline secure for generations to come. But I had no powers ...

... And the trinity my sisters and I should have formed had never come into existence.

House Rubén had only two children, as far as I knew. Twins rather than triplets. But both of them were powerful. There was no weak link.

“You have power,” my father said, sharply. He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself. “The spells I have cast on you ... they should have stayed in place until I took them off. But you broke them.”

I looked down at the pavestones. “But I don't know how!”

“Figure it out,” my father said, sternly. He squeezed my shoulder, gently. “Time is not on our side.”

I had some pretty conflicting responses to Cat's father. Some people thought he was borderline abusive, others thought they understood his point. I prefer to see him as a grey figure – he loves all three of his daughters and wants them to be happy, but – because of his position – he has to use them to promote his family's interests. He genuinely thinks Cat does have magic, because – at least in part – because that's what he wants to believe.

I shook my head, helplessly. Maybe I did have a gift. But it was more likely that I was just a freak, a child born without any magic at all.

A zero.

The Zero Blessing by Chris Nuttall Commentary on Chapter 2 Analysis by Chris Nuttall

I don't know how long I'll keep doing this – probably up to CH10, if anyone is interested in me continuing ... <grin>.

Chapter Two

Aguirre Hall is more than just my family's residence. It's the centre of our power.

One of the fundamental points that I've noticed a lot of light fantasy works miss is just how the nobility – however defined – wields power. Lord Whatever isn't just powerful because he's rich, he's powerful because he has a small army of retainers at his disposal. The old families of England – the Percy Family, for example – were never just a small extended family. They had loyal servants and clients, soldiers and suchlike under their command. The monarch might be the titular ruler of the country, but over-mighty noblemen could often threaten the monarch's position.

As military tech advanced, it became harder and harder for the great noblemen to match the central government. During the English Civil War, King Charles had problems recruiting soldiers, as the old nobility had been weakened during Queen Elizabeth and King James's reign. They never truly recovered, even after the Restoration, which is partly why Bonnie Prince Charlie was never successful in raising the English Jacobites. Post-1745, private military forces in the UK largely faded completely.

(I think Rowling nodded to this when she gave Draco two cronies – Crabbe and Goyle.)

In this case, Cat's father is the ruler of a large household of magicians and forgers, with clients all over the city. He's a very powerful man.

I followed my father through the gates – warded extensively to keep out hawkers, traders and pedestrians, even though I couldn't sense the spells – and up towards the hall. It is an immense building, a mansion composed of stone and practically coated in protective enchantments and spells. The magical community is fond of testing our protections from time to time, sending probes over the walls and into our wards. So far, none of them have actually managed to break through the defences.

Travis, the butler, opened the door as we approached. He's lesser family – he has a blood tie to us – and it gives him an ability to sense the more senior members as they walk into the mansion. I rather liked him, despite a snooty attitude that grated on my nerves from time to time. My sisters joked he had his nose so high in the air that he kept walking into walls, but I didn't think so. Besides, he had always been kind to me.

Lesser family, in this case, refers to people who are related to the mainline family, but not that closely. Travis is effectively a client of his Great Uncle.

“Sir,” he said, addressing my father. “Your family is gathered in the lower dining room.”

“Very good,” Dad said. “We shall attend on them at once.”

I sighed – I'd hoped for a chance to sit down and plot revenge – but Dad clearly had other ideas. It was too much to hope that he would punish Alana, of course. He wanted me to develop my powers ... and if that meant allowing my sister to jinx and hex me whenever my back was turned, he'd allow it as long as she didn't do anything life-threatening. Social death, of course, didn't register. It never seemed to occur to my father that while he had the power to be rude to all and sundry, I didn't have the same luxury. No one made allowances for zeroes.

Like too many parents, Cat's father believes that children can be pushed into progressing further if life becomes uncomfortable for them. He therefore turns a blind eye to Alana bullying Cat, telling himself that it's actually good for her. Obviously, he's wrong. Cat has all the incentive she needs to learn magic, but not the ability.

The hallway opened up in front of us as my father headed for the stairs, his calm measured tread echoing in the air. I followed him, pausing just long enough to glance at the Family Sword, buried in the Family Hearthstone. The sword is a genuine Object of Power, crafted over a thousand years ago and handed down from generation to generation. According to legend, only a true member of the family can draw the sword from the stone. I've seen a couple of apprentices, strong young men, try and fail to pull it free. The sword had been utterly unmovable.

