

The N3J
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
July 2020

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Editorial

We continue to search for new reviewers. If you write novels, note we will accept your reviews of novels by other authors in your genre. And if they review your work, that's also within reason allowable.

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, and Samuel Lubell. Jagi Lamplighter and Cedar Sanderson give us peerless writing on creating and marketing sf/fnal 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:

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Novels

The Compleat Martian Invasion: Earth's Defense Awakens

by John Taloni

Review by Pat Patterson

Give it up for the cover, people: Nikola Tesla stares at you, enigmatically, wearing the planet Mars as a halo (sort of; an artist could describe it better), with the Earth and a steampunk spacecraft completing the picture. I don't know who did the art, but they earned every bit of their fee. If this book hadn't been recommended to me by a human, the cover would have grabbed me.

Here's what you need to know: Jules Verne, H G Wells, and Edgar Rice Burroughs were telling the truth. Most of their storylines are represented here, and:

THEY ARE WOVEN TOGETHER BEAUTIFULLY!!!!

This is the book that tells what happens next. It is set in the Victorian Age, although the Widow of Windsor has herself passed away, alas, leaving the throne to her daughter Louise. This does not result in a weakening of the power of the monarchy; in fact, circumstances and Her Majesty's personality produce a sovereign both capable and intent to rule.

The secret of Cavorite has been lost, along with Cavor himself, who was last seen falling into a hole on the Moon, with ant-like soldiers clutching at his body. His companion, Bedford, escaped to return to Earth in possession of a large amount of Lunar gold, more than enough to sustain him. However, the loss of Cavor coupled with a subsequent tragedy have quite thrown him off track, and he has sunk into dissipation in Morocco, passing his time away by smoking copious quantities of hashish.

Until Queen Louise summons him to duty: the Martians are on their way again! And England has need of her humble servant, once more!

Okay, I admit it: the exclamation points are NOT in the text. The adventure is, however. This is precisely the sort of story that defined the genre, even before Hugo Gernsback came on the scene. Amazing feats by brave men and women, struggling against impossible odds and bizarre creatures from other planets; what's not to like?

Historical figures are prominent in the story, as well. Tesla, as we know from the cover, plays a central role, as does Marie Sklodowska, who married Pierre Curie in our timeline. In their timeline, he was one of the many casualties of the First Martian War.

And there is a L-O-O-O-V-E interest, too, complete with the male protagonist acting stupidly because of problems of class.

Verne was all about the science; Wells was all about the characters. (I don't know what Burroughs was all about; sorry) This work combines the strength of both, and manages NOT to be digging into the unobtainium and handwavium vault too often. Those bits that are included are directly from the works of the predecessors, and are not the failure of the author.

It's an excellent work, particularly for those of us who remember fondly reading the original adventures under the covers with a flashlight. For others who missed that experience, but have been attracted to steampunk, it's also a win.

Fade by Daniel Humphreys Review by Pat Patterson

Until I read the book, I thought the cover represented a man standing, armed, in front of a loading ramp. HOWEVER, after reading and discovering that he drives a camper, I can see clearly that he's standing in front of his camper, illuminated in the headlights. Good text use, with the title 'fading' without fading into an illegible blur. The cover credit is to Damonza Dot Com; I'm not permitted to put the actual link into the review. I don't know that I've run across their work before, but I like this cover.

NOTE: This book gets very close to the edge of my 'too creepy, can't read' category. In fact, if my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA knew what I was reading, she probably would make me stop. If you have a sensitivity in this area, you may not want to pick this one up. It didn't QUITE cross the line for me, but it might for you.

Paxton Locke is a Ghost Remover. He rides a Kawasaki Vulcan 750, which would be one of my top choices if I couldn't ride a Honda. It's got ALL the (then) high-tech features that make it virtually maintenance free, such as liquid-cooled, shaft drive, automatic cam-chain tensioner; these things run forever and give you 50 mpg and a top end MUCH higher than you ever want to go. He needs the economy, because he also drives a camper, and I'm guessing those things get about 7 mpg. However, they have the benefit of being a home you can drive away from trouble.

A Ghost Remover is different from a Ghost Buster; they don't use nuclear devices to suck spooks into magnetic containment. Paxton works with the uneasy dead, people who were killed unpleasantly, often by murder. His job is accomplished by persuading them that they really ARE dead, and that they don't belong on earth anymore. That part is pretty easy, actually.

What MADE them dead in the first place is a different story. He has found himself on the home of serial killers, who attempt to add him to their collection. That part is hard.

Another part that's hard is how he came to be in this line of work in the first place. It's revealed during the story, and I'm not gonna spoil it. I'll just point out that his mom is incarcerated for doing a nasty thing, and that she learned things from a book.

From time to time, Paxton has found it necessary to defend himself against physical threats. Unlike almost every other adventure story protagonist, he's not a black belt in seven martial arts, lethal with a knife, and a Gold Medal winner on pistol and rifle competitions. Frankly, I think he needs to spend a bit more time on the range, but until he does that, he has given himself the best alternative, in the form of a Taser and two shotguns. His primary shotgun is a 12 gauge Mossberg, which he has retrofitted with a high-capacity barrel and tube magazine, with 7 rounds in the gun and a stock-holder with reloads. That's a pretty good solution, and one I've used myself in the past (although I stuck with the standard 5-round magazine tube, to give me the ability to have a shorter barrel). As for his secondary shotgun... I'd like to congratulate Humphreys for finding a use for one of the most USELESS gimmicks available at great cost, a Serbu Super Shorty. That's a 12 gauge shotgun with a pistol grip that is only 16.5 inches

long; the standard model hold a total of three rounds, although Paxton evidently got a discontinued model, because he claims to be able to load five. Maybe with the Aguila mini-shells, but, hey, this is fiction, and all of the other elements are correct. So, no foul. (Umm...the Serbu DOES fall into the Any Other Weapon category, and requires a \$5 tax stamp to transfer. It's a stupid regulation, a holdover from the 1934 Gun Control Act.)

Paxton's current case takes him back to his home territory, which he escaped at the time of his mom's incarceration, and has avoided because of unpleasant memories. Duty calls, however, and although he is certain that Bad Things await, he responds. Before doing so, he contacts the people who helped him keep it together after his mother's actions, and provided a home and sponsorship, Arizona Detective Kent Sikora, and Esteban De La Rosa, former cop now running a private investigator firm. The contact is highly significant, as he feels it necessary to make a 'good-bye' call before setting out.

The morality in the story is this: all things serve, in the end, BUT some things are more preferable. It's a good way of dealing with the issue of free will, and of having to choose the lesser of evils. It's essential to Paxton to understand this concept, because he is bearing a load of guilt that is in the process of preventing him from making significant human contact.

And, more of the story will follow, as this is titled 'Paxton Locke Book 1.'

Fall of Zona Nox by Nicholas Woode-Smith Review by Pat Patterson

A basic limitation of an e-book is that you don't get a sense of the length of the book, unlike the dead tree versions. Had I looked a bit, I would have seen that the book is listed as being 628 pages long.

Had I done that, I would have given it a miss from the beginning. As it was, I made it through Chapter 15, page 243, before I realized i just wasn't going to like this book.

Using multiple POVs has become a fairly standard practice, but the problem of maintaining continuity then arises. I was content with reading the story of James, the teenager who is, I believe, the central character. However, we spent too much time away from him, developing the story of Don Marzio, the head of the Marzio Mafia. Then we have battle scenes, which really don't resolve the crisis, but only lead into another battle scene.

The book would benefit from another run-through by a good copy-editor. Example:

"As they were preparing to enter, they heard a loud crash, a scream and a squash as shards of glass fell and a man donning red descended from the sky to the concrete, hitting the solid surface with a loud thump and crunch."

In the first place, 'donning' means 'putting on;' it does not mean 'wearing.' Unless the character was in the act of pulling on crimson trousers as he plummeted, it's the wrong word choice. In the second place, it's just too wordy. Keep the crash, but get rid of the scream and the squash, and discard 'the solid surface' because we already know it's concrete, and I'd discard the 'loud thump' as well. You can keep the crunch, if you like.

The wordiness is a good bit of the problem, although I think the exposition could be condensed, as well. Before the action really starts, there is a pointless scene of an invasion of a merchant's territory to

steal and smash. It does provide us a feel for the lawless environment, but we already KNOW that's the case. The scene doesn't move the story along.

And the story, if I have seen it, is of a future collapsing society, being run for profit over many worlds by heartless corporations, with the valiant efforts of the Troopers attempting to stave off the end. That may not be the case at all, but if it is, I really think there is a good story here. It's just obscured by needless scenery. Pruning shears are called for, as well as some clear-cutting.

Please do not construe my comments to mean that the author has no skill. I believe he does; I THINK he has mapped out a good storyline. He also has included a glossary, which I have found to be missing in some other works involving multiple alien races. The cover art is not credited, as far as I can tell, but it's a great bit of art.

This is a first book, and should be regarded as such. For people who LOVE epics, this might be right up your alley. For me, it was just okay, and that's what the three stars mean.

Fantastic Schools, Volume 1 Edited by Jagi Lamplighter and Chris Nuttall Review by Tamara Wilhite

“Fantastic Schools, Volume 1” was edited by Jagi Lamplighter and Chris Nuttall. I’d previously read and reviewed his novel “The Zero Blessing”. “The Zero Blessing” is the first novel in his “Schooled in Magic” universe. It is a world very different from Harry Potter, yet his first book is compared to that because that’s become the default comparison for any “preteens sent to magic school” unless they’re vampires. One of the short stories in “Fantastic Schools” is by Mr. Nuttall, but there are more than a dozen short stories in the collection.

“Little Witches” is by Mel Lee Newmin. This short story feels like it is aimed at older elementary school children. That’s fine in and of itself given how many kids that age read these types of stories. I don’t like the caricatures in the story like Sir Basil. The story itself is trite. The rest of the stories in this collection are far better.

“The Path of the Phoenix” is by Emily Martha Sorensen. The short story is set in her “Black Magic Academy” and “White Magic Academy” universe. You have separate schools for good and evil witches, and a generally good witch is trying to keep that secret as she attends the school for the dark arts. She’s managed not to kill an opponent in a death match, but her secret is about to be revealed ... This is the first strong series in the anthology.

“A Firm Hand” was written by Aaron Van Treeck. People who manifest magic are transported to a magic bootcamp. Master magic or die trying. And then you’re drafted ...

