

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

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# Editorial

We're delighted to welcome long-time reviewer Jason P. Hunt of [scifi4me.com](http://scifi4me.com) to our list of contributors. I hope that you enjoy his work.

The contents have been slightly re-organized. Recognizing that we review anthologies and shorter novels, our first section is now Fiction. Prose Bono remains as before. Literary Criticism, Fannish history, and interviews are now all in Non-Fiction.

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, Jason P. Hunt, 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.



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

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:

Jason P. Hunt <http://scifi4me.com>

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

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

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

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

Tamara Wilhite also appears at <http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

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# Fiction

## A Fiery Sunset

by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey

Review by Pat Patterson

The Humans have had enough, and it's time for payback.

There is such a richness of story detail in this series, it's surprising to reflect that it's only slightly more than a year old. Nearly every paragraph reminds me of a prior storyline, and sometimes that sets up a demand that I go back and re-read earlier works in the Four Horsemen Universe so I can more vividly enjoy the writing here.

At the same time, this book COULD, POSSIBLY be read as a stand-alone. It's the first volume in 'The Omega War' arc, and that may be a part of why that's possible. However, I think it's more likely that the authors, having a solid grasp on character and plot, just don't have to depend on prior works to carry their water for them.

For reasons not related to the story, I was kept away from the series for a period of months. When I returned to the series, two days ago, I suffered no sense of discontinuity. For the uninitiated, a one-paragraph prologue would be helpful, but my guess is that the primary audience for this volume is that slaving horde out there, those who check their email 15 times per day to see if Seventh Seal Press has released anything new. Even so, 150 words of summation wouldn't go amiss. We are also anticipating the release of reference material in the electronic forms of the works, as dozens of other life-forms, each with unique characteristics, are essential players. Sigh. Rome wasn't built, and all that, and when you have to get PRODUCT on the table, you don't always have the resources to present the trimmings. In addition to the customary mecha battles we have demanded, this volume also presents some startling new alien species. For those who value diversity for its' own sake, I suppose that makes this series go straight (err, maybe not STRAIGHT) to the top of the list.

The tie-ins with the initial book in the series, "Cartwright's Cavaliers," are significant. Jim Cartwright, the somewhat low-luck leader of one of the Four Horsemen companies, is featured prominently, and the storylines beginning in that work are extended. But here's what you really need to know about the book:

After being subjected to wholesale persecution and murder at the hands of indifferent or hostile Galactics, the humans in the mercenary companies have FINALLY seen clearly that the Mercenary Guild power brokers are out to destroy them. And they are determined to go down fighting.

It's the combination of the personal stories (tragic loss, budding love, professional development), with the Big Picture view (Machiavellian politics at the galactic level, incredibly ancient birds coming home to roost) that lifts this volume above standard, exploding spaceship, space opera fare.

Well, that plus the fact that it is just so well written:

"I understand," he said. "You're scared. This is a great place to hide."

"How dare you," she said, her voice low and menacing.

"My grandfather would spit on you," Nigel said.

You miss that by just a smidgen, and it's farce, at best. But if you NAIL it, as the authors have done, then the reader can feel the tension in the air, and subconsciously reaches for a weapon and a desk to use as cover. And it's like that, all the way through.

## Alternate Routes by Tim Powers

### Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFREVU September 2018

Tim Powers is known for his secret histories--stories set in our world with hidden magic or shadowy secret agencies manipulating powers unknown to ordinary citizens. *Alternate Routes* presents a world where ghosts are real and mysterious gateways off Los Angeles' freeways lead to an alternate, surreal plane of existence linked to the ancient Greek myth of Daedalus' Labyrinth. Central to the narrative is a clandestine government agency, the Transportation Utility Agency (TUA) that regularly communicates with "deleted persons" via ghost bands on the radio, using the magical current from lane changing on the freeways.

The book begins with Sabastian Vickery aka Herbert Woods, an unjustly disgraced Secret Service agent in hiding, working for a chain of taco wagons that doubles as a "spectral-evasion car service". Years earlier, while in the Secret Service protecting the president, Vickery accidentally heard a message from a ghost to a TUA vehicle in the presidential motorcade. This caused the TUA to attempt to kill him, forcing him to go on the run, using his experience as a cop and growing knowledge of the unseen world to hide.

But when his dead wife, pulled into strengthened existence by a dream Vickery has, begins communicating with TUA, he's found by Ingrid Castine, a TUA agent who has developed a conscience. Instead of arresting him, she saves him from two other agents of the TUA. In exchange, he offers to help her get out of Los Angeles. This leads to a chase as Vickery and Castine use different mystical means to hide from ghosts and the TUA. But when Castine, fleeing the TUA, takes a nonexistent exit off the freeway, Vickery tries to rescue her with the help of a 19th Century Jew who previously linked the Pasadena Freeway with the Labyrinth. This leads to a greater threat as the two begin a complete merge, causing chaos and death.

The relationship between Vickery and Castine is interesting. At first, they do not trust each other. Vickery says "you and I are allies for a few hours, I do owe you that – we're not friends." And at one point, Castine draws her gun on Vickery, saying, "This is too perfect a place to kill someone and hide a body!" But soon Vickery cares enough about Castine that he risks his life to enter the freeway afterlife to save her. Another curious character is a ghost who imagines herself to be Sara of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's story *The Little Princess*.

Tim Powers grew up and still lives in Southern California and his first-hand knowledge of the area certainly comes across well in this book. The impressive detail causes the reader to believe in the more fantastic elements of the novel.

Some people may be surprised to see Baen Books publishing Tim Powers, whose writing tends to be more on the literary end (often borderline mainstream with strong horror elements). Yet while Baen certainly publishes many action-oriented novels, they also publish authors important to the field. And Powers, while known for mixing real history with uncanny events, certainly can tell an exciting adventure story as readers of *The Anubis Gates* or *On Stranger Tides* can attest.

*Alternate Routes* may be as close as Tim Powers gets to traditional urban fantasy as he puts his own unique spin on the common urban fantasy tropes of cop/agent investigating the supernatural and two characters forced to work together who develop a relationship. Readers who love ghost stories, Californians, and fans of Seanan McGuire's *Sparrow Hill Road* (which, while very different in structure and tone, shares the theme of ghost roads) will greatly enjoy *Alternate Routes*. Hopefully, the fact that the book is published by Baen and the action-packed cover will lure in new readers.

Reviewer's Note: I have driven Tim Powers in my car when he was Guest of Honor for Capclave, but we were nowhere near the LA freeways and did not encounter any ghosts.

### Ambassador and Nomad by William Alexander Review by Anita Barrios

We discovered William Alexander's fantasy middle grade work, his medieval faire-setting *A Festival of Ghosts* and *A Properly Unhaunted Place*, a few years ago and read and reviewed them for my annual December, Review-a-Day Countdown to the Holiday. [Ed: *Nomad* is reviewed later in this issue.]

I'd been meaning to read more of his middle grade books (there are a bunch!) and came across this sci-fi duology. I passed them along to my teen son, who also loved them.

They really do read like one book that got broken into two for middle-grade reader expectations of length. The first is 222 pages, and clearly ends unresolved. In fact, by the end, it feels like it's just getting started. While the second book is a bit longer, 264 pages, and wraps up everything started in book one. I'd recommend reading one right after the other with no pause between them.

Eleven-year-old Gabe Fuentes starts the summer before 6th grade on the neighborhood park playground, watching his younger siblings, and learns his best friend, Frankie, won't be able to spend it with him. Earlier, the boys set off a "rocket" made from a metal pipe, instead of cardboard (can anyone say pipe-bomb?), and after the damage, which Gabe took the blame for, Frankie's mom is shipping him off to his father's house in Califas.

At the same time, "The Envoy," a sort of purple blob that had been hanging out on an abandoned USSR-era clandestine moon base, has built a genuine rocket and launched itself back to Earth to select another Ambassador to speak for Terra, Earth.

It lands in the park lake and spots Gabe, choosing him to be the next Ambassador. When it shows itself to Gabe, he takes the news equanimously, listening to its explanation why it chose a child to be its plenipotentiary for Earth with a marked lack of panic or disbelief.

According to the Envoy, which speaks in Gabe's mother's voice, "Adults of most species find it more difficult to communicate with anyone outside their arbitrary circle -- or even recognize that anybody

exists outside it. So ambassadors are always young. Always."

The Envoy has repurposed the duplex owner's washing machine to properly "entangle" Gabe's being and get him, while he dreams, to the Chancery, where ambassadors of all the existing species hang out and "play" and negotiate.

The Envoy spotted a fleet of ships in our solar system's asteroid belt, and Gabe has to go to the Chancery and figure out who may be stealing water from us (humans).

It's not long before someone tries to kill him, sucking the entanglement device (the repurposed washing machine) and the basement and first floor of the duplex through a black hole. At the same time, Gabe's father runs a stop sign. Or, at least the patrol officer who stops him claims he ran a stop sign, and once Gabe's dad admits he has no "papers" to be in the US legally, he's carted off to an ICE detention facility. Along with his mother. He learns his older sister, Lupe, was also not born in the US.

While both his parents are from Mexico, originally, Gabe's mother came legally on a visa while his father got caught trying to enter when he was very young and was deported, which means Gabe's dad will be shipped back to Mexico immediately, while his mother is given a hearing.

But there's another twist: Frankie's house used to be a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Fuentes family's evacuation plan is to hide out there, in case of detection.

Gabe figures he can't hide out with his family in his best-friend's hideaway because someone's trying to kill him...and when he slips out, and a laser fires in the exact spot where he'd just been standing, he knows leaving is the only safe thing to do.

With the Envoy's help, and some very clever reasoning on his part, he'll physically out-run the assassins' attempts to kill him while walking a fine-line between our nearest galactic neighbors and a species, the Outlast, known for its desire to exterminate all life in the galaxy.

It's a great read, and in some ways is a very typical middle grade book. There's a scene when Gabe has to pee in space, zero-gravity, that had all of us laughing and kinda grossed-out at the same time.

A fun way to start your summer reading!

## An Airless Storm by Peter Grant Review by Pat Patterson

Peter Grant has invented a new literary genre; Space Opera Procedural.

The cover artist is Steve Beaulieu, and he has successfully created a distinctive look for this series. That's a nice effect that indie authors don't get automatically, since they aren't working with a traditional publisher. I'm not really qualified to be an art critic, but I DO appreciate a book better if it has a cover consistent with the rest of the series. When the Man-Kzin War series was first published by Baen, you could pick them out from the rest of the titles across the aisle at the bookstore. I have no data that suggest there is an impact on sales, BUT I like it, and I think it's a nice pro touch. Peter Grant has some GREAT covers; maybe not as beautiful as the covers on his wife Dorothy's books, but great, anyway.

At some point in reading this second installment in the Cochrane's Company series, I realized the author had created a new genre: The Space Opera Procedural. You will recognize the reference to police procedurals, which are almost as much about HOW things happen as they are about catching/not catching crooks; I love those things! Well, Grant has moved it from the mean streets of Philadelphia into the galactic arena. Does a HECK of a job at it, too!

Cochrane was cashiered from the ranks and lost his wife due to the machinations of the High and Mighty twerps. He didn't slink off to oblivion; he managed to scrape together ships and personnel and produce a security force. In the first installment, we saw how he used asteroid mining to supplement his income and played different factions against each other to make their crimes pay for him. In this volume, that same approach intensifies, and the old scores begin to get settled.

"I seek justice, as should we all, but I will settle for revenge." That's THE great line of the movie, spoken to Denzel Washington at the beginning of 'The Magnificent Seven,' and it could also be a theme of this series. There are bad guys, and Bad Guys, and BAD GUYS!!!! in this story, and the character tension is established by the way that Commander Cochrane seeks justice AND revenge, but manages to avoid becoming the ethical equivalent of those who destroy.

One of his enemies is the Brotherhood, a company of pirates, robbers, murderers and thieves, who seek to expand from their criminal roots in Albania of ancestral Earth and develop their own self-sustaining empire, ranked among the top criminal enterprises. They have been under the leadership of a series of charismatic tyrants and are often individually True Believers. Their tactics have been grim, and part of the plot has to do with making some of those into sympathetic people. It's nicely done, by the way.

Another enemy is the High and Mighty twerps, who have prevented talent from being rewarded by means of manipulation and brute force. Cochrane uses those same methods and adds more subtle economic strategies into the mix.

A word about those strategies: until recently, I did not know that there was insurance for insurers. That's a real thing; the way it works is that all insurance companies contribute to a common fund, and if the losses for one particular company result in bankruptcy, the clients who purchased policies with that company are covered by the fund (more or less). Earlier this year, my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, was hired as a legal paraprop by a law firm representing this industry, and that's how I discovered such a thing exists. Therefore, I wish to offer Peter Grant some EXTRA applause, for accurately depicting an obscure liability feature. This adds to the IN SPA-ACE! community: Pigs, Nuns, Lawyers, and now Insurance Agents: well done, sir!

In addition to the fascinating behind-the-scenes revelations of how to set up a successful security company ( IN SPA-ACE!), there are nicely done space battle sequences. You can't have REAL space opera without exploding spaceships, and Grant supplies that in a good mix with the procedurals.

Alas, it is also necessary for people to fall in love. Fortunately, Grant treats the idea with respect, and allows us to see adults act with restraint and appreciation for more factors than pheromones. Those acts which DO involve smooching are discreetly handled behind closed doors, and (eventually) with the benefit of clergy. I sincerely appreciate this treatment; not EVERYONE is compelled to act as if the procreative act had no more consequence than a sneeze in real life, and I regard this as another way in which Grant's characters are revealed to be real people.