I've tried to draw a distinction between Objects of Power and Devices of Power – the former actually hold a mythical status, like the One Ring or the Deathly Hallows, even when their use is seemingly mundane.

I'd tried to pull it out myself, one day when Alana's taunts had become unbearable. The sword had come out easily, even though I'd only been nine years old. It was proof, I suppose, that my parents didn't take in a foundling they'd found on the steps ... but I still couldn't do magic. Half the sword's true powers seemed beyond my reach. My father, wielding the sword, could work wonders. But then, he could work wonders without the sword too.

Yep, Cat is definitely her father's daughter. He checked.

"Come on," Dad said, crossly. "Don't dawdle."

I gave the sword one last look, then hurried up the stairs after him. The lower two floors of the mansion are devoted to my family's work, ranging from living rooms for the apprentices and servants to forges, spell-crafting chambers and the lower library, one of the finest libraries in the world. The really interesting – and unique – texts are kept in the upper library, but most magicians would be pleased merely to have a look at the lower library. It's the greatest store of magical knowledge in the kingdom, outside Jude's, and it's all ours.

Another source of power within this world is having sole possession of magical textbooks handed down from the Thousand Year Empire.

The upper two levels, protected by a set of inner wards, are reserved for the family. No one, not even Dad's most trusted apprentices, can pass through the doors without permission, unless they're recognised as being of family blood. The doors open easily at my touch, but won't move an inch for someone who isn't keyed into the wards. And there are more powerful defences lurking in reserve, just waiting for someone foolish enough to break through the outer layer. A magician who tries to break into our private quarters will spend the rest of his life wishing he hadn't.

The downside of living in such a household is that your house isn't just a house, but an administrative centre. Like the White House, only a relatively small collection of rooms are put aside for the family itself.

I wanted to go to my bedroom, if only long enough to splash water on my face, but Dad led me down the corridor and into the dining room before I could say a word. The smaller dining room is still larger than the classroom, easily big enough to sit thirty or forty guests ... I've often wondered why Dad insists on having family dinners, when we could easily eat in our rooms. There are only five of us, after all. My parents, my sisters and myself.

Alana shot me a smug look as I entered the room. She looked ... regal. My mother had been teaching Bella and her all the tricks she needed to get herself crowned queen bee, once she entered Jude's. I'd sat in on a couple of lessons, when Bella had insisted on not suffering alone, but I'd found them immensely boring. Popularity was meaningless compared to power and I had none. As long as my sisters were around, I'd always be an outcast. Who would be my friend when it would expose them to my sister's malice?

This is, of course, one of the many reasons why school bullying is so destructive.

Kids – and many adults, when the internet lynch mob is on the prowl – have a habit of shying away from someone who is being bullied, fearful of attracting the attention of the bully to themselves. This actually makes life worse for the victim, as he/she comes to see the entire population of the school as the bully, even when most of the students haven't actually done anything.

Like I said, I hated school.

I rolled my eyes at Alana, trying not to show how much it hurt to see her. Alana held herself like an adult, her long dark hair hanging down to brush against her shoulders. The dark blue dress she wore drew attention to her face, which was carefully made up to hide all traces of imperfections. Even at twelve, Alana was tall. She'd be taller than my mother by the time she graduated and went on to run the family. And the simple necklace she wore, glittering with eldritch light, was a sign of power.

“Dad,” Bella said. “You're back!”

Dad smiled at her. I tried to keep my expression under control as I sat down. Bella had always been Dad's favourite, although I'd never understood why. She was short and pudgy, barely putting in the minimum effort to succeed at anything. I could imagine her graduating from school and then coming home to spend the rest of her life vegetating, despite having more magic in her fingertips than most people have in their entire bodies. She was clever enough, when she could be bothered to be clever, but she rarely cared enough to put in the effort. I would have done far more if I'd had her powers.

Both Alana and Bella went off the rails, but they went off in different directions. Alana thinks she's entitled to power and is willing to work to get it, while Bella is content to sup from the silver spoon for the rest of her life. Indeed, both of them suffered because their parents were more focused on trying to help Cat than them.