“Asymptote at Three O’Clock” is by Steven Johnson. Even magic school students look forward to the end of the day, the week and especially the semester. But the teacher has a final major lesson for the students before they can leave.

“Practical Exercise” was written by George Phillis. I’ve reviewed his book “Mistress of the Waves” and was looking forward to his foray into fantasy. A young woman who wants to learn the fundamentals of magic runs into bullies on her first day. And then the bully attempts a deadly duel when he’s ex-

pelled because of her.

“The Ascendant Cup” is a short story by Thomas Carpenter. This story is set in his much larger fictional universe, “The Hundred Halls”. A group of magical teens enter a contest that offers a massive payout. Unlike some other fictional magic schools, it is set in the modern era. For example, the students wear jeans and listen to EDM. And while they have magic, they also have smartphones. I like the little details like the emergency cauldron disposal chute in the kitchen.

“Doom Garden” is an aptly named story by Benjamin Wheeler. There is a gardener who has been transported to a world like ours but with magic. He has become a university groundskeeper, and he fights the magical students in his quest to maintain his beautiful garden. Then someone opens a literal portal to Hell in the quad ...

“Crucible” by Frank Luke is a short story set in the “Legends and Lore” game / fictional universe. Grant Von Wold was pulled there from our universe and has trained as a wizard, though he’s a theology student. Now he has to pass his greatest test, his final exam. It is life and death. This story is notable for being a rare, respectably Christian fantasy story.

“The Last Academy” was written by G. Scott Huggins. It asks where the weird and de facto special education students of the magical world would go. And it presents a story where the misfits are the only ones who can save the world. It is a look at what might happen if Harry Potter had become a Death Eater and/or Voldemort won. There are lots of Harry Potter references here, artfully and ironically placed.

“Finals” is by Bernadette Durbin. An undercover law enforcement officer is posing as a student on a campus like any other in the 1990s, though there is magic added. She’s looking for whatever killed one of her compatriots at that campus. Her greatest concern was that and finals until the Elves start a blood feud with the theater department. It is one of the funniest stories.

“Metamorphosis” by Roger Strahan features a gifted young woman finds herself in a magical school after fending off a bully with surprising results. The story is tied to his “The Witch of New Orleans” series.

“How to Get into a Magic School” by Erin Furby was written in response to a classroom full of elementary school kids asking how they could get into magic school. This story about a magical school recruiter meeting a homesteading family in rural Alaska was the answer.

“Deep School Tuition” is a short story by Denton Salle. I’ve previously interviewed the author, and I was curious what his story would be. A young woman in sales and marketing is trying magic to get ahead. She’s tried everything, and now she’s considering the Deep School. Unfortunately, it commands a deep price. This turns out to be another strong, Christian fantasy story.

“Gennady’s Tale” is a short fantasy story by Chris Nuttall. This story is set in his “Schooled by Magic” universe. It is also the longest and darkest story in the anthology. This story is PG-13, though his “Schooled in Magic” books are between PG and PG-13 and thus suitable for middle-schoolers.

Footnotes From the Apocalypse
by L.A. Behm II
Review by Pat Patterson

My grandfather, then a soldier in France, survived the Spanish Flu epidemic. I knew about that for many years, but thought nothing of it; it was just the flu, after all. I didn't know until much later that the disease infected half a billion people worldwide, and killed 100 million.

The disease that brings down the technological society in Behm's novel is only SLIGHTLY more lethal. John Peters, the protagonist, waits out the worst of the initial downfall at home, dragging himself between bathroom and bedroom, and staying hydrated by what sounds a lot like Gatorade; that probably made the difference between life and death for him. Who knows, though? When the reaper is running through civilization at full power, sometimes it's just random chance who lives and who dies.

Having had a bit of warning, Peters and his wife have a well-stocked retreat cabin. Unfortunately, she is out of town, along with their son, when the pandemic hits, and Rivers has to make his way alone. He finds that it hasn't taken long for cannibalism to be implemented, and essentially shoots his way out of the cookpot at an early ambush. He also establishes what happens to be the basic pattern for the rest of his life: go in armed, and rescue the hostages.

His cabin becomes a sanctuary for those he has rescued. The number grows, as he takes on such pathetic figures as a group of teenagers, one of whom is in the process of being eaten by a tiger when Peters intervenes.

The people left tend to fall into roving gangs, with occasional clusters of more organized groups centered around universities. The gangs tend to adopt the identity of pre-Fall sports teams.

This is the story of a survivor; hence, the story of someone who has had good luck, and also the preparation to take advantage of it. Peters' background as a brown-water navy sailor was part of the preparation, but he also had a few other things to increase the odds in his favor. The cabin retreat was the biggest factor, but his personal firearms, and the ability to use them, also were necessary but not sufficient conditions for survival. Once past the immediate crisis, though, it's clearly Peters' ability to work with others that is the greatest survival factor. His matter-of-fact assumption that "together, we are going to accomplish THIS mission," keeps people focussed on the job at hand, without giving them time to slip into despair about the loss of things or loved ones. He's not unaware of the need to grieve, however; at one point, he calls for a wake, to mark the loss of the International Space Station. He also recognizes the significance of tradition, in a point humorously made by incorporating a team of Gurkhas into his militia.

Throughout, it's series of good adventure stories. Even though it DOES tell the tale of The End Of The World As We Know It, there is much more adventure than depression involved. It's not a handbook for survival, but a description about how survival could happen. And it's a great read!

The Genius Plague
by David Walton
Review by Sam Lubell

Originally published in sreview.com July 2018

The Genius Plague is a standalone biology-based science fiction thriller with a strong family element. Readers who enjoy a mysterious conspiracy, lots of action, and smart characters will enjoy this book. The book opens with a prologue in which a riverboat of Amazon tourists and mycologist (a scientist who studies mushrooms) Paul Johns is attacked by mysterious terrorists. Paul escapes and uses his knowledge of plants and mushrooms to stay alive. But when he returns to the U.S. his doctors diagnose him as having a fungi infection that killed the other survivor. Meanwhile, his brother Neil, the first person narrator of most of the book, obtains a job cracking codes at the National Security Agency, where his father, who now has Alzheimer's, used to work.

Neil is an interesting character. He is very smart when he cannot start the computer on which he is supposed to take a test of his codebreaking skills to get into the NSA; he solves the code using pencil and paper. But he has been kicked out of three top universities and has issues with authority; he almost gets kicked out of the NSA twice on his first day. Yet his out-of-the-box thinking enables him to detect that an unsolvable code used by Columbian drug smugglers is an obscure whistle language used by one small Amazon tribe.

Smart as Neil is, his brother Paul is even smarter since being exposed to the fungi, beating Neil in Scrabble. And he infects their father with the fungi as a cure for Alzheimer's. But there are hints that the fungi acts as a brain-controlling parasite, forcing humans into serving its interests. Radical environmentalists assassinate South American leaders and even U.S. troops start disobeying orders. The book is a compelling, paranoid thriller. The hero, Neil, spends much of the book trying to persuade people of the dangers and the reader is compelled to keep turning pages to find out how he will save everyone. Although certainly dark in places, the book is fun overall.

I do think the book needs a bit more consistency in how the fungi operate. At times it seems like an outside brain capable of running humans remotely as a few victims are able to occasionally resist somewhat. At other times, it seems merely to influence people, making them want to do what is in the best interests of the fungi. It is also a little unrealistic, although necessary for the book and common in thrillers, for one character to be so central to everything that happens, especially since Neil's brother seems to be in charge of the pro-fungi forces.

It is worth noting that *The Genius Plague* is the rarity among modern genre books--a true standalone. I would recommend the book to readers of techno-thrillers, even for readers who do not like science fiction.

Head On by John Scalzi
Review by Samuel Lubell
Originally Published in sfrevu.com May 2018

Head On, a sequel to 2014's *Lock In*, is a near future mystery set in a world where one percent of the population has Haden's Syndrome, a disease that paralyzes people's bodies but leaves the brain otherwise working. Since one of the victims was the U.S. First Lady, the government funded advanced technologies to let Haden's function in the world, including remotely controlled android bodies called "Personal Transports" (nicknamed threeps). Inevitably, a popular sport develops, Hilketa, in which specially constructed threeps use swords and hammers to tear off the head of a threep on the other team and carry it through the goal.

FBI agent Chris Shane, a Haden, is in the audience when Duane Chapman drops dead while playing Hilketa. But when Chris and senior partner Leslie Vann, a non-Haden, investigate why Duane's stats and vitals were removed from the data feed, they find the league official who ordered this data removal has apparently committed suicide.

Naturally, there is more going on than the FBI agents know at first. As they investigate, they discover secrets involving sex, violence, and money. Chris' parents help in the investigation, as they had been invited to become the owners of a Hilketa team for DC. And Chris' roommates play a role, especially one who is a data analyst. There is even a cute cat who becomes an important witness.

As in the first book, part of the fun is having Chris' threep bodies burned, smashed, and otherwise destroyed. At one point a character jokes that Chris is hard on the threeps the agent occupies. However, this is played more like a cop who keeps on smashing cars rather than like an invulnerable superhero (there is a nice scene where the head of the Philadelphia FBI office argues with Chris over who will pay to replace the latest destroyed threep).

The story is told first-person by Chris and the author never reveals if Chris is male or female. Like with *Lock In*, the audiobook for *Head On* has two versions, one narrated by *Star Trek*'s Wil Wheaton and one by *Buffy*'s Amber Benson. Scalzi successfully keeps this gender secret low-key. In fact, when I read the first book, I did not even notice that the gender was never specified. The book does mention that Chris' father is African-American (it comes up as one of the reasons why the league wants him to become an owner).

As usual, Scalzi's writing is fast, funny, and compellingly readable from the very first sentence, "By the time Duane Chapman died on the Hilketa field, his head had already been torn off twice." The book is very entertaining, even when describing elaborate funding schemes. Characterization is sufficient but little more than the bare bones. Chris does not dwell on the negative side of being a Haden or wish to be normal. Occasionally Chris does think (or is reminded by another character) of his good fortune in being born to a billionaire who can afford 24-hour care for Chris' paralyzed body and multiple threeps. And there are a few more hints about the past of Chris' FBI partner. But for the most part, this feels like a "buddy cop" show where one partner has multiple robot bodies.