Assassin  
by Kacey Ezell  
Review by Pat Patterson

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program. Note: I also had access to the ARC, but I didn't read it, since I have yet to finish my current TBR&R. However, when this book was published in advance of the original release date, I grabbed it immediately and started feasting.

It's a study in personality, a mystery story, and a ripping good yarn. I wanted to dive into it right away. First, however, I joyously re-read the appetizers. There are three of these.

The first one I encountered was "Gilded Cage," by Kacey Ezell in the anthology "A Fistful of Credits." This is actually the second story in the timeline (so far). It is a creepy, horrid tale of addiction and bad choices made for good reasons, and how those reduce options from the infinite down to zero. I don't think I've ever read such blood-curdling scenes presented with such an economy of words. The story of Human Susan Aloh is told here, and it's a story of degradation and a twisted redemption. Reow is in the Supporting Actress role, and her four kits are also introduced.

In the anthology "The Good, The Bad, and The Merc," we get the origin story of Reow, founder of the Night Wind Clan, and PROBABLY a bit of the backstory of the wicked, wicked Dirrys of the Whispering Fear Clan, in the compelling "Lessons," also by Kacey Ezell.

In addition, this volume contains a major exposition of the nature of the wicked, wicked Dirrys, a subtle clue PROBABLY linking the wicked, wicked Dirrys to Reow's origin, and a creepy bit of insight into the inner workings of the Depik warrior's mind in Marisa Wolf's "Under The Skin." Aroh, the seemingly peaceful warrior, is the protagonist.

It is not ESSENTIAL that you read the three stories in order to appreciate this book, but they are great stories in themselves, and if you have Kindle Unlimited, there is absolutely no reason not to get the two anthologies (again, I hope), and your reading of "Assassin" will be the richer for it.

I have never taken a conventional writing class, nor have attended any of the magnificent workshops available for professional writers. If there are ever any reviewer workshops offered in my vicinity, I will be sure not to attend those, either. However, I DO pay attention to what successful authors throw away in their comments on blogs and columns and things, and one of the most important points, they say, is that a character show change and development.

And that happens here. Although the wicked, wicked Dirrys remains wicked throughout, Reow progresses from needy newborn, to determined infant, to assertive adult, to entirely proficient and murderous assassin possessing a sort of sociopathic compassion, to loving mother, and finally a Machiavellian mover and shaker of empires. Furthermore, her children evolve to meet the demands made on them. The initial challenge is to shift from a reasonably co-equal status, although each has some area of special strength, to a more hierarchical structure, when mother Rowr is promoted to Peacemaker status. Death From Above, as the senior female, is next in line to rule, and that decision is confirmed by her pregnancy. Ezell and Wolf do an excellent job of describing the undercurrents of emotion as the young Depik as they adapt to the new reality, which is closely followed by the full-fledged attack on their nest.

Meanwhile, in the Whispering Fear clan, Arow, the protagonist of "Under the Skin," has his own char-

acter development going on. Depik loyalties and their rules of behavior are deeply ingrained, and his treatment by the wicked, wicked Dirrys has set up profound conflicts in him.

The stories of the young Depik are woven together to form the narrative, and there is plenty of action involved (unless you are a Depik, who always want more action), but the main story is a whodunit-style mystery. We THINK we know who would be wicked enough to do the CRIME, but how and why remain a mystery. Yes, you will want to know, and yes, you will find out.

In addition, we get more story about Susan Aloh (Susa), and some tastes of her adaptation to her new status. There are a couple of tense moments here, particularly when she returns briefly to Earth. This return also gives us an opportunity to check in with CASPR teams of the Four Horsemen, those in the service of The Golden Horde.

I could be wrong about this, but it appears to me that one section of this novel, dealing with an accidental acquisition of a mercenary unit, could have been packaged as a self-contained short story. Maybe not; I know there are at least two more books planned in this series, so it just may be a particularly well-developed sub-plot forming.

And for those of you who love ridiculous humor: the new leader of the Night Wind Clan has the name 'Death from Above.' However, friends and family always use a shortened form of her name, in this case, referring to her simply as 'Death.' This gives us chuckles throughout the book, particularly (for me, at least) in those scenes in which the character is suffering from morning sickness. Speaking as a bio-father of three, I can testify that morning sickness is nothing to be laughed at, at the time, but when it inflicts a character named Death, it's FUNNY, as the following quote illustrates:

“This isn’t uncommon in pregnancies,” the healer said briskly as Death wiped her mouth with a shaky paw. Mhrand had brought her to the infirmary after she’d been unable to keep anything down, and Jhora had shooed him out just before Death started heaving again.

Even though I KNOW this refers to a catlike assassin, I can't help but be amused at the thought of Death throwing up. I confess that my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, did NOT find the passage particularly humorous, but then, she has actually had morning sickness, and I have not. There are other instances where her name appears in passages I find whimsical, but I will not detail them for you, as it would be a spoiler.

**Brimstone Angels**  
**by Erin M. Evans**  
**Review by Jason P. Hunt**  
For more of his reviews, read <http://scifi4me.com>

I finally managed to sit down with *Brimstone Angels* and the first thing I should point out is that the “angels” of the title don’t get very much play in the book.

Having said that, there’s a character who’s suspected of being the “Brimstone Angel” of the title, but the entire piece of the story introducing that doesn’t happen until the last...fifth?...of the book.

The gist of it: several characters find themselves, for various reasons, on the road to the storied city of Neverwinter, which was destroyed and is now being rebuilt. Descendants from those who fled the de-

struction are on their way back to restore the city, and our adventurers get caught up in a plot to ... overthrow Asmodeus? Maybe? The plot goes along fairly well and easily, until it suddenly gets a little muddy when we descend into the various planes of Hell and get into the machinations of the succubus Rohini and her rather nasty boss. But up until then, the story holds together well.

We have tieflings Havilar, who is good with a blade, and her sister Farideh, who finds herself unwittingly bound to a half-devil named Lorcan. This Lorcan fellow is not popular with anyone, and he reminds me a bit of Loki from the Marvel Cinematic Universe — snarky, mischievous, a right dastardly troublemaker with designs of his own when it comes to Farideh, who completes his collection of descendants of various devil spawn from Back In The Day. Farideh and Havilar are apparently of rare stock.

Farideh's tie to Lorcan gives her powerful wizarding skills. Her ability to cast magic is both good and bad, and the whole "ties to a half-devil" is not happily received by her adopted Dragonborn father, Mehen (I keep picturing Beta Ray Bill, for some reason). He's a clanless warrior plying his trade as a bounty hunter, and the three are wandering homeless after being run out of a town of outcasts. Along the way, they pick up a couple of religious types, Tam and Brin, who each have their own secrets and objectives.

The plot thickens as everyone gets into Neverwinter, and in some ways it thickens just a little too much. This is clearly a first book in a series, so it doesn't all wrap up at the end.

Overall, it's a good read. Plenty of action. Lots of magic. Moral quandaries. Misunderstandings and misperceptions. It's satisfying in that the main characters all have an arc from the beginning to end of the book. Everyone gets plenty of development so as not to get short-changed by the ending. That's not to say it's a cliffhanger that leaves you hanging. If it was a single book, it would still read just fine.

In particular, the relationship between Farideh and Lorcan could have been played for the sexual overtones, but I like that it's not. The whole "seduction of the innocent" is suggested, but it's not something that's played up for titillation or conspicuous provocation. Farideh is simply a girl in over her head, and she has to make her way with this new obligation while at the same time trying to avoid alienating her family. The dynamic between the tiefling twins is the usual "Mom always did like you best!" fare, with one the perceived favorite.

When we're first introduced to Brin, I made a note predicting his reveal, and I was surprised to find I was wrong about it. It does set up some interesting dynamics for the second book. He might be the weakest of the main characters, but he serves his purpose and moves the story along in the places where he has to be the driver of the plot. And there's potential in the loose mentor/protégé connection that develops between Brin and Tam, given that they're both able to cast spells on behalf of the "light side" deities. Tam also has just enough revealed to have me interested in seeing more of his story, because we don't get enough time with him.

It's been a very long time since I played Dungeons & Dragons, and I don't get much opportunity to read books in that universe, but I enjoyed this one. And now I need to look around to see if the sequel is in the review pile somewhere...

Conscience Beta  
by J.D. Beckwith  
Review by Pat Patterson

A comment about the cover art: Beckwith did it himself, and it's got a nice comic-book effect. I understand the symbolism: the scales of Justice being pulled off balance by a scientist & a struggling figure; Justice herself with one eye out from under the blindfold; little sparkly things in her revealed bright blue eye. I have NO suggestions as to what could be a better cover; I just think the book deserves better. However, I am not an artist, and I am not an art critic, and I surely could be wrong.

I suppose I get to read more 'first books' than most people, but I'm hardly an expert. However, I can safely say that this is a marvelous first effort. Someone has almost certainly been working with Beckwith, or perhaps he is just naturally a good writer. He has avoided most of the trivial goof-ball mistakes I've encountered in other first attempts. In fact, the only aberration I noticed was the inconsistency in labelling that nasty-tasting black candy that the chief villain is addicted to in the stuff.

If we didn't already identify Transki as a bad guy, the fact that he eats licorice all day should be a clue. Only evil villains could eat that stuff.

The obvious hero in the story is Dr. Jenny Hoskins, a medical researcher, who manages to avoid being a Mary Sue while still standing up for truth, justice, and the American Way.

Sidekick status goes to Emmet Haslet, a computer geek, who rises above being baggage by taking on the mission of righting a wrong when completely isolated from any support system. He also has some outstanding non-sidekick features, such as having a closet full of home-made spy equipment and a hidden ability as a pool shark.

The best character of all, however, is that of Henry. Initially portrayed as a clueless, hapless jerk, longing for someone to persecute him, he wins through by his relentless refusal to let his suffering crush him. If you hit a rusted iron pole hard enough, a lot of dirt and rust is going to fall off, and that's what happens with Henry.

The plot: behavior control by means of injected nanites. Remember the conditioning given to young Malcolm McDowell in "A Clockwork Orange?" It's rather like that, except that the consequences of forbidden action initiate a brief flash of migraine-like pain, which escalates to seizures and loss of consciousness if the behavior doesn't change. Since it is machine-driven, the reaction can be controlled externally, as can recovery.

And that's what the evil licorice-sucking Dr. Transki does, in order to speed up development of the system, so as to sell it to the government.

Now, the BEST thing that Beckwith does is this: he describes an incredibly manipulative, destructive tool, which is PERFECT for a Big Brother Is Watching You government system, but he does it in such a way as to make it seem like it would be a good thing, if only it wasn't being misused by the evil Dr. Transki. He SELLS the idea, he really does! In fact, after Jenny and Emmet rescue Henry, they are rewarded by receiving lovely positions in the new agency which will administer the program. And they promise, oh, yes they do, that THEY will never abuse such power. And they all live happily ever after in the Brave New World... .

..and then Beckwith CLEVERLY tosses in an almost-final scene, in which the Evil lifts the cover off, and says 'Peekaboo!'

And upon reflection, I think that it's the fact that there is a sho-nuff final scene, in which the benefits of the program are touted, that really sets the Evil apart.

I've got to hand it to Beckwith: this is really done well.

## Do You Dare to Live? Sarvet's Wanderyar by J. M. Ney-Grimm Review by Pat Patterson

However, the author, J. M. Ney-Grimm, has written so clearly about a core crisis in our lives that I HAVE to talk about it.

And so, I return to my blog, which has been neglected for months. This is where I talk about the things that really matter, in addition to writing wildly ridiculous stories.

First, the background.

Sarvet is mentioned briefly (IIRC) in "Winter Glory," which is the first work of Ney-Grimm's I encountered. It tells the story of her mother Paiam and her father Ivvar, in a time when they have grown old and mostly grey, although they do retain most of their vitality. It is a wonderful story that tells the truth: old people can fall in love, mightily, and can be counted on not to be twerps about it, unlike the star-crossed lovers, the terminally stupid Romeo and Juliet.

If it did NOTHING else than point out the truth that old people can love JUST as authentically, if not more so, than the young and reckless, it would be enough.

However, it also an excellently crafted tale of fantastical life in a mythic Northland. And if THAT was all it did, it would be enough.

But, in the middle of the book, Ney-Grimm tosses in an insight into the working of the human heart that was so succinct and poignant, that I had to set the book aside, and meditate on it; and then, I presented it to my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA. She was also rendered temporarily immobile by the power of the words.

From the POV of Paiam:

"Ivvar had laughed and pulled his jacket from his rucksack, wrapping it around her while she gaped in surprise. She'd felt so cared for, so safe. And hated it, because under that safety, she felt vulnerable. If he could make her safe, then he could make her unsafe, too. \*\*I wanted my own strength, not his.\*\* Borrowing strength felt risky.

And so she picked a quarrel on the way home."

And now, returning to the purpose of this post: Maybe 70 years before the setting of "Winter Glory," we have a prequel in "Sarvet's Wanderyar."

Nearly 15 years old, Sarvet lives with her Sisters, in a community of women. At regular but infrequent times, the Sisters are host to the Brothers, who live some distance away in a community of their own. Except for these special holidays, there is no interaction between men and women; boy children stay with their mothers only until they are old enough to join the Brothers in their home.

