

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

**EDITORIAL**

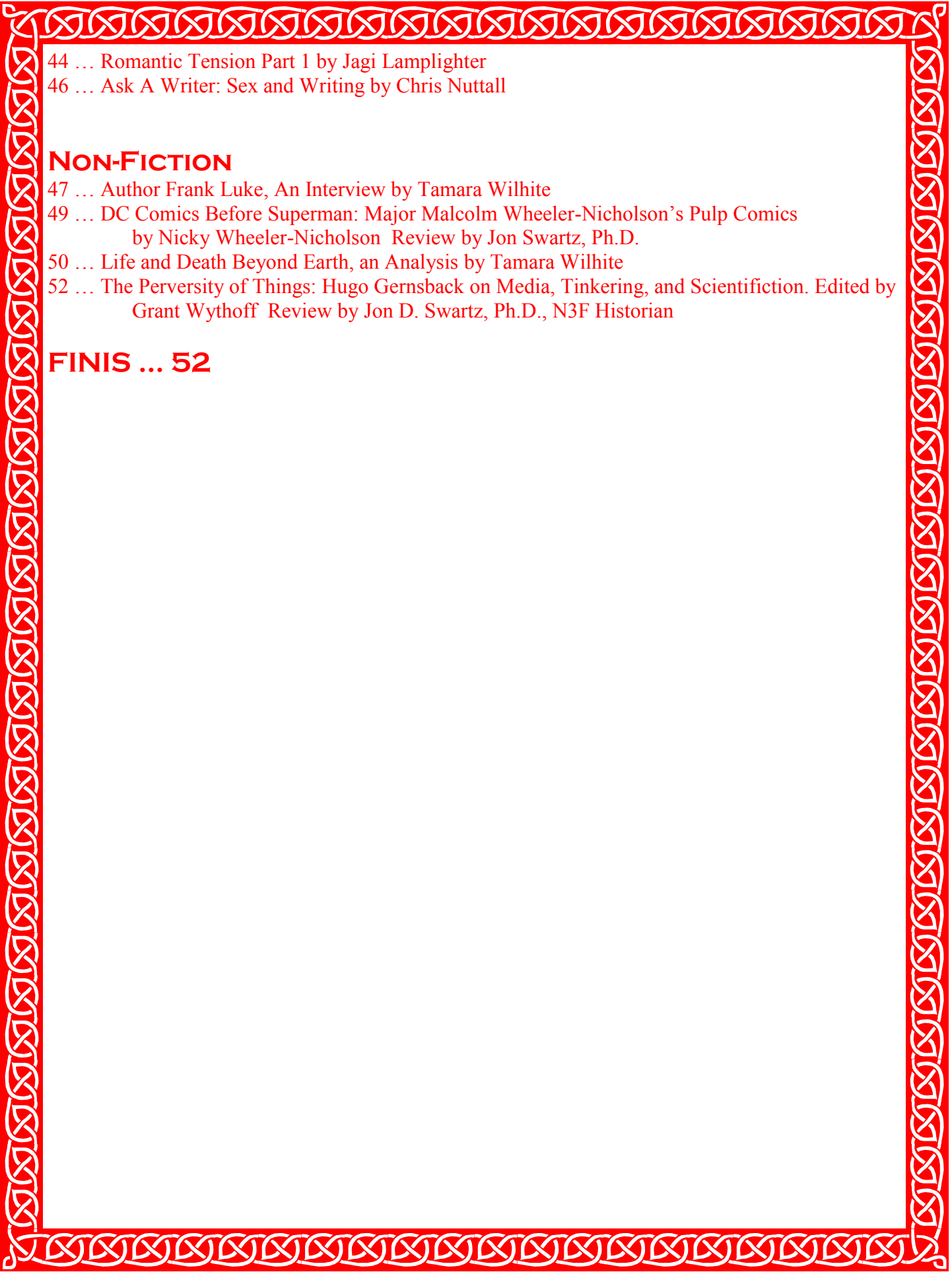
1 ... Editorial

**FICTION**

- 2 ... A Long Time Until Now by Michael Z. Williamson Review by Jim McCoy  
3 ... Alchemy of Shadows by David L. Burkhead Review by Pat Patterson  
5 ... An Accident of Stars by Foz Meadows Review by Chris Nuttall  
7 ... Bite Sized by Holly Chism Review by Pat Patterson  
8 ... Chosen Ones by Veronica Roth Review by Mindy Hunt  
10 ... Coven by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy  
12 ... Footfall by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle A Retrospect by Chris Nuttall  
17 ... Ghost Hour by Jennifer Brozek Review by Jim McCoy  
19 ... Halving it All by Stephanie McPeak Petersen Review by Philip Cahill  
20 ... Legend by Christopher Woods Review by Pat Patterson  
21 ... Light Magic by Ellie Ferguson Review by Pat Patterson  
23 ... Murphy's Law of Vampires by Declan Finn Review by Jim McCoy  
24 ... Neither Here nor There by Mackey Chandler Review by Pat Patterson  
26 ... The Oppenheimer Alternative by Robert J. Sawyer Review by Sam Lubell  
27 ... The Pride of the Damned by Peter Grant Review by Pat Patterson  
28 ... Psychic Spiral by Amie Gibbons and Country Music Review by Pat Patterson  
30 ... Sea Change by Nancy Kress Review by Sam Lubell  
31 ... So Little and So Light by Sarah A. Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson  
34 ... Son of Grendel by Matthew W. Quinn Review by Chris Nuttall  
35 ... Team Newb: Sun and Shadow Online by M. Helbig Review by Jim McCoy  
37 ... Tide of Battle by Michael Z. Williamson Review by Pat Patterson  
38 ... Today I Am Carey by Martin L. Shoemaker Review by Sam Lubell  
40 ... Under a Spell by Hannah Jayne Review by Mindy Hunt  
41 ... Whispers of the Apoc: Tales from the Zombie Apocalypse Edited by Martin Wilsey  
Review by Pat Patterson

**PROSE BONO**

43 ... Deep Characters By Cedar Sanderson

- 
- 44 ... Romantic Tension Part 1 by Jagi Lamplighter  
46 ... Ask A Writer: Sex and Writing by Chris Nuttall

### **NON-FICTION**

- 47 ... Author Frank Luke, An Interview by Tamara Wilhite  
49 ... DC Comics Before Superman: Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's Pulp Comics  
by Nicky Wheeler-Nicholson Review by Jon Swartz, Ph.D.  
50 ... Life and Death Beyond Earth, an Analysis by Tamara Wilhite  
52 ... The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction. Edited by  
Grant Wythoff Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

**FINIS ... 52**

# Editorial

We're delighted to welcome reviewer Mindy Hunt of SciFi4Me.com to our list of contributors. I hope that you enjoy her work.

The contents have been slightly re-organized. Recognizing that we sometimes 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, Mindy 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. In some issues proofreading support is provided by Jean Lamb. Regular contributors include Pat Patterson, Jim McCoy, Chris Nuttall, Tamara Wilhite, Samuel Lubell, Heath Row, Jagi Lamplighter, and Cedar Sanderson. Some of 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> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Mindy Hunt: <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperversiveSF.com>

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

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

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Robert Runte <http://SFeditor.ca>

Cedar Sanderson: <http://www.CedarWrites.com>

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

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

# Fiction

**A Long Time Until Now by Michael Z. Williamson**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com

Once in a while a book comes along out of nowhere and hits you with a setting that you weren't quite expecting. I mean, think about it. We're Science Fiction and Fantasy fans. We've been on a million starships, seen a million alien worlds. We've walked through the gates and into the throne rooms of more medieval kingdoms than we can even count. Each is unique and special, but it's all been done and even the surprises really aren't that surprising. As exciting as the action and the characters can be, settings are just regurgitated tropes. Well, unless you're reading *A Long Time Until Now* by Michael Z. Williamson. Then things get different in a hurry.

The story opens with a convoy in Afghanistan. Then there's a noise. The next thing we know, everything has changed, only nothing has. Our heroes (several members of the Army who were part of the convoy) are sent hurtling back in time to, well, we're never really certain when. Call it a few millennia give or take. That part is fairly standard. What makes this different is mix of peoples that show up. Pre-historic Afghanistan becomes a mixing bowl of people and time periods. We're treated to dealings with prehistoric cultures from two different places and eras, Roman legions with Indian allies from a later period and visitors from our future. The Americans are at the top of the pile due to their technological advantage right up until they're not. I don't want to give too much up here, but things do get rather interesting in that regard.

The interesting part here, to me at least, is that Williamson freely acknowledges the humanity of his characters. The young woman who decides all the men are going to rape her because she's the only woman around is believable and even understandable. The older characters (in their thirties and forties) and their aches and pains. Several have medical problems that require medicines that aren't manufactured in ancient Afghanistan and have to figure out how to take care of themselves. It's not always easy for our lost soldiers and then it gets, well... not worse, but weirder.

Dealings between cultures are always going to be weird. It's all well and good to respect someone else's culture. It's even good to try to adapt to other cultures when necessary. It's never easy though, and it gets worse when the two sides don't even have a language in common. *Mad Mike* nails it though. His characters are smart enough to know that they don't know how another culture works. They try to figure things out. Sometimes they succeed. Sometimes they fail miserably. Fortunately, they have a linguist with them that can help figure things out.

The amount of research that went into this book is unreal. Williamson is able to take us through the construction of an eighteenth or nineteenth century wilderness fort step by step using modern tools. He acknowledges a lot of organizational issues and addresses them. Unlike a lot of others, this book makes sense. The fort is produced by work. The tools are what the troops could reasonably expect to have. Food is gathered or hunted for by people who are aware that they are going to run out of rounds eventually. Their personal hygiene supplies run out and people get bummed out about it. It just works.

In any story, the characters are what hold interest. Williamson does a damn good job with those. There were times in the story where I wasn't sure if I wanted to hug these guys or get them good and drunk,

but they were all people I could get along with. They were well trained and motivated, yes, but they reacted right in other ways. I have a vision of a writer out there somewhere working on something similar. In this alternate story though, the people who get marooned just embrace the suck and get the job done. Williamson's characters do get the job done, but they do it while acting like real people. They mourn for their lost loved ones. They have porn downloaded to their phones. (Yes, there is a realistic way to charge them.) Life sucks when they first get there because the food is bland. It all works together. These characters live and breathe.

That brings me to my first complaint. It's not the first time I've written this. Sometimes it seems just a bit too coincidental that a group that gets lost has an exact mix of the bare minimum in skills needed to survive. I get that it's necessary for the story but for me it stretches the bounds of believability when every skill you need is present and there are no slackers around. Seriously Mr. Williamson, where is the shitbird? Every unit has one. Even more than that though, we get a lecture on how the Roman legions were so fearsome because they were so well organized and then find out that the person giving the speech has an MBA. Don't get me wrong. I'm not some idiot leftist who thinks that the only reason people enlist in the military is because they're too stupid to realize that they could get hurt in a war. But that doesn't necessarily add up to a ten man element having an organizational expert, an expert in husbandry, an expert in botany and someone who knows how to forge metal into tools in it. I know it fits the requirements of the story and it doesn't really pull me out of the story when I'm in it. A Long Time Until Now is a good book though, and I found myself thinking about it when I wasn't reading. The effect was that it took me longer to get back into the book when I picked it back up than I would have otherwise.

My only other whine is about the ending. It's plausible per the standards of the story, but it feels a bit *deus ex machina* to me. I know that there was no way the characters were going to find their own way out of the problem given their technical know-how and what they had available but it seems like a bit of a stretch to me. All whining aside though, this was a damn fine book. I'm looking forward to Williamson's next one.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 M4 rounds

## Alchemy of Shadows by David L. Burkhead Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

An ancient young man faces peril, with trustworthy assistants

First, a word about the cover, because otherwise I will forget. It's as close to a perfect representation of the book as you are ever going to get when you are dealing with a complex subject. In fact, THIS particular cover might almost be considered as a review in itself. The MC, somehow depicted so that he almost seems to be in 3D, is holding a glowing flask; he's framed in an ancient stone window, and the background is the skyline of a modern city. That pretty much lets you know, or at least provides a clue, as to the way the story will unfold. BTW, there IS some sort of red object just above his outstretched left hand (the one holding the flask), but my reader doesn't give me the ability to zoom in and see the details. When I saw the cover was by Sarah Hoyt, I thought: of course. The woman is a genius, and she's probably seen enough covers that either utterly miss the point of the book or are so poorly executed that she is going to make sure that the author gets the maximum value out of a cover.

The MC introduces himself:

"This century I used Johann Schmidt as my name."

If there is a class on how to get your novel started, the author took it and made an 'A.' With an economy of words, he lets us know that we are dealing with an unusually long-lived human, who does NOT have the ability to do anything he wants. Else, why would he need to change his name? It's really an excellent bit of craft, in my opinion.

Johann immediately gets into a fight and has to run. We discover that he is being chased by supernatural beings who can freeze him with a touch, and that light is the only defense he's found. We also discover that his first and only reaction is to run and hide.

I didn't care for the two years of chemistry I had to take in college, and perhaps part of the reason is that it followed rules I didn't get. What worked in ONE solvent didn't work in another, and I didn't want to pay attention that closely. Alchemy, on the other hand, might have been the answer. If everything had a salt; if everything had some universal properties; if phlogiston was what burned; if ether is what light traveled through: I'd be good with that. Instead of electron bonds, everything was stuck together with little bits of library paste: THAT'S the kind I want to study.

Burkhead postulated that world, but adds the limit in, right at the beginning, so you are left wondering why everybody isn't a wizard-y type person, and also why Johann must remain on the run: It's HIS blood, personally, that makes the real stuff happen.