The book is perfectly good as light entertainment. However, since Scalzi does not go beyond the surface here, readers looking for more will be disappointed. Scalzi does touch on how the government is backing away from its tax breaks and assistance to Haden's, and there is the occasional comment about Chris' privileged background compared to the condition of other Haden's. But this stays in the back-

ground and Scalzi never allows the politics do more than flavor characters' motivations.

Although *Head On* is the sequel to *Locked In* and features the same characters in a new mystery, it stands alone. The author provides enough information about Haden's Syndrome, the characters, and the world so a fresh reader can jump right in. There is only a brief mention of the previous case (just as Watson does not bring up everything Sherlock Holmes did in each story).

Fans of mysteries and near-future science fiction will enjoy *Head On* and Scalzi fans will instantly feel right at home. The book provides an entertaining few hours and, unlike many mysteries, can be re-read with enjoyment even after the reader knows the solution to the crimes.

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

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 premeditation."

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 beasties 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.

Invasion: Day of Battle by John F. Holmes Review by Pat Patterson

I just re-read my review of "Invasion, Book 1: Resistance," which you can find [here](#); and I'm thinking: WOW, was I ever a tough grader! I gave that book 4 stars, SOLELY because it ended on such a cliff-hanger. I believe I'm going to have to amend that review, now, and clarify that it was BECAUSE IT WAS SUCH A COMPELLING STORY!!!! and had a cliff-hanger ending. The second volume wasn't available at that time, so it was really just frustration that I couldn't go further that's reflected in the loss of a star; It wasn't that I didn't like it; it's that I liked it too much.

Well, Holmes has atoned for that with this book. Not only has he written the much desired sequel, but his prologue does an excellent job of refreshing my memory without boring me to tears. I read the first book in August, to get the review out before the Dragon Awards were voted, and somehow (it was personal stuff) I missed the release of this in November. So, the Prologue was needed, and was very well done, indeed.

This is the kind of book that would be placed on the top shelf of my bookcase, in the days before e-books were my drug of choice. If I turn my head, I can see the crowded array of those top-shelf books: Heinlein; Niven; Pournelle; Drake. Clancy and Crichton were on the next shelf, by the way, just to give you a better idea of my rating system back then. It's outmoded, now, because I have shifted over to ebooks, and I might procure as many as three dead-tree books each year, and those are usually reference materials; the exceptions are autographed copies, which I do pick up from time to time.

So much for the preliminary, now on to the review of THIS volume in the story, which may be found on Amazon [here](#):

Many of the characters from "Resistance" continue their stories in "Day of Battle," and some of them regrettably end their stories here. That's to be expected, in a war fought against superior technology, particularly when the enemy holds the high ground.

However, the covert plan has made arrangements for those circumstances. Timing, as always, is the key, and since the enemy has systematically stomped on advanced communications, that is probably the most difficult part of the plan to implement. Everything has to happen at the same time, or, at least, in the exact sequence. And that's a difficult story to tell.

Holmes manages to do that quite effectively, however, by telling the complete story of each point-of-view character from beginning to end. When he shifts the POV, he summarizes the other activities that are taking place at the same time, so that we realize the incredible complexity of the battle, without getting lost in the story.

The space battle has to be won. The submarine attacks have to be protected. The cities have to be invaded. The strong points and other key installations have to be defeated, and it all has to happen at the same time, or it won't work, and we won't get another chance.

It would not be possible, without the assistance of the superbrains of the artificial intelligences, coordinated by the commanding general with a brain link. It would not be possible, without the theft of an

invader spacecraft, piloted by the Empress of Japan. It would not be possible, without the skill and determination of a pitifully small number of combat veterans, who have been waiting for their chance. It would not be possible, without the volunteers and conscripts from the generation which has grown up post-invasion.

And Holmes manages to tell every story, in a way that allows us to experience the personal sacrifices made at each level.

The book doesn't solve every issue, fortunately, so we have (at least) one other volume to anticipate. The same cliff-hanger feel isn't here in this story, for which we may be truly grateful.

The Moons of Barsk by Lawrence M. Schoen Review by Sam Lubell

Originally published in sfrevu.com August 2018

The Moons of Barsk is a worthy sequel to the impressive *Barsk*. But do not even try reading this one until after you have read the first book.

The Moons of Barsk is set in a far future when humans have been forgotten and animals, uplifted to advanced intelligence and civilized behavior, rule the universe with 87 distinct races on 4,000 planets in the Alliance. However, the other races have confined the two fant (elephant) species, the pariahs of this future, to the planet Barsk. This planet is also the only source of koph, a drug that enables Speakers to communicate with the dead.

The book begins with Ryne, a fant physics professor, following a compulsion common to all fants--to travel to a specific island not on any map when they know their death is looming. But instead of death, he discovers a secret advanced civilization, the Caudex, with off world technology not found anywhere else on the planet. They offer to extend his life so he can continue researching and help save Barsk from the Alliance which is imposing more and more restrictions on the fants. The Caudex believes the Alliance wants all fants dead and that exiling them to Barsk was just a stopgap measure to their eventual extinction.

Meanwhile, the fourteen-year-old Pizlo, outcast from fant society as an abomination due to being born to parents out of wedlock, has discovered his own ability to Speak with the dead and is gaining greater control of his glimpses of the future expressed through conversations with the natural world. He believes he needs to go on his own hero's journey but is unsure what this would entail. He has become close to his mentor Jorl's daughter, Rina, one of the handful of fants who acknowledge his existence, resulting in cute scenes in which Pizlo tells her stories.

For his part, Jorl, a university scholar and historian, has become a member of the Alliance's Senate, using his extended Speaker powers to project his image off world to fulfill his duties without leaving the planet. He advocates ending the isolation of the fants by allowing some to settle on other planets. Meanwhile, a member of the raccoon species has petitioned Joel, as Barsk's senator, to allow a group of raccoons to settle on Barsk, which would violate the Compact sundering the fants from the rest of the Alliance.

As with the first Barsk book, *The Moons of Barsk* is very philosophical, with conversations about meta-story and the hero's journey. Pizlo's own outcast status mirrors the relationship of the fants to the rest of the species in the Alliance. The conflict between the Caudex and Jorl is the conflict between isolation-

ism and integration. Since this novel deals with speaking with the dead and precognition, it must address these issues of the nature of self and fate versus free will.

I found *The Moons of Barsk* to be excellent, but not quite as excellent as the first book. The original *Barsk* was plotted as a series of Russian nesting dolls, with each new revelation about the prophesied Silence later found to be inaccurate or at least incomplete. *The Moons of Barsk* lacks this spiral structure and, for the first third, seems to stumble as a series of unconnected incidents. Also, while many plotlines are resolved, the book ends with a cliffhanger that is literally life or death for a sympathetic character. Hopefully, a third book will swiftly appear to resolve this.

Readers who enjoy old fashioned idea science fiction of the sort popularized by Isaac Asimov (although with better characterization) will enjoy *The Moons of Barsk*. This book is ideal for readers who want books that make them think, that have new twists on science fiction concepts, and characters who ask important questions of themselves and the universe. Those who want space battles and violence may want to look elsewhere.

Not By Sight by Ken Prescott Review by Pat Patterson

It's been 27 years (December 31, 1991) since the very last act of the former Soviet Union: The Soviet Ambassador to the UN delivered a letter to the UN Secretary-General announcing that Russia was the successor state to the USSR. That was merely turning the lights off and locking the door, however; the USSR had been collapsing for the past several years, with August 21, 1991 marking the last formal resistance to handing over power to a non-Communist state.

For those who came to adulthood in the post-1991 world, it's difficult to comprehend just what a significant role the Cold War played in the lives of the people born in the 10 years following the end of WWII. We had regular duck-and-cover drills in the classroom, and learned evacuation routes from school to home in case of a nuclear war. Millions of service members served in Europe (I was one of them) to act as a speed bump on the day when the Soviet tanks came rolling across the Fulda Gap, with all our efforts designed to slow their progress so that Reforger could bring the combat units based in the continental US across the Atlantic. Every barracks, every military building of any kind, had posters on the wall, urging us to KNOW OUR ENEMY, with scary descriptions of the utter determination of the Soviet soldier to obey orders without question.

At the time I was stationed in Europe (March 1973 - August 1975), the Soviet Union was in total control. The United States military focus was almost entirely in Southeast Asia, and the reductions in force that came following the end of our involvement there, the end of the draft, and the upheavals in our government all acted to give the Soviets a great deal of security on the home front. (It made them so secure, in fact, that they made the decision to get involved in Afghanistan, which they regretted bitterly.)

In 1980, things changed, with the election of Ronald Reagan, who declared them to be an evil empire.

Reagan's determination to bolster the strength of conventional armed forces, while modernizing and developing new weapon systems, forced the Soviets into an arms race they couldn't possibly win, because their economy didn't have the ability to provide both guns and butter. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he immediately began a process of openness and reform (glasnost and pere-

stroika).

It was the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, because having gained a little freedom, the associated republics wanted more. The more concessions Gorbachev gave, the more the satellites wanted, and the more the hard-liners in his government resisted.

And that's the background for Prescott's novel.

I MUST first pay my compliments to the cover, else I will forget. It's really eye-catching: a night-vision shot of an attack helicopter, silhouetted against the brighter flares of....something. Might be the lights of a city, might be burning tanks; but whatever the brighter points are, they serve to emphasize the stealthy lethality of the war machine. The font and placement are also good choices, too; my initial impression was of early dot-matrix green-screen printing, and that's exactly the right tone for the time in which the story is set. An artist could tell you why the title and author's name are legible; I don't speak that language, but I appreciate that effect.

Despite a typo in the Chapter Five title, the main events take place over a period of about a week in early May, 1988.

In December of 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the INF, with the implementation date of June, 1988. The hard-liners in East Germany (DDR) and in the Soviet Union bitterly opposed the liberalization policies Gorbachev had implemented, and resisted them to the fullest. The DDR rightly forecast that only the backing of the Soviet military machine kept them in power, and so there were factions that sought any opportunity to disrupt the implementation of the treaty.

Meanwhile, in America, rogue elements in the intelligence community were eager to take just about any action they could, in the wake of the Iran-Contra disaster. Knowing that heads were going to roll, they wanted to produce an intelligence coup as justification for their continued employment.

Enter Dennis Sandoval, an Air Force enlisted man in the process of qualifying for the elite intelligence department known as Ghostrunners. His somewhat fog-shrouded past has provided him with enhanced skills, but he has earned the ire of his executive officer by reporting the dishonesty of an existing member of the team, who has since been kicked out of the unit.