The book begins with the morning of one of the special holidays, Other-joy. There are a number of events to be celebrated this day, and one of them is the 'linking' ceremony, which we would call a wedding. Following the linking, the couple lives together for a month, then return to live in community houses, to be united only at the designated holidays. (I may have some small part of the details wrong, but that's the basic idea.)

Sarvet is too young to be a candidate for the linking ceremony but will progress through other ceremonies for a few years until she is eligible.

However, there is a problem.

Sarvet had a birth injury that has made her lame and causes her chronic pain. Her Birth-Mother, Paiam, is adamantly opposed to the thought of Sarvet progressing further along the ceremonies of maturity. In fact, Paiam opposes all physical activity for Sarvet, and has attempted to forbid her from participating in the life of the Sister House by insisting that she be removed from the roster of chores requiring anything other than the most sedentary of activities. Sarvet hates this approach and wishes that she could be defined and celebrated for all that she IS able to do, and not by what she can't. It does take her more effort to walk, and running is impossible, and yet Sarvet has learned coping skills that allow her to perform many tasks, even if it takes her more time.

Sarvet is not without allies. Lodge-Mother Johtaia, the head of the Sister House, has used her authority in small ways to make her life easier. However, a showdown, which no one really wants, and yet everyone seems to be conspiring to make happen, will take place very soon.

By the way, the section above the warning is what comprises my book review of "Sarvet's Wanderyar." If that's all you seek, then turn back, or [click here](#).

Sarvet is an adolescent female, but the life crisis she experiences isn't limited by her age, gender, or her culture. I believe she has come up against the primary Question. She is experiencing it as "How do I stop all this (emotional) pain I am feeling," but I think that's just a symptom. I think the pain is what drives us into ASKING the Question, which I think is some combination of "Who am I? What does it mean? How am I to live?"

Her physical limitation, and her mother's reaction to it, have driven her to develop certain coping mechanisms. Some of those, especially those related to her non-working hip and ankle, remain functional; she still needs to use a special movement, and certain specific muscles, in order to walk. True, it usually is a painful walk, but she has learned to accept the pain, and to push through it.

However, the coping mechanisms she HAD to develop to protect herself against her mother's anger and rejection have become a problem for her. They have become SO powerful, that she finds herself mentally and emotionally including her mother in everything she does. This is the case, even if her mother is not present. In her youth, Sarvet HAD to develop the habit of anticipating her mother's reaction; and now that she is approaching some sort of independence, she discovers that she is carrying her mother's

rejection around with her, and in that way, her mother is STILL influencing everything she does.

She DESPERATELY wants to be free of her mother, but the desire itself is a sign that she is still a slave.

Now, in the story a miracle happens, in that Sarvet encounters mythical beings with the ability to heal. It is in that process of healing that she discovers the implacable problem, which I have called the Question:

"Letting go is letting her in, and I won't!"

She was scared to expand, scared to claim the fullness of bounty available in a life, scared to expect fun, scared to expect pleasure. I snatch when chance presents an opportunity, but I don't seek any out. I'm a beggar at the gates of living, just like my mother, and . . . I do not have to be!

"Receiving a gift is dangerous, but barring out risk in fear . . . is the greater loss."

I have said that this section is philosophy, and not a book review. However, I MUST point out the brilliance with which Ney-Grimm has set up this crisis, in the presence of the mythical beings with the power to heal.

Earlier, Sarvet was in a conflict with her Birth-Mother, and her Lodge-Mother instructed her to ask for her heart's desire.

So, Sarvet did, (not gonna tell you what that was!)

And her Lodge-Mother gasps and tells her to ask for something else!

What an absolute kick in the head! You get told to ASK, by an authority, and you risk all by asking, and they deny it! Not the sort of thing that makes you want to take an emotional risk again, is it?

And that is just exactly the risk she is asked to take.

While most of us will not find ourselves in the presence of mythical beings with the power to heal a birth injury, I believe ALL of us will find ourselves in what is fundamentally exactly the same crisis, IF WE ARE FORTUNATE! We will be forced to see that something that we NEEDED as a defense against our adversaries has become the WORST adversary. Although it started as something to help and support us, now it limits and constrains us. And, IF WE ARE FORTUNATE, we will be asked to let go of that defense, and we will NOT be given a guarantee that the outcome will include our safety.

Letting go of that constricting defense may, in fact, expose us to more pain. Remember, "Receiving a gift is dangerous." But the alternative is, at best, to be slowly strangled emotionally by the defenses we HAD to put in place to shield ourselves from being hurt.

Now, perhaps my language has not been as brilliantly illuminating as Ney-Grimm's, and you have no idea what is the nature of a crisis as described. My use of the term 'the Question' makes you think of Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, but that's about it. So, let me give you the three examples that come to mind in my own life. There may have been more than three of these, but these are the crisis points that I immediately thought of:

1. My conversion to Christianity in 1973.
2. My admission of alcoholism in 1988.
3. My offering myself in marriage to my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, in 2010.

It would take too much time to explain to you exactly WHY those three times were such a crisis point, but I hope you will believe me when I tell you that in each case, it WAS a crisis, and it WAS a tremendous risk, because I had no guarantee it was going to work out for me, So far, all three HAVE worked out, but at the time I committed, I didn't know that. All I knew was that in each case I felt as if I had to get better or die, and either choice was acceptable to me.

And THAT, I believe, is what what Ney-Grimm has expressed so beautifully in this book. With 65 years of experience as a human being, two graduate degrees in counseling, and 30 years in recovery, I am HIGHLY endorsing this book for its insight, AND it is a great story, too; not a bit of preachiness to it. Yes, message fiction works, IF you are the kind or artist Ney-Grimm is.

## Dragon School: Episodes 1-5 by Sarah K.L. Wilson Review by Jim McCoy

So, I've kind of got a confession to make. I've got like a huge backlog of stuff that people sent me to review and I errr...

Read something else.

But it was, like, really good, so I thought I'd force all of my fans (LAWL) to read my thoughts on it because awesome. Or sumfin'.

And I know some people don't like young adult fiction, but I truly feel sad for those people and think they should broaden their horizons. Sure, the teenage years were rough for some of us (and believe me, I was a geek with acne, I would know) but that shouldn't ruin your enjoyment of a perfectly good story. Especially one that's awesome dipped in awesome sauce on a stick.

So what is this gem that I'm up past my bedtime to share with all of you? (Seriously, I get up for work at 5 AM and it's 11 PM here.)

It's Dragon School: Episodes 1-5 by Sarah K.L. Wilson. It's the story of a young girl with something to prove. It's the story of overcoming a common birth and a disability to achieve her goals. I'm not sure if it's a story of incredible courage, or a case of having more guts than brains, but she's definitely no coward. It's action packed, non-stop and I already downloaded the second omnibus. I stopped reading it to let you all know about this series though, because you need to read it.

When I first downloaded Dragon School, I thought it was going to be a massive omnibus. It is massively entertaining, but it's not all that long. I can see why she packages them five episodes at a time because the five of them were about the length of an average novel at three hundred ninety-one pages on Kindle. (Yes, I know all of the cool kids do word count but I'm a geek. Not just that, I'm a LAZY geek. I'm not counting all of those words.) The next one is slightly longer at four hundred and one. The five

episodes serving is just about right.

I swore I wasn't going to rant about not getting anything done on my day off because I had my nose buried in Dragon School all day, so I won't. After all, it's not like I really need clean clothes or groceries. I'll be just fine without them. I did take time out to make my last steak tonight and I think I've got some Ramen around here somewhere...

Good authors are evil. Wilson is practically Skeletor mixed with Darth Vader. Or sumfin'

Our heroine is one Amel Leafbrought. She is a commoner in a feudal society. She has a problem with her leg and can't walk without a crutch or at a normal pace. (I'm not sure what the exact nature of the leg problem is, other than that it hurts, and it won't hold weight. As a gout sufferer I can relate.) She passes some tests and wins the right to choose a dragon. (That's not a spoiler. It's in the first chapter.) Then she picks one, gets inducted into Dragon School and chaos ensues.

I'm not really the superstitious type, but you'd almost think there was some malevolent force out there intentionally waiting for her to join Dragon School before allowing the world to blow up. Like, oh, I dunno...

An author or something?

They tend to do that, I suppose.

At any rate, Amel is the kind of girl who doesn't have a bit of backup in her. Seriously, this is the girl you want to go to war with. She's smart, tough and indomitable. I like this girl. I teach my daughters to be "Strong, Proud, Smart, Tough, and Brave." Amel is all of the above. I like this girl. I respect this girl. Hell, I admire this girl. I'd really like to see my oldest read this (it might be a little tough for my nine-year-old) but good luck with that. She's into romance and not the good stuff. Poor kid.

Oh, and I've never seen a character quite so loyal to her friends. Amel is a girl that would go through a fire to save someone she cared about with gasoline drawers on and not worry about what would happen until after they were safe. What a girl.

I really like the dragons in Dragon School. For an old school Dungeons and Dragons reader they take a bit of getting used to (Chromatic Dragons that are good guys are weird for some of us) but once you wrap your brain around the fact that you're in a different universe they're awesome. Seriously, one of my least favorite things about both the J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Harry Turtledove's Darkness series is that they get dragons wrong. Dragons are meant to be huge and fearsome, yes, but also of at least human intelligence.

Wilson gets it right.

Her dragons are smart and lively as well as flat out deadly. They may have a bit of a temper at times, but they are predators with lots of natural weapons, so that seems only natural. They're also good friends and allies – or at least some of them are. Others I haven't seen so much about and there are hints of tension within the ranks of the dragons, most of which are wild.

I'm hoping that'll show up in future volumes. I'm kind of guessing that it will, actually.

The political scheming is intense. For a commoner girl, Amel sure does get caught up in a whole bunch of stuff above her station. I don't want to get too spoilery but trust me, she gets to know some seriously important people. I'm wondering if she doesn't end up with some kind of minor title herself at some point. I guess I'll just have to keep reading. For some reason, that doesn't seem like a bad thing to me.

Listen, there are a lot of other characters I'd like to talk about but honestly, it's almost midnight now. I need to be up soon, and I totally want to get through a few chapters of Episode Six now. Hie thee off to Amazon for Dragon School: Episodes 1-5 while I hie me off to sleep. And, seriously, get the omnibus editions. The individual episodes are pretty short, and you won't have to go through the frustration of interrupting your reading for multiple downloads.

Bottom Line 5.0 out of 5 Sets of Leathers

**The Eleventh Gate**  
**by Nancy Kress**  
**Review by Jason P. Hunt**  
For more of his Reviews, [scifi4me.com](http://scifi4me.com)

What happens when Romeo and Juliet accidentally set off a War of the Roses between the Hatfields and McCoys with bioweapons and Stargate technology?

Following the collapse of civilization on Earth, two dynasties have set up shop across numerous worlds. The Peregoy family is a corporatocracy controlling several planets and employing pretty much everyone who's a "citizen". Meanwhile, the Landrys have established a society based rigidly on classic Libertarian values — or at least, Libertarian "live and let live" values as presented in the book. And it's these rivals who have to deal with getting drawn into a war neither of them wanted or expected. And it's all because two people thought they knew better and could manipulate them into becoming allies.

Nancy Kress delivers a solid story where there's no absolute villain, just a lot of people trying to make the best of a bad situation, and a few who are trying to keep it from going bad to worse. Even though there are elements we've seen before in other stories — the Stargate shows up in Stargate, Babylon 5, and the Honor Harrington stories, for example — the combination of elements is unique enough that it doesn't feel like a rip-off. In this day and age, it's a challenge to come up with anything unique anymore, but Kress does so with her rival civilizations. Besides David Weber, has anyone else fully invested in speculating what a fully Libertarian society would look like? We also get a little bit of a look at the Communist/Socialist perspective with the "Compatriots" of the Movement, so no ideology is spared a little cross-examination here.

Kress takes those starting points and offers an examination of politics, but she rightly does it within the context of the story, with commentary on each society coming from those who live there. And it's good that these characters all learn a thing or two about their own viewpoints by the time we get to the end. Her inclusion of two students of history — Luis Martinez and Caitlin Landry — also plays to the notion that "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it" without being too overt and preachy about it. This is a good thing.

At the center of the story, Phillip Anderson seems like a bit of a crackpot at first. His quest for a tran-

scendental existence is reminiscent of the “ascension” of Stargate or the Star Child of 2001, but it’s a little more complex than that within the bounds of the story. Yes, there’s a higher, non-corporeal existence, but it comes with a price, and there are still limits. There is no *deus ex machina* here. The humans still have to fend for themselves.

Outside of one over-the-top character (I won’t spoil it), the main cast are all nuanced and multi-dimensional. They have priorities that align with their individual goals and plans, but they also aren’t absolutes. As the situation spirals, they all react in ways that feel earned, not contrived. Along the way, there are some good character moments, questions of priorities and worldviews, and self-examinations that feel organic.

In the end it’s a satisfying story that leaves a few options for a sequel, but also can be perfectly fine as a one-and-done story.

## Halving It All A novella by Stephanie McPeak Petersen Review by Philip Cahill

There is a five-star review of this book on Amazon and the comment is “I just ordered this book. I’m excited to read it. I’ll update soon.” I have decided to adopt a different reviewing technique.

This book works best as a soft science fiction book for pre-teen children. It does contain some ideas that might be difficult for that age group but the writing style seems to me to be aimed at children of 11 and over. The author has previously published an economics textbook for kids. This book also introduces some core ideas in economics; the money supply, inflation and the price mechanism. There is also a joke about marginal rates of taxation in chapter 16.