But then, she didn't need to work, not if she didn't want to. The family would take care of her for the rest of her life.

Dad clapped his hands, the sound echoing outside the room. I groaned inwardly – even that simple spell was denied me – and watched as Lucy wheeled the food into the room. The last day of schooling, it seemed, was special. Cook had produced his finest roast beef, then used magic to keep it hot until we were ready to eat. Lucy might be a maid, but even she could cast the spells to release the food. She'd always been nice to me, at least when she knew I was listening, yet I'd seen her cast a few disdainful glances at me when she'd thought I wasn't looking. I don't know why. Alana had targeted Lucy with a few nasty spells before Mum had put a stop to it. Whatever Mum had said to my sister had clearly been effective.

Lucy, like Travis, is lesser family. She resents Cat because Cat has a high position, despite a complete lack of magic. This wasn't too uncommon amongst bastard children of the nobility from 1100 onwards, where they would often be raised at Court (like Henry Fitzroy) but never have a chance at real power. I don't know how many of them turned traitor, but I'd bet good money that quite a few of them did.

“Let us eat,” Dad said, after casting a spell to make sure the food was safe to eat. I don't know why he bothered – the cook had been with the family longer than I had been alive – but he insisted on checking, every time. He'd taught us all the spells too, although I couldn't make them work. Someone who wanted to poison me would have an easy time of it. “Lucy, carve the meat.”

Henry, the cook, had excelled himself – as usual. I would have enjoyed the meal, I thought, if I hadn't been brooding. Alana had probably ensured I wouldn't get to enter upper school, even if my father shovelled money in their direction. Madam Rosebud was probably already complaining to the headmaster about my cheeky attitude. And if I didn't get to go on, what then? There were no apprenticeships for students without powers, at least in Shallot. I couldn't even get hired as a sailor until I was older!

And I'd still need some spells if I wanted to sail, I thought, numbly. What can I do with no magic at all?

This is, again, the crux of the problem.

"I worked out the last stages of the potion," Mum said. "The idiot who wrote the book left out two steps and altered five of the quantities."

One of the points that will become important later is that this society suffered a major disaster – the fall of the Thousand Year Empire – several hundred years ago and a great deal of knowledge was lost. The books that remain often leave details out – including one of great significance – because the writer couldn't imagine anyone not knowing it. Kat's mother, among others, tries to work out what's missing.

"Well done, Mum," Bella said. "Can anyone brew it now?"

"Caitlyn can't," Alana said. She snickered. "Zeros can't brew potions."

I felt my cheeks heat with helpless rage. Mum had taught me how to brew, but – of course – I lacked the magic to trigger the cascade that turned the potion from a mixture of odd ingredients to something useful. It didn't matter how carefully I followed the instructions, or what changes I made if I felt like experimenting ... nothing worked. Alana or Bella could take a potion I'd brewed and trigger it, but I couldn't trigger theirs. Maybe I was doomed to work in an apothecary. Someone who had enough magic to start the cascade, but lacked the patience to brew the mixture properly ...

"That's very good, dear," Dad said. "Are you going to write it up?"

"I think so," Mum said. "It isn't anything worth trying to reserve for the family."

"Don't let Stregheria hear you say that," Alana said. She was trying to be grown-up, acting as though she was an adult already. "She'd expect you to reserve it."

Alana admires her Great Aunt, but for the wrong reasons – Great Aunt Stregheria is a powerful and independent woman who can get away with slapping (in effect) one of the most powerful men in the world. Alana actually sees that sort of power as something to aspire to, but doesn't see the downsides – no one likes Great Aunt Stregheria and no one will help her if she's in trouble.

Mum looked annoyed, her lips thinning until they were almost invisible. Great Aunt Stregheria certainly would expect the recipe to be held in reserve. She was a selfish old biddy, one utterly devoted to herself. Mum had never liked her, even before she'd turned Mum's children into frogs. I'd heard, afterwards, that Mum had been on the verge of calling Stregheria out for a duel. Stregheria was old and powerful, but I wouldn't have bet against my mother. She was powerful too.

“There is little to be gained by keeping it back,” Mum said, stiffly. “It’s a basic healing potion, not something radical.”

I don’t know if it comes across here, but Cat’s mother is a researcher at heart – she loves unlocking secrets and proving her skills. It sometimes leads to ... interesting ... discussions with her husband.