To his surprise, he immediately gets placed into operational status upon completion of training. That, plus an appalling lack of intelligence needed to carry out the mission, makes him suspicious that all is not as it seems.

He's correct in that. He is told his mission is to exfiltrate an unknown American missionary who is smuggling Bibles across the border. (Note: this was a common practice in the days before the Iron Curtain fell.) In addition to the fact that he is not given the identity of the missionary, other aspects of the mission are also problematic; however, the reaction of his executive officer when he asks questions makes him decide to keep his mouth shut, at least through official channels.

What follows is an adventure which could have been written by Tom Clancy at the height of his career, and since I repeatedly devoured every book Clancy wrote, that's high praise from me. Weapon use and deployment, moving across terrain, and spycraft are all described with the ring of authenticity. The only

NON-standard story elements are the little coincidences, which are necessary to the storyline, and incidentally in providing us with a look at Sandoval's background.

There aren't any cliff-hangers, but there are a number of plot lines which could and should be developed further. The story has an obvious prequel called for, and the character is too good to be seen in just one book.

Podkayne Of Mars by Robert A. Heinlein Review by Chris Nuttall

Fifteen years or so ago, I went through a Heinlein craze and read a vast number of his books in quick succession. Some offered new insights – Starship Troopers, in particular – while others seemed to have aged poorly or rarely lived up to their promise. Heinlein was both a storyteller and a teacher and the two didn't always mix.

I must have read Podkayne Of Mars during that time, as I have a copy dating back to then in my Baen collection. It didn't really stick in my mind, for reasons that have also failed to stick in my mind. It wasn't until I read a harshly negative set of Heinlein reviews that I dug my copy out of storage and read it again. It was, in many ways, an interesting read, even though it has not aged well. Heinlein had far less creative freedom, in many ways, than his modern-day successors.

Podkayne Of Mars is a journal, written in first person by Podkayne – Poddy, for short – a fifteen-year-old girl who was born on Mars. Additional information is provided by her nine-year-old brother Clark, who writes his own commentary between chapters. Whatever else can be said of the book, the journal format works remarkably well. Poddy comes across as a living person, a teenager at the point where one is aware of one's own potential, but less aware of one's own limitations.

That said, Poddy can fairly be described as 'all heart, no head.' She is depressingly naive in many ways, always willing to see the best in people ... something that eventually gets her killed. Clark, by contrast, is practically the exact opposite – a budding sociopath whose first question is pretty much 'what's in it for me?' The Baen cover captures the difference between the two viewpoint characters very well – Poddy is bright and earnest, while Clark looks sinister and evil.

The story starts when a planned family cruise – an interplanetary cruise, naturally – is cancelled by a bureaucratic error which dumps three unplanned babies on the parents without a moment's notice. Poddy's Uncle Tom – of whom more below – steps in to arrange for Poddy and Clark to travel with him to Venus, then to Earth. Unknown to Poddy (although perhaps not to Clark) aged Uncle Tom is not doing this out of the goodness of his own heart. He is a diplomat on a secret mission who needs to speak to governments on both Venus and Earth. The children are there to provide him cover.

Two-thirds of the book covers the journey from Mars to Venus. Poddy discovers that sexism and classism still holds sway, even though she has a first-class berth on the ship. She meets a number of people who think that all of Mars's inhabitants are criminals or worse. She occupies her time trying to coax the crew to tell her more about the ship – she has dreams of becoming the first female spacecraft captain – and trying to supervise her brother.

On Venus, Poddy and Clark are kidnapped by rogue factions who intend to use them to pressure Uncle Tom into changing his vote. Knowing that Tom will not cooperate, the two attempt an escape.

Heinlein's original version ends with Poddy dying in the escape, the impact of her death shocking Clark and changing him for the better. His editors rebelled against the ending and insisted that he save the poor girl. The Baen edition holds both endings and, realistically, I think the first one is better.

It's easy to see why some readers – looking back from 2017 – don't think too much of Podkayne Of Mars. Heinlein predicted some things with great accuracy, but other things were flat-out wrong. The idea that women can't be spacecraft crew – and captains – looks bad to us now. That leaves us seeing Poddy as a strange mixture of innocent and coyly manipulative, using her feminine wiles to get what she wants. If nothing else, this behaviour is not calculated to make anyone actually respect her. Poddy is both charming- she writes in a florid teenage manner – and stupid. She has ambitions, but she never bothers to do what it takes to achieve them. Indeed, she isn't sure what her ambitions are.

And Clark is largely an irredeemable figure. He may, in some ways, be the archetypical Jerk Sue. He is a genius, with a long list of genuinely remarkable achievements. Heinlein may have gone too far in making him heady, as it can be argued he's too clever. On the other hand, it's also possible to argue that Clark is nowhere near as clever as he thinks he is – beating the gambling system might have been the result of a system, or sheer luck, or a deliberate decision by the house to let him win. Heinlein doesn't tell us for sure.

On second reading, Uncle Tom – too – comes across as a darker figure. Some reviewers have claimed to spot an incestuous subtext in the book. I don't see it. Instead, I see a wily old manipulator hiding behind a facade. It isn't a coincidence, I think, that our true introduction to Tom comes when he applies a merciless dose of blackmail to get what he wants, then uses a naked threat to cover it. His apparent willingness to call out someone for accusing him of blackmail – as in challenging them to a duel – hides quite neatly the simple fact that he is a blackmailer. Throughout the voyage, he uses the children as meat-shields ... and, when the chips are down, appears to be willing to sacrifice them to uphold his principles. From a cold point of view, this may be valid; from an emotional point, this is monstrous.

Indeed, in many ways, Uncle Tom reminds me of Albus Dumbledore. A decent old man-facade hiding a willingness to do whatever it takes (including sacrificing his own life) to win the war. Uncle Tom's lecture to Poddy and Clark's parents comes across about as well as Dumbledore's little speech at the end of Order of the Phoenix – an attempt to escape blame for something that is, to a very great extent, his fault. (He blames the whole disaster on bad parenting, but that was not the main cause.)

That said, Heinlein was very brave for his time. Poddy is a mixed-race child and her parents are considered prime breeding stock, not a very popular attitude. It's easy for me to portray a mixed-race starship captain or a black girl attending a magic school, but Heinlein didn't have so much freedom. And – unlike in The Rolling Stones – it's clear that the mother has a successful career of her own. Poddy's failure to actually master the tools she needs to get ahead, therefore, looks more like a personal failing than anything inherent to her society.

(And, by modern standards, the book is astonishingly clean.)

Podkayne Of Mars is, in short, an extended character study of two very different children and their manipulative uncle, rather than a straight story. The story is about how they cope with moving from one society to two very different societies and, in the end, how their personal failings lead to disaster.

It is not as entertaining as some of Heinlein's other works.

But it does make you think.

The Recognition Run by Henry Vogel
Review by Pat Patterson

This was one of the last additions to my January reading program, and the last book I actually finished during January. Still have more to work on before my next queue opens up, but if all of those are the quality of "The Recognition Run," I will be a happy man.

One of the axioms I've heard bantered about over the years is that if you have one problem, it can be difficult or impossible to resolve. However, if you have multiple problems, they tend to solve themselves.

That's certainly the case here. Old beggar (!) Jared has a granddaughter to protect. Ship owner Drake needs a reason to live. And the young Jeanine needs a way to get out of town before she is murdered for reasons she doesn't understand.

Many things are not understood by many people initially, which proves to be a good thing when thugs waylay Jared and Jeanine. Despite their appearance, both are formidable fighters, and that gives Jeanine the time she needs to escape. Without going into detail, Drake is the means of her getting off planet.

So now, we have TWO people who have been cast adrift. What to do, what to do? Fortunately, both of them are well aware that Jared, in one of his final acts, has selected Drake as Mr. Right for Jeanine, almost thrusting her into Drake's bed, as a matter of fact. That, plus his courtesy, and their mutual attraction, leads Jeanine to seek physical comfort from him, as they escape into space from their pursuers.

This is NOT a scene of glittering pulsing crushing, by the way. None of the pairings in the book are portrayed that way. It's good adventure for adults, and for the right, mature, appropriately minded teen, it will be taken as intended. It's no Heinlein Juvenile, but it absolutely is less explicit than that which can be found on broadcast television. Still, if you are not certain about the appropriateness of this as a gift for a young person, read it yourself, and I think most will find nothing to object to.

Drake reveals his secret to Jeanine: his wife and child were killed by the wickedness of one of the ruling houses; the crime was compounded when his commander merely demanded payment from the offender, then gave a small part of that to Drake. He is now, more or less, in the status of a Ronin, except that his lord wasn't killed; he merely betrayed Drake.

Jeanine's secret comes as a surprise to both of them. She is obviously more than someone washed up on the beach, which Drake discerns by her combat abilities and other aspects of her behavior. (We know, of course, through a reveal in the first chapter.)

Although there is PLENTY of good action, exploding space ships, and smooching, the primary message of the book to me is that loyalty flows both up AND down the chain of command. It is the failure of the ruling class to treat the working class folks as they deserve which has rotted the society, leaving good men and women forced to try to avoid careless malignance, while uppercrust twerps negotiate for power by devising insults on the one hand, and fawning on the powerful with the other.

Vogel ALWAYS tells a good story, and NEVER leaves his readers with cliff hanger endings. There is enough resolution that we are satisfied, and yet it is clear that there is much more story to tell.

And for this, we may be truly grateful.

Tears of Paradox by Daniella Bova
Review by Pat Patterson

Although a paradox is presented many times in the book, the paradox that is the foundation of the story is never named explicitly.

Here's the real paradox: Christians are people who don't belong here. The world is NOT our home, and it is central to classic Christian theology that we are at war with the world.

It's quite inevitable that Christians will be drawn into conflict with the world; we were told that, in the beginning. We were told that we would be hated, and that the day would come when we would have to go into hiding. Something that seemed impossible to believe when I was young has become inevitable now in the last third of my life.

Around the time this book was written (2014), a prominent author was castigated as a hater, simply because he accepted the doctrine of his church, and that doctrine contradicted the opinion of the People Of Open Minds (POOM). POOM insisted that he repudiate his church, or he would be rejected, and called a Nazi, and other bad sorts of things. He very appropriately told them that he was NOT going to repudiate his church, and that his beliefs were none of their business. POOM hated that. They cannot abide the idea that there is someone, somewhere, who is not entirely and enthusiastically advocating the goodness of everyone doing whatever they jolly well pleased. To suggest that some actions were NOT absolutely FINE was, to POOM, an outrage that must be stamped out.