The book starts with three women being sent to a moon, called Ting, 300 light-years from Earth. The moon is an economic re-education camp and the women are kidnapped from a present-day United States because they are socialists. In this book a socialist appears to be someone who does not agree with capitalism. Violet Self, a humanoid alien, is the matron of the re-education camp. This opening section and the author’s own, excellent, book cover image reminds me a bit of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

It then transpires that the women should not have been sent to Ting because they were merely spreading mis-information about capitalism in their social media exchanges and this is allowed on their Homeworld. Unfortunately, Earth’s atmosphere has now been closed because of a pandemic so the women are sent to Violet Self’s home moon Kapathund. On this moon, they get involved in combating the moon’s problems with inflation and an economic vaccine. This is called the Comrade Vaccine. The effect of the vaccine is to make people perceive need in other people and give all their money away.

We also meet three earthlings who go, voluntarily, to Moon 40, the 40th moon of the planet Silvid. They go there to each take part in a simulation of a communist state. There are three simulations that run simultaneously and each of the three earthlings act as the president of a communist state for a period of two weeks. During the period they must manage the state’s centrally-planned economy.

I won’t give away how these events play out. At the end of the book we understand how the events on

Kapathund and Moon 40 are linked.

OK, so what did I think of this book? I think that the idea of introducing economics to children in this way has much to recommend it. It is a short, entertaining, read and the material appears to me to be quite accessible. I liked that it was an introduction to a type of science fiction that I've never read before.

There were a few things that puzzled me. I am not sure why Violet lay pantless in her reclining chair at the beginning of chapter 6 or why one of the robots on Moon 40 said "I don't sort the laundry" in French. These are, however, only minor quibbles.

This is not a hard SF book so the reader is required to suspend his or her disbelief about, amongst other things, instantaneous travel to and communication with a planetary system 300 light years from Earth. One of the Earthlings on Moon 40 makes a phone call to Earth and within 20 seconds of hearing the intergalactic (not interstellar) dial tone he starts his call. Economists amongst the readership will also be required to suspend their disbelief about the utility of making major changes to the money supply a key policy instrument.

**The Iron Dragon's Mother**  
**by Michael Swanwick**  
**Review by Sam Lubell**  
*Originally in SFREVU June 2020*

The Iron Dragon's Mother is the third book in an accidental trilogy. Swanwick wrote the first book, The Iron Dragon's Daughter, in 1993. The second book, The Dragons of Babel, came out in 2008. And The Iron Dragon's Mother is a 2019 book. While the books share a common background and the occasional side-character, each one stands alone rather than being a planned set of continuing adventures.

Swanwick has called this type of fantasy "hard fantasy". Others might classify it as steampunk or post-Industrial Faerie. In his world human changelings work in factories out of the world of Charles Dickens while half-human half-elves pilot sentient mechanical iron dragons as if they were air force jets. There are links to our world and the faerie world has trains and other steampunk-level technology.

The book begins in our world with Helen V, a dying 90-year-old woman who does not know the dragons are coming for her. She has been studying the Tibetan Book of the Dead and, in the moment of her death, focuses on the last speck of life and leaps. Meanwhile in Faerie, Caitlin, a new iron dragon pilot almost loses control of her dragon while exiting the Dream Gate. In the investigation, fake evidence is produced claiming she is not a virgin, which is necessary to fly a dragon. The authorities also accuse her of killing her half-brother, who Caitlin knows is still alive. With everyone against her, Caitlin escapes to find her brother as proof of her innocence.

Much to her confusion, she discovers that an independent person, Helen, has started living inside of her head. Helen advises her to start a fresh life for herself while Caitlin is more concerned with restoring her honor. She joins a hobo camp, under the name Cat, and is saved from railroad goons by a young girl named Esme who says she brings luck but doesn't remember things (she previously appeared in Dragons of Babel). Caitlin and Esme have a series of adventures and learn that there is a prophecy that Helen will "shake the foundations of the world, to the consternation of the Powers of Faerie". There is also a Conspiracy led by Caitlin's mother.

As usual with Swanwick the plot is secondary to the language and images conjured up. Swanwick is

strongest in his short stories, but the episodic nature of this book plays to this strength more than would a tighter plot. That said, the episodes do connect and both Helen and Caitlin end up as stronger characters than they were before they began their adventures.

Although a dragon is slain in the book, those looking for traditional fantasy action-adventure should search elsewhere (although steampunk fans will find much to enjoy). Readers who enjoy highly literate storytelling with a strong imaginative bent will love *The Iron Dragon's Mother*. It is not necessary to have read the previous two books in the trilogy (although they too are highly recommended).

## King David's Spaceship by Jerry Pournelle Review by Tamara Wilhite

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

### The Fictional Universe of "King David's Spaceship"

"King David's Spaceship" by Jerry Pournelle is set in the Co-Dominium universe. The Co-Dominium universe has become an alternate history after the collapse of the Soviet Union, instead of it co-ruling Earth for a century or two along with the United States. The space navy knew that the power sharing arrangement couldn't last so had the stated goal to save as many as possible, so they sought to move as many colonists and involuntary deportees off world. When Earth finally nuked itself, Russian and American elites left fled to their respective most-developed colonies. The American hub, Sparta, becomes the center of the first interstellar empire. Another civil war erupts, this time between humanity and the genetically engineered Sauron. The Empire of Man collapses for generations before a new one arises, still centered in Sparta.

The new empire seeks to colonize and assimilate everyone as quickly as possible so that the recovering worlds don't all reach space and start fighting with each other. Some worlds remain at hunter-gatherer levels, some have pre-industrial societies, and the few with space flight are accorded near-equal status with Sparta in what can be compared to the Federation. Prince Samuel's World was perhaps two generations from spaceflight when found and finds it involuntarily classified as a colony. Its king wants to change that, hence the title.

Note that you do not have to have read any other Co-Dominium books to understand this one. "King David's Spaceship" is a stand-alone novel, though it references "The Mote in God's Eye".

### Points in Favor of "King David's Spaceship"

This book moves quickly in a style like "Tran" but with a far better plot. To some degree, the jumps from action scene to action scene are driven by the fact that the author had to type on a typewriter, so there's no point in describing walking down the hall or tons of exposition.

You actually see the Empire's logic for doing what they do. Their military is educated about the war that destroyed Earth and the human civil war that destroyed the first empire. They see it as moral and appropriate to lie to regional governments while consolidating power and installing their own people as an aristocracy. The greatest morality is preventing yet another human civil war that throws humans back into yet another dark age. Setting up an aristocracy among their own colonists is reasonable, too,

to them because how else do you get fusion plant operators to travel from civilized worlds to backward ones for the rest of their lives.

You also understand the natives' point of view. You need to have spaceships or starships to be granted Class 1 or 2 status; then your world is admitted as a subject world with significant autonomy. If you lack that when discovered, your world is settled with an aristocracy from the Empire that will remain dominant, though the settlers and military in particular are encouraged to intermarry. Fail to submit, though, and the Empire will level your planet. It did so in the past and did so to one of the planet's cities as a demonstration.

#### A Strike Against "King David's Spaceship"

There is an excellent essay by Pournelle in the anthology "N-Space" that explains why the technology in the Co-Dominium universe is as it is, why democracy is not a guaranteed form of future government, and why other aspects of his society were relatively unchanged or modeled off of earlier historical forms. I wish that this Co-Dominium book and others were re-released with that essay. I do admit it is a little dated given that JKF Junior died, so he cannot possibly be the golden boy nominee for President by the Democrats. That's why his sister was considered for the deceased uncle's former office and other Democrat family members were recommended for various positions instead.

#### Observations

This book contains more mentions of horror stories that resulted from mistakes that occurred before the Empire adopted a non-interference rule with discovered worlds. The fact that the Empire still manages to throw things off-kilter while setting up bases and often making things worse merely by arriving and living in its garrison is demonstrated on Makassar. It's a realistic view of how what Star Trek does not address.

#### Summary

"King David's Spaceship" is a fascinating science fiction action novel that covers two planets and gives glimpses of a broader fictional universe. It contains a caste of fleshed out characters motivated by their own causes and broader sense of duty to their home-world. You can enjoy this Co-Dominium novel without having read anything else by Pournelle. Five stars for "King David's Spaceship".

## Mercenary Calling by Laura Montgomery Review by Pat Patterson

LAWYERS IN SP-A-A-A-CE!!! try to save the WORLDS (notice the plural)

Some of us have been hopeless dreamers of vacations on the Moon or living in a self-sustaining colony at L-5, or petting miniature dinosaurs on faraway planets, all of our lives. Despite that, we made our living selling vacuum cleaners, or providing patient care, or teaching 12-year-old middle schoolers how to multiply fractions. The author of this book got a bit closer to the dream than most of us: she's a space lawyer. (Read her bio; this is a book review!)

The above is relevant, because the protagonist, Calvin Tondini, is also a space lawyer. This means that the procedural details of the story, which are massive contributions, aren't just fabricated, but are based on personal experience, extrapolated to a time in the not-too-distant future. I hesitate to draw comparison to Grisham, Turow, or Scott Pratt, because THOSE lawyer books always involves someone getting shot, stabbed, or otherwise violently slain. Actually, that's how 'Mercenary Calling' starts as well, but it's different in this case. And I'm not gonna go further, because I am SO not gonna write a spoiler.

I will say this: the survival of Earth was called into question. That provided the impetus to develop technology for FTL travel, to find a new basket to put our eggs in. But for reasons exotic and reasons tawdry, there are Dark Doings which are determined to sabotage a return voyage.

Calvin doesn't initially seem to be an idealistic young lawyer; but he has managed to save a space program at the risk of alienating those with an influence on his career, at a time when a place in a secure bureaucracy is the goal of every lawyer. Is he REALLY a candidate for sort-of saving the world, or the worlds yet unknown?

Sara Seastrom is his associate/love/not-love interest/adversary. Yes, it's complicated, and you are gonna really enjoy finding out why. (Fear not: there are no sweaty sheet scenes.)

Paolina Nigmatullin is his client. She is also the only surviving captain of the returning interstellar voyage, and she is up on charges of mutiny, along with whatever else the government can think of to charge her with. It's really NOT a good lawyer book, unless there is some tension between the lawyer and the client. I am pleased to report that this is present in full and glorious detail. I don't think I mentioned that people are trying to kill her. As well as members of her crew.

Additional characters provide heroism, self-sacrifice, competing interests, and nasty skullduggery, as well as talk-show schlock and betrayal of the public trust. There is PLENTY of good character development.

Great story.  
Excellent characters.  
And hope for the future.

Nomad  
by William Alexander  
Review by Anita Barrios

Nomad takes up where Ambassador leaves off, although it begins in the point of view of the Ambassador immediately before Gabe -- Nadia Kollontai. [Ed: Ambassador is reviewed earlier in this issue.] Her aunt and uncle are Jewish, but living in the USSR in 1974 and working on the super-secret moon base. She and the Envoy steal aboard the last N-1 rocket fired by the USSR to the moon and Zvezda Base to meet a rogue pilot and fly in the Machinae lanes.

The Outlast are in our arm of the galaxy and using the Machinae lanes to conquer world after world.

The Machinae are mentioned, briefly, in the first book as being the only species that can travel the vast expanses of the universe quickly, going from point to point. But they won't open their "lanes" to any species other than the Outlast, which has lately been using them to achieve Universe-wide domination

and extermination of all life that isn't theirs.

Nadia leaves the base with the pilot, which explains how the poor purple Envoy got to the moon base in the first book, and Gabe's story picks up again.

When we last left Gabe, he's figured out who's trying to kill him -- the Kaen -- and why -- because they don't want it known they're pirating our water from the asteroid belt, and because it looked like, in Gabe's ignorance of inter-galactic affairs, that he was conspiring with the Outlast, at least initially.

He's struck a bargain with the Kaen to stop trying to kill him, if they'll come get him on the moon base and take him back to Earth. Then they can continue outrunning the Outlast, which is headed in Earth's direction.

Ambassador Kaen (and this part's a bit confusing -- the Kaen are a "tribe" of nomad species, a conglomeration of many kinds, who have one unifying language, but that's about it, but Ambassador Kaen is a girl -- a human girl -- because in the Kaen's travels they've picked up people before, namely the Olmec, and incorporated them into their tribe) comes to pick up Gabe from Zvezda moon base.

He's shocked to learn she's human, but it turns out the Kaen (as a nomad tribe) are descendants of early Olmecs and Aztecs. He and Kaen confront the four Kaen captains who ordered Gabe's assassination. They convince them, together with Nadia, whose ventures into the Machinae lanes have left her near-blind but completely un-aged, to explore how the Outlast are using the Machinae lanes. Their only hope against the Outlast is to band together to figure out how to fly the Machinae lanes and convince the Machinae to shut down the lanes, if they want to save Earth and the Kaen fleet from the advancing Outlast.

At first, Gabe doesn't understand that the Omegan, the Outlast Ambassador, is part of a hive-mind of sorts, where if one knows a thing, they all know a thing, and therefore all the Omegan knows or experiences, the rest of the Outlast know. Gabe endangers other species, just by drawing the attention of Omegan. But in the process of speaking to Omegan, Gabe learns somehow the Outlast's linked consciousness allows them to travel the lanes, because the Machinae recognize it.

Unfortunately, the Outlast are just as smart as Gabe and Kaen and even more determined to maintain their domination of the lanes and stop the humans.

The Kaen fulfill their agreement and return Gabe to Earth, but as he tries to rescue his father in Mexico, he gets caught trying to enter the US without any documentation and he ends up in an ICE detention facility as well.