Johann is 800 years old, but his body remains that of a short 19-year-old. He's short for the present day, that is; when he was born, almost everybody was his height, because only the rich could afford enough food to reach full potential. And it's those little bits that make this for such a fascinating read, apart from the story line. Burkhead tosses in a few glimpses into Johann's past life and lets us see how he has managed to adapt over most of a millennium.

In his current life, which is another new beginning, he meets an astoundingly beautiful girl and her amiable giant of a football-playing brother. They are fellow students at some school up in Indiana nobody ever heard of, where Johann is taking the first steps to establish an adult & productive existence.

It's a difficult task; in the modern age, the ability to transform lead into gold isn't nearly as valuable as the ability to use computer systems in ways the designers did not intend for them to be used. Johann has picked up the basics of that as well, enough to know that the keys to system is most often through people, and not through code.

I was 19 for only one year, and it was rather traumatic. My body was demanding stimulation that my social and work skill set simply could not accommodate, and it came very close to killing me. Johann has had 800 years in this form, and while he has undoubtedly learned some wisdom in that time, how do you hammer the demands of a 19-year-old's body into submission?

He does tell us explicitly that he has learned to avoid emotional entanglements. There are two problems: first, he does not age, and his partner does; second, those in pursuit can use anyone Johann has formed an attachment to gain influence over him.

I deducted one star because I found the obligatory sex scene to be absolutely unnecessary to the story, but instead of skipping over, as is my custom, I kept thinking that any second now, some critical aspect of Johann's dilemma was going to be revealed. Nope; it was just a sex scene. I DO understand that there are those who require that the scene be included in their fiction, and this scene had that feel: here, I'm



gonna put these words in here because you demand it, you rabble, but it's utterly ridiculous that I have to do so, and I'm not including any story elements, just sex!

I should note that elsewhere, Johann acts most responsibly, and against his interests, when he is presented with another opportunity for a salacious episode. In fact, this latter scene, which DOES develop character, had me go back and add the fifth star back in; however, in the final evaluation, I left this as a four star review, because Amazon says that 4 means 'I liked it' and 5 means 'I loved it,' and I liked this book.

There will be more in the series and you can bet I will read and review those as well.

## An Accident of Stars by Foz Meadows Review by Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

Apathy breeds more evils than defeat. So, you know ... keep fighting.

An Accident of Stars was recommended to me by someone who'd read Schooled In Magic, although the two books are actually quite different. The blurb was enticing enough to get me to download the free sample, then purchase the paperback. Was it worth it? Well, yes and no. But I'll get to that in a moment.

The publisher did not, it should be noted, do a particularly good job with formatting and publishing this book. A large number of page breaks and scene switches are missing, with the net result that the POV character and even the location seems to switch without warning. I actually found myself having to go back and reread several sections, just so I could be sure about what was going on. This is a point the author needs to address with them before the third book in the series – assuming there is one – comes out. However, I did my best not to take that into account when planning this review.

The book features – but isn't entirely centred around – a young girl called Saffron, who is not enjoying her time at school. (The description of girls being harassed by boys and schoolteachers unable or unwilling to do anything is entirely accurate.) When she encounters an older woman called Gwen Vere (groan) she is accidentally transported into a whole other world; Gwen is a world-walker and now Saffron is one too. Unable to return her home, at least at once, and standing out like a sore thumb because she looks very different to most of the locals, Saffron finds herself dragged into a political struggle and playing a major role in a rebellion.

Unusually for such a book – and in stark contest to Schooled in Magic – there are two other viewpoint characters who share the stage with Saffron. Gwen blames herself for the selection of the local ruler – which actually suggests she enjoys, or used to enjoy, considerable influence – while Viya is the spoiled consort of the local ruler who runs away, aided by a mysterious figure with links to Gwen. (Coincidence drives the plot a little more than it should, but that doesn't really hurt.) In some ways, this slows the book down because there are too many infodumps; in others, it hurts because it's often hard to know precisely what is going on. I spent quite a bit of my time thinking that I'd come into the story halfway.

The book focuses – intensely focuses – on most of the female cast, with men taking a back seat most of the time. (The society is somewhat of a matriarchy, although the chief bad guy is a guy – and his gender doesn't seem to be an issue.) In some ways, this reads oddly – Saffron is important, but not that im-

portant. She plays an important role, yet she isn't the chosen one or something along those lines. The women are a varied lot, from the towering (and dislikeable) matriarch of the rebels to Gwen and the younger women. It's an interesting inverse of the traditional male-dominated fantasy tropes and, in general, it works ... at least partly, I think, because there is no apparent awareness of this.

And yet, there are aspects of it that doesn't. The ending, in my opinion, is something of a letdown. Saffron's choice, when offered the chance to go home, is both understandable and tragic. Gwen makes a basic mistake that leaves room open for a sequel. And magic – such as it is – and to some extent the plot itself relies on connections between the female (and one male) cast. Some of these connections are unknown, apparently to some of the characters as well as the reader, until they become important. Meadows doesn't foreshadow them enough for my liking. This universe doesn't hang together as well as *Mistborn*, for example. And yet, as a general rule, it is a readable book.

Meadows deserves credit for creating a world that looks and feels different to both ours and the standard fantasy universe we know and love from countless books. Society has many differences – poly-marriages are common in this universe, for example – and this is both good and bad, underlining the problems with the increased demand for 'diversity' in fantasy and science-fiction. (Meadows certainly did put her money where her mouth is.) It is harder to follow what is going on – and why it is important – than it would be in a more conventional setting. This book could probably have done with a detailed description of the universe at the back. As it is, the cynic in me wonders if the only people intent on overthrowing the bad guy are the losers in the struggle for power. Saffron is perhaps the only person involved with the rebels who doesn't have a personal motive as well as an idealistic one.

At the same time, there are moments that rang oddly. On a minor scale, Saffron berates herself for not accepting – emotionally – that fourteen-year-old brown-skinned Viya is actually a queen – and blames it on racism. Yet someone from our society would have trouble believing that a teenage girl would wield real authority, regardless of the colour of her skin. (Historically, kings and princes did start early, although child-kings were almost always bad news.) On a more major scale, Gwen (who was born and raised in Thatcher's Britain) tells Saffron that she feels more comfortable in her new world than her old.

This rubbed me the wrong way for all kinds of reasons. On one hand, I can understand someone feeling that way; on the other hand, Gwen is ignoring some of the harsh realities of a medieval world. Given that she did have a hand in political developments, even though she made a serious mistake and presumably had to run, I'd say she entered society in her new world, perhaps through her marriage, at a very high level. People who say they'd be happier in the past – or another world – don't understand what it means to be without toilets, air conditioning, hot and cold running water, modern medicine, etc. The life of the vast majority of the population, back then, was nasty, brutish and short. Part of the reason societies were male-dominated was that women often died in childbirth. Even the most powerful men (Pompey the Great, for example) couldn't save their wives from dying in childbirth.

Would Gwen want to stay if she spent her life toiling in the fields? Or cleaning manure from the streets? Or doing something else menial because there is no technology to do it for her? I have a firm belief that most of the people who complain about the modern world have never lived in a second or third world country. Gwen seems to lack an understanding she should have. And this leads to a different point – if you can go backwards and forwards, why not try to obtain weapons and tech from Earth?

There are people who would say this is a kind of imperialism. Maybe it is, in a sense. And yet, these people are not the ones who have to live in primitive conditions. If they did, their opinions would change.



Overall, *An Accident of Stars* is an interesting book. There are moments I liked, such as Saffron's arrival and slow introduction to her new world, and moments I felt were marginally awkward and/or shoe-horned in. Saffron's bisexuality is played up too much for a minor plot point, along with Gwen's poly-marriage; Saffron's appearance being unique (and her closest counterpart's seeming reluctance to inter-breed) feels like a point that doesn't need to be made repeatedly. The plot moves slowly, driven a little too much by coincidence and the ending had problems, although understandable ones. (Saffron goes home, forever changed.)

But it is definitely worth a read.

(And it gave me an idea for a book. What if someone did import modern weapons and mercenaries?)

### Bite Sized by Holly Chism Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Meg, the Vampire Hero, and her buddy Andi, the Bail Bondsman, fight crime and renovate the house.

First, a comment about the cover. Dark and hidden things, right? Viewed at just the right angle, you can see that it's a silhouette of a small figure in a dress-like garment. However, finding that angle isn't guaranteed, and if you don't find it, it's just a dark blob. I rather like the IDEA of the title and author's name printed on a slant against a different colored background, but the execution is lacking; I couldn't make out the author's name on the screen at the book selection page.

Any deficits in the cover are quickly forgotten when you start reading.

I had to beat one of my children with a sledgehammer the other day, because the book I had loaned him STARTS with a boring and seemingly irrelevant first chapter. After restoring him to health, I explained to him that his disdain was on the money, and that any editor worth their salary would have demanded a re-write. That's a lesson they could easily have learned by picking up THIS book.

Immediately, we swing into action; IMMEDIATELY, we know there is Something Strange About This; immediately, we are engaged. (In fact, I was so engaged, I read the entire book in one sitting. It was GREAT fun!) The Opening Scene: Meg, the Vampire Hero, interrupts a brutal rape, freeing the target and disposing of the perpetrator by sucking all his blood.

Her motivation is soon revealed, but not until she has the chance to be a bit mystified herself. The intended victim doesn't flee the scene as soon as Meg rips her from the grasp of the rapist; instead, she moves off stage just long enough to pick up a baseball bat and return to assist her rescuer, who has the outward form of a tiny (5', 0") 28 year old woman. She then follows up on this pro-active approach by accepting in a rather calm fashion the reality that she has been rescued from rape by a vampire.

As people often will do after sharing a traumatic experience, Andi (the intended target) and Meg the Vampire Hero take a moment to sit and reflect on the activities and get to know each other. As it happens, they both have a need the other can fulfill, which is a pleasant continuation of their initial dynamic. In this case, however, it's not 'I need to be rescued from rape/I need to drink some blood' that draws them together, but the fact that Meg has a home needing maintenance, which she can't arrange because she is a night person, and Andi has recently been evicted from her home, so she is sleeping in her office. Perhaps a bit influenced by the rush of blood to her head, Meg offers Andi the job of live-in caretaker.

And, in doing so, she gains a friend.

Together, and with the aid of others, vampiric and otherwise, they solve some nasty serial murders and discover things about Meg's transformation from human person to vampire person.

The alliance between vampires and humans isn't a NEW idea, but the execution is terrific. That's something that seems to elude the awareness of people who approach you at parties, and say, 'Hey, I've got a great idea for a book. Why don't I tell it to you, and you write the book, and we'll split the profits 50-50?' They fail to understand that ideas are pretty much hanging from the trees and lying on the ground, and that there are (maybe) only a dozen or so unique plots in the universe, that it's the execution of the idea that makes a book. Here, Chism excels. The witty, snarky interactions Meg has with others, the revelation of her feelings of loneliness, the steps she has had to take to handle the basics of surviving as a vampire without making the humans around her into trivial snack-packs: all of that is put together beautifully.

Example: Meg has lived alone as a vampire for quite some time, and now she has invited a human person to move in with her. Problem: she has no toilet paper in the house. I'm not sure I have ever considered that aspect of vampire housekeeping.

Another example: vampires take on room temperature. That means that if they aren't careful, they can freeze solid in sub-zero temperatures. They retain awareness, but they are a block of frozen...vampire meat. Yeah, that's a hassle.

Example: Andi's significant other is a black cop. She picks 'Blazing Saddles' for a group movie and has no idea about the plot of the movie. Tee-hee.

Plenty of room for expansion of the franchise. I hope we get a chance to hear more of Andi's history; what she does reveal provides plenty of basis for a year or so in counseling.

And, as a special little unexpected benefit, the book gave me an idea for a home-made craft-type gift I can present to charm my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA. I'm not gonna say what it is, in case she reads the review before I can assemble it, though. Read the book, and you'll likely figure it out. Maybe not.

## Chosen Ones by Veronica Roth

### Review by Mindy Hunt

SciFi4Me.com

The last books of Veronica Roth's that I read were her Divergent series. Compared to the other female led series out at the time, I really enjoyed these. Roth was willing to do something to her main character I haven't seen a lot of: let them die. So when given the chance to read Roth's latest book, Chosen Ones, I was excited and hopeful that it would immerse me into a world I'm glad to visit but do not want to live in.

The premise of the book is interesting. Usually readers are brought into a story and participate in the actions of the characters through their time of conflict. But then what? Where does life for the survivors go from there? With the trauma they have survived, life surely cannot be all flowers and cupcakes after that. This book follows up on that conflict. Remember, with great responsibility comes great PTSD.

The story takes place 15 years after five teenagers were chosen to face a powerful being causing chaos in the world based on a prophecy. With some help from a government agency, a little magic, and the different strengths they brought to the table, they defeated the “Dark One.” The world around them returned to a new normal; however, not for them. The public knows who they are and treat them like celebrities, but they’re lost on where to go from there. This new lifestyle works fine for a couple of the five chosen ones, taking advantage of having a famous name and face, but not so much for the others.

Sloane interested the Dark One the most and had the hardest time adjusting in the aftermath. After being kidnapped by him and having unusual magical experiences, she kept many of her problems to herself regardless of her relationships with the others. On the 10th anniversary of the Dark One’s disappearance, something unexpected happens: three of the chosen ones are pulled from Earth to Genetrix, the magical alternate reality that had split off of Earth in 1969 when a naval ship set off a ballistic missile in the deepest part of the ocean.

They find the landscape of this alternate reality is roughly the same, but everything is magic driven. The people of Genetrix use siphons, similar to body jewelry, to cast spells, whether for practical tasks, healing, or harm. Like their Earth and the Dark One, Genetrix is terrorized by the Resurrectionist. After the chosen one in their reality was killed, the head magical group started looking into other dimensions for another chosen one to help them defeat their foe.