And this is precisely the sort of thing that leads to the world that Bova describes. I expect that we are only one or two national elections away from having enough POOM in authority, that the restrictions and prohibitions that Bova describes are put into place. Perhaps it will take longer.

BUT: people of my opinions and POOM cannot peacefully co-exist, because we are diametrically opposed on the core issue of who is in control. POOM insists that every power comes from the people; we others maintain, sincerely, that the Creator endows us with rights; and those two ideas cannot be reconciled.

Bova has chosen a youngish couple, and their circle of friends and family, to tell the story of the rupture of polite disagreement. Michelle is five years younger than Jason, but she has loved him all of her life. Jason has also loved Michelle, although the age difference prevents him from acting on that love until after he has left home for a hitch in the Air Force, and then returned home to work as a mechanic. When they finally meet again, she is almost 18, and the age difference is no longer a prohibitive factor.

In a standard story, he comes back, meets her, they kindle a relationship, and hop into the sack. That doesn't happen here. Michelle is a devout Catholic, Jason less so; but Jason does have a profound sense that his relationship with Michelle is a sacred thing, and not to be cashed in for physical sensation and sweaty sheets.

This establishes their combined efforts as a foundation for both of their lives. It gives them both a framework to relate to the rest of the world, and in particular, it drives Jason to completely re-think his own spiritual condition, his relationship to the church, and to God.

Bova uses two techniques in telling the story. One, I found to be helpful; the other, I hope never to encounter again.

The technique I liked: We are given a chance to go into these characters' heads in a way that I'm not sure I have seen before. Things happen; and then, the character engages furiously with the meaning of what has taken place in an internal dialogue.

The struggles that Jason goes through, as he considers his wife, his mother, his best friend, his mentor, are all detailed to a very fine degree. Furthermore, they ring true, or at least they do to me. I have spent a LOT more time thinking about what has happened, and what might happen, than I ever have spent in significant, life-changing action. We don't get details about Jason at work on a car's engine, although we know that is taking place. Instead, we know his hands get greasy, as his mind processes the truth and value of what he is experiencing in his life. We are completely involved with him, as he makes his way to finding his place in the Kingdom of God.

We also see into Michelle's mind, although the format is quite different. For the most part, we listen in on her prayers, and her speeches to her unborn baby.

The technique I hope to NEVER see again: Jason's story and Michelle's story are presented as if in parallel; HOWEVER, they are NOT in sync in time. Michelle presents her story in a single location, at some time which is much later than the story that Jason presents. I found this to be quite disorienting, and I would NOT have proceeded further than perhaps the first twenty or so pages, had I not read one of Bova's other works, the short story 'The Birthday Party' in the collection "Freedom's Light." That is a fine story, with a good sense of characters, and place, and plot, and so I had, and continue to have, a great deal of respect for her as a writer.

Frankly, though, she has chosen an impossible thing. She has chosen to present to the world a story that throws the false values of humanism and materialism straight into the gutter, where they belong, and that is something POOM cannot tolerate. I believe she has already received at least one POOM review. I have my doubts that this book, which brutally confronts reality to its' face, is going to find popularity. She not only declares that the emperor has no clothes on, he supplies commentary on his warts and flabby paunch.

But, I doubt she wrote it because she was looking for commercial success (I hope she gets it anyway). I rather think that she has chosen to emulate those found in Revelations chapter 12 verse 11: "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death."

The Thing In The Woods by Matthew Quinn Review by Chris Nuttall

There is very little that is completely original in The Thing In The Woods. I've seen these tropes before in a dozen horror movies. The idea of an isolated American town with a dark secret – in this case, a ancient man-eating monster and a cult that worships it – is hardly new. And yet, the story does have an undeniable charm.

The teenage hero of the story – James Daly – is an outsider in the community, someone who dreams of leaving. (Most of the characters either want to leave or protect what they have.) When he has a close -encounter with the monster, he finds himself targeted by the cultists and trying to escape a web of deceit and conspiracy. The villain is someone who very clearly started out with good intentions – the protection of the community – and went steadily off the rails, something that eventually turns some of

his supporters against him.

In some ways, the book doesn't develop some (or all) of its themes. There are hints of a greater story that never seem to come into focus – government involvement, perhaps – although there might be a sequel that tackles the question of just how much the government did know. (The government goes to some trouble to buy silence from the survivors, at the end of the book.) You could wonder if the book spotlights those who want to defend their community or those who just want to leave ... but, at the same time, the book touches on the hopelessness of being trapped in such a community. Intentionally or not, the book points to some of the reasons for Trump's victory in 2016.

The Thing In The Woods is a fairly short read, but quite a decent one. I actually wanted to say more about it, but little came to mind. You'll enjoy it if you like horror stories mingled with urban life.

The Thing in the Woods by Matthew W. Quinn Review by Pat Patterson

I do NOT read horror. It's on my list of exclusions. However, the person who asked me to read and review this book wasn't aware of that, and asked so cordially, that I decided to give it a shot. It wasn't bad at all. Yes, there is a monster, and yes, it eats people, but I wasn't creeped out in the same way I would be if somebody attempted to tell me a ghost story. I say 'attempted,' because they would NOT be successful, whether I had to leave the room or throat-punch them.

The setting is quite authentic, in a fictional city just outside metro Atlanta. I've lived in places much like this, both on the north side and on the south side of the city, and Quinn does an excellent job of describing the countryside, as well as the economic plight faced by smaller communities absorbed into the metropolis. In fact, the villain of the piece has a quite sympathetic introduction; he's a BBQ restaurant owner who has lost significant business to the chain restaurants that have moved in. He, on the other hand, hires locals, and buys supplies from local merchants. He probably serves better BBQ, too.

The author has also done his historical research, too; the 12th Michigan Volunteer Infantry, who are eaten by the monster, was an actual unit that fought down from Tennessee, Kennesaw Mountain, fought in the Battle of Atlanta, then headed west chasing General Hood into Alabama, from whence they were mustered out unless eaten by monsters). The enlisted soldiers suffered 102 fatalities from enemy fire, and 94 deaths from disease; no count of monster-related deaths is recorded.

Other noteworthy accuracies that I had to look up: the throttle on an ATV is NOT like the twist-grip throttle on a motorcycle. I'm now trying to recall if I have ever actually been on an ATV, and can't recall, but the throttle works like he says it does. Secondly, the Bad Guy recalls worthless draftees (with some exceptions) in his MARINE company in Viet Nam; I could not remember any Viet Nam era draftees to the Marine Corps, only the Army, BUT I checked it out, and there were 42,000 drafted Marines during that time, and likely most of them went to Viet Nam.

I could have used more character development of the teens in the book, especially since it IS primarily their story. We get some insight into the primary male character, and a bit less into the primary female character, but the others, not so much. Exception: the two girl friends of the the main female character.

Of particular value to me is the respect given my redneck kin. Usually, country Southerners are depicted as stupid and slow. and that happens not to be the case. Yes, SOME of us DO have accents, as noted

in the book, but most of us do not. Even the teens are given credit for having brains; the main character has been accepted at UNC-CH, which is quite rare for an out of state student, while two others have been admitted to Georgia Tech, one of the foremost engineering schools in the country. Furthermore, the protagonist is seeking a business degree, and recognizes that Georgia State is an excellent choice. (Admittedly, I'm not impartial, having earned three degrees there myself.)

Dim opinion, based on 45 year old knowledge: the Claymore mine IS a remarkably effective ambush and defensive weapon, but I don't believe it would do as much damage as described in the story. However, I've only fired one of them, and that was in 1972, and I'm not an expert. That IS my only weapons quibble, and I'm pretty much death on firearms mistakes. (NOTE: a character refers to them as 'land mines' which they AREN'T, but that's the character's ignorance, not the author's.)

While I will NOT venture further into Spook Land, this wasn't bad. I would like to point out, however, that were such a monster existing in a pond near Atlanta, it would NOT be worshipped and fed human sacrifices. Instead, businessmen would be lining up to build a theme park around it, and raking in the tourist dollars like crazy.

Walking on the Sea of Clouds by Gray Rinehart Review by Pat Patterson

At some point in the early-to-mid 1990's, I purchased a computer simulation game called either "Moonbase" or "Lunar Command." It was loads of fun for a while; you had to build habitats and mining units, and keep within a budget. After a while, though, there was just a lot of work involved, and I think I abandoned the game.

Gray Rinehart has re-created both the novelty and the tedium of that early computer simulation, and personalized it with perhaps the most human characters I've ever had the pleasure to encounter in my reading space.

For most of the moon colonists, the mission of establishing a working colony on the moon has been THE driving force in their lives. They are the people who pasted posters of the moon on their bedroom ceiling, so they could memorize the features revealed by telescopes and the early lunar explorer programs. They made sure their moms bought enough of the right kind of cereal, so that they could get the glow-in-the-dark moon globe with the box tops. It's always been their passion, and has sustained them through exhaustive schooling and the selection process; when the rules said that only married couples would be accepted, they advertised for mates with credentials which would supplement their own.

A few have other reasons; they are drawn into the adventure because it's the dream of the person that they love. And THIS is where I realized what a brilliant observer of humans Gray Rinehart is: he manages to get inside the head of those who have mixed feelings so well, that we absolutely understand their conflict. His insight into the workings of the human mind are found in other areas of conflict, as well; the wife in one couple is extremely conflicted over the beliefs and practices of religion, while her husband was raised in a missionary family, and retains much of the belief system he was raised with. Throughout, ALL of the involved characters are portrayed sympathetically, which is quite a feat, given that they have such a different set of core values.

I do not mean to imply that all is butterflies and sunshine within the group. The administrator uses his giant thumb to mash people from time to time. Some people are obnoxious, bordering on becoming a

danger to the existence of the colony. And over everything is the constant strain of making the project come in, on time, and within budget. "No bucks, no Buck Rogers" said the character in the "The Right Stuff," and the adage still applies. The real money comes from asteroid mining, and the moon base is a part of the supply chain. They cannot afford to siphon off too much from the actual mining efforts for their own use, or the bean counters on Earth are likely to cut corners, reduce support, or even give up on the project.

Lunar dust is abrasive. Tanks and structures leak. Equipment breaks down before it's supposed to, or sometimes a planned shipment goes off course and important resources get hard-landed far out of reach. It's always hard work, and just because the weight of an object is 1/6 that on Earth, the mass remains unchanged, so the colonists don't get to act like Superman and pick up huge items and move them around casually.