After fighting his way out, he's got a solution in mind for his parents' immigration predicament -- one the Envoy is more than capable of executing, at Gabe's order.

Nadia and her rogue pilot give the lanes one more shot, and when the lanes come down, the Outlast go down -- and out of this universe -- with them.

This was a satisfying conclusion to the two-book series!

Shadow of an Empire  
by Max Florschutz  
Review by Pat Patterson

Not steampunk, but some of the same feel; a rich story of a fantasy Western with special features included.

If I don't mention the cover NOW, I'll forget, so here goes: this is the kind of artwork you might expect to see hanging up in a bar, or a mancave if the cave man has some longings for John Wayne days. Beautiful & dreary landscape, and the silhouette of a man on a horse in the foreground lets you know how insignificant people are, compared to the desert. It's by Michal Kváč, and I don't recollect ever seeing his work before.

Here's the set-up: In the far distant future, the highest technology appears to be the steam engine. We discover (eventually) that there was something referred to as 'The Shattering,' which separates our time from theirs. Society is dominated by a network of First Families, and they have accumulated most of the wealth and property and keep a stranglehold on the means to wealth. Some people have one or more abilities to control matter and are given nicknames according to their talent. They MAY be more likely among First Families, but the jury is still out on that.

In the East, the constraints of society are severe, and the main character, Sali, has escaped (mysteriously) to go west to live in the Outlands (think 1950s & 60s cowboy shows on TV) and be a lawman. The first line of lawmen are the Peacekeepers, who are locals designated to keep order. Sali is an Adjudicator, which seems to correspond roughly to a US Marshall. He has jurisdiction over a particular large territory and has greater authority (including capital punishment) than the Peacekeepers. Higher still are ranked the Inquisitors, including one Meelo Karn. Although the term reminds us of the never-to-be-expected Spanish Inquisition, this is not her role. Rather, she is a sort of super-detective, with license to go anywhere in order to solve a crime.

Meanwhile, back at the bank...

A thoroughly nasty bit of work, one Markus Nirren, Noble Gone Bad, has broken a large number of wicked, wicked people out of imprisonment, and has declared that he plans to spread insurrection in the Outlands. This brings two surprises. In the first place, there hasn't been a hint of rebellion in the Outlands to this point, and second, he states that he has Sali's cooperation and approval in his efforts.

Fortunately for Sali, nobody believes him. Meelo has been sent, ostensibly to take him in for questioning, but actually to serve as his partner in bringing Nirren and his wicked, wicked band to justice.

Okay, here I wish to testify of the brilliance of the author. In almost ANY other work, what immediately gets set up is an "I only work by myself" bit, followed by the new partner having to prove herself, and then sexual tension mounts, and they do the tango under the moonlight before the bad guys kidnap her and he saves her, winning her hand in something. NO NO NO NO NO! That doesn't happen here. None of that happens here! Instead, they develop a camaraderie, and they both contribute to the cause. By deliberately avoiding all the above-mentioned tropes, Florschutz kept my interest solely by means of an excellent story. Well done, well done indeed, sir!

Several nice things about this work. In the first place, we are thoroughly involved in the story before the bizarre stuff appears. Secondly, the gifts are sufficiently constrained so as to avoid the need for Kryptonite. Boilers, for example, who have the ability to manipulate heat, must store it by natural or artificial means before they can use it, and it takes time to build it up again. Therefore, Sali and Meelo have to use their brains, eyes and ears to solve problems, not just blast every bad guy into smithereens.

Secondly, there are several sub-plots running. We get enough hints to know this is the case, but I doubt you will guess EVERYTHING that happens before the reveal.

Finally, the development of technology on par with the rest of the society means that crime-fighting (and other aspects of life) aren't limited to The Way It's Always Been. For example, Sali uses a revolver (a GREAT one!) and a lever action rifle, while Meelo has the latest development, a semi-auto pistol and rifle. A central development in technology is the emergence of Grey Knights, giant suits of armor worn by trained boilers, who carry much larger weapons. Along with this kind of change, there is also evidence that the rules of nature are changing as well, as some of the predatory animals have seemingly developed new characteristics.

And we aren't given any reason why this should be so, or if the two are somehow linked.

Until I started writing this review, I didn't check out the size of the book. At 842 pages, it's a monster. More bang for the buck, as far as I'm concerned. I didn't ever get the feeling that the story was dragging, so it's not a novel stuffed full of fluff; it's just written in the length that will accommodate the story. It also allows for some nice character development for people who are making a walk-on. For example, there is a Peacekeeper sergeant who is given a great deal of humanity in the way he tells his story to Sali and Meelo. I LIKE that sort of touch.

## Shattered Under Midnight by Dorothy Grant Review by Pat Patterson

A TIGHTLY-WRITTEN story that could almost be a Hitchcock suspense drama (in space).

A word about the cover art: I don't know who designed this, but they are quite skilled. There are a lot of design elements that show through without being obscured by the titles, and they do a good job of representing the elements of the book. The face of a character is superimposed on a ringed planet, and that works really well; the single tower rising well above a city lit for the night reflects the fact that the buildings themselves are going to be a character in the work. My sole objection is the hair color of the depicted character. It's a central point in the plot that the MC has red hair; does the young woman on the cover have red hair? It's not a red that I am familiar with.

Ummm...I don't understand the title. Not a big deal, though. In the book, 'shattered' is a term meaning exhausted. It makes just as much sense as 'From Here to Eternity' and 'Gone With the Wind,' at any rate.

Raina is the heroine, and she has a mysterious past, present, and future. She's little, and on the run.

Seth/Akrep is the hero, and he also is a figure of mystery. He's big, though.

The planet was once the home of a long-vanished race, and currently much income is derived from the

tourist trade. In addition to the folks on vacation from planets far away, there are other factions with interest in the ruins. One of those factions is the Preservationists, who may be thought of as the most severe sort of ecology freaks you can imagine. They don't want the nasty hands of humans to sully anything, anywhere, and they are perfectly willing to blow everyone to pieces to get their point across. Raina is the child of genetic engineering, designed by a shadowy entity that seeks to control the universe, or something. She is part of the plan, but as is the case when plans are developing, she is about to be discarded. Not wishing termination, she runs. And, as she is fleeing through a transportation hub, she encounters Seth. And circumstances soon reveal that he is also in run & hide mode, although his cause is different.

When a bomb attack, and the subsequent police intervention, threaten to expose them both, Seth/Akreb convinces Raina that they will be less suspicious if they travel as a couple than they will as two single people. What starts as a simple bond of convenience develops quickly into an alliance.

There is more to the ruins than is apparent to Seth/Akrep. He discovers that when Raina drags him through a wall. Not by knocking the wall down; she just pulls him through the wall, much as an elephant seal going through a barrier of lime jello.

In addition to the main story, there is homage to Heinlein, and to either the Princess Bride or Monty Python. I read it, smiled, and turned the page, and now I can't find it again, and I have to leave and go pick up the basset hounds to dog sit them this afternoon.

The book could almost be used as an example of what tight writing is. The plot moves FAST, and if you are sleepy when you read it, you are going to find yourself in a situation you don't remember entering. It's THERE, but blink your eyes, and miss it. One day, I will start looking at page counts before I start reading a Kindle, and this won't take me by surprise. That day was not this day, however.

### The Stones of Silence by Peter Grant Review by Pat Patterson

Space opera, with lovely attention given to the problems encountered in founding an enterprise (or empire).

If I'm reading the publication data correctly, this volume was published on May 11; the second volume came out June 9, and the third volume will be released in July. Bravo! If you were a particularly slow reader, you could binge-read this series in real time!

We've had stories of asteroid miners in torch-ships for years, and there is at least one semi-ancient article (by Larry Niven) debunking the idea. There is at least one other way to get the good stuff out of the rocks, however, and that is the core technology of this story. Instead of humans, wandering through space and hitting stuff with a hammer, robot miners are released. They don't need an air supply or food, and you don't pay them overtime; it's as close to an ideal solution as we are likely to get.

It ALSO provides a definitive answer to those who wonder why we should throw good money after bad, when there is obviously nothing worthwhile out there as anyone can plainly see, and we have so many problems right here at home. Actually, there already IS a definitive answer to that ("Shut up"), but this one works well: "There's GOLD in them thar hills!"

Alas, where there is gold, there are also claim jumpers, and Big Bankers from Back East, and a few other associated problems. So, how do you modify this story into something that makes sense as space opera? Or more succinctly, how does Peter Grant do it?

Magnificently, that's how.

His protagonist, Cochrane, is a skilled and experienced ship's captain who has been badly treated by the equivalent of one set of Big Bankers from Back East, which has relieved him of further obligations to them. He approaches another set of BBFBE, and offers his services to defend their claim, and makes such a good case that they take him up on his offer, giving him the minimum start-up cash he needs to form a small, professional mercenary outfit. He has plenty of people to recruit from; when one group has a firm lock on the road to advancement, and reserves it for others of their ilk, the talents of the outsiders will go unrewarded, and that's a sure prescription for a discontented class of skilled individuals.

There are a couple of other factions involved, but the chief danger is from a group of renegades from an organized crime faction, splintered off into a super-nationalistic group. A separate group, the Dragon Tong (Maxwell and Laredo) are not actively involved, but provide Cochrane with a market for his goods, and some other services as well.

This is definitely NOT a story limited to the-fastest-draw-always-wins, nor does a Mr. Bond show up with specially mixed drinks and kiss the girls. Cochrane understands that the modern force has to always run a delicate balance between training, material, and intelligence.

Concentrate on one to the exclusion of the others, and you will lose. Having the RIGHT balance doesn't necessarily mean you will win, either, but it does mean that when you get lucky, you are prepared to take advantage of the luck.

Confession: I'm a FAST reader (blistering pace, really) and I also have attention deficit disorder. Therefore, I tend to skip over names and chapter titles in the narrative, because they don't provide the same type of content that nouns and verbs (and the other parts of speech) do. This caused me some initial problems, because I wasn't sure who was on what side. A reader with a different approach might not have that problem, and at some point, I didn't have it either. I don't know when that was, but I WAS confused about which side I should be cheering for, initially.

Oh, for the days of the Cold War, when everyone named Ivan was the bad guy, and William was the good guy, and Francis was a spy...

## The Thunderer: Three Tales of the God of Thunder by David L. Burkhead Review by Pat Patterson

Thor with PEOPLE, Thor with PEERS, and the consequences of Thor's intervention (maybe).

I devoured science fiction as I was learning to read. That's one of the reasons I like the form of short fiction so much. It IS hard to review, though, because often the shorter works are written to support some sort of quirk in design (either man-made or otherwise) or even (shudder) to provide an excuse for

a pun.

Not these. In fact, thinking about some of Burkhead's other short work, I don't think any of them rely on a gimmick. He just tells stories. And some stories work in the short form, while others require multiple volumes.

In this work, Burkhead tells stories of Thor. This is NOT your comic-book hero; this is the ancient and scary person. Be prepared.

Story 1: What happens when you are on your way home from work, and you get mugged? If you are lucky, you just lose your money. You might lose your life, though, and that is likely to happen to the protagonist in the first story. It doesn't, though, because he has spoken kindly to a homeless person, who turns out to be...more than a bum. We are glad that this proves to be the case, because the protagonist is a thoroughly nice guy, married to a thoroughly nice lady, with a thoroughly nice daughter. However, this IS one of the old stories: Don't let the gods notice you!

Story 2: What happens when the giants want to mess with you? Well, they trick you, and confuse you, and deceive you, and even though the game is rigged, you STILL have to play. This story brings out some details to the old stories, making Thor more than just a guy with a big hammer. It also exposes us to a bit of the bawdiness found in the banter of the old & powerful people. Don't expect sophisticated humor from them. I recall some elements of this story from reading mythology; this re-telling is absolutely worth the time.

Story 3: What happens when you stick your nose into the business of the superbeings? Here, Burkhead has a little fun with us, I believe. Are the monsters those found in the classic tales, or are they space aliens? Are their powers magical, or just advanced technology? It could go either way, but it's still a great read. HOWEVER, this little tale served me, at any rate, with a decided reminder that we are not long on this Earth. We THINK we are important, because we are each living all the life we can; the truth is that our existence represents only a tiny fragment of geological time, and it's going to get cold again. And there is nothing any of us can do about that.

I found each of these stories to be very well done, but my favorite was the first. The protagonist IS a nice guy, and he demonstrated personal courage and honor; because he was worthy, he was given assistance from a minor divinity. It's a nice thought, isn't it?

## WorldWar: In the Balance by Harry Turtledove Review by Tamara Wilhite

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

### Introduction

“Worldwar: In the Balance” is the start of a World War 2 alternate history series by Turtledove. In the middle of World War 2, reptilian aliens show up and try to dominate the Earth ... and find that humans don't just roll over to invaders as planned.

## Pros of World War: In the Balance

The book has excellent personal development without spending too much time on any character. Part of this is because the book is intended to be the start of a series.

You see actual World War 2 guerilla tactics used against invading aliens.

The historical characters and places described in the book are well researched from Molotov to the Greenbriar hotel.

The mindsets of many humans are totally believable, such as being wary of allying with the Nazis even after agreeing they have to fight together to take out the aliens.

The little details that reveal subtle deprivations are telling, such as being glad you have an ice box instead of a new-fangled fridge because the power is often going out, though that only works as long as the ice man has ice.

Some people will cheer the Jews of Poland rising up and, in this fictional work, surviving the Nazi Holocaust. Conversely, the aliens are written as so modern human in their sensibilities that while they have few qualms nuking cities, they are horrified by Treblinka.