I listened, absently, as we finished our dinner. I’d hoped, as soon as Lucy had removed the plates, to be allowed to leave, but no such luck. Dad told all three of us to follow him to his study. I sighed, even as Alana exchanged excited looks with Bella. Dad’s study, to them, was a hall of wonders. To me it was just another dangerous room in a dangerous house.

It was, in many ways, the sort of study I’d like to have. The walls were lined with bookshelves, including many volumes I knew were unique or forbidden; the chairs were charmed to be comfortable, all the better to allow my father to work. But I also knew the room was strongly warded, so strongly warded that even Mum couldn’t enter without permission. Alana had tried to sneak in a few times, but she’d always been caught. Dad had not been amused.

“Your mother and I have made some decisions about your futures,” Dad said, once we were sitting on comfortable armchairs. They were so large that I half-wondered if someone had cast a shrinking spell on me when I wasn’t looking. Even Dad looked small, sitting on his chair. “The three of you will be going to Jude’s.”

This is not, of course, what Cat expected.

It was so unexpected that I didn’t quite grasp what he’d said, not for a long chilling moment. It had to be a joke, a cruel joke. Even my sisters looked shocked. Alana actually paled. And why not? I’d long since given up hope of going to Jude’s. Entering a school for magicians without magic ... it would have been safer to cover myself in fish sauce, then go for a swim in the shark tank.

Originally, this was a concept that was meant for Schooled In Magic. But I’d set that universe up in a manner that made it impossible – or, at least, impossible for anyone to actually succeed. Like I believe I mentioned, I wish I’d had this core idea before I started work on SIM.

“Dad,” Alana managed, finally. “Caitlyn can’t go to Jude’s!”

Dad fixed her with his stern look. “And why not?”

Bella spluttered. “Because she’s a zero!”

Alana and Bella are being brats here, but they do have a point.

I’m actually quite fond of situations where the jerkass has a point. Normally, the point is ignored because the jerk isn’t popular. Really, that happened to me a lot during my schooldays. I’d say something and be ignored because one of the more popular students had a better idea.

“Caitlyn defeated a spell that bested me,” Dad pointed out, icily. “Can either of you say the same?”

“... I,” Bella said. “Dad ...”

Alana took over. “Dad, she hasn’t been able to cast a single spell,” she said, talking about me as if I wasn’t there. “She can’t even do this!”

She waved a hand in the air. Sparkling light appeared out of nowhere, surrounding her like a halo. It was a very basic spell, perhaps one of the most basic. Light could be bright, perhaps even blinding, but it couldn’t cause any real harm. Most parents preferred to use light spells to teach their kids because the risk of accidentally starting a fire or injuring themselves was minimal.

And she was right. I couldn’t even do that.

“Your sister has magic,” Dad said, firmly. It was a tone that promised punishment to anyone who dared to disagree with him. “She just cannot access it. Being at Jude’s will help her to develop her magic.”

I swallowed, hard. “Dad ... I can’t go.”

“You will,” Dad said. “The family needs the trinity.”

“We have a weak link,” Alana muttered.

This world believes that twins – and triplets and so on – actually reinforce the magic, if they learn to work as a team. This is true, sort of. It isn’t true here because Cat can’t work magic with her siblings, hence the weak link remark, and the other two have very different personalities.

Dad gave her a long considering look. “Do you still want to go to the party tomorrow evening?”

Alana winced. “Yes, Dad.”

“Then be quiet,” Dad ordered.

He looked back at me. “Caitlyn, I understand your concerns,” he said. “Be that as it may, you do have magic. You have to be trained to use it.”

“I don’t,” I said, miserably.

Alana had told me that I’d be disowned when I turned twelve, if I didn’t show any signs of magic. I didn’t want to believe her, but I’d always worried. She’d certainly made it clear that she would disown me, when she became head of the family. Her great and terrible future would be blighted by a powerless sister ...

Alana is probably right here, even though – again – she’s being a jerk. Having a complete zero in the family raises interesting and quite worrying questions about what might be running through the bloodstream. It will not only undermine Alana by calling her magic into question, it will weaken her hand when it comes to discussing potential marriage arrangements after she graduates. Suitors will wonder if Alana’s kids will be born without magic too.