It's hard work, and Rinehart makes that clear. It's also beautiful work, and Rinehart makes that clear as well. I had hoped, as a member of the generation that remembers Sputnik circling the Earth, and our own inability to get into orbit, that by this time, I would have been able to book passage on a cruise ship to the Moon, and take pictures of the Apollo 11 landing site.

Since that hasn't worked out for me, I'd love to see it happen for my grandsons and granddaughters. When I used to get requests from United Way, they would let me designate a particular recipient of the \$% per pay period I donated. I wish there was such an option with the IRS, because I'd fund space exploration directly, instead of leaving it up to Congress.

Prose Bono

The End is Only The Beginning by Cedar Sanderson

Last week I finished another novel. I sit here and look at that sentence and I'm thinking 'how casual' like I wasn't so excited at getting it done I was practically dancing around the house. This book has been hanging over my head for a long time, now. I'd bypassed it, having gotten very stuck on it, to finish Possum Creek Massacre and Tanager's Fledglings, both. So I have been writing on this thing for over two years. And now, it's done. Whoohooo!

And that's over. Time to get into the real work on it. Just writing 'then it all went happily ever after.' does not finish up the work on a novel. Now, I have a whole list of Stuff that Must Be Done in order to prepare this book for a successful launch. In rough order:

- Cooling-off period (at least a week)
- Re-read and revise
- Beta Readers
- Editing – hire out
- Formatting
- Covers (both ebook and print, possibly audiobook format for ACX)
- re-read and revise
- Typo Hunting (in which the author prints out the ms on paper and takes up a red pen)
- write a blurb (or hire it out)
- discover the keywords and subgenre

- Send out review copies
- proof the print copy (more typo hunting)
- promotion pushes on my blog
- guest posts/promo pieces on other blogs
- Paid ads (may come after the below process)
- Press Publish
- Find more typos

Timeline for all of that, and the little details I'm overlooking at the moment? I don't know. The bottlenecks are beta responses – Beta Readers are doing me a huge favor, so I try not to push for quick responses. People have lives. As I have a life, I'm entirely sympathetic, if somewhat nervous about what they are going to say about my book. The other big bottleneck is editing. Depending on who is doing this, how many of them, and other variables also out of my control, this can take a lot of time. Which means..

I can't start the promotion machine rolling until the manuscript is back in my hands from editors. Not really. I don't know that I'll do a pre-order with this book (it's novel #9 and I haven't done that with any of the others) but if I do, I cannot set that time period up when I am relying on the editors to fit into my deadlines. I know better. That's poking Murphy with a stick, and nothankyou. Not going to invoke that one. I can, however, be doing other things during this lag time. I can be working on covers, blurbs, keywords, possibly reaching out and asking a fellow pro for a cover quote.

Once I have the completed, polished ms ready to fly, I am probably going to hire someone to do the formatting for print. I know Vellum is the gold standard, and although I have Affinity Publisher which will do what InDesign does, what I do not have is the time. It's worth it to me to hire someone else for this. Just like I hire editors, as I cannot edit my own stuff effectively (no one can).

Then, and only then, can I say 'this is the publication date' and start working toward a concrete deadline. At this point I start talking to friends and finding those in my network willing to help with cross-promotion. This is a mutual thing, I do it for them, and hopefully they will return the favor. This is something that builds on years of relationships, it's not something you can just appear on the scene and rely on. Networking, in publishing as in any other business, is a huge factor in success. Like it or not...

I'm also looking into using paid ads, Amazon or other places, for a change. I haven't done this a lot in the past – other than buying ad slots in discount book emails similar to Bookbub – but I'd like to give it a try. The East Witch is a standalone. However, it is in the same world as my Pixie Noir series, so I can try to drive sales to the new novel by putting Pixie on sale. Similarly, in the future I may be able to drive sales of the trilogy by putting the standalone on sale. Since they come chronologically before this book, that may not be as effective.

One of the things I have to take a risk on is sending out review copies fairly soon. These can have a lead time of months, so I need to have my book in their hands long before it's ready for release. Or I delay the release to accommodate that. I'd like to have this book out before the Christmas sales. I think I can do that. Hopefully. If things go smoothly.

Seven Rules by Jim McCoy

I was scrolling through my Facebook feed earlier and I came across a photo that said, "Seven Rules I Learned About Storytelling by Playing Dungeons and Dragons." There were no rules listed with it. I took it that the readers were supposed to provide the rules ourselves. At least two others reached the same conclusion. Here are the rules I came up with and my justification for why they are important. Feel free to add your own and/or tell me I'm full of crap in the comments. I would seriously like to hear what everyone thinks.

1.) Every character should have a voice.

I guess I don't mean this literally. If the character goes to a restaurant and the only thing the server does is refill their cup, then the server shouldn't have anything to say. Any character that is a big part of your story should have a reason to be there and something to say though. Yes, I know that in many D+D groups, and this goes for other RPGs too, the healer is there because you needed him and you invited your dumb friend to play one because you needed one. He still gets a say in what happens to the group.

This works in a book or movie too. There is often one side character who just seems to go along with the group. That's fine. Not everyone has a world-ending super powerful personality. They should still have something to say about what's going on, even if it's just to agree. How many people hear are Kevin Smith fans? Silent Bob doesn't usually have a lot to say but when he says things, people listen. If you have a character that is around a lot and doesn't say much it needs to matter more when they do. Leonard Nimoy refused to do Star Trek: Generations because his character had no voice and no purpose. He was an actor, author and director. I figure he knew what he was doing.

2.) Characters act in their own best interest.

Remember when the rogue (or thief depending on your edition) gouged the jewels out of the statues eyes and the paladin lost his mind? Both were doing what would benefit them: The rogue wanted to get rich and the paladin wanted to stay in good graces with his deity. Neither could be expected to act any other way. They both did what they perceived as benefitting them. That's not to say that characters won't help each other out, but how many times has everything gone to crap because a character did what was best for them? Whether it was Peter in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe or Boromir trying to steal the ring in Lord of the Rings at some point someone is going to do something to benefit themselves.

If I'm reading a long story with a core group and nobody goes off the reservation it loses something. Keep this in mind if for no other reason than that a good story stays good when things go awry and this is a good way to MAKE them go awry.

3.) Failure is sometimes necessary to a good story.

A good way to ratchet up the tension is for something to go horrendously wrong. When your engineer is fixing the whatchamacallit and his thingambabobber gets stuck and tears it loose just as the bad guys are about to launch the gravity bomb and blow up the ship things get INTERESTING. When your main character is about to fight a kobold and the head of his warhammer pops off everyone starts to worry. (At least I like to think so. I actually used this one.)

Seriously. Things don't always go well. Luke Skywalker doesn't save his aunt and uncle. Kirk can't save his own son from the Klingons. Spock can't save Vulcan in the Trek reboots. The list goes on.

4.) Villains are often as intelligent as heroes.

This is important. I watched the GI Joe cartoon when I was a wee little Jimbo. I enjoyed it when I was nine. GI Joe always found the obvious hole in Cobra Commander's plan and then they kicked his ass. It was great! My heroes won and it was easy. But here's the thing: I'm thirty-nine now. I don't necessarily get caught up in that crap anymore. It's much better to see my heroes sweat.

In the Dragonlance Chronicles, Tanis Half-Elven finds himself face to face with Queen Takhisis, that universe's version of Satan. He knows that if he can't honestly worship her he won't survive. She can see into his soul and knows what he is thinking and feeling. He manages to pull it off but just barely. In the same series, Sturm Brightblade faces a determined enemy that is as smart as he is, and he watches two thirds of the Knights of Solamnia butchered when the good guys get suckered. That's an oh shit moment that I'll never forget. Weis and Hickman got this one right even if I am still bitter about what eventually happened to Sturm.

5.) The unexpected can be awesome.

And furthermore, it usually is. Something that MAKES SENSE but is unexpected can make a story. Seriously. Going back to the Dragonlance Chronicles, no one saw Tasslehoff Burrfoot breaking a Dragon Orb the way he did. No one expected Gollum to bite Frodo's finger off at the end of Return of the King. And, well, when Darth Vader looked at Luke Skywalker and said "No, I am your father" the whole world stopped and we all pooped our pants. See what I mean?

If you drop something in from seemingly out of left field and make it work your whole story can benefit greatly. That includes when the group in your D+D campaign finds itself trapped in a fairy ring, or popping up in Ravenloft, or wearing a really neat cloak and then the ship lifts out of the sea...

And yeah, your fiction can be made better with this as well.

6.) Never promise something and fail to deliver.

You remember that one time when your DM told you that the Grand Duke Whatshisname was supposed to award you the Awesome Thing of Coolness and a pile of gold when you completed your quest. Do you remember how badly you wanted to murder him when you found out that the town had been sacked and the Grand Duke beheaded while you were off risking your life to achieve the objective? Do you? I do. Any reader is going to feel the same if you screw the hero in the book. There are good reasons to do this sometimes but even then it should be more of a temporary setback than "Never, never gonna get it." I like En Vogue's music but I've never bought a book written by one of them.

If any of you are World of Warcraft players, think about the Lich King fight. You spent the entire expansion chasing this guy and defeating his minions. You found your way to his castle, Icecrown Citadel. You fought your way up to him by defeating waves of mobs, only God knows how many bosses, fighting a battle with another airship and killing dragons along the way. You finally get to his throne high atop ICC where you battle him... and watch someone else (Tirion Fordring) kill him. Talk about ripped off. I get the fact that they wanted to match the book but COME ON. I spent the whole raid wanting to take this guy out. Why take that away from me and every other damn player that made it

that far?

7.) The Law of Unintended Consequences applies in fiction as well as in fact.

Yay! The adventure is complete. You've rescued the princess, stolen the Orb of Ouchness and returned safely from the caper. You think everything is awesome. It's time to sun your buns, spend your gold and research your new spell. There's only one problem: That door you opened that didn't have anything behind it? It was a portal to The Sucky Place of Suckiness and now all of the evil Suckmonsters are here to suck the life out of everything. It's all your fault. That same guy who paid you to rescue his daughter and steal the Orb of Ouchness is now pissed at you because the Suckmonsters have consumed three villages worth of farmers and livestock. You're the one at fault because they're all coming from the place you just left and everyone knows it. Your life as you know it is about to be over and all because you opened a door... and had NO CLUE that any of this would happen.