Nazi Berlin gets nuked. That's worth at least one star.

Winston Churchill makes an appearance. Even Dr. Who has included him in several episodes because he's such an engaging, impassioned character.

## Cons of World War: In the Balance

The invading aliens are written like the stereotypical evil villain down to mocking laughter (and these aren't human villains) and biting sarcasm. They repeatedly make statements like "we'll help them now but we don't have to honor any agreement" which reminds me of the Firefly line "they'll curse our sudden but inevitable betrayal".

The humanized aliens have euphemisms that are clearly rip offs of humans, such as "turning tailstump" instead of "turning tail" while running away, "obvious to even a still wet hatchling" instead of "even a baby could understand it" and "as easy as a female in season" instead of easy as shooting fish in a barrel.

Stilted, clunky alien dialogue, even when it isn't trope villain monologue types.

The aliens have a divine emperor and use it as a God, blessing and curse. Lazy, easy, and trope writing. Praise the Emperor, he's dead and with the emperors, the aliens are so primitive they don't know the emperor's name.

Good Lord, the predatory aliens give in to the "you can mass murder people but don't you dare kill the dog" trope.

Way too much time is spent describing how people look, as if to establish the period in the piece.

An alien species that conquered two others is irrationally assuming that another intelligent species must be “crazy” or “irrational”. Yes, there are human political factions that call each other stupid, ignorant or crazy to de-legitimize them, but advanced aliens should be able to rationalize it as “according to this species thought patterns/behavior”.

#### Observations

These advanced aliens are so bureaucratic it is regulation down to how to hide under one’s seat in a disaster. This would have seemed impossible until seeing the sheer number and complexity of US and EU regulations since 2000 punishing people for selling fish too fresh, hundreds of regulations on the packaging of toothpaste and “if there isn’t a rule, it isn’t allowed” instead of the traditional inverse being the case.

The book heavily relies on the classic tropes that humans are so good because they are adaptable, creative, and innovative. Another trope it uses is where the aliens are a few centuries advanced from us, using technology just far enough ahead that they are hard to beat but not impossibly so.

#### Summary

I give “World War: In the Balance” by Harry Turtledove two stars. If he hadn't made the aliens such clunky and stereotypical villains, it would have rated higher.

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## Prose Bono

### Ask A Writer: Keeping Going by Chris Nuttall

“I have a question for your blog. Do you have any tips for helping beginner writers, such as myself, to have the confidence to keep going? While I’m having a particularly confident spell at present, I know this is an issue for many beginner writers.”

The short answer is to keep at it.

Yes, I know. That doesn’t sound particularly helpful. But the blunt truth is that learning to write is very much like learning to do press-ups – the more you do, the easier you’ll find it ... but if you stop for a few days, you’ll find you fall back to square one.

What I did – what most writers do, I think – is two-fold. First, I set myself a goal. I told myself, at first, that I would try to write at least 500 words a day, rain or shine. It didn’t matter what those words were, I told myself, as long as they were a reasonably coherent story. The idea was to develop the habit of writing. Most – pretty much all – of what I wrote in those early years was utter drivel (he says, modestly <wink>) but I did manage to develop the confidence and drive to just keep going.

The second thing I did, to some extent, was to draw up a rough outline of the planned book. I found that if I knew where I was going, while leaving room for modifications as I went along, it helped convince

me that I was striving towards a goal. (This is particularly helpful if you're writing a book that depends on you seeding clues throughout the narrative, perhaps a detective story.) I don't believe in following plots religiously, but it does help when you're starting out.

The blunt truth is that the first million or so words you write will be crap, to put it mildly. Very few people start out with the talent to write polished prose – it's a skill that writers develop over time. My honest advice is not to seek feedback for a while because it will either be from friends and family (people who aren't going to be cruel) or people who will slam it outright, without making allowances for your relative newness. Self-published books like *Empress Theresa*, where it is clear that the writer hasn't spent years practicing his craft (whatever he says about it), tend to attract unpleasant remarks and reviews that aren't always particularly constructive.

Don't expect instant success. And beyond that, don't give up.

Good luck.

### Wagging the Tail An Approach to Writing by Cedar Sanderson

Others have talked about docking the tail of the writer. The long tail – the backlist of your books, that in theory will continue to sell forever, in the current publishing world – is something that as a writer, I intend to cultivate. For one thing, I don't have a huge fanbase. So there is the potential to be discovered by new readers who then (theoretically) will go back and read the stories extant.

Earlier this year I came very close to giving up writing. The Indie world is a demanding one, and I was facing the facts. I am only one person, the day job is the only thing paying the bills around here, and I can't possibly write enough to contribute significantly... I certainly can't churn out a half-dozen novels a year as many Indie have to, in order to support the method of marketing they are using to make a living. I just could not. Full stop, why am I bothering to write at all?

Only... I can't really not write. It is just part of me. So after a few tearful conversations with my husband, and chats with friends who believe in my work and supported me, telling me I write Good Stuff, and I should keep going as long as it made me happy. With POD and never-out-of-print ebooks, I can have that long tail, and keep wagging it happily until such time as I can devote my life to a writing career. With that encouragement, I kept on. And this year has been my best writing year since I graduated and switched focus to career. I have a novel that should appear in a couple of months, it's been the year of the anthology with short stories coming out every couple of months, I have some projects just simmering along on back burners... Giving up and letting go of the idea of being marketable has made me so much more productive.

The daily writing helps. Doing it day in, and day out, creates a momentum that cannot be denied. Yesterday I wasn't feeling well, and contemplated taking a 'sick day' and skipping the writing. I'm jammed up on the three big projects I'm working on (I'll have a session with the Evil Muse today and shake that loose I think) so I just sat down and thought 'I'll write a flash.'

So I did. It took me less than an hour, from the first words on the page, and some of that was thinking through what I was doing, and how to structure it. You can read *Rusalka* over on my blog. It's a funny

thing, how I can do that, and most of the time when I am trying to write a short it wants to grow up to be a novel. I've mixed mythos in that, too. But I do that a lot.

So the blog is, still, a marketing tool, if not the fad fashionable one (that seems to be newsletters for authors right now. I have administered newsletters in the past. Nothankyouverymuch). The blog works, although I may have to retrain people to click the 'subscribe' button for easy delivery of posts to their email boxes. Heh. I don't do a daily post. At one point I did, and I was trying multiple short posts a day (do not recommend, by the way. Unless you're doing this full time, or you have a 'team' writing 'content') and I got a complaint from a subscriber that I was spamming their email box. You can't win! And to circle back to the team writing. I once had an exchange with a balloon twister who wanted to start up a blog, and they were soliciting paid writing. Since I am peculiarly qualified on both sides of that, I wanted to know how much he was paying? He wanted to pay out 0.0085\$ a word. He got a writer, too, from somewhere across the globe, who could write passable English but had no idea what he was writing about. Which is why you'll find large website content weird and stilted at times, and heaven knows you have to be careful about 'how-to' blogs that are promo pieces rather than a real person doing authentic things.

Where did that soap box come from? Steps off and kicks it under the bench. Ahem.

To come back to the long tail. My plan is long-term. I am going to be writing for 20 years into the future, not the 'now'. This means I really do need to keep up with cover trends (and I just re-covered the Pixie series) and I need to figure out how to trickle-charge my books with a small amount of marketing. I have faith this is going to work. For one thing, since I am not pushing myself to keep up with full time writers, I'll not run out of ideas any time soon. Nor, a much more real concern, will I burn myself out. I can and do see sales on ebooks that have been out for years. Paper? waggles hand. Not so much, unless I am selling out of hand at a con, and I really don't do those much. My friend James Young had just about convinced me last year to do more of it, and then 2020 happened.

So you never know. But I can say that I have 100% control over my work, so I can cultivate it like a garden and I intend to do so. Mixing my metaphors happily as I go along. Garden dragon with a really long tail? Oh, yeah, I can do that.

## Ask A Writer – Fan Fiction by Chris Nuttall

I've had a number of questions after my first Ask A Writer post, which I will try to answer – one by one – when I get a moment. However, this one caught my eye.

"I tried sending you a question, but yahoo keeps saying your email address is invalid, so here is my question. Sorry if it's already addressed below. I did a search and saw you have previously discussed your works published under the Creative Commons license, but what about other works?"

How do you, specifically, feel about fans writing and disseminating (AKA publishing) fan fiction set in a world that you created and involving one or more characters that you created? Which works are published under which types of licenses, and what are the implications of those licenses specifically for fan fiction? More generally, is there a right way and a wrong way to go about writing and publishing fan fiction?"

To answer the first point, I normally write 'AT' instead of '@' because that keeps spammers from

harvesting my email address and sending me junk. (I like to make them work for it.)

Back to the rest of the question ... well, I'm not qualified to talk about the precise types of licences, so I'll stick to generalities.

The short answer is that fan fiction has the potential, at least, to cause significant problems for the author. If a fan writes a story that mirrors the author's future works, that fan might try to claim that the author stole their work. It may not be easy to actually make such a case, but no smart author wants to have to go to court and fight it.

For example, it was easy for David Weber fans – like me – to make educated guesses on what would happen as the Manticore-Haven War developed. Weber scattered clues to the tech tree throughout the early books, allowing us to see the logical development of pod missiles, LACs and FTL communicators. This rewarded his long-time fans, who engaged in discussions about how this or that plot point would be resolved. But it also ran the risk of someone taking a planned future development and turning it into a fan fiction.

I remember discussions about how the Honor-White Haven-Emily love triangle would play out. Us fans predicted a Grayson-style poly-marriage, with all three of them united in marital bliss, long before it actually happened. And if someone had turned that into a fan fiction ... well, it could have caused problems for David.

There actually was an incident involving Marion Zimmer Bradley – before she became infamous for something far worse – where an attempt to pay a fan for an idea led to legal threats and the ultimate closure of most fan-works. I don't know precisely what happened – my personal read is that Bradley (or her ghost writers) wanted to use more than just an idea – but the fallout did a great deal of damage to fan fiction. Writers do not want to waste time with legal wrangling. Many writers drew the conclusion that it was better not to allow fan fiction, full stop.

Realistically, the 'right' and 'wrong' way to publish fan fiction rests very much on the author him/herself. David Weber forbids fan fiction and I believe that his wishes should be honoured. JK Rowling was much more permissive – the sheer number of fan fiction writers in the Harry Potter universe clearly shocked Warner Brothers – but even she had some reservations. And rightly so. I do not recall any pre-Half Blood Prince fan fictions that featured You-Know-Who splitting his soul into seven Artefacts of Doom, but I think I recall some that deduced that Harry had picked up a piece of the Dark Lord's soul. Could this have caused problems for Rowling? I think she would prefer not to find out the hard way.

For me, personally?

I wouldn't object to fan fiction set in my universes if the writer in question put a formal note at the start disclaiming all rights, even to Original Characters (OCs). Obviously, some fan fiction writers will think this is unduly restrictive, but I don't want to get involved in an argument over who had a particular idea first. Proving that I got their first would be difficult, particularly as so much of my future plans exist only in my head or in vaguely scribbled notes so I'd have problems trying to date. I would try to avoid reading fan fiction set in my universes – certainly if I didn't know the author personally – if only because I'd have problems proving that I wasn't influenced by it.

I'd be very proud if something of mine kicked off a fan fiction craze as big – or even a tenth as big – as

Harry Potter. Getting people reading and writing is no small achievement. JKR has earned her place in heaven. But I'd also be wary of the potential implications.

I would object, very strongly, to someone actually charging money for their fan fiction (even if it isn't based in one of my universes.) That's something you really shouldn't do without explicit permission from the author. (And probably from his publishers too, as just who owns the rights can be a little hard to determine from the outside.) In my opinion, that is stepping beyond writing for fun.

Obviously, other writers might disagree.

## Small, Familiar Magics By Cedar Sanderson

I've been working on multiple writing projects at once, as has become my habit. The late Christopher Stasheff, who I was privileged to meet and talk with at a convention a few years ago, told me that he called it Voltaire's Desk, this moving from one thing to another, then coming back around again.

For one thing, it keeps me from getting bogged down, and right now with me pushing the words as hard as I can, that's essential. If I had the time to wander off for a day or three and digest until the story was ready to come out? But I don't. I'm averaging 1200 words a day in August. Being able to dictate on my commute is helping that. So! I have multiple things that allow me to switch between them.

What it doesn't allow for, this spoken method of creativity, is editing. That's all got to be butt-in-chair fingers-on-keyboard time. So necessary! And here I am, avoiding it.

I sent the East Witch off to the tender cares of Beta Readers last week, and the initial responses have been encouraging. I have work to do, which I expected. I was amused to be told that parts of it read like David Drake after he'd been intensively researching a subject and then wrote it into a fiction tale. I'm not sure that was wholly intended as a compliment, but I will take it! I'm even now considering putting a bibliography as a note behind the book for those who would like to read some of the very obscure folklore and fairy tales I dug out to shape the book. Siberian forests aren't the only bleak thing up there. The history of Siberia's native peoples is even darker.

My editor, on her initial pass through the book, informs me I'm a clean writer. I sort of flinch, knowing that the next book will have been partly masticated and spit out by Dragon Naturally and it's not going to be that clean! The next book finished will be Hatrack. I think. Maybe. The other book the First Reader and I are working on is a seekrit. Because we are toying with submitting that one to a traditional publisher. Whereupon we will pretend it doesn't exist for something like two years, while we work on other projects.