“You can and you will,” Dad said. “Your mother and I are in agreement. You and your sisters will enter Jude’s after the summer holidays.”

Bella looked ... nervous. “We could learn from you instead ...”

“You’re growing older,” Dad said. “And there are limits to what we can teach you.”

This is true. Their parents are knowledgeable people, but they’re not tutors.

“And we have to make friends and contacts,” Alana added.

“Quite right,” Dad agreed.

The British Boarding Schools and Universities – particularly Oxford and Cambridge – were (and indeed still are) more than just educational establishments. Students, mostly from wealthy or well-established families, would go to school in hopes of making friends and contacts among others – rather like Yale in the US, which taught five presidents and plenty of other movers and shakers.

This, as I noted in another essay, is true of Hogwarts too. The school actually gives the Wizarding World its core monoculture. Jude’s has the same advantages and disadvantages, although it’s hardly the only school in the world.

He launched into an explanation of the problems facing our house, the same explanation he’d given me earlier. I barely heard a word. My sisters had spent the last four years tormenting me with magic, but now ... now I was going to school. Jude was a good school, according to my parents, yet I’d heard horror stories from some of the apprentices. If you had strong magic, the school was great; if you were weak, you were picked on by everyone else. And the teachers did nothing to stop it. Alana and Bella wouldn’t have any trouble – the family name would make up for any problems – but me ...? I’d be lucky if I wasn’t permanently trapped as a frog by the end of the first week.

Cat is panicking here. Trapping someone as a frog permanently is beyond most first year students.

Alana poked my arm. “Pay attention.”

I looked up. Dad was looking back at me, annoyed.

“Now, there will be some specific accommodations made,” he said. “Alana, Bella ... you will not discuss your sister’s problems with anyone. You will both be under a binding spell to make sure of it.”

“But Dad,” Alana protested. “I ...”

“The matter is settled,” Dad said, firmly.

Alana shot me a nasty look that promised trouble. A binding spell wasn’t particularly dangerous, not if cast by a skilled mage, but it was a very blunt way of saying that my father didn’t trust her to keep her mouth shut. It was an insult, in many ways. And I wouldn’t put it past my sister to figure out a way around the binding. Dad wouldn’t risk putting a strong spell on his daughter. If nothing else, Mum wouldn’t let him.

Cat’s father isn’t entirely blind to just how badly Cat is treated, even though he thinks it’s for her own good. Now, with all three of them going to school, he’s prepared to make life harder for Alana and Bella.

On the other hand, like Cat says, putting a binding on someone is offensive. And he can’t use one

strong enough to really make sure they don't cause trouble.

I tried, anyway. "Dad, I can't work magic," I said.

Dad cocked his head. "Do you want to work magic?"

I nodded. I'd wanted it ever since I'd understood that my parents were magicians. And I still wanted it. The power Bella wasted so casually ... what could I do, if that were mine instead of hers?

"Then this is your best chance," Dad said, seriously. He clapped his hand on my shoulder, reassuringly. I knew he meant well, but ... "The tutors are the best in the world. They can teach you."

"Your last chance," Alana said.

I shook my head. I'd never been able to get a spell to work, not one. There were people with no talent who could do better than that. But me? I couldn't cast a single spell.

Perhaps I should run away, I thought. It was a tempting thought. But where would I go?

Cat does not know anything about the world outside Shallot, beyond crude stereotypes. This obviously becomes important later.

Dad clapped his hands together. "Caitlyn, you can go," he said. "Alana, Bella; I have some other matters to discuss with you."

I nodded, then turned and left the study. My sisters were going to hate me after today. The binding wouldn't hurt them – Dad would see to that – but it would be humiliating. I'd find it humiliating too, if someone had cast such a spell on me. And they had ...

Revenge, I promised myself. Alana might have magic, but I wasn't going to bow the knee to her. I wasn't doing anything else until bedtime, so I might as well plan revenge. And then see if I can give her a fright.

Smiling, I hurried back to my room. I had some thinking to do.

One of the points I tried to work on here is that Cat isn't a passive victim, unlike Johan of The Very Ugly Duckling. She's smart, she's knowledgeable and she's flatly reluctant to give in. She may not have any magic of her own, but she does try to find ways to get back at her sisters for their bullying. The jury is out, of course, on if this makes her a good person or not.