It's a lot like when the Event Horizon (in the movie of the same name) tried to travel to another solar system... and went to hell. Apparently, folding space doesn't do what everyone thinks it should. In Robotech when the SDF III takes the Robotech Expeditionary Force to the other side of the universe, they left the Earth vulnerable to an enemy that they knew nothing about. They never meant to do that, but it spawned an entire part of a series. Stuff like this just works.

So that's my version of how to tell a good story as taught by playing RPGs. What isn't here that should be? What's here that should not be?

Talking to Write by Cedar Sanderson

At the beginning of this year I faced some cold, hard reality. I could not continue to call myself a writer if I could not produce... and I was not producing. Again, a month or so ago, I assessed my own capacity, and came really close to folding up the pages of my writing career and walking away from it. I didn't, and I'm glad I persisted.

If you give a geeky writer a goal...

First: Pushing myself to write more. Nebulous, but it was a start.

Second: quantify it. It started with increasing daily wordcount goals every month. I kept posting my monthly accountability posts on my blog, and seeing the charts move up encouraged me.

Third: amplify it. I started forcing myself to do dictation during my daily commute. (highly recommend both this handheld voice recorder, and reading *On Becoming a Dictator*)

Fourth: sustain it. I hate listening to my own voice, so now I am teaching myself to speak the punctuation. Which allows Dragon Naturally to do the transcription (you will want the premium version to do this, basic doesn't do recording transcription that I'm aware of).

Then the geeky writer will achieve new heights... I'm doubling or tripling my daily wordcount, so it is working. If I can train Dragon, and myself, I can achieve a novel's worth of wordcount in two months (conservatively).

Next new goal...?

Early this month I pushed myself to do a writing marathon while on vacation, which enabled me to finish *The East Witch*. I have a new novel! One I wouldn't have had I given up on this! Now? I'm a significant way into another novel, this one a very special project I'm collaborating on with my First Reader. Plus working on the serial *Case of the Perambulating Hatrack* which is about 2/3 finished at pulp novel length.

So I keep getting asked how I'm going about making the wordcount happen on a daily basis. It's dictation, but as I learned fairly quickly, dictating on the commute and then transcribing when I got home was overwhelming. Plus, as I said above, I really hate the sound of my own voice. And I have discovered that I have a weird quirk from years of training in storytelling and puppetry and performance... I do voices. And I put a lot of emotion in the story. Which is, ah, well, the First Reader teases me if I'm playing it out loud as I type it up. This is why I'm going to use *Dragon Naturally* to transcribe the audio.

Which is, ah, interesting...

This is the word salad you get out of *Dragon* if you have auto-punctuation turned on (it only provides periods and commas, based on pauses in speech. Which isn't always a good thing when you are composing as you speak and stop to think.) I also have the program trained on the specific manuscript to recognize some, but not all, of the names and words I'm likely to use, with specific pronunciation training.

There was lucky and Jannik Jannik to take care of himself. Danny was no longer going to worry about the slight buck Rogers spaceman he still had no idea what exactly Jannik triggered whether he could do it again. But damn out. He blinked his eyes again, feeling the tears rolled down his cheeks time Jannik got picked up. He was, and I looked directly at him disappointed Sgt. Danny popped his head up cautiously and looked. There was a darker passion the fog like a shadow approaching Danny grunted beside him, Lieut. Roskowski called out as everybody see that in a low tone course of eyes and yeses came back. Danny had a feeling that all of them were readying their weapons boiled with lights again, and then bolts out instead of the abrupt rip this time it was a slow tendril down on the tendril more like cauldron, looking out into the room fog stretched like a soap bubble until it popped and then once again. I was something huge and dark with too much teeth in the room with them. Danny popped a three round burst and then ducked under down behind behind Mousseau to go around him to the other side of the big aircraft box so was his spear wasn't to be a whole lot of help. This was something that required weapons that can reach out and touch someone to deliver real damage here Jackie's rounds going off into peculiar wine made his flesh crawl that might be Jannik whatever it was it what drowned towards the right side of the box and was headed that way.

However, if you go through the process of training yourself, as well as training your *Dragon* (that phrase amuses the heck out of me to say) you'll get something more like this:

Danny was not surprised to find lucky being his usual efficient Roman self, as much as it was a stereotype, Danny had already learned in the two days he'd known him Luciano was a prototypical leaching man.

"Lucky, how's it going man." Danny shouted at him.

Lucky was standing atop a sick wall of heavy crates and moving another one into place as Danny called to him. He settled it neatly into its corner, then turned and sketched a sort of salute or wave at Danny below him. "Almost there, Sgt." He pointed out towards the missed, which did not seem to have retreated since Danny last side. "You might want to check on Moussa, he's acting twitchy."

Danny nodded and saluted lucky, then started to walk around the stockade towards Moussa's position. As soon as he could use the the fog at ground level, he understood what lucky meant. The missed had been sitting showing shapes of crates and piles of gear earlier and Danny sighed. Now, the missed was roiling as though things were moving inside it, and it had darkened, Danny thought he could no longer see some of the things he can could have seen before. He made his way around the stockade to the massive crate for Moussa had been sitting earlier. So was now standing leaning on his ear. His eyes never stopping as he scanned the fog. His face was as serene as ever, but Danny thought he could detect some tension in the other man's shoulders and stance.

Danny spoke to him in a low tone, somehow speaking loudly seemed like a bad idea here and now. "Moussa, report"

Moussa didn't look at Johnny Danny, he spoke almost without moving his lips. "There demons in the fog, Sgt. Things I cannot put a name to, which crawl and creep and scuttle."

"That sounds ominous. Do you expect an attack?" Danny asked.

"I cannot say. Perhaps lucky should finish with the stockade and join me."

Danny realized that was as close to the asking for help is Moussa would get so side of the he also would arm himself and join, and he would get Jannik to join them as well, which made him realize that Jannik's desk and a computer set up should be moved to safety inside the stockade. Danny nodded it Moussa

"You if you need help urgently will be back shortly." Danny turned and marched away his shoulders sent he'd almost begun to relax almost. This place was uncanny, and his spine crawled with the sensation of being watched from behind.

Still in huge need of editing, but much, much better than the block of word salad. I keep feeding my manuscript back through the training for writing style, as well, after I've edited bits, and it seems to help. It simply can't wrap it's little AI mind around the Zulu warrior's name, Musa. You'll see it above in several formats. And the proto-Assyrian, Ibi, which... well, Dragon refuses to acknowledge it as a name at all!

I'm excited. I'm seeing real progress, and potential. Meeting my goals feels good. Now, to make new goals! Like... Marketing. Promotion. Those sorts of vital-but-boring tasks. First, though, I'm going to go write. The worlds in my head are getting more vivid the more time I spend in them.

Wright's Writing Corner
Open Active
by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Open active:

Start scene with changes underway and then explain how you got there... unless change are significant.

First: what do I mean by openings? In this case, I mean the beginnings to new scenes and chapters. Much of this could also be applied to first lines, but first lines have additional issues weighing upon them. So, for the most part, I am talking about internal openings—how to start after a scene change.

Second: what do I mean by opening actively. An active opening is when you start your scene in the middle of the action, where something interesting is already going on, instead of with a bridging scene that connects the previous scene to the next scene.

Active openings are also called *In Medias Res*, which, for the Latin Illiterate (like myself) is a phrase meaning something like “in the middle of the affair.”

Just to make sure we are all on the same page, here are two examples of openings—one active, one not:

- 1) The next day, we rose early and washed the car. After that, we headed down Route 66.
- 2) “He’s gaining on us! Step on it!” Carly yelled. She hung half out the passenger window, so that when I swerved around the rolling oil drum, she nearly fell out of the car.

Why is an active beginning interesting? Two reasons: the active opening sentence is often more interesting in and of itself. (See above.) Second, it raises questions: what is going on? Why is this happening? Who is chasing them? The more questions the reader has—assuming that they have faith that the author will provide answers—the more eager the reader is to read on.

There is another benefit as well. Starting in the middle often makes the whole scene more interesting. It tends to jump right to the exciting part, skipping the lead up. This helps keep the scene on track and moving quickly.

The key to the active opening is two things: picking an arresting scene and filling in the gap.

Picking an arresting scene: Picking a scene that will draw the reader’s interest requires that you think out the events you want to have happen and pick a moment from it that is early enough that the main action has not happened yet, and yet far enough along that the action has already begun.

The action does not need to have fully begun. In the above example, instead of starting with the chase, I could have started with:

“There’s a red Honda following us.” Carly leaned out the window, her hand shading her eyes. “Does that mean anything to you?”

This beginning is also active—far more active than the first one. But it requires less explanation for the

reader to grasp how the main characters reached this spot. Which leads us to our second point.

Filling in the gaps: Jumping in the middle of the scene means you have to take at least a moment to go back and explain what happen between the previous scene and the current action—how the characters got to the exciting predicament they are in now. Usually, this is done by a mini-flashback in the first few paragraphs of the new scene. You do not want to wait too long, as you don't want the readers sense of puzzlement to grow to the point that it interferes with their enjoyment. So, unless the way the character got there is a secret you are withholding for a good reason, you want to get that out of the way as soon as possible.

The key to a good active opening is being able to do this elegantly. Going back to our example one above, pretend for a moment that it is important that the characters recently washed their car. If so, include it in the mini-flashback.

Cutting hard to the right to avoid the oncoming truck, I barreled through a puddle, splashing mud all over our newly washed car.

Or even:

I cut hard to the right, avoiding an oncoming truck. We had risen early this morning so we could wash the car before setting out. At the time, it had not occurred to me that they might find us during the trip, so we had not brought our weapons. If they caught us, all we had to defend ourselves with was my little brother's soccer cleat that he left in the car by mistake and an old umbrella.

When do you use an active opening? Basically, whenever you can. Action is more interesting than static. Which leads to the next question: when do you not open actively?

There are a number of instances when an active opening is not desirable. Among others, they include: complexity of events jumped, subject of scene, and variation.

Complexity: if many events have taken place since the last scene, it may be impossible to write a quick, elegant mini-flashback. It is easy to cover getting up and washing the car, or flying into town and going shopping before heading to the rendezvous, but if the villains showed up, killed the main character's parakeet, burnt down his house, and kidnapped his mother-in-law before the big fight scene, that is a little harder to sum-up.