I've been asked for sequels to Tanager – it's up next on the roster. Possum Creek Massacre? Well, the immediate sequel is available now, as Child of Crows is published in Supernatural Streets. The next novel will be Bone Sigh, and I am shooting for early 2021 with that. If I can keep up the momentum I've got going. I'd also like to get out a sequel to Lab Gremlins, which I am thinking I may roll the sequelae of Violet Mouse into... Honestly, that short. It's not supposed to have 'what came next?' because there are too many options. But the reviews are all good, and longing for more. So I will do my inadequate best there.

And of course, knowing my muse, there will be oddball projects that materialize and capture me. I can't help it! I'm not scattered, I'm just built this way!

It's the small, familiar magics of the days that keep us going. The coffee dark and bitter. The good morning kiss. The dog's cold nose and pleading eyes. The whole world, dark and gray, bright and shiny, different every time you step out the door. People, who are every one of them their own self-contained unique personality walking around and interacting with you. Surprises abound, and discovering them makes it all worth while.

When my children were born, I had no idea what to expect. It was delightful to learn that almost immediately this little person who couldn't even hold her head up had a personality. Then, when two and three came along, I realized that they were each so different! Number four proved my hypothesis, that behind every face is a soul worth getting to know. You might not like that person (the ones who aren't your own children), but they are nonetheless a human and not the same person as you are. I have found it fascinating, over the years, trying to comprehend motivations, reactions, and all the myriad ways we bounce off of one another and our surroundings.

I try to capture a little of this magic in my work. It's worth catching, like lightning in a jar, and holding up to look at the beauty before you release it again. Even fireflies have lives to live, beyond our amusements.

### Wright's Writing Corner: Writing Tips — Measurement By Example By Jagi Lamplighter

Measurements by example: Tall as a man, rather than six feet high, where applicable. This idea was suggested by my friend Von. She felt that measurements like six feet often left a person with no particular mental image, while "the height of a man" was much easier to mentally picture.

Since I could not tell you on larger measurements if a particular length were 100' or 1000', I immediately took to this idea. I do not always remember to use it, and sometimes it does not seem appropriate, but here are a few examples.

"This arching gate was flanked by giant tusks, nine times the size of a man, which shone with an ivory light." (from Prospero In Hell)

"The tiny serpentine dragon was about the length of a pencil."

"Around the corner lumbered a gigantic mammoth over four car lengths long."

"I hefted the MacGuffin. It weighted about as much as three gallons of milk."

"The drooling Hobgrobbernob shambled toward me. He was about an Olympic swimming pool away. Unfortunately, the terrain was flat grass not deep water."

"I ran. It continued to shamble. Soon, the distance was more like a soccer field. Then two soccer fields. Then three. Maybe today would not be my last day after all."

It is pretty simple. Pick the length, size, etc. you want to express. Thing of some recognizable object of a similar length. Describe the measurement in terms of the recognizable object.

## Ask A Writer – Cover Artists and Contracts

### By Chris Nuttall

This didn't originally start life as an Ask A Writer question – it was included in an email and I thought, as I have had similar problems in the past, that it would be appropriate to tackle as the very first answered AAW question. I've rewritten the email so it forms a question <grin>.

"I hired an artist to produce a cover for my eBook and paid him a fee. Twelve months later, I still don't have a cover. What should I do?"

The immediate question is simple – do you have a contract? If so, does the contract specify a due date and (potential) penalties for non-deliverance?

If there is a contract, you can – and should – contact the artist and request an update. If, for whatever reason, the artist is unable to provide the artwork, you can reasonably ask for a refund and try to obtain a cover design from another artist. An artist might claim that he did a chunk of work for you anyway (the cover sketch and suchlike) and so should keep the money, but I wouldn't take that argument too seriously. You hired him to produce a usable piece of artwork and he hasn't done it.

If there isn't a contract, it will be harder to push the artist into either completing the commission or refunding your money. However, you can still contact the artist, explain you need the artwork by [whenever] and request an update.

You'll have to decide if you accept the reason for the delay for yourself. (Personally, I tend to be more forgiving if I get told these things in advance.) If you think it is a good reason, you still need to decide if you want to give the artist more time or find a different artist. At the risk of sounding heartless, this is a business. You need a cover to publish a book. If you want to give the artist more time, you probably need to be very clear on the due date.

If not, recovering your money may be difficult, based on your (and his) location. You may find that it costs more to get the money back through legal means than you've already spent. But you'd probably need to talk to a lawyer about that.

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There is a certain tendency amongst self-published writers to forgo contracts and rely on gentleman's agreements between writers and artists. I understand the impulse – and I don't like involving lawyers any more than the next independent contractor – but the writer is buying a piece of artwork. It is important to make sure you know what you're actually getting and that you have full rights to it. Failing to dot every 'I' and cross every 'T' now could cost you later.

Most professional artists have a standard contract. But if you have to write your own, it must include:

- A description of the design. You can be vague or achingly precise – I have a habit of saying 'space combat' or 'exploding starships' – but the vaguer you are, the more room there is for misunderstandings. A line reading 'Brad Pitt in a marine uniform' leaves the artist with the option of dressing Brad as a Jarhead or a Bootneck, depending.

- A description of the formatting requirements. You want something you can actually use. I generally go

for 'JPEG suitable for Amazon Kindle' as a basic requirement.

-A statement of the writer's rights to the artwork. You want an exclusive piece of work. (Think of it as buying a car – the old owner doesn't have any rights to it once the money exchanges hands.) Most artists will want to keep the right to use the artwork in their portfolio, which allows them to show off their talents, as well as being specifically credited for the work. You should let them do it – I'd be more worried if they didn't want to do it.

-A due date. If you need the artwork by 01/10/2017, you have to specify that in the contract.

-Price and a payment schedule.

The artist will want something at the start – or when the preliminary sketches are produced (so there's agreement on the basic design). You need to stipulate when (and how) those payments will be made.

-A statement of what happens if the artist is unable or unwilling to complete the job to the writer's satisfaction.

There are quite a few variables that need to be taken into consideration. A typical 'exploding spacecraft' cover is one that can be repurposed, if necessary; a cover based on a very specific design may not be reusable. The artist will probably want more money up front for the latter!

This is a delicate balancing act. On one hand, the writer wants a usable cover and doesn't want to throw money away for nothing; on the other hand, the artist has put work into the design and will want something for it, even if the writer cannot use the cover. Think very carefully before you offer too much money up front – ideally, make sure the artist has a good reputation before you pay too much before any work is actually done.

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As I have said before, writing is a business. If you want to make money, you have to approach it as a business. You're hiring an artist to produce a usable piece of work. If the artist can't or won't keep their side of the agreement, you have to go elsewhere. Cover yourself because no one else will watch out for you. Write and/or read the contract carefully!

# Non-Fiction

The Merrill Theory of Lit'ry Criticism:

Judith Merrill's Nonfiction

Edited by Ritch Calvin

Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

Science fiction (SF) author, editor, and critic Judith Josephine Grossman (January 21, 1923 – September 12, 1997) took the pen name of Judith Merrill in 1945, and used it for the rest of her career. For much of her life, she worked as a book editor in the United States, and then – beginning in 1968 – in Canada. She moved to Canada, after spending a year in England, because of the political unrest she experienced in the United States (e. g., the Democratic National Convention in Chicago). As a part of the New Wave in SF (emphasizing form over story), she edited the influential *England Swings SF* anthology in 1968. In Canada, she became involved in social and political activism.

As a young woman, she was a member of the famous Futurians of New York, under her married name of Judith Zissman. She is credited with being the first woman to join the SF club who was not a wife or girlfriend of one of the male members.

Merril is principally remembered today for the SF anthologies she edited -- starting in 1950 -- especially a "Year's Best" anthology series that ran from 1956 to 1967. For some time, this was the only regular SF anthology series being published.

The book under review, published in 2016 by Aqueduct Press, is a collection of Merrill's book reviews from *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* (*F&SF*) in the 1960s, plus the introductions from her annual SF anthologies. Her non-fiction from *F&SF* includes essays she wrote on fellow genre authors Fritz Leiber (full text) and Theodore Sturgeon (partial text); both were written as part of tributes to the authors in special issues of *F&SF*. In addition, her historical articles from the academic SF journal *Extrapolation* are included (e. g., "What do you mean: Science? Fiction?"). The book, Heirloom Books Number 4, is more than 350 pages in length.

She spent most of her professional career struggling with a definition of SF, redefining it many times over the years. At one time she adopted the definition favored by fellow author/critic Anthony Boucher: "The literature of disciplined imagination." For the most part, however, she preferred to think of the genre as science *fantasy* rather than science *fiction*.

In reviewing a book, Merrill examined it in terms of the following: character, language, novelty or originality, imagination, logic, unity of form/content, literature, gender, and structure.

In 1970 -- while living and working in Canada -- Merrill began an endowment at the Toronto Public Library, and donated all her books and magazines to the Library. This collection of research materials, known for a time as the Spaced Out Library, was later renamed the Merrill Collection of Science Fiction, Speculation, and Fantasy.

In the volume under review, the editor has omitted most of Merrill's introductions to individual stories

in the anthologies she edited, and sections of the annual collections she edited, but all of this material is available in an electronic version of the book. The editor, who supplies an informative introduction, is Ritch Calvin, an Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at SUNY, Stony Brook, New York. He is a former president of the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA), and won its Mary Kay Bray Award in 2009 (for the best essay, interview, or extended review published each year in *The SFRA Review*).

I recommend this collection highly for anyone interested in Merrill's non-fiction writing. The only limitation, at least to me, is its lack of an index.

## The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom

### by David Ritter and Daniel Ritter

### Review by Tamara Wilhite



First Fandom Experience presents  
**The Visual History of  
Science Fiction Fandom  
Volume One: The 1930s**

One of my earliest memories is of the massive science fiction laden bookcase in my childhood home. I read John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt, Ray Bradbury, Larry Niven and other classic sci-fi authors before I was in middle school. That's understandable given that I'm named for a character in a Robert Heinlein

novel. This means I'm unusually familiar with both the art and stories of Golden Age sci-fi. This is why I chose to read and review "The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom: Part 1". Part 1 is devoted to the 1930s and came out in hardback in February, 2020.

#### Why Does Golden Age Science Fiction Matter?

To quote Carl Sagan, these are the stories that inspired the people who put man on the Moon. It was an optimistic time, and we may want to recapture that spirit. (I've written elsewhere how the dearth of optimistic science fiction is probably contributing to the difficulty in getting kids interested in STEM.) Furthermore, these are the stories that led to popular works having an impact today. For example, Asimov's "Foundation" series is being turned into a TV show. The first stories of the "Robots" series came out in the 1930s.

Golden Age science fiction is more than "swords and sorcery on Mars" or pulpy laser gun fights. For example, it is a 1940s story that led to Asimov's laws. We're debating putting them into artificial intelligence in the near future. That's aside from the long lists of inventions developed by people who were fans of science fiction franchises. The lists of real-world inventions inspired by "Star Trek" alone would fill several pages.

If you've seen the book covers that inspired a thousand engineering careers (including my own), you would recognize similar scenes in science fiction movies across the intervening decades. Ideas that originated in the 1930s and 1940s continue to shape movies, books and memes today. This makes analysis of classic science fiction a worthwhile cultural exploration of both literature and



"Especial attention is being given at present to the fascinating subject of interplanetary travel..."  
— ALLEN GLASSER

**The Scientists**  
For the benefit of science fiction fans living in New York and vicinity, an organization known as The Scientists has recently been formed. The purpose of this club is to provide a common meeting ground for scientifically-minded laymen, and to foster discussion of modern developments, theories and projects in the realm of science.  
Especial attention is being given at present to the fascinating subject of interplanetary travel and communication, a topic as yet understood by the general public. Before this idea can be realized, the public must be educated in understand and appreciate its significance. While the actual work involved in achieving interplanetary communication will be done by trained scientific, popular support is absolutely essential to the success of any such undertaking. The Scientists' association, wants to assist, as part of its program, in spreading the doctrine of interplanetary travel.  
The activities of the club, however, are by no means limited to this sole interest. Many other enlightening pursuits are available to members, including access to the club library, which contains a fine assortment of scientific literature, both fiction and non-fiction.  
The organization is open to all persons over six-

**THE TRAVELER**  
Volume 1 July, 1935 Number 1  
Published every month by The Scientists.  
Editor:.....Allen Glasser  
Associate Editor:.....Marjorie Delinger  
Assistant Editor:.....Barrie Butler  
**OUR AIM**  
The purpose of The Traveler is to present in this paper is four-fold. First, to record the activities of the club; itself. Second, to provide a medium for the expression of the members' ideas on contemporary scientific developments. Third, to create a widespread interest in scientific fiction. Fourth, and most important, to prove that science is not a dry-as-dust study, but a vital, interesting, and entertaining subject.  
Many scientists are troubled about the future population of this country—and of the world. At a recent gathering in Geneva, Switzerland, the question of the food supply of one hundred years this may seem to be worrying about bridges before they are needed, yet after all we should have some care as to the health and happiness of our descendants. The food supply of one hundred years this may seem to be worrying about bridges before they are needed, yet after all we should have some care as to the health and happiness of our descendants. The food supply of one hundred years this may seem to be worrying about bridges before they are needed, yet after all we should have some care as to the health and happiness of our descendants.  
The population of the world has tripled since the year 1800, according to figures presented at Geneva. This is in spite of wars, droughts and epidemics. There will be five billion people by 2025, if the present rate of increase keeps up. There are only thirteen billion acres of

art. This brings us to “The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom: Part 1” by First Fandom Experience.