Under the threat of never being returned back to Earth they agree to help defeat the Resurrectionist, only to discover things are not what they seem and find a surprise of their own.

I don’t want to give away too much more of the story, but there is the general plot.

As with the *Divergent* series, Roth does a fantastic job at world building in *Chosen Ones*. The story takes place in Chicago, or the Genetrix version, Cordus. The details she has of the post-Dark One era and real locations makes it easy to picture the world Sloane and her companions are navigating through. But what I like is when the crew is transported to Genetrix, the descriptions of places in Cordus that are in Chicago locations, but are not the same place. If you’ve been to Chicago, you can see them exiting Lake Shore Drive into the South Loop but instead of seeing the usual sites, current Chicago buildings have been changed for the more ‘magical’ taste in architecture versus some of the classic. The map is the same, but the landscape is much different. It’s easy to let yourself get immersed into Sloane’s world.

I also like Roth’s way of presenting to the reader information for both Earth and Genetrix and the two evil ones. The chapters are from Sloane’s point of view. However, in between the chapters are government documents, books excerpts, magazine articles, and statements about Sloane from various agents or doctors. On the flip side, once the story moves to Genetrix, it is the same, but any statements are about their chosen one (the first one). You get an idea of how these kids were all “picked up” by their government agencies, their families allowing the young teens to leave, possibly to their deaths, and how the government saw them as expendable while carefully manipulating them to fulfill the prophecy. Once the Dark One was gone, the five of them were basically sent back into the world to fend for themselves, with a nice paycheck.

This leads to the second story of the book. *Chosen Ones* is about what happens next after you save the world. Society continues but what about those who did the dirty work? Sloane’s experience has shaped her into the person she is currently. She spent five years being told she was a part of a prophecy to destroy a destroyer and be put in situations that would have killed her had she and her partners not kept their heads straight. She had to put her trust in these strangers who would become her only safe circle

and a government agency that kept them in the know just enough to get the job done. Through the government paperwork that we get to read, we see the information that was kept from the five chosen ones and how they viewed Sloane, their analysis of her behavior. What's shocking is how easily they simply released her back into the world afterward.

Her experience with the Dark One on Earth helped her protect herself on Genetrix, not just to get out of sticky situations but also follow her gut feelings on the people she meets. She feels things are not right with her captors and there is more than what they lead them to believe, similar to the what the reader learns from the government papers we get to read between the chapters. Her instincts are stronger than the others which leads her to the truth first. This also leads me to the one fault I found in the book: the ending.

The buildup that Roth does, creating the worlds and explaining why these characters are there, is done beautifully. She truly has once again shown her skills with this. But the ending leaves a lot to be desired. While I wasn't expecting the same satisfaction I got from the Divergent series (this is a different story), I felt the ending was abrupt, like Roth was running out of paper and needed the story to wrap quickly. At one point, I was wondering if this was the first part of a possible two-parter. But no. It's not a bad ending, but it needed more pages to breathe.

The concept of Chosen Ones is great. The story is great. Veronica Roth has proven to be a good writer that I want to read more work from. Just know that the ending of this book will hit like a brick wall but not in the way that will knock the wind out of you.

Coven by Declan Finn  
Review by Jim McCoy  
[JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com](http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com)

Did you ever get the feeling that the thing should have thinged the other thing with the thing or the thing was going to thing wrong?

Yeah, that's what I'm thingin' too.

But here's the thing: That's okay. Declan Finn has brought us another good one and I'm here to tell you all about it because that's what I do. Sometimes I even make sense.

Protip: Don't let your happiness depend on my making sense. You're likely to end up depressed. But, I mean I tr...

Yeah, not really.

I'm a nutcase and I prefer it that way. It makes me harder to predict.

Except when a new Saint Tommy Novel comes out. Coven is the latest and it's epic. This one has Saint Tommy back home in his native New York. Life is good except when things are trying to kill him and let's face it, that's often. St. Tommy Novels are always action-packed and Coven is no exception.

Seriously, Coven has more boom-boom-pow in it than an Old School Hip Hop track. Seriously, if they ever turn these books into movies (and they're short enough for a two hour movie format to almost

work right) they need to get Steven Spielberg direct with special assistant Michael Bay. Bay for the special effects and Spielberg for plot and acting, and general this-is-a-movie-that-is-good-for-more-than--its-special-effects thing. Yeah, I think that would work.

I mean, how else would you do a mystical clay Iron Man suit? Or flying bolts of lightning? Or just plain old gunshots and explosions? Maybe we could borrow a Phantom of the Opera director for the mist effects because I've seen it three times live and they've never failed to impress. I mean, they're just... yeah.

What mist effects you ask? READ THE BOOK!!!

Seriously, Coven is worth your time. I loved it.

But wait! There's more!

Tommy's friends are back and they are some bad mamma-jammas. Combat-exorcists, kids who have trained with the Swiss Guard, a shotgun wielding wife, they're all there and they do what they do best: create mayhem.

No, not that stupid commercial. Please try to keep up.

Listen, if you're going to keep making corny jokes, you're going to start sounding like me. You don't want that, do you?

Where was I again?

Oh yes. Coven.

Loved that story!

And this time, St. Tommy needs all the help he can get because he's missing his god-given superpowers, properly known as charisms. So, no bi-location, no levitation, no anything. It's kind of scary. When you're used to seeing the hero rescued by God and he's not, it builds tension. When he can't just magic his way out of a fight, it gets intense. No fancy tricks in a fight equals a much harder fight. Oh, and who is he fighting?

This time it's a military base and Child Protective Services that house the demons and it fits. Anyone who follows this blog knows I love all of those who risk their lives to protect ours, but the way Finn lays it out just works. "Team Building Exercises" indeed. I think he has a point here though.

See, in the real world, Planet Earth, circa 2020, not all is as it seems. Finn's book places demons and their lackeys in the roles of those who are supposed to be protecting us and he's not wrong. Just about everyone has their own agenda, especially in a country like the United States. This is a good thing most of the time.

Then again, sometimes you get a demon infested CPS worker and well...

Yeah, someone needs to put her in check.

I enjoyed that part as I haven't always had the happiest of times with family court in the past. Divorced dads rarely do. I mean, I wouldn't wish this on Tommy and his family or anybody really, but it has a

very realistic feel to me. Then again, I'm the guy who got a visit from a CPS worker on the day my oldest daughter was born for the horrible crime of cutting her nails so she wouldn't scratch her face to pieces, so I may be a bit biased.

Of course, the actions scenes in Coven are amazeballs and Tommy's power armor is unbelievably awesome. Seriously, Tony Stark needs to get himself a set of this stuff. Maybe then he'd stop being such a girlie-man and whining every time he gets all shot up. If this stuff can heal a person, then it's better than his junk. Except that it can't fly. Flying would make it better. Then again, no power armor suit is perfect and if its good enough for a Clan Elemental then it's good enough for Tommy.

(Gratuitous Battletech Joke there. I hear both of the people who got it laughing.)

The Big Bad is kind of more Bad than big. I mean, he's basically just a normal sized human being but he's definitely Bad, just like Michael Jackson in the music video of the same name, except not as well dressed. I think. I don't specifically remember what he was wearing.

An, OH BOY, is he well-armed. I'm not going to say with what, but trust me, it's scary dangerous. It's also been used other places, but not quite this well and definitely never in this manner. I liked it. Honestly, it made more sense for said doohickey to be used in the way it was than the ways I've seen it used before too. I like this idea. I mean, I'm not going to tell you what the doohickey was or how it was used, but trust me, you'll like it. Unless you disagree with me. But don't worry the fact that you're wrong doesn't make you that guy. Probably. Well, maybe. Look, I'm right here, can't we just deal with that? Just this once?

Of course, there is room for a sequel here, but that makes me happy because I love this series and I can't wait to see Tommy send more demons back where they came from. Only maybe I'll buy a bigger bag of popcorn next time because I ran out of it before I realized I'd properly begun eating it while reading this thing. It's one of those "Wait, you mean the real world actually exists right now?" kind of books. I'll be waiting with baited brea...bated breath?

Or sumfin.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Exorcised Demons

## Footfall by Jerry Pournelle – A Retrospect Review by Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

The passing of Jerry Pournelle, one of the acknowledged Grand Masters of science-fiction, has left me looking back at his work and how it has influenced me over the years. Pournelle crafted – crafted, perchance – some of the most important novels of the last four decades, both alone and in partnership with Larry Niven. Of those, *The Mote In God's Eye*, *Lucifer's Hammer* and *Footfall* stand head and shoulders above the rest. They set the standards for the rest of us to follow.

But why?

To answer that, one must answer a question that has bedeviled many of us in the SF community in the



last decade or so. What is science-fiction? Is it merely a setting or is it something more? Is it focused on technology or the human factor, adventure or philosophy? Is it the future, or the past, or an alternate world? And does it cross the line between straight SF and other genres?

The question is not easy to answer. A romance story dressed up in science-fiction clothing would not, in my view, be pure science-fiction. A detective story that didn't depend on a science-fiction element as well as a science-fiction world – a clone body being used to hide a crime, for example – would not be pure science-fiction either. Indeed, the more advanced the technological base of the story, the thinner the line between science-fiction and fantasy. The Culture novels of Iain M. Banks are great reads, but the technology is so far ahead of the current level that it might as well be fantasy. Banks has to work hard to craft situations where the Culture simply cannot appeal to a combination of force and simple self-interest.

A pure science-fiction story, in my view, requires two elements. First, the technology must be both reasonably possible, at least within our current understanding, and be what makes the story happen. Ideally, technology and the practical application of same should be what solves the problem. And second, the human characters must be human. They cannot – they must not – be something greater. A person who grows up in the Foundation may still be recognisably human, but a person who grows up in the Culture may not be. Their mindset will be very different from ours.

Obviously, there is a lot of room for debate here. A story may not fit my definition above, but still be a very good read. David Weber's Honour Harrington books are good reads, yet they rely on a specific kind of universe and technological base; Peter F. Hamilton's Void books showcase the wonders of a possible future, but – again – have left the limits of present-day technology a very long time ago.

By this definition, *Footfall* is one of the purest science-fiction books in the world.  
9781857230970-fr-300 (For once, the UK got the cool cover.)

Niven and Pournelle did not anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Footfall* takes place in a vaguely alternate universe, where both the US and the USSR have bases on the moon, a Soviet space station orbits the Earth and the Challenger disaster never happened. Despite that, it is a fairly good reproduction of the US in 1985: no cell phones, no stealth airplanes, no internet, relatively few ground-to-space weapons. Given that the moonbases are of very little importance to the story, one might simply ignore them. In some ways, the story is as dated as *The War of the Worlds*.

The story begins when astronomers detect a giant alien mothership approaching Earth. Indeed, the first quarter of the book covers a series of reactions, from governments who are torn between welcoming the new arrivals and preparing for war to survivalists who want to go underground, fearing the worst. Preparations are made to greet the aliens with a multinational welcoming committee on the space station, but – of course – the aliens have other ideas. As soon as they get close to Earth, they attack. The space station is captured, humanity's network of satellites is blasted to dust and kinetic projectiles are rained on the planet below. Military bases, airports, dams and everything else that looks dangerous – from orbit – is smashed flat before a single alien sets foot on Earth.

As humanity reels under the onslaught, the aliens land in Kansas. Their control of space makes their position impregnable – notably, the authors don't spend much time on the battles – until the US and USSR cooperate to drop nukes on the alien lodgement, obliterating both the alien base and much of the region. The aliens retaliate, however, by launching an asteroid at Earth, clearing the way for a second landing in Africa. Desperately, the US builds an Orion spacecraft and launches a final desperate bid to regain control of the high orbitals and force the aliens to surrender. It works, barely ...

What is most impressive about *Footfall* is that the technology used by both sides is well within the limits of the possible. There are no heat rays (although lasers are mentioned), nor are there force fields. The aliens use railguns and Project Thor kinetic projectiles to clear the way for their landings, smashing armoured columns from orbit and making it impossible to muster a large-scale counteroffensive. (The one major counteroffensive fails miserably, pretty much completely off-screen.) They use lasers to launch spacecraft into orbit, as well as serving as an anti-aircraft system; they use orbital power satellites to keep their facilities operational and, later, as a bribe to get a number of countries to surrender to them. Merely by holding the orbital space around Earth, they appear to be certain to win. The book makes it clear that one doesn't need aliens to hold command of space. In its universe, the USSR was slowly moving to take space for itself.

The aliens themselves are alien, although not as weird as the aliens from *The Mote in God's Eye*. Resembling small elephants, they have a very alien herd mentality; they start the war, at least in part, to test themselves against us. It is clear that they would have surrendered if we had proven stronger, at the start; our failure to surrender when they stomped us flat bemused, then angered them. (And then it dawns on them that they can ask for conditional surrender instead of unconditional surrender ...) Niven and Pournelle do a very good job of representing the alien politics and making them understandable, if not likable. These aliens are not humans in alien suits.

*Footfall* is, in many ways, an event story. Like much such stories, the characterisation suffers. (Red Storm Rising is one of the few single-volume event stories that actually managed to balance events with decent character arcs.) The President and most of the other characters are instantly forgettable, with a handful of exceptions. (It's nice to see a female army intelligence officer who just is.) There are no scenes where POTUS flies a combat jet into battle <grin>.

The characters who do have genuine story arcs tend to make points; some subtle, some not. Senator Was Dawson, a space enthusiast, calls in every favour he is owed to be part of the welcoming committee, which ends badly when he finds himself an alien prisoner. Nothing loathe, he tries to use his new position to convince the alien dissidents to make peace with Earth, an attempt that backfires horribly when he manages to talk them out of being dissidents! And John Fox, an anti-technological zealot, rapidly comes to realise that he is little better than a traitor to the entire human race. Both Fox and Dawson have to work fast to redeem themselves and the book is ambiguous about their success.

Niven and Pournelle (and I) acknowledge that technology can cause problems. Every change in the status quo has caused problems. And yet, technology can also solve the problems it causes as well as the original problems it set out to solve. The first nuclear power plants were dangerous things – no one would dispute that – but more modern nuclear plants are far safer. So-called 'Green' energy has produced little more than a series of expensive boondoggles. People who want to go back to the simple life have never experienced it.

Oddly, for a book of its era, *Footfall* shows Russians as sympathetic characters, even though it has no illusions about the Soviet Union itself. The Russians are understandable, torn between the need to keep Eastern Europe under control and a grim awareness that the price of constant repression is staggeringly high. Even the most powerful among the Russians are inmates in a giant prison camp, fearful to say or do anything for fear of attracting the ire of the KGB. And the price Russia pays for helping to nuke the aliens in Kansas is a bitter civil war. Russia vanishes from the plot halfway through the book and it is easy to understand why.

Part of this, of course, is another teachable moment. The aliens were effectively 'uplifted,' brought to

sentience by a long-gone precursor race. Their technology comes from records left behind by their precursors, saving them the trouble of developing it themselves. And yet, the aliens are seemingly blind to the potentials of their systems, let alone the boundless opportunities outside the gravity well. Even the dissidents, the ones opposed to the war, are horrified when they realise just how much humans know. Their shift to supporting the war comes when it dawns on them that humans will crush them, given time. Their way of war – loser surrenders and gets assimilated – doesn't apply to us.

This is true of the Soviet Union too, both in the book and in real life. The Russians did make some impressive technological developments, but they spent far too much of their time stealing technology from the West and copying it. Part of this was because of the constant paranoia, the constant awareness that one was being watched, that one had to watch what one said ... hardly a good state for scientific development. The Soviet Union was more interested in repressing its people than in allowing them to flourish. If nothing else, *Footfall* serves as a both a reminder of why the ideal of communism is so insidious and a reminder of why we should be very glad the Soviet Union collapsed and vanished into the dustbin of history. One may censor something one doesn't like – as a debate of the merits of the pornographic movie *Deep Throat* makes clear – but where do you stop? It isn't easy to resist the 'think of the children' mentality, yet it must be resisted! Where do you stop?

Niven and Pournelle spend less time covering the side-effects of the war than I would have expected, although they do manage to slip in a few more teachable moments. America survives the later stages of the war, at least in part, because the government is weakened without being destroyed. What makes it work, as one character notes, is just enough government, combined with a high degree of personal initiative. Washington's burdensome web of regulations and 'you can't do that' bureaucrats being cut down sharply is good for the economy, something that far too many people fail to grasp. My old rule of thumb – the more you ask the government to do, the less it can do – remains as true as ever. Indeed, I wish they'd spent more time covering some of the points here. But I cannot fault their decision to limit it.

That said, there are some odd moments in the plot. While the Russian subplot coming to an end makes sense, the survivalists are of less importance and could probably have been cut out without materially weakening the book. (I was expecting them to be in Kansas, which they weren't.) Other moments could probably have been cut down too, perhaps while some other sections were expanded. On the other hand, the alien politics makes for a welcome change – particularly when compared to *Lucifer's Hammer* – and probably could have done with a little further expansion.

In many ways, *Footfall* reads a little dated. The technology and politics (US and international) are well out of date. Social attitudes changed a lot over the years since the book was written, for better or worse. Other aspects are unknown to a new generation of readers – unlike *The Mote in God's Eye*, the book isn't that timeless. Indeed, the in-jokes – characters based on science-fiction writers of that time, for example – are largely meaningless these days. You'd have to know a great deal about the fandom of that time to understand them. That said, you don't need to understand such details to like and enjoy the book.

And yet, *Footfall* has not yet expired completely. Command of space remains utterly priceless, in military affairs. Even a relatively primitive opponent, given free access to space, would be able to crush the United States and NATO. (China's interest in space should be seen as a potential threat.) There is nothing in the book that we could not do, given the political will. No magic tech, just hard science. And the anti-luddite message never stops being important. Technology – and the understanding of technology –

is the key to progress, genuine progress. It is also the key to victory, both in the Cold War and the ongoing conflict with Radical Islam. Tech can make life better in a way that no amount of de facto fascism cannot. Capitalism and constitutional democracies are not perfect, but they are far – far – better than the alternative. Those who would hold us back do not have our best interests at heart.

The best science-fiction talks about the limitless possibilities of the future. By that standard, *Footfall* will be popular for a very long time to come.

The story begins when astronomers detect a giant alien mothership approaching Earth. Indeed, the first quarter of the book covers a series of reactions, from governments who are torn between welcoming the new arrivals and preparing for war to survivalists who want to go underground, fearing the worst. Preparations are made to greet the aliens with a multinational welcoming committee on the space station, but – of course – the aliens have other ideas. As soon as they get close to Earth, they attack. The space station is captured, humanity's network of satellites is blasted to dust and kinetic projectiles are rained on the planet below. Military bases, airports, dams and everything else that looks dangerous – from orbit – is smashed flat before a single alien sets foot on Earth.

As humanity reels under the onslaught, the aliens land in Kansas. Their control of space makes their position impregnable – notably, the authors don't spend much time on the battles – until the US and USSR cooperate to drop nukes on the alien lodgement, obliterating both the alien base and much of the region. The aliens retaliate, however, by launching an asteroid at Earth, clearing the way for a second landing in Africa. Desperately, the US builds an Orion spacecraft and launches a final desperate bid to regain control of the high orbitals and force the aliens to surrender. It works, barely ...

What is most impressive about *Footfall* is that the technology used by both sides is well within the limits of the possible. There are no heat rays (although lasers are mentioned), nor are there force fields. The aliens use railguns and Project Thor kinetic projectiles to clear the way for their landings, smashing armoured columns from orbit and making it impossible to muster a large-scale counteroffensive. (The one major counteroffensive fails miserably, pretty much completely off-screen.) They use lasers to launch spacecraft into orbit, as well as serving as an anti-aircraft system; they use orbital power satellites to keep their facilities operational and, later, as a bribe to get a number of countries to surrender to them. Merely by holding the orbital space around Earth, they appear to be certain to win. The book makes it clear that one doesn't need aliens to hold command of space. In its universe, the USSR was slowly moving to take space for itself.

The aliens themselves are alien, although not as weird as the aliens from *The Mote in God's Eye*. Resembling small elephants, they have a very alien herd mentality; they start the war, at least in part, to test themselves against us. It is clear that they would have surrendered if we had proven stronger, at the start; our failure to surrender when they stomped us flat bemused, then angered them. (And then it dawns on them that they can ask for conditional surrender instead of unconditional surrender ...) Niven and Pournelle do a very good job of representing the alien politics and making them understandable, if not likable. These aliens are not humans in alien suits.

*Footfall* is, in many ways, an event story. Like much such stories, the characterisation suffers. (Red Storm Rising is one of the few single-volume event stories that actually managed to balance events with decent character arcs.) The President and most of the other characters are instantly forgettable, with a handful of exceptions. (It's nice to see a female army intelligence officer who just is.) There are no scenes where POTUS flies a combat jet into battle <grin>.

The characters who do have genuine story arcs tend to make points; some subtle, some not. Senator Was Dawson, a space enthusiast, calls in every favor he is owed to be part of the welcoming committee, which ends badly when he finds himself an alien prisoner. Nothing loathe, he tries to use his new position to convince the alien dissidents to make peace with Earth, an attempt that backfires horribly when he manages to talk them out of being dissidents! And John Fox, an anti-technological zealot, rapidly comes to realise that he is little better than a traitor to the entire human race. Both Fox and Dawson have to work fast to redeem themselves and the book is ambiguous about their success.

## Ghost Hour by Jennifer Brozek

### Review by Jim McCoy

[JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com](http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com)

Life is good when you can revisit an old favorite in a new way. It's even better when the new stuff is enjoyable. Enter Jennifer Brozek's *Ghost Hour*, a newly release Battletech novel. It's a Young Adult novel, which is something I wish they had when I was young enough to fit into the demographic. Ah well, I've got two daughters in the YA age group now. I still loved this thing.

We all know that the Young Adult genre really began with J.K. Rowling. Before Harry Potter readers went straight from children's books to the big leagues. I kind of feel like this is probably closer to Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows than Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Like Deathly Hallows, *Ghost Hour* does not shy away from the cost of war. The body count is pretty high and the anguish the characters feel at losing their friends and family members is real. *Ghost Hour* is a rough read in a good way.

Seriously, there is a lot here that is honestly kind of gut-wrenching. Brozek herself has served as I mentioned when I reviewed the first in the Battletech YA series, *The Nellus Academy Incident*. It shows here, as she exposes the dark side of war better than the vast majority of Military Science Fiction authors I've read. With a lot of authors, you see the glory side of war. Maybe a friend or two gets lost along the way, but they're nearly forgotten for most of the rest of the story. Maybe a spouse is left behind somewhere (and if you haven't seen the film *We Were Soldiers* you need to because it does this well, too) but the reader never hears about the anguish they feel not knowing what's going to happen to their loved one. There is a lot of that here, although it is people that are serving wondering about their loved ones who are also serving. It's pretty deep.

That's not to say that there aren't some really awesome slam, bang slugfests, because there are. No one loves a good old-fashioned 'Mech battle like the guy who used to set them up on his bedroom floor and leave them there because they lasted for weeks and trust me, I'd know if they weren't done right, but they are. There are plenty of explosions to keep even the most hardened grognard among the Battletech elite happy. I mean, unless they're the "OMG EVERYTHING AFTER <insert year here> SUCKS" camp, in which case they can go cook along with their character. I mean that literally. Double heat sinks FTW!

For the record, no *Ghost Hour* does not go that deep into the tech. At least not for the most part. I will confess to not having seen the latest edition of BT, and there is apparently at least one new weapon that I'm not aware of but totally could have used in my mixed Battletech and Mechwarrior RPG campaign even though it wouldn't have been invented in 3050 because GH takes place a century later, but...

Yeah, I'll stop whining now. But still, it was cool.



And for those still wondering, no you don't have to have a very good understanding of the technology of Battletech to enjoy Ghost Hour. There is a glossary at the back if you have any questions. Those with just a passing familiarity will find the story extremely easy to follow. With one exception, Brozek keeps to the classics of the series. And if you like tabletop war-gaming at all, you can always check Battletech out. I love it. I used to run a mixed Mechwarrior TTRPG/Aerotech/Battletech/Battletroops campaign and I loved it.

This series is about a bunch of cadets who won't stay in their place when their planet is attacked and go rogue and try to fight the war before they're out of training. I find this to be a lot of fun, even if it often works the other way in the real world. (During World War II, training times were reduced, and West Point classes graduated early.) It was still a rollicking good time and a good representation of members of the military and their desire to be involved in "the real thing" whether they're ready for it or not. Although these kids do appear to be about as ready as anyone else ever was.

At the end of the day too, it's the kids that make the book. It should come as no surprise to anyone who reads my reviews that it's characters and what happens to them that really get me into a work of fiction. The thing is that the main characters in Ghost Hour are precisely the kind of people I can respect and worry about. They go through an awful lot, but they never give up. For most of the book they're losing or just taking a pasting they can't really do much about. They don't care. Actually, that's wrong. They DO care. They just don't let it stop them. They keep fighting. These cadets are soldiers in the truest sense of the word.

Probably the only part about Ghost Hour that I didn't like is that it reminds me how much easier it is to find quality YA SF/F these days than it is to find quality regular SF/F. Outside of what Stephanie Meyers tried to pull (and yes, I tried reading Twilight. It was terrible. I gave it to my sister, and she gave it to her daughter. And yes, Bella was a teen and it was YA. Some terribly angst-y, sparkly vampire crap-tacular YA but still YA) I haven't seen a single YA Science Fiction or fantasy novel that I haven't enjoyed. I can't necessarily say the same of the adult samplings I've seen.

I have to mention the main villain, however briefly. I tend to be pretty sympathetic to people who are just doing their duty. I'm an American who thinks that Yamamoto Isoroku was a respectable guy. I still can't feel the slightest bit of sympathy for the antagonist of this one though. I won't say if anything happens to him, but he deserves nothing but the worst. Still, it makes reading the book more fun if you really want to see the bad guy get his.

Overall, I don't really have much choice except to tell you to buy this book. I realized partway through Ghost Hour that it wasn't a sequel to the book I thought it was and now I have to go back and buy the first one in the series (when I got the email I thought this was the sequel to The Nellis Academy Incident. I guess that's why my mama always told me not to think. She says it always gets me in trouble.) I'm kind of bummed because I've spoiled part of it, but I'm really excited because there's more to read.

Well, and there's a preview of the sequel to Ghost Hour at the back of the book. I didn't read the preview. I never do. I am, however, looking forward to reading the whole book and find out how this ends.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Crashed Dropships



Halving it All by Stephanie McPeak Petersen  
Review by Philip Cahill

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 was 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.

Legend by Christopher Woods  
Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

His strength is that of 10, because his heart is pure. No, really it IS pure!

"Legend" is an expansion of a character in a short story in the Four Horseman Universe collection "For A Fistful of Credits." Under normal circumstances, I would re-read that short story to provide background for a review, but in this case, "Legend" is at the TOP of my reading list, and I have all 10 of my KU slots occupied. Alas, the best I could do is go back and read my review of the story, and that was really no help.

Not needed, at any rate, because everything you need to know is contained in this volume. Martin Quincy doesn't really WANT to be a merc, even though he is very, very good at what he does. He also doesn't want to command a merc company. Nobody seems to care.

He is NOT one of those guys you run into who are full of stories: "No kidding, there I was, all alone on the Plain, with nothing but a gnawed antelope thighbone...." His defect runs the other way. He much prefers to stay in the background when there is no active fighting going on, so he dislikes it when OTHERS tell his war stories. And many of those stories exist, too, because he most decidedly does NOT stay in the background when it drops into the pot.

Along the way, he picks up what may be regarded as Boon Companions; mercs who share his approach to the ethics of warfare. They like being on the side of the Good Guys; that isn't always apparent at the beginning of their contracts, in the earliest days of Earth mercs, but the wisdom gathered by participating in a number of battles finely hones his sense for the team he wants to play for. That isn't always a good move, either financially or in terms of personal survival, but it's the path he chooses, and his team goes where he goes.

Even if one of them only does it so he can kill Martin when the time is right.

I have two objections to make, and one of them is slightly ridiculous.

Slightly ridiculous objection: sex with aliens? Nah. Ain't never gonna happen. Human sexual response is primarily determined EARLY in life. Now, PERHAPS the resemblance of one of the species to a sexualized cartoon characters of the mid-80's is a factor here, but otherwise, I'm not buying it. That's ridiculous, because how you gonna have a modern hero without a romance, and I've already accepted 10 other impossible things, but I still don't buy the concept.

The second objection I have is to the lack of place/time designations in the story. The book is laid out in a series of flash-forwards / flash-backwards, and it was a little bit difficult to keep up with where certain events took place in the story. This one may also be slightly ridiculous, because I tend to skip past those labels as I read, but if they are THERE, then at least I can refer back to them if I get confused. I wish that there were clear cues: '10 years earlier, on Planet Yeep....'

Having said that, I devoured the entire book as fast as I could. It was delicious. I have been a fan of Christopher Woods work for a year or two, and my one regret is that he wasn't able to put a Checkers

hamburger joint on Planet Karma. The Greek diner will have to do.

The banter between Martin and his buddies is delightful. Lots of running gags, loads of snark. You'll love it.

## Light Magic by Ellie Ferguson Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Very down to earth, despite beauty and power, she wants to solve the mystery of her mother in Mossy Oak.

The Sarah A. Hoyt cover is a feast for the eyes. Let's quickly point out that the font type, color, and placement make both the author name and the book title quite readable against the background, without obscuring the main feature, which is an astoundingly beautiful woman, looking directly at the reader. My INITIAL impression was "CAJUN!", based on her coloration and the background streetlight, which is a type I seem to remember from my time in New Orleans. However, there is nothing in the text to confirm that ethnicity, and it's decidedly NOT set in New Orleans.

The dark beauty depicted is Meg Sheridan, a lawyer, former Army officer, and 'elemental' magic user. For those who wandered into this world by accident and have no knowledge of this rather specialized subject matter, an elemental is not someone who is just starting; they have power over one or more of the elements. In Meg's case, that element is air, and her power extends to those things which routinely accompany great movements of air, such as rain and lightning.

She shows up in Mossy Oak at a very low point in her life. She was raised as a DEFINITE outsider in another community, which was hostile to her and her mother, because of their abilities to use magic. She escaped that environment by going to college, then the Army, but kept in close contact with her mother as she built her career as a lawyer. Out of the blue, she gets a phone call that her mother is dead, following a brief illness her mother had hidden from her. That's followed immediately by a terse letter from her mother, telling her to return to Mossy Oak, and get in touch with a woman she has never heard mentioned.

More unexpected things happen than she is quite prepared to accept, including an attempt on her life. It takes her rather a long time to discover the reasons her mother sent her to Mossy Oak, and why she kept it a secret from her. Finding the solutions to these issues, and the revelation of additional crisis points, forms the structure of the book.

Fascinating and Itchy Points. These were cut in their entirety from the review; however, there ARE those of you who have said that you enjoy this sort of thing, and I sure enjoy researching and writing them, so here goes.

Fascinating points for me: Main character Meg, in addition to the lawyer/magician thing, is also a biker, and rides into town on her Harley. I'm a Honda man myself, having owned many bikes in increasing displacements since I got out of the Army in 1975.

This is me on my current bike, a classic 1985 Honda Sabre V65. I'm wearing improvised rain gear, also known as a garbage bag.

Now, I like Hondas, but the PRIMARY reason I'm a Honda Guy and not a Harley Guy is because I started small, with a Honda CL175, and closely linked to that is the fact that I probably paid about \$300 for my used bike, while the smallest Harley at the time was a Sportster, and would have cost me at least \$2,000, if my google-fu is working.

Even so, I know enough to know that the Harley-Davidson SuperLow model she picked is the perfect choice for her, if Harley is the way she wanted to go. It's as close to a good all-round entry level bike as Harley has ever offered, but it also has enough WHOOMPFFF for old cats like me, as well as small statured people. The seat height is around 23 inches; compare that to my current bike, with a seat height of 32 inches. My bike is so tall that it ALWAYS was a bit difficult to climb on, and when I'm having a muscle spasm, nearly impossible. So, she has good sense, along with somewhat expensive tastes and sizable component of rebel.

Also figuring in the story is a vintage Indian Chief motorcycle, which would likely bring at least \$35K on the open market, and possibly as much as \$75K. Back in pre-WWII days, it's my understanding that Indian was the chief competitor of Harley Davidson, and they are still spoken of with awe. A few years ago, I looked at the latest attempt to get them back into being a market force, and they ARE lovely, but they are priced WAY out of my range. But, if you want to turn heads, you will surely do it with one of these bikes.

Expensive cars are also a bit of a factor, but that's a mode of travel I regard with indifference.

Gunfire described is appropriate for the scene, and extensive training on the range is the recreational activity favored by Meg and her new allies, further making them my kind of people.

Itchy points for me: There are three occasions where something/someone is introduced, and I expect more information, but it isn't brought up again. I'm gonna mention the most trivial, basically to show you that I'm DEFINITELY ADD, I also have a bit of OCD behavior mixed in:

About 3/4 of the way into the book, Meg is awakened by a knock on the door. According to the text, the knock, PLUS her bladder, let her know that there are other things she has to do with her life rather than sleep. Then, the narrative has her get out of bed, go to the door, and leave with the woman who is standing outside waiting on her.

And I was left, crossing my legs, in sympathy for her unrelieved bladder!

Please believe me when I say that I was NOT longing for a detailed description of the lady's morning visit to that most private of rooms in the house; that's not an item of interest for me. And I ALSO don't believe that good writing consists of a moment-by-moment documentation of the actions of every person in the book. It's just that in THIS case, Green's HIGHLY competent writing had me believing that I WAS following the main character step-by-step, and she didn't get a chance to go to the bathroom!

I feel relatively sure that this is a petty quibble, and there was no way that I'm gonna penalize the rating for an unreported potty break, BUT it was an itch in my reading that I wanted scratched.

There were two other cases where characters/settings were introduced, and were interesting enough that I expected further development, but it didn't come. In one case, I think the intent was to draw some parallels to prior character introductions in the series, not to start a plot device in THIS story.

This may just be something we have to accept when great writers have a LONG story arc. I clearly recall in one of James Michener's massive story arcs the inclusion of a jar of dough for making sourbread, which pops up in the story over several generations. At first, I thought it was SURE to be included because someone was going to die from eating it, or something like that, but it's not. He's just talking about the way sourdough bread is made.

At any rate, I mention this in case anyone else is as persnickety as I am in looking at the details, and to let you know that (SPOILER ALERT) it is All Right. Meg doesn't die of a burst bladder, nor does she have an accident in public that Depends could have ameliorated. I don't know if that REALLY is a spoiler or not. You will notice that I did NOT say whether Meg dies; just that she doesn't die of one particular cause. So there.

And the verdict is: I found this to be a nicely done book in the series, adding on to the stories of existing characters, while also giving us more of the back story of Mossy Oak and the residents. We still don't know what makes this Side of The Tracks Eerie, and to my mind that means we will get some more of these. I certainly hope so.

Peace be on your household.

## Murphy's Law of Vampires by Declan Finn

### Review by Jim McCoy

[JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com](http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com)

Also, for the record, this is the second book in the series. I did review the first one.)

Way back, in the Late Pleistocene Era, I went to high school with a guy named Brandon, but we all called him Monk. I still do. Monk is now married to the greatest sister-in-law of the heart EV-AR Melissa, and has three young boys who I miss dearly since my move back home to Michigan. He has since cured himself of the malady I am about to discuss. His timing was epic.

I know it's weird, and most of you won't get this, but I can't help think of him while reading Declan Finn's *Murphy's Law of Vampires* because the main character, Marco Catalano, is a lot like Monk was in high school: He knows an awesome girl. He loves the awesome girl. He hangs out with the awesome girl. He just can't work up the gumption to tell the awesome girl how awesome she is and that he wants to be her man. Back in high school, and into my early twenties, I called this maneuver "Pulling a Monk." Marco appears to be a natural. And he's Catholic too. I wonder if he needs a nickname...

The thing about Marco is he's kind of like a Monk crossed with a Chuck Norris and a little bit of Buffy thrown in. Yeah, he's a physical bad ass but he's scared of a woman. Marco kills vampires in hand to hand combat using skill, brains and luck, along with the occasional assist from his friends and comrades. Monk, uhh...played football and baseball, but vampires? Not so much. At any rate...

I really like Marco as a character. Like, I want to hang out with the guy sometime. I know he doesn't exist, but Finn does a good enough job with the character that it's like being in the same room with a real person. Catalano has enough foibles to make him believable and enough confidence to make him worth reading. He's a really good guy with a really dark streak that he's not really comfortable with. I don't blame him. He fights for what's good and right but sometimes he has to kill vampires. He sees them as people, and he struggles with it.

Marco's I-wish-she-was-my-girlfriend is named Amanda. She's a vampire, but this is where Finn turns vampirism on its head. Amanda is a good vampire and a good Christian. She is a bloodsucker, it's true, but she is neither evil nor a sparkly emo whiner. Amanda is a hard-nosed, very intelligent and a good warrior in her own right. She faces down some men who give her problems because of her incredible good looks without breaking a sweat. She's just as gutless when it comes to talking to her I-wish-he-was-my-boyfriend but she's hardcore when it comes to everything else.

The book sizzles. The action sequences are impressive. Finn obviously spent hours mapping out the best way to do violence to vampires and other things before writing this. He has very carefully choreographed the fighting in this book. It's impressive. Marco and company are smart and dangerous. Catalano knows that he has to out-plan his enemies and he does so well. The action is so well described that I found myself moving in my seat along with the movements in the fighting. It was exciting. I had my adrenaline going. I wanted to kick ass along with him. It's probably better that I didn't though. I'm a three-hundred-pound man. I would have gotten in the way.

Something I've often commented on is the need for an epic villain. Finn delivers. Given the fact that the characters in the book can't figure out what Mr. Day is, I won't spoil the fun. But he is pure, unadulterated evil for a reason. He is deadly and vicious. He has a very interesting back story. He's the kind of guy that REALLY REALLY REALLY deserves every terrible thing that happens to him. He's tough as hell and smart. This is no Cobra Commander making stupid mistakes. Day is smart and savvy. He makes chaos because that is his nature. He is cocky but he's damn near indestructible so he should be. But Day does what he does in a logical manner. I wouldn't want to take this guy on.

Finn is a man of both religious and political conviction and it comes through in his writing. Marco, though a New York native, ends up in San Francisco. He is less than impressed with some of the antics of his neighbors. It's obvious that his beliefs belong not just to him but to Finn as well. I was okay with it because I share most of the same beliefs but if you find yourself on the more liberal and/or non-Christian end of the spectrum you may find some of the book to be a bit grating. Rest assured it's no worse than what us rightists feel when we're reading works by Scalzi, but you guys aren't as used to it. Buck up though. The story is worth it.

I do have one gripe: One of the side characters, whose name I have refused to remember, is dumb as a dump yet she manages to kill vampires. She is, in terms of intelligence at least, the antithesis of the rest of the team. She should be dead but she's not. I don't get this character. She shouldn't be here. She's a bit too obvious. I'm kind of hoping that she's a mole somehow. She's a little too out there stupid. It makes sense if she is playing stupid as a form of camouflage but that's the only way it makes sense. She shouldn't be able to work her way through a brawl without screwing up. It threw me a few times. This chick is just terrible. Then again, it's not a world ending error and I really did like the rest of the book.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Test Tubes Full of Holy Water

## Neither Here nor There by Mackey Chandler Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

A smart and ethical regular guy on one side; those who would seek to control us on the other.

"Like most other people in the world, who were not famous standup comedians, Jay always thought of the best response a few hours or days after the golden moment in which to deliver the perfect repartee."



It's this sort of throw-away repartee, popping up unexpectedly, that makes "Neither Here Nor There" a greatly amusing book to read, in addition to the "science fiction/action/persecuted innocent" themes. Think of them as the collections of brown sugar in your morning oatmeal.

Which is not to imply that the rest of the book is oatmeal, unless you especially like oatmeal. If so, then the book is NOT the stuff that you get out of a paper packet; it's REAL oatmeal, with butter, brown sugar, and maybe raisins or a little milk. Umm...I just realized it's past lunchtime. Sorry.

In the not-too-distant future, protagonist Jay is not a super-hero. He's a low-status college professor and part-time hobby researcher. He isn't fabulously wealthy; in fact, he drives a ratty old truck that isn't as reliable as it might be. He's not a former Black Operative, not a secret master of kung-fu, and he doesn't have a hidden stash of firearms. He's just this guy, see?

And then, his private research gets LUCKY! A program (and hardware) he has been toying with for a remote viewing application comes together and has the unexpected property of allowing him to move matter through a 'window' produced by the system. SHAZAM! A portal into...the same dimension.

Except, it might not be so lucky after all.

In this future, Big Brother is DEFINITELY watching you, although he's not as brutal about it as in '1984.' In fact, there is no ONE big brother; there are different agencies, with different missions, and they compete with each other for status. However, they are all on the look-out for the next killer app, and Jay's little device is just that. With it, an operator can view ANYPLACE they can locate, and move things (including people) through the portal. Privacy, which is already severely compromised, would be ended; there would LITERALLY be no place that you could go where you couldn't be watched, and physical distance would no longer be a limit to the long arm of the law.

What I found to be the most engrossing aspect of the story is the problem-solving that Jay (and some few semi-accomplices) use in the development of the portal device. At each step, the technology isn't the key; it's the THINKING that's the key. How do I fix it so I can reach a hand through? How do I hide it? What are the limits? Yes, I suppose there IS a certain amount of unobtainium employed in the process, but that's entirely acceptable. Chandler does NOT ask us to suspend ALL the laws of physics, nor does he ask us to suspend logic AT ALL. It is a perfectly constructed story; it does not require us to have the timetables of all the trains in London memorized, or different varieties of cigar ash. Jay and his pals are smart, but not beyond the realm of reality; one of his new friends DOES have a background as a Shadow Warrior, but I have more than one friend like that myself. When a puzzle needs to be solved, Jay doesn't quickly whip up a new sooper-doooper ray gun shamulixer to defranistan the whichawhen; he hires a lawyer, or a security company.

Therefore, we are ONLY required to make two suspensions of reality: first, we must believe that current surveillance technology and government policy will slide toward more invasion of personal privacy over the next few decades, and THAT'S not a hard stretch; second, we have to accept the discovery of a single new property of energy interacting with matter. Happens all the time, by the way.

I suppose we are then left with this question: Do we have any other alternative to escaping a growing intrusion into our private lives, other than having a fantastic new technology developed by a highly ethical hobbyist?

I leave the solution to the reader.

## The Oppenheimer Alternative by Robert J. Sawyer

### Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu July 2020

The Oppenheimer Alternative is arguably two books in one. A third of the book is a straightforward historical novel about the life of renowned physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer from his early years as a professor at Berkeley to becoming the head of the Manhattan Project, through the explosion of the first atom bomb. This seems like well-researched history, with no divergence from what really happened (beyond the usual license given to historical fiction writers to invite dialogue and motivation). But then, the story shifts to alternate history as the scientists studying fusion discover a problem with the sun. After a letter from Einstein supports a theory of Edward Teller, Oppenheimer determines that instability in the sun will cause an ejection of solar matter that will destroy all life on Earth in 2028.

The rest of the book is devoted to the efforts of the leading physicists of the 1940s and 50s to save humanity while trying to cope with cold war paranoia, scientific jealousy, and questions over control of atomic power. Oppenheimer becomes head of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ which he rapidly turns into a think tank for exploring options to save the human race whether by shielding the Earth from the sun, colonizing Mars, or some other crazy blue-sky idea.

But the core of the book is Oppenheimer's loss of the love of his life, Jean Tatlock, who twice turned down Oppenheimer's marriage proposals but continued an affair with him after his marriage. Their secret trysts become evidence for his untrustworthiness in a postwar hearing revoking his security clearance. It takes Oppenheimer years to get over her suicide, if he ever really does (as the ending makes clear). Sawyer contrasts this with Oppenheimer's relationship with his alcoholic wife, who is bitter over having given up her own potential scientific career. Sawyer's minor characters also have strong characterization with scientists frequently acting out of petty jealousy and annoyance.

Much of the historical detail rings true. Distrust of the Soviet Union and communism takes place even while the U.S. is allied with them. The book has occasional bits showing how common anti-Semitism is among the characters. For instance, there's a nice scene where General Groves yells, "God, how I hate pushy Jews like you!" only to stutter "I didn't mean you," when confronted with Albert Einstein. Although nearly all the characters are scientists and frequently talk about science topics, Sawyer does an excellent job communicating scientific ideas clearly.

There are some writers who, even if they do not write the same book over and over again, write very similar books. Not so with Robert Sawyer, a Guest of Honor at Capclave 2019, who pairs an enormous imagination with extensive research. Whether writing about a dinosaur Galileo, atheist Neanderthals, or a self-aware World Wide Web, Sawyer makes his characters, and the world in which they live, come alive. If there is one thing Sawyer's books do have in common, in addition to their overall excellence, it is his concern for morality and determining the right thing to do. In this book, this concern is reflected in discussions over the nuclear bomb and later keeping the end of the world a big secret from ordinary people.

The publication of The Oppenheimer Alternative is especially timely. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the birth of the Atomic Age with the Trinity Test, the first explosion of an atomic bomb on July 16th 1945, which is shown in the book.

It may be worth noting that although Sawyer has won the Hugo and Nebula awards and had one of his

novels adapted for television, this novel was published by a small press, Arc Manor's CAEZIK imprint, in trade paperback and ebook formats. Sawyer retained audiobook and ebook rights. Sawyer has said he wanted the book to go to market quickly, to coincide with the anniversary, and the big publishers were not "nimble" enough to do that.

Fans of historical novels set in the recent past will love *The Oppenheimer Alternative*. Fans of alternate history who are willing to wait a while for the speculative content will find their patience rewarded. Readers interested in science, and how scientists interact also will find much to enjoy. However, this is not an action-driven book; those who want battles and fight scenes should look elsewhere.

## The Pride of the Damned by Peter Grant Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

A great cap to a great series.

This is the third in the Cochrane's Company series and could be the last. All plot lines are tied off and characters reach their resolution. It **WOULD** be possible, however, to write more in this universe, as it is clear that the people involved will be writing more of their own stories in the future.

As I commented in my review of the second volume, I believe Grant has invented a new form of literature, the Space Opera Procedural. All of the elements that go into making W.E.B. Griffith's "Brotherhood of the Badge" series about something more than 'cops and robbers, bad guys get put away' are present here. There was less of that sort of thing in this volume, because the main work of building the mercenary unit was described earlier in the series, but the complexities of money and property transfers are portrayed, and I was not bored for a second.

Once again, the Brotherhood are the Bad Guys, and the Good Guys are Cochrane's Company, with loose affiliations on both sides. This provides us with the opportunity to see another basic difference in the way that the two opposing organizations work: the Brotherhood **BUYS** alliance with gold, while Cochrane's Company adds the self-interest of the allies to the mix. This makes it certain that the alliances stay until the end; because it is in their best interest to do so.

It also serves to highlight the ethical differences between the parties. Another reviewer has strongly objected to some heinous acts which take place in the course of the book and uses those acts to reject the MC as an ethical human.

It is true that quite a few people are killed, some of them horribly, but in none of the slaughters can the finger be pointed at Cochrane or members of his mercenary company as the agents for massacre of innocents. In one case, his allies use the law of their system to execute certain people **BEFORE** they have had a chance to commit their crimes, but after they have committed to a criminal course of action. This is gruesome, to be sure, but appears to be completely legal in the planetary system involved.

In another case, a powerful enterprise not aligned with either Cochrane or the Brotherhood causes a bad death to come to some bad people; it is clear that their own actions brought them to the place where their execution could take place. It's a key scene, moreover. The title, "Pride of the Damned," really has no true meaning unless the subjects **ARE** going to face a very bad end. Should bad guys be given an opportunity to face death with honor? Well, I'm not certain of that, and have never had to make that kind of decision, **BUT** it seems to me that even if we are talking about fictional characters, maybe they **SHOULD** be given the opportunity to demonstrate **SOME** virtue.

It's a question I could argue from either side. Hopefully, that doesn't make me mealy-mouthed, just mature enough to realize that every question isn't binary.

Cochrane isn't a heroic character. He has some heroic qualities: determination to get the job done, ability to inspire others, vision, mercy toward the foe whenever able. However, he does have to make some decisions that are going to be difficult to live with. Fortunately, for him, he has surrounded himself with a cast of characters who are all strong, and who will provide him with structure and support in the years ahead. That will include jacking him up if he were to start crying in his beer too many nights.

It's really a good cap to a great series, and I particularly LOVE the fact that the volumes were released so quickly. Tolkien published 'The Hobbit' in 1937, and (I think) it was 1956 before 'The Return of the King' was printed. And then, there is George RR Martin....

## Psychic Spiral by Amie Gibbons and Country Music Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Good day to you, friends and family out there in Internet Land!

I'm gonna give you links to a couple of Hank Williams, Senior, songs to listen to, in order to give you some background for certain parts of this post, and one Stephen Stills song, which I heard coming straight out of CS&N. I think David Crosby and Graham Nash are actually singing on this version, but I'm pretty sure it's off the "Stephen Stills" album.

Please note: every one of these songs was chosen because they present such a distorted view of human romantic/sexual intimacy that they would be LETHAL if they were selected as a life theme!

I'm working HARD to keep my Amazon book reviews short and relevant today (and hopefully in the future) and using the blog to make my philosophical points. I had started the Amazon review, and discovered I had wandered into Meaningful Dialogue Mode, and shifted gears. I whacked all of the good stuff out of the review, but it's included here. This has (almost) all of the review content, but read and vote 'helpful' on the review anyway, okay? And the link to the review is NOT included here, because Amazon is dragging it's heels in posting the review, and I have First Day At School paperwork waiting on me for Kenneth and Alicia.

Here's my one sentence summary:

This book is about the dangers of time travel, and George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' is about livestock.

It is absolutely true that there is a Bad Problem that must be resolved, and Ariana Ryder and her traveling band of Vampires, Lovers, Dimwits, and Familiars must devote all of their efforts to save each other and the universe. That's the framework that permits the painfully insightful lesson in the human condition to be provided to the audience as a story. In addition, there are LOTS of cute scenes of Ariana's pet flying carpet, Pyro, zooming about, making coffee and scrambling eggs. We haven't had nearly enough words about Pyro in the previous volumes in the series, so these are very welcome.

However...

....one reviewer flipped out, calling the material 'filthy.' By that, I am sure they mean pornography, and passed that verdict because of the explicit sex scenes included in the narrative. I believe they missed the point of what is actually an exposition of the consequences of unrestrained behavior.

I want to be very clear about this: I am not a fan of sexually explicit movies and books, or strip clubs, comedy routines, etc. For me, sex is a participatory sport only, to be engaged in with complete abandon, IN PRIVACY, and the allure of substitutions of words on paper or images on a screen is completely lost on me. A couple of years ago, I discovered that some literary genres DEMAND the inclusion of at least one explicit scene, or the audience feels cheated. I just skip that part, and let the rest of the story determine whether it's a book I can recommend, or not.

In previous books, Ariana, the psychic lawyer FBI agent, has fantasized about sex with some characters, and fulfilled those fantasies with others. When I see what is going on, I accept that this is a necessary part of character development, and skip pages, to resume the story when the throbbing whatever has moved away from center stage.

However, in THIS book, the explicit sexual scenes are actually the EXACT opposite of pornography. They are not designed to titillate, but to provide the essential setting to bring home (rather brutally) the destructive consequences of irresponsible sexual behavior.

In my Papa Pat Rambles blog post of 7/6/18, I discuss that group of interactions that we approximate with the term 'love,' drawing the distinction between emotion and commitment. Here, Gibbons makes the point PAINFULLY clear that basing our actions strictly on our EMOTIONAL condition will bring disaster, if not tempered with rational thought and informed commitment.

She uses (at least) three characters to make this point. One, Annabeth, or AB, is a physician who has had a disastrous series of interactions with a partner who has consistently failed to regard her welfare in the relationship. AB feels torn by the conflicting EMOTIONS that she feels but is unable to put them in the proper perspective; her feelings are real, but nothing to build a future with.

This is the easiest problem for the observer to identify, and the reader may be tempted to reach into the book and intervene on her behalf. It's a pattern that results in people remaining in physically abusive relationships for years, murmuring "but I LOVE him/her" and "he/she will change THIS time, I know they will!"

The idea that emotions belong in the driver's seat is an utterly bogus notion, and yet it sells a LOT of records, movies, books, as well as toothpaste and tacos. Actually, as I was writing the previous sentence, I was also listening to Hank Williams, Sr, singing "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You." Well, baloney. You sure as can help your BEHAVIOR, if you do, your emotional fixation will change, and you can go on with the business of running your life the way you want to..

The second character to make the point that King Feelings is a monster is the MC, Ariana. In the past, she has allowed her physical and emotional attraction to her boss and the Old Vampire Carvi to dominate much of her thought life. She has made progress in this area, but even though she is in a committed relationship with Young Vampire Quill, she allows her thought life to wander where it will. In the crisis scene, she even permits/encourages some sexual play (part physical, part psychic) with multiple partners.

I had to skip a LOT of pages during this interaction, and IF THE SCENE STOPPED RIGHT THERE,

it WOULD have qualified as porn. However, that scene ONLY serves as a set-up to what follows, which is an intense feeling of self-loathing and regret, and NONE of those involved think it was the right choice to make. It is as explicit about the potentially lethal consequences of unrestrained submission to an emotional fixation as anything I have seen in literature, and it accurately describes the sense of self-betrayal that follows indulgence. It's actually more dangerous than a hangover from over-indulging in alcohol, because usually the hangover doesn't make you want to immediately get drunk again, whereas the feelings of guilt and shame over an emotionally-driven behavior binge is precisely what drives people into seeking chemical relief or oblivion.

The third example is that of the Old Vampire. Here, for once, we see that it IS possible for rational thought and commitment to prevail over emotion. Without completely writing a spoiler, I can't go further, though, so you are gonna have to read the book.

I think Gibbons has been exceedingly brave in writing this installment in the series, and that's why I gave the book five stars on my Amazon review. She has described with near-perfect accuracy the excruciating consequences of involvement with a narcissistic person, completely detailing the turmoil in which the victim is left.

She has also taken the playful, girlish infatuation of the MC demonstrated in the first of the series and showed precisely where the failure to rein in those impulses can go. In doing so, she has made it impossible (I believe) for the heroine to continue ignore her own responsibility in the way her life is unfolding.

I applaud her for doing so; at the same time, I'm wondering: "How in the heck is she going to write her way out of THIS?"

## Sea Change by Nancy Kress Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu June 2020

The writing of Nancy Kress frequently reminds the readers that biology is a hard science and that rigorous science and great characterization can coexist. She pulls this off once again in *Sea Change*, a new lengthy novella (or short novel, at just under 200 pages) set in the near future. Kress, who is scheduled to appear at Capclave in October 2020, successfully combines secret societies/conspiracies, genetically modified organisms (GMO), Native Americans, climate change/environmental disaster, celebrity culture, and personal tragedies.

Kress jumps readers right into her future world of 2032 and trusts they can figure out the situation from the clues she plants as the story progresses. In this near future, America is still recovering from The Catastrophe, an economic crash that destroys entire companies after genetically altered plants used to make an anti-dehydration drug mutated, killing 115 children. This fueled a national anti-GMO movement, food hoarding and riots, and the creation of a Department of Agricultural Security devoted to protecting the purity of good sources, even as millions went hungry. "Genetic engineering was Satan. It had brought Armageddon. This was a holy war." Fighting against this anti-GMO government is an underground secret society of scientists and supporters called simply the Org, devoted to saving the world through genetic engineering of crops so they can feed more people safely.

There is a lot on how the Org stays secret at a time of extreme government surveillance. It uses a cell structure so each person knows only a few members and avoids any electronic form of communication.



It would have been easy for Kress to present a story about GMOs being good or evil. Instead, she more subtly shows both the benefits and potential liabilities. The Org is as much against large multinational organizations focused on profit as it is opposed to groups calling for environmental purity.

As in *Beggars in Spain*, Kress' trilogy of genetically modified people, her characters are real people coping with the problems and potentials of genetics. She gives her narrator and main character, Renata, a rich background. While an activist searching for a cause after graduating from college, Renata married an actor and had a son, Ian, who died on the Quinault Nation reservation after eating clams contaminated by toxic algae. After Ian's death almost destroyed Renata, only the need to work as a paralegal on sexual-assault cases at the Quinault Nation reservation and joining the Org on the recommendation of her ex-husband's brother brought her back to life. But the reader does not learn about most of this backstory until halfway through the book.

The plot begins when Renata, on her way to meet a new recruit, encounters a self-driving house with the Org's secret signal paint. But when she enters it, one step ahead of the police, there is no agent or message there. She goes to her rendezvous and shows her new recruit Org research on modifying carrots to grow in the future's increasingly salty soil. But later she gets a call that the authorities have found out about the carrots. So part of the plot is determining the leak in her cell. At the same time, a severe injury brings Renata's ex-husband back into her life.

Readers who like conspiracies and stories with both strong science and strong characters will enjoy *Sea Change* and wish it were a full novel.

### So Little and So Light by Sarah A. Hoyt Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

That which is best about us WILL conquer in the end, and this collection provides examples.

In the past, I have had some mild struggles with the 5-star system used in reviewing Amazon products. Much of that has revolved around the fact that the star ratings are described as being ENTIRELY subjective, from the 1-star "I Hated It" to the 5-star "I Loved It."

I get it. I really do. I just ordered school supplies for my two middle-schoolers yesterday, and when the pencils arrive on time, they will get a 5-star review; they don't NEED anything else said. A 5-star system is perfectly adequate, even superfluous, for the majority of Amazon products.

In order to express anything about the artistic content, opening up of genres, life-transforming insights, the reviewer MUST write a review. That's how I justified giving "Snow in Her Eyes," an excellent, well-executed, appropriately intricate supernatural mystery, written by a favorite author, a 1-star review a year or so ago. In the course of the review, I explained that while it was a top-quality work, with well-written characters, and a compelling storyline, it violated one of my basic rules about things I read and watch. You should look it up.

Needlessly pedantic of me, you say? Guilty as charged. I have no defense, except that I HATED that excellent bit of writing. And so, I assigned it a single star, and then explained why, and even wrote a blog post (Papa Pat Rambles, 8/4/17) to expand on my reasons. But I maintain it is a limitation of the rating system.

The five stars I assign here are another limitation of the rating system. I need stars to tell you about how the first story took my breath away, how it almost made me hope to be placed inside THAT reality; how one story gave me so much to think about as ONE possibility for the way civilization as we know it could end; how beautiful the cover is. Butterfly wings on a cat? I once had a cat named Butterfly. My current Feline-In-Residence has recently shown signs that perhaps she is not long from earning her own wings. Our existence itself is expressed in the title: so little, and so light.

Sigh. Some things cannot be described, they must be experienced. This book is one of them. Nevertheless, here are my signposts to brilliance. And as I must do whenever I review story collections, I try VERY hard to communicate the essence of each story, without spoilers.

Wait Until the War Is Over. Eurydice's father is lost in the grip of Alzheimer's Disease. She didn't even know how bad things were, until her mother died; then, she had to abandon a career job and a potential mate to be a caretaker. But her father's dementia takes a strange form; he believes they are fighting against an alien invasion. She can't stay, but she can't leave. My commentary: When I read this, I thought that this story was so PERSONAL to me, that it likely would not have mass appeal. As it happens, my beloved mother, who lead me to discover the love of books and the love of learning, and who knew ALL of the answers in every subject as I struggled to drag my attention deficit disorder through school memorization, has been gripped by the same disease, and I was drawn into this story to the point of wondering if I could be transported there by closing my eyes, crossing my fingers, and saying 'there's no place like home.' I would be interested to know if this story has a similar impact on an adult child who does NOT have a parent in similar circumstances.

Only the Lonely. In a far-distant future, dating is difficult. It's REALLY difficult if there is a chance that a first date might result in something other than the usual choices of romance, temporary diversion, or utter boredom: something along the lines of oblivion.

Lost. They say that old grannies used to scare their children with stories about how the fairies might come along and steal them from their beds, leaving something other-than-human in exchange. Well, I have two sisters, and I can testify that there are times when I would not have been able to affirm that we shared ANY sort of common parentage. They are both angels, though. And, in this story, we discover a different sort of sibling alienation and affirmation.

Neptune's Orphans. Set in the universe of the Good Men, three products of genetic experimentation have to trust to their enemies to protect them from their friends. No way, THAT'S gonna work out. Only chance they have, though.

After the Sabines. I had to stop for a bit after devouring this story. There is SO much here, so vividly portrayed, that I'm a bit, just a tiny bit, absolutely flummoxed by the fact that Hoyt manages to compress it all into these few pages. The title points us to the incident celebrated lasciviously in Renaissance art as the 'Rape of the Sabines.' It actually describes an event in Roman history/myth in which the Roman men took Sabine wives, although there seems to be considerable disagreement as to whether this was an act of force (as was depicted in sculpture and painting), or enthusiastic negotiating, somewhat against the will of the grizzled old village elders. Next, Hoyt very accurately describes the population bomb that the Chinese created for themselves with their 'One Child' policy. As it happens, they have DOOMED their culture, and there is no fix for it; UNLESS they attempt something along the lines of this story. Finally, Hoyt has stated elsewhere that she entered the United States as a young, nubile, brilliant Portuguese woman, promptly acquiring the man of her dreams by her exotic pronunciation of that most romantic of terms, "Moose and Squirrel." As a person who has personally experienced a radi-

cal shift in cultures due to a marriage, she is uniquely suited to write this story. You have LOTS of different emotional options to choose from as you read this one, from a rage great enough to advocate a nuclear war, all the way to hope for the future. Don't stint yourself; choose more than one. You can always swap out for something different later.

The Serpent's Tail. Within a very few paragraphs, I discovered that this was an adaptation of the story of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. Then I discovered it wasn't. Then I discovered I really didn't know WHAT sort of morality tale this was, and finally concluded that it might not be one. It's intriguing a story as you will find, though.

Spinning Away. At one point, the most trusted man in America was Walter Cronkite, I believe with good reason. He stayed at the helm of the CBS news desk through the absolute worst times the United States has experienced since the Civil War, and reported on what he saw, and what he thought it meant. In the last five or six years of his run, investigative journalism into the Watergate Crisis created a new image for news media. That was followed by the worst of schlock journalism, and today, we have fake news. In this story, Hoyt portrays an alternative next step in the evolution of the media representative: professional reporters who hide their identity, but maintain a massive influence nonetheless, with an audience consisting of "about ninety percent of the adult population on Earth." Laina is one of those journalists, and people are trying to kill her.

The Private Wound. Hoyt has spent a LOT of time in researching and writing about history and can spot anachronisms in a person writing about Shakespeare from two continents away. This is one of her strengths; she can stick a small change into the actual events and predict what is likely to result. She does this by understanding her characters, and the forces that affected them. We don't really know if she has archaeo-telepathy or not, but she might; at any rate, she describes events as interpreted by someone, even if that ISN'T the actual reigning monarch. As far as I'm concerned, though, I accept it, because she IS after all, an authentic authority of such things, whereas I'm just a guy who knows how to read and google. This story gives us an alternative for Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen of England and Ireland from 1558-1603.

Super Lamb Banana. The Beatles, in the form of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ring Starr, only existed as a group from 1962-1970. However, their influence on music and perhaps society can still be identified today, and some of their music is much easier to retrieve, for those of us of a certain age, from the brain, than it is from the Internet (mostly due to licensing issues, but have an earworm: "you say you want a revolution, well, you know..."). This story posits John Lennon in a variety of alternative existences, in roles from street bum to happy grandfather.

To Learn to Forget. In one of the earliest stories I read involving humans receiving treatment to give more-or-less eternal life, "Invariant," by John R. Pierce (Astounding, 1944, but I know I read in is some collection), the author presents the argument that the price for eternal life is amnesia. Here, Hoyt suggests an alternative, and likely more terrifying, consequence of the technology.

Things Remembered. What will be the role of the human investigator when CSI techniques are pervasive, and include such things as robot lizards that lift fingerprints and automatically look for a match?

The Bombs Bursting in Air. Another story set in the Good Men universe, this describes an investigator who is expecting destruction, and experiences personal challenges to her faith instead. It's not a strictly cerebral bit, and I think you would have to know the story of the Good Men to appreciate the thinking part of it; however, stuff gets blown up, which is intensely satisfying in itself.

On a Far Distant Shore. Also set in the universe of the Good Men, this one will rip your heart. Raise to believe in the faith of the Usaians, she became a beancounter for a Good Man. But there is just something about a bit of colored cloth that resonates, even in the heart of the disenchanting.

So Little and So Light. This is a time-traveler story and includes the common theme that you can/can't disrupt the timestream, so don't try/you should try. Included are some VERY interesting scenes of possible critical turning points. Ummm... I REALLY can't tell you what is at the heart of the story, because it would be a spoiler.

Devour this book, as I did. Hang on to it, because you are going to want to go back and savor the flavors over time, and to store the memories in your heart, where you can reach them, again and again.

## Son of Grendel by Matthew W. Quinn Review by Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

When I reviewed *Battle for the Wastelands*, I commented that the problems facing Grendel – the toughest warlord on the block, the big bad of the novel – were very much akin to the problems facing Henry II, as he built a cluster of separate kingdoms and duchies into a coherent state. On paper, Henry should have had everything he needed to ensure the long-term success of his empire; in practice, it didn't last because of a series of civil wars. The most dangerous of those, perhaps, was the struggle between Henry II and his son, Henry the Young King. This was not an uncommon pattern amongst the nobility of that era. Sons would grow into manhood, start chafing under their father's continued rule and start making plans to take power by force.

*Son of Grendel*, set roughly a year before *Battle for the Wastelands*, is a novella that follows two people. On one hand, we have Falki Grendelsson, eldest son of Grendel, whose father is determined that he learn how to fight and how to rule before Grendel himself dies, leaving his kingdom to his son. On the other, we have Robert Dalton, leading a desperate resistance against the encroaching enemy ... unaware that Falki has orders to earn his spurs by hunting the resistance down.

The novella showcases the growth of a young man into a reasonably decent commanding officer, although one we would regard with a certain degree of horror. Falki tries to strike a balance between being a good lord and a ruthless warlord and doesn't find it easy, particularly as he has to learn to suppress his bloodlust or prompt more rebellions. He chafes under the guidance of his father and his father's trusted advisor, who has orders to help Falki through his development. There's a core of a good person there, including someone canny enough to understand the dangers of their environment, but also demons that will overshadow the remainder of the novel series.

The book also pulls no punches when it details the effects of conquest on both sides. The resistance fighters were driven off their old farms, which were then doled out to loyalists ... who proved incompetent farmers who had to hire the old farmers just to work the lands. There's no attempt to hide the sheer brutality of the warlords, or the frustrations they face when coming to grips with an elusive enemy, or the effects of their anti-rebel campaigns that create more rebels. At one point, Falki has to tell his men not to rape. It's hard to tell if anyone paid any attention.

Unlike *Battle*, the book also looks at racial dynamics of the post-disaster world. Tribalism is rife, leading to all sorts of problems. Falki is mixed-race, in our terms, which means that – despite being a legal son and heir – he has problems fitting in with both sides. It bothers him, at least in part because his ri-

vals – his half-brothers – probably don't have that problem. They might have a ready-made power base when they grow up and start competing with him for the throne.

The book's weakness, however, is that focusing on two major characters weakens it. There isn't anything like enough room to develop both Falki and Robert, let alone show their development as characters and their eventual final clash. It might have worked better, as a story of a boy's growth into manhood, if it focused on one. However, as a short action-adventure story set in a steampunk world, it works very well.

## Team Newb: Sun and Shadow Online by M. Helbig

### Review by Jim McCoy

JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com

Word to Mr. Helbig: Far be it from me to correct an awesome author such as yourself, and believe me your novel Team Newb, Sun and Shadow Online, makes me believe that you're an awesome author or, since this is the first of your works that I've read, at the very least an author who wrote an awesome book, but BRO...

It's not Newb, it's N00b, and those aren't the letter "O" they're zeroes to show the whole wide world just how much value a n00b has.

\*SIGH\*

Ah well. I guess I'll get over it, because this was a REALLY good book.

So what's got me so excited?

Usually when I read a LitRPG, the main character starts out with at least an idea of what the problem is and an idea of how the game works. Not so much this time. Our hero, Lucas, isn't even planning on entering a game. He starts out the book trying to get away from a game that his father designed (the titular Sun and Shadow Online) and then things take a turn for the dark side and he has no choice.

I like this main character though. He's got a high degree of mental toughness and enough brains to think himself through a problem. He doesn't give up even when all seems to be lost. He learns the game quickly (for a n00b) and levels somewhat quickly-ish. I mean, I feel like I probably could have out-leveled him playing WoW, but I've been playing for close to a decade and I know the game. I've played both sides and I know the starting areas and quests really well. He doesn't have that and if he kills more bunnies than he REALLY needs to, well he got a couple levels out of it.

Of course, one does not adventure alone if it is possible to avoid doing so. For the vast majority of hardcore vets out there (that didn't start a game during the beta or on launch day) there was someone who helped them figure things out. I did my first raid in WoW after a woman named Edie (in the guise of her toon Persifinee) helped me figure out where to go and what to do to level my character. In Lucas's (COUGH, I mean Horus, his in-game avatar) case, that happens to be a small group of friends named Alizia, Decronas and Olaf.

They're all n00bs too, and he helps them as much as they help him (since he does have experience with other games) but as with any Massively Multiplayer Role Playing game (let alone one that's conducted



in Virtual Reality) there is an awful lot to learn and Decronas in particular seems to have friends who know things. This is big because it enables the team to venture out into the world sooner and to be better equipped when they do it.

I don't do spoilers, so I'll just say that there is a very good reason that all of the characters, but in particular Horus, need to make gold quickly. I find their "kill everything you can and loot everything you kill," type strategy to be the one that every single n00b ever has used to increase their bank balance. Seriously, even most Dungeons and Dragons campaigns start out with "Go over there and get rich" as the incentive to start adventuring. Gold and gear are the motivation to have a good time, but there is something I wonder about.

It would seem to me that Horus, at least, has played other games and would have a working knowledge of how craft skills work in general. And yes, I know that you won't get rich with beginning craft skills in any game that's more than a few months old, but I'd be starting out learning something. That's how I became a WoW millionaire (well that, and way too many solo runs of old raids to get cash quick) and you'd think he'd try it, but not so far. Then again, there is a sequel so maybe there? I dunno, I'd just like to see my boy doing something to help himself when he desperately needs it. You'd think Decrona would get it too, since she has all of those contacts feeding her information. That's just me whining though and sitting around crafting doesn't add a whole lot of action to a novel, so maybe that was a better way to go? Maybe?

Speaking of action, I love the way fights work. Team Newb is set in the future, so the tech is a lot more advanced than what we have now. I love the thought of targeting specific vulnerable areas (tabletop RPG players would recognize this as a "called shot.") to maximize damage in an MMORPG. I love the creativity of the players as they figure out how to defeat some of the enemies they face. I've never seen an online setting where some of these strategies would be possible, but they work great and they make sense. The reader just has to keep in mind that Sun and Shadow Online is a game of the future. There are features that have been added over the last century.

Speaking of World of Warcraft, I have to wonder if Mr. Helbig hasn't had a max level character or sixty-three himself. I get the sneaking suspicion that he's seen the Horde trash Goldshire before moving on to an all-out assault on Stormwind once or twice, or maybe died a couple of times defending it. And the way he uses quests as a primary way of leveling is very similar to that in WoW.

Then again, the way his bind points work looks more like Everquest as does the amount of downtime (he skips over it unless there is something going on during downtime) he includes. No EQ player will ever forget the frustration of FINALLY beating that freaking Goblin Whelp and then taking five minutes to get his HP back so he could fight a giant rat. Mark my words, it happened. A lot. Two words: Newbie Log. Everyone who ever played an Dark Elf in EQ just laughed. The rest of the EQ players are remembering seeing the words. "You are hungry. You are thirsty." pop up in their chat box while their HP wouldn't recover and wondering why. Yup, happens here.

And I guess that's really what makes Team Newb (N00b!) work: There's enough differences here to make it feel like a game you haven't played and just enough similarities to make it feel like a game you could play. I love that aspect of it.

I'm leaving out much of the meta-story and that's really the important part of Team Newb but I don't want to spoil too much and there's a lot there. Trust me though, anyone who has played an MMO knows that Real Life Comes First. There's always the guy who can't make raid because his wife is making him mow the lawn that night, or the woman who didn't manage to make the potions this week be-



cause she had to babysit, or the ranger who didn't have time to craft the good arrows and is stuck using the cheap vendor junk...

\*SIGH\*

Real life MMO playing is often about avoiding the meta-story but trust me it's there. And it's in Team Newb too. Try it. You'll like it.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Jerkins of Please Don't Kill me

## Tide of Battle by Michael Z. Williamson

### Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Another great selection of Mad Mike's work; let's do this again real soon, okay?

This will not be ANYONE'S first book by Michael Z. Williamson. You either got it because you love his work, or you have aggravated the heck out of someone because you are a snowflake, and they sent you this so they could watch your head explode. Mad Mike does not just slaughter sacred cows; he tans their skins and eats the meat. In fact, he might even have included some of the recipes in this volume, along with chicken cooked on a rock.

Some of the stories are in the Freehold Universe, others in shared worlds, and there are standalones. The non-fiction runs the gamut, but even when he is being serious, Mad Mike's sense of humor comes through.

A few years ago, Mad Mike put out another collection of short stories in a volume entitled "Tour of Duty." I got the pre-publication version of that one from Baen, and sent one story to my first-born son, who was at the time stationed in Afghanistan. The story I sent was "Desert Blues," which describes an attack on a base in the Middle East, during which a guitarist defiantly proclaims via his music that he will NOT be cowed. I didn't know, at the time I sent it, that my first-born son, who had just been given his OWN first-born son shortly before he deployed, had already been smashed bloody in a rocket attack; and I had no idea that the story was going to help my son, strengthen him to hold on the things he knew to be true. So, frappen thanks again, Mad Mike. My son still struggles, but the long-term prognosis is better, we think.

There are no stories in THIS collection that will profoundly change my life. most likely, although some might change yours. For example:

"The Digital Kid." A boy has the desire burning inside; and when his dreams are shattered, the desire gives him what he needs to overcome.

"Soft Casualty" (Freehold) can bring home to you the horror that some might face from being in a war zone, even if they have no tissue damage. I read the story in some other context, but it's just as creepy here.

"Starhome," also set in the Freehold universe, is another illustration of the way that Big Government/Big NGO cannot allow anyone to remain unaffiliated. The owner/operator of a chunk of rock in a for-

merly convenient location has to choose.

"Hate in The Darkness" is a straight-up tale of space warfare, with stern chases and intercepts, and choices which WILL kill people who don't deserve to die. The high technology doesn't alter the ethics.

"A Flower Grows in Whitechapel" and "A Peony Among Roses" (written with Gail Sanders) are linked stories, set in a British Empire with magic and fear and colonialism; and flowers.

"How Sweet the Sound" (with Morgen Kirby) is a standalone, but it MIGHT be related to Robert Heinlein's "The Puppet Masters." In a world where the survival of the human race is at issue, when can you say, "I have had enough?" It has bagpipes, too.

"How Do You Solve a Problem Like Grandpa" is set in Ringo's 'Black Tide' universe. Grandpa is a tough old bird, who knew SOMETHING was going to go wrong. So, he got ready. And his family wanted him to not do that.

"A Fire in The Grass" and "Medley" are co-written with Jessica Schlenker, who is, I believe, a certified Brilliant Person and has been a very helpful resource in Mad Mike's researches. Telepaths and Magic and Nomads, and my inability to stick with the story was very, very inconsiderate, and I will attempt to do better next time. This is MY failure, and not that of the authors.

"Off the Cuff": 140 words. That's it; composed on the spur of the moment in a MOST worthy cause, and FUNNY.

"Battle's Tide" This one has a fascinating context, and I KNOW I have encountered part of it elsewhere. Telepathic dinosaurs, sentient big cats, and the land bridge at Gibraltar has just collapsed, and the big hole is getting filled in; it will be what we call the Mediterranean.

The remainder of the book, in the section most aptly titled 'Provocations,' PROBABLY reflects Mad Mike's positions accurately. However, as he points out, sometimes he says things for the shock value. I must point out that this is a man I have seen posed in front of what must be every variety of Mosin-Nagant ever made; yet, he only owns ONE M1 Garand. So, is he for real, or is he bughouse nuts. Well, his opinions fit my hand better than others do; you be the judge. Be aware that he feels that he MUST be an equal opportunity offender, or else he really will be a racist. And that's gonna lead to some really strange ca-ca, particularly in his list of beverages.

I will note that I enjoyed "A Long Time Until Now" greatly, and his section on 'The Making Of' (not the real title) was like the bonus material on "The Gladiator" DVD; just superb, in my opinion.

## Today I Am Carey by Martin L. Shoemaker Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu June 2019

Some stories work better at certain lengths. Sometimes an emotional punch that is so very effective in a short story loses something when extended into a novel. Today I Am Carey by Martin L. Shoemaker manages to avoid this problem but runs into another. It is unable to maintain the high emotional level of the story for the length of a whole novel.

In August 2015, Clarkesworld Magazine published, "Today I am Paul" by Martin Shoemaker. The story acquired a fair amount of attention including being nominated for a Nebula award and winning the

WSFA Small Press Award in 2016. So, it is not surprising that Shoemaker chose to expand it for his debut novel.

The book begins, as did the original story, with Mildred, an Alzheimer's patient, cared for by an android with an emulation net that allows it to become anyone the patient thinks it is. This seems perfect for a family feeling a bit guilty about not spending enough time with their mother/grandmother and for an Alzheimer's patient who no longer remembers the year or that the people who she remembers are dead or grown up. But somehow, by emulating humans, the android has become more human, developing its own consciousness in a unique and unplanned way.

When Mildred dies, after a fire, her family is given permission to keep the android, which they name Carey, and the story becomes more episodic, with incidents from the growing parental relationship between Carey and Millie, Mildred's five-year-old granddaughter. Carey learns about Santa Claus, giving and receiving presents, and both real and sock frogs.

An attempt to replicate Carey's self-awareness causes malfunctions that threaten his ability to save Millie during a flood. Carey's inventor, Dr. Zinta, decides the protocols for research on humans should apply to Carey. Over time Carey's model is declared outdated and no longer supported in program updates (the scientist gives him a library card saying he now has to get medical information the old-fashioned way). Millie falls in love with Dr. Zinta's assistant and they insist on taking Carey to their wedding in Belize, only to face a Colonel who fought androids and fears what Carey can do. Other adventures include Carey getting a job at a long-term care facility and meeting a former juggler with memory problems, Carey being the only one available when a pregnant Millie has her baby, and Carey learning about art.

But just when the book seems to have turned into a weekly sitcom, an experiment causes Carey to shut down for over five years. And the personal lives of Carey's family have changed for the worse. Now the themes of memory loss, sense of self, and Alzheimer's converge in new and surprising ways, ultimately concluding in an ending that is both tragic and fitting.

Today I am Carey may sound like a retread of Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man*, but Carey does not try to become human, it just happens. Nor does Carey try to lead an Android rebellion or lead to the manufacture of a new type of android. Instead, this is a small, very personal story about a caretaker who becomes a member of the family.

The book's main, probably unavoidable, flaw is the somewhat pedestrian middle section. Shoemaker understandably wants to show, not just assert, that Carey has become part of the family. This is necessary for the emotional payoffs in the final section, but it does feel like a bit of a slog to get through.

Readers who are looking for action and adventure will find plenty else in the Baen catalog. Today I am Carey is a very emotional character-driven story that, for all that the main character is an android, remains a truly human story. Anyone who has ever lost a loved one, who knows someone facing an incurable disease, or who simply has enough empathy to feel someone else's suffering will find this book very emotionally satisfying.

Under a Spell by Hannah Jayne  
Review by Mindy Hunt

SciFi4Me.com

I have often wondered what it would be like to go back to high school. The campus, the people who work there, the students who are too cool for school. In Hannah Jayne's *Under a Spell*, Sophie Lawson's job sends her back to her alma mater to look for a secret coven of witches.

Sophie works for the UDA – The Underworld Detection Agency – in San Francisco. Basically, if things go wrong and it appears that something supernatural is involved, they get called in. When a girl goes missing from Sophie's high school, her boss recruits her and her handler, Will, to pose as substitute teachers to do some investigation for a new secret coven of witches. This is not the ideal job in Sophie's mind; she hated high school and was the awkward, antisocial kid who was bullied. At first, she thinks it's just girls being girls (it's an all-girls school), but the more she and Will discover, they start to believe there might be something to this secret club. Her bias against the different stereotypes clouds her judgement, but in the end, they make a discovery that shocks them all.

This is the fifth book of the Underworld Detection Agency Chronicles, so I was having to play a quick catch up to know the characters. Luckily Jayne made that a fairly easy task with names and positions within the agency. I'm always nervous picking up a book that's not the first of a series. I understand that the author will do some introductions but not spend too much time so they can jump into the story. And this book definitely does that. I didn't mind, though, because I was instantly pulled into Sophie's world, her task, and her emotions over having to return to her dreaded high school.

The book is fast-paced and you have to be focused just enough to stay with the story. It's not too hard to follow. I felt it made sense, nothing that seemed too odd (for looking for witches in high school, completely normal, right?). Twists were welcome, not obvious but