Basically, the rule of thumb is: if the explanation of how they got there is so long or awkward as to slow down the current scene, you would probably be better off writing the events in chronological order.

Scene Subject: If the subject the scene is not active, there is no point in confusing the reader by starting in the middle. A quiet walk in the garden with the family parakeet (before the villains arrive to off the dear bird*) does not need an active beginning. While it would still be nice to open with an interesting or evocative line, it does not need to be in medias res.

Variation: Even if all your scenes have dramatic action (while walking in the garden with the cat, the main character activates a trip wire that opens a trap door dropping him into the center of a fight going on in the underground headquarters of the villain) it is sometimes nice to start a scene with a description or a gentle moment merely for the sake of variation.

Readers need breathers as well as action. A moment taken sniffing the hyacinths and feeling the breeze that is ruffling the parakeet's feathers can make the surprise drop into the busy secret headquarters even more unexpected.

How much breather vs. action—how many scenes to open in the midst of things vs. otherwise—depends upon your genre. For instance, a romance might be likely to have more gentle scene openings than a thriller.

In closing, starting your scenes with a bang helps jumpstart your readers into the scene, compelling them to keep reading. Then—so long as you have a compelling middle and end on another bang—your story will be irresistible.

*Do not fear, Dear Parakeet Lovers, our feathered heroine is not daunted by this turn of events. She comes back to help the hero as a ghost.

Literary Criticism

His Dark Materials and Philosophy Review by Tamara Wilhite

What Is “His Dark Materials”?

“His Dark Materials” is the name given to a series of books by Philip Pullman. The books are called “Northern Lights”, “The Subtle Knife” and “The Amber Spyglass”. He wrote a subsequent trilogy called “The Book of Dust” that expanded this universe. I’d summarize the books as Nietzsche for kids. And I’m not alone in that belief.

These books have regularly featured among the most commonly contested books in libraries. Why? Because the books are a direct attack on religion and the Catholic Church in particular. Then there is Lyra Belacqua, a young woman who lies without end, though one of the theoretical morals of the novels is to appreciate the truth. The books themselves suggest the ends justify the means. Yet the works are incredibly, philosophically rich.

Are There Movies Based on “His Dark Materials”?

The movie “The Golden Compass” was based on Pullman’s “Northern Lights” novel. “His Dark Materials” was the basis for an HBO series of the same name that began in 2019.

About “His Dark Materials and Philosophy”

Chapter 1 is an analysis of the characteristics of a god worthy to worship. It discusses the problem of Evil, the evil in the Magisterium and evil in general. Chapter 2 discusses the knife that can cut through the barriers between worlds, allowing children like Lyra and Will to travel between them. It also addresses the physics and metaphysics of Dust and the spyglass.

Chapter 3 is a look at death in His Dark Materials. For example, people clearly have souls as demonstrated by daemons, and the second book takes us to a literal world of the dead. Chapter 4 examines daemons and identity. While daemons change as children play, they take a final form at puberty. And they don't change though adults often do.

Chapter 5 ties "His Dark Materials" to Nietzsche. Ms. Coulter is compared to the Overwoman. She is a mysterious character in war between Metatron and Asriel, the representative of religion's quest for power and a supposed quest for secular reason. Lyra and Will are compared to the philosophy of "Beyond Good and Evil". Lyra's path to becoming an overwoman herself is also in line with Nietzsche's philosophy, including her repeated deferrals to Will.

Chapter 6 presents the story as how the power of an innocent girl can change the world. It discusses the fears Lyra faces on her path to maturity and coming into her own by realizing the adults around her are wrong. The books are very late-wave feminist in that the father has to sacrifice himself to save his daughter who then achieves his end goals such as finding the source of the Dust and liberating the dead. The third book ends with her starting to build his Republic.

Chapter 7 compares "His Dark Materials" to Margaret Cavendish's work as well as better known classics. Chapter 8 parallels the conflict Pullman faced with Socrates. He outlines the attack on Christianity and authority in general that are the core morals of the series that others consider immoral. This chapter also discusses how the death of God in the books parallels the metaphysical death of god in Nietzsche.

Chapter 9 is, to me, the best though it had so much more potential. It brings up the prophecies tied to Lyra such as her being the new Eve where Ms. Malone is the snake or how only Lyra can defeat fate and death by being ignorant. The author briefly brings up the threat to one's freedom fate represents.

"The Subtle Knife" shows Will refusing to ask his father's fate from the magical device that can give him the answer, because he sees it as preserving the illusion of freedom. Ironically, Lyra exercises what is supposed to be her freedom by not asking on his behalf or out of her own curiosity. Instead, she asks the device what Will says when he says it and rarely anything else.

The author touches on the risk of AI being the oracle that tells us what to do and undermining our freedom of choice. This could have been an essay in its own right. The author didn't discuss the risk of elites in power using the machines to tell us what to do, presenting it as a neutral source of advice when it actually reflects their biases and commands what they consider "best".

Chapter 10 tries to analyze the truth in Lyra's lies, such as how her stories contain higher truths or that her good intentions excuse the lies. One example is the lie that restores someone to their rightful place.

Chapter 11 is the only political chapter in this book, though the editor's introduction suggested there would be more such political moralizing. The writer's biases blind him to anything other than a critique of all conservative views as "post-truth".

Chapter 12 returns to the true philosophical analysis of this deep body of work. It discusses the metaphysical differences between various types of creatures in the series. It doesn't quite compare daemons to spirit animals but should have.

Chapter 13 veers off course with the philosopher comparing circumcision to the separation of children

from their daemons. Yet the writer leaves out the horrors of female genital mutilation and mentions a lesser, beneficial procedure instead.

Chapter 14 presents the series as the breaking of the link between higher knowledge and sin. It references Jacques Derrida's work. It argues in favor of subjective and outcome based morality. That was the basis of social justice.

The chapter is interesting for its analysis of the alethiometer. For example, the device only communicates via symbols. This is a direct refutation to the written words of the Bible or Book, sometimes literally referred to as the Word.

Related Reading

Read "The Chronicles of Narnia" to see what Pullman was trying to counter. The movies are relatively close to the source material.

"Paradise Lost" would be an excellent piece to read, but it is a slog.

I suggest reading Johnathan Haidt's "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion". It is a counterpoint to the "post-truth" essay.

Frank Herbert's "Dune" series is far better at discussing the trap and lure of prescience than "His Dark materials" addressed in Chapter 9.

An Interview with Sandra Haven by Tamara Wilhite

Sandra Haven is a professional editor who mentors and advises writers, as well. I have been a fan of her newsletter for writers for years. And I had the opportunity to interview her.

Tamara Wilhite: Your bio says you were the senior editor of the Writer's International Forum, and I know you've been working for years. How long have you been working as an editor?

Sandra Haven: Forever! Well, maybe not quite that long, although three decades feels like that at times. A great aspect of being in the same field that long is having clients who have been with me for over ten years and watching their writing improve and expand and see their success in publishing. I can't imagine doing anything else.

Tamara Wilhite: What genre accounts for most of your work? And where do the writers need the most help?

Sandra Haven: I found early on that I find prefer editing SF/fantasy and mysteries, so I specialize in those. These genres tend to include more critical thinking, deeper research and more range of imagination, at least in my opinion, than other genres.

As far as where writers need the most help, two stages of the writing process cause the biggest bump: one on each end of the writing path. Some have reams of notes and plans and never seem to get the actual writing done. Yet it seems once a writer starts writing, the words tumble (and, yes, stumble at times!) but it DOES get written.

The other period of difficulty is after the book is completed. Then the stark and confusing business of promoting and marketing hits nearly every writer pretty hard. But there are marketing programs and methods to help writers for that.

The in-between stages—the actual writing—is where writers need my kind of help, developmental editing, and this is also the most surprising, rewarding and exhilarating period.

Tamara Wilhite: What are some of the most common mistakes you see writers making? For example, telling instead of showing.

Sandra Haven: Although telling instead of showing is a very common writing problem, the most common I think is not understanding the need to fulfill the expectations of their specific audience. Which usually means the writer hasn't defined an audience. Writing a book that "everyone will love" doesn't really work. Because, really, I don't like to read the same things you do or the person next to you or my neighbor. We all have specific reading preferences. Once a writer understands that, he can define his audience, use their expectations, and create fresh stories that will thrill those readers.

Tamara Wilhite: A lot of people reading this are writers themselves, whether they're contributing to fanfics or anthologies or working on an all-American novel of their own. How do they know when they're ready to submit it to an editor like you? And when do they need to keep working on it?

Sandra Haven: There is no easy answer to that one. Writers have a blind spot when it comes to their own writing. I guess I'd say it is ready when they find themselves arbitrarily rearranging or changing their words because they "don't know how to make it better." Also, when they are certain it is perfect! Both can be a sign they need a professional eye.

Tamara Wilhite: As an editor, do you agree with the theory that the word processor has made modern literature too wordy?

Sandra Haven: Not so much too wordy as too sloppy. It is too easy to allow online dictation programs and grammar checkers to pump the words out. Mind you, I use a dictation program. And I have grammar checkers onboard, too. But there is no substitute for carefully reviewing what you wrote BEFORE sending it into the cybersphere. I think that is a failing, not of technology, but of human nature.

Tamara Wilhite: And what is your opinion of terribly written books that manage to sell well and even hit the big screen like "50 Shades of Grey"?

Sandra Haven: (Groaning here!) It saddens me to see some fine literature and great stories are overlooked when some dismal works are published. I can only say that having the right book at the right time in front of the right person can create a big success that is, at best, questionable. As for the popularity of some such dismal works? Remember I said earlier that not everyone has the same preferences in reading ...

Tamara Wilhite: May I ask what you're working on now?

Sandra Haven: I just finished editing two pandemic books. Both were completed prior to this year and prior to COVID-19. One was an alternative history, showing the impact a pandemic would have made during a past era. The other is a looking at a future world where pandemics are consistently a factor and the aggressive efforts to save humanity. Both were very well researched. I learned so much, scientific

facts that have made me understand the real pandemic we face far better. But the biggest take-away was my respect for writers.

Writers are seers, in my opinion. They have the eye for current trends, vivid imaginations and they can put together the pieces of reality and possibility in such unique ways. I feel privileged to join them on the path to sharing their insights with readers.

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

Sandra Haven: I encourage people to read more and on more varied themes—it can provide you with unique insights, fresh perspectives and views of the past and future that can inspire and enlighten. In the process, it makes our present both more tolerable and more enjoyable.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.