About “The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom: Part 1”

This compilation by dedicated fans at First Fandom Experience or FFE includes more than classic book covers. It includes magazine covers, photographs and sci-fi artwork. The book also provides commentary that puts historic science fiction photos into context as well as content that hasn't been publicly available before. For example, you'll learn that sci-fi fandom isn't new, and neither is cosplay. Conventions go back to the 1930s, too. Troublesome fans? The 1939 Worldcon had an Exclusion Act banning six prominent fans by name. This book draws from original sources presented here for those who want to learn about it.

Then there's the history of publications like “Amazing Stories” you can read today. This fan compilation even touches on the history of the first fanzines. How meta.

“The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom” takes a look at the origin of multiple super hero franchises, as well. For example, page 76 is titled “The Reign of the Superboys”. You probably know the origin story of Superman, but this is a short introduction to the Superman comic itself. However, superheroes are only a small part of this compilation.

If you are a fan of swords and sorcery, the book explains the origin of Conan the Barbarian. He appeared in the December, 1932 edition of “Weird Tales”. And fantasy and science fiction weren't that far apart when one could still imagine encountering Barsoom. However, the collection is focused on science fiction.

## SCIENCE FICTION IN THE MAINSTREAM THE WAR OF THE WORLDS RADIO BROADCAST

In the climate of growing paranoia spurred by fear of impending war, the October 30, 1938 episode of Orson Welles' *Mercury Theater On the Air* presented an adaptation of H.G. Wells' tale of Martian invasion. The dramatization was set in rural New Jersey, with the first 20 minutes staged as news bulletins. Despite multiple disclaimers, some listeners became convinced that the news was real. Pockets of hysteria resulted—accounts of which were significantly overblown in the next day's press.

Reaction to the event among science fiction fans was muted. Most coverage in fanzines amount to “good program, people are silly” with various citations of similar hoax-inspired panics from the past. Walter Fleming's thoughtful assessment seems to reflect the general response of the fan community—some sense of pride that science fiction had sufficiently penetrated the mainstream American psyche to make such a scenario believable.

RIGHT: *Fantasy News*, Volume 1, Number 10, November 6, 1938

BELOW: *Spaceways*, Volume 1, Number 2, January 1939

BOTTOM: *Science Fiction News Letter*, Volume 2, Number 24, October 31, 1938

OPPOSITE: James V. Taurasi's depiction of Martian Invasion graced the cover of *Cosmic Tales*, Volume 1, Number 8, December 1938.

**"WAR OF WORLDS" RADIO HOAX NOT FIRST OF ITS KIND!**  
.....  
These warlike, scientific hoaxes are no new thing. They have occurred in the past, and will, undoubtedly, occur again in the future. Old readers of AMAZING will recall the story "THE MOON HOAX" which was an accurate, true account of how man of almost a century past deluded people into believing that he had seen life on the moon through an imaginary telescope. The story was generally accepted as true and was not disproved for many years--Only as recently as 26 years ago, a great comet passed close to the earth. So close, in fact, that it could clearly be discerned in bright daylight. The panic-stricken populace of many countries (including U.S.) believing that the end of the world was near stopped business for almost 2 days. No even the reassurance of the world's foremost astronomers could convince them there was no danger until the comet had safely passed----- (S.F.)

## Gods of the North

by Robert E. Howard

The danger of the sword had died away, the shouting of the slaughter was hushed, silence lay on the red-snowed snow. The pale black sun that glittered so blindingly from the ice-fields and the snow-covered plains struck sheets of silver from rust corroder and broken blades, where the dead lay in heaps. The nervous hand yet gripped the broken knife, belated heads, back-drawn in the death throes, blood red beards and golden beards gleamed upward, as if in last invocation to Ymir the frost-giant.

Across the red drifts and mud-colored fens, two figures approached one another. In that utter desolation only they moved. The dusty sky was over them, the white limitless plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a graveyard through the shambles of a world.

Their shields were gone, their corselets dimmed. Blood smeared their mail; their swords were red. Their hoarse helms showed the marks of fierce combats. One spoke, he whose face and beard were red as the blood on the snail-snow.

"Now of the seven lords," said he, "red was your name, and that my brother in Vanhalla may know who was the last of Wulfborn's hand to fall before the sword of Heimdal."

"This is my answer," replied the black-haired warrior. "Not in Vanhalla, but in Valhalla will you tell your brother the name of Asa of Alfborn."

Heimdal roared and sprang, and his sword swung in a mighty arc. Asa staggered and his vision was filled with red sparks as the blade shivered into bits of blue fire on his helmet. But as he recoiled he clutched with all the power of his great shoulders. The sharp point drove through brass scales and bones and hoars, and the red-haired warrior died at Asa's feet.

Asa stood away, trailing his sword, a sudden sick weakness assailing him. The glow of his eye like a red star shone away from the yellow-brown red-haired day.

A few steps Asa mumbled a mumbled word, and he supporting his sword, he fell on his side.

A silver line did not think away like a woman.

And now for the first time, she smiled at him.

She laughed, a low, throaty laugh, as she looked at him.

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Wrenn Plains, Texas,  
Nov. 10, 1938.

Dear Mr. Howard:

Here is a short story, "The Most King's Daughter" which I thought you might find suitable for The Fantasy Fan.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,  
Robert E. Howard

## INTRODUCTION

A letter sent to Donald A. Wollheim, accompanying the manuscript of  
*The Heechee*

Dear Wollheim--

Here is something which Two-Gun Bob says he wants forwarded to you for The Photograph, and which I profoundly hope you'll be able to use. This is really great stuff--shows that the most significant sense of the drum of "History" of anyone I know. He possesses a panoramic vision which takes in the evolution and interaction of races and nations over vast periods of time, and gives one the same large-scale excitement which (with even greater scope) is furnished by things like Stapledon's "Last and First Men."

The only flaw in this stuff is R.E.H.'s incurable tendency to divine names too closely resembling actual names of ancient history--names which, for us, have a very different set of associations. In many cases he does this despoilingly--on the theory that the familiar names descend from the fabulous realm he describes--but such a design is invalidated by the fact that we clearly know the etymology of many of the historic terms, hence cannot accept the pedigree he suggests. E. Hoffman Price and I have both argued with Two-Gun on this point, but we make no headway whatsoever. The only thing to do is to accept the nomenclature as he gives it, wink at the weak

There are chapters on science fiction legends like James Blish. Blish later novelized the original Star Trek television series. He also gets credit for the first science fiction meme, The Society for the Prevention of Wire Staples in STF Magazines or SPWSSTFM. Yes, science fiction memes predate computers.

There are chapters about writers who were inspired by the 1930s sci-fi like Frederick Pohl. In 1930, he was reading the Golden Age magazines as an impressionable ten year old. In 1972, he published his first work involving the Heechee. His last work came out in 2011. This is but one example of how science fiction narratives, both real world and fictional, truly span generations.

There is discussion on the technocracy movement that one could argue gained steam in the 1930s. There are many people who hold that view today, though a fair number mistakenly think we can get it by outsourcing decision making to artificial intelligence instead of engineers and scientists, ignoring the fact that AI will be programmed to reflect the biases and provide outcomes of said engineers. Yet it was the technocracy movement led to Ray Bradbury getting involved in science fiction. The technocracy movement also contributed to H.G. Wells' 1936 film "Things To Come". That's discussed at length in the book.

"The Visual History of Science Fiction Fandom: Part 1" addresses the "War of the Worlds" broadcast, describing it as the moment science fiction became popular culture phenomena. If you haven't seen the 1953 original, you may have seen the 2005 version with Tom Cruise.

If the history, artwork or sources interest you, the index is incredibly detailed. This book is unusual for including fan art as well as professional science fiction art. The only thing that surprised me was the relative lack of classic sci-fi book covers, though historic magazine covers are scattered throughout the book.

#### Summary

Are you a science fiction fan, either of classic or modern works? Are you a comic book fan? Do you like swords and sorcery? Would you like to learn about the history of fandom or the rise of now famous authors from fan to published fiction author? Then there's something here for you. I look forward to seeing part 2.

## Storytelling in the Pulp, Comics, and Radio: How Technology Changed Popular Fiction in America By Tim DeForest Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

I recently re-read this book, originally published several years ago, and found it so interesting that I wanted to share my thoughts on it with fellow Neffers.

As many of you probably know, the first half of the 20th Century could be considered a golden age of American storytelling. As stated by DeForest: "Mailboxes burgeoned with pulp magazines, conveying an endless variety of fiction. Comic strips, with their ongoing dramatic story lines, were a staple of newspapers, eagerly followed by millions of readers. Families gathered around the radio, anxious to hear the latest from their favorite performers."

Then, according to DeForest, technology stepped in and American storytelling changed forever. He concentrates his analysis of this subject on three popular forms of storytelling in 20th Century America -- comic strips, commercial radio, and pulp magazines -- to tell how technology changed these three popular media.

DeForest begins his book with story papers and dime novels, and tells the reader how they evolved into the pulps, with separate sections on the different types of pulp magazines -- including those that featured science fiction (SF). Then he deals with adventure comic strips, once so popular, and why they were reduced to their current smaller and pathetic state. Finally, he explains how dramatic radio was replaced by television.

The adventure comic strips examined closely by DeForest include Tarzan, Superman, Prince Valiant, and Dick Tracy; the pulps include *Amazing*, *Astounding*, and *Weird Tales*; and some of the radio programs he reports on are *The Shadow*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Dimension X*, and *X Minus One*. As seen from the comic strips, pulps, and radio programs mentioned, SF topics are frequently presented and discussed.

The illustrations included in the book are excellent, and the appendices -- giving a time line and a list of his favorite radio programs -- are helpful. The index is also well done.

DeForest's love for the material he writes about is quite evident, and he and I apparently have a lot in common. I own almost every book listed in his bibliography, attesting to our similar interests and reading habits.

One of his statements in particular caught my eye: "Television killed radio; something new came along and we once again left the old behind." The loss of dramatic radio really affected me because I grew up with it, have written books about it, and still listen to old-time radio programs every day.

DeForest writes that he has been interested in early 20th Century pop culture for most of his life. At the time this book was published, he lived in Florida and was the circulation manager of the library at a private college, the Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota.

Another work by DeForest, *Radio by the Book* (2008), dealing with the adaptation of literature for presentation on radio, is also worth reading.

## An Interview with Author Nicki Huntsman Smith By Tamara Wilhite

I had the opportunity to interview post-apocalyptic and supernatural fiction author Nicki Huntsman Smith. I rarely have the chance to connect with local writers. (We're both from the Dallas, Texas area.)

Tamara Wilhite: Your most popular books are the "*Troop of Shadows Chronicles*" series. Why do you think that is?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: I think it's largely due to the compelling characters. I took the time to create characters who were relatable, interesting, humorous, flawed, or all of the above. Secondly, these characters were placed in a bleak post-apocalyptic world, which tends to bring out the best and worst in people. Throw in a compelling storyline and you end up with books readers find difficult to put down.

Tamara Wilhite: You said that fans of "*The Stand*" will like the "*Troop of Shadows Chronicles*". Did that book influence this work?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: Stephen King has been one of my favorite writers for more than thirty years and "*The Stand*" is my favorite of King's books. I think a novelist's writing style is influenced by the books she reads, and King's definitely had, and continues to have, an impact on mine. Prior to reading "*The Stand*," I had read a few post-apocalyptic books and found the concept utterly fascinating. So af-

ter consuming “*The Stand*,” I knew that someday I would like to write in the same genre and utilize multiple points of view in a similar way.

Tamara Wilhite: And what else has influenced your writing?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: Many books and many authors. When I read a perfectly written sentence, I immediately want to fire up Microsoft Word and write something perfect of my own.

Tamara Wilhite: They say write with what you know, though that can be difficult with horror, science fiction and post-apocalyptic works. What kind of research did you do for these novels?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: Around the time I began writing the first book in the series, “Doomsday Preppers” had been a popular TV show. I found the concept of prepping for a large-scale catastrophic event fascinating and engaged in some small-scale prepping of my own. I spent time on an online survivalist forum, learned all the dos and don’ts from highly knowledgeable preppers, and even taught myself how to make my own shelf-stable food. I learned how to can fruits and vegetables, pressure-can meats, and dehydrate other foods for long-term storage. I also spent a lot of time on Google learning about firearms and incendiary devices. My searches have surely raised a few red flags at the NSA.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to write your first novel, “*Secrets under the Mesa*”?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: I was writing short stories at that time and decided “*Secrets under the Mesa*” could easily become a full-length novel. So I created the world-altering habit of writing daily. Soon after, my first full-length novel was complete. It was a momentous day.

Tamara Wilhite: You published the short story collection “*Dead Leaves, Dark Corners*” in 2017. Have you had short stories published anywhere else?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: I published a Kindle Short Read called “*Perceptions*” a couple of years ago.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you currently working on?

Nicki Huntsman Smith: “*What Befalls the Children – Book 4 in the Troop of Shadows Chronicles*.” The first draft is complete. I’m in the editing process phase and plan to publish in the summer of 2020. After that, I’d like to begin a new horror-occult series which will take place in the Midwest during the early 60s. I’ll continue to write additional books in the “*Troop of Shadows*” series as well.

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

Nicki Huntsman Smith: I hope I’m able to do for my readers what all the authors of books I’ve loved during my life have done for me: take me to worlds I wouldn’t get to visit otherwise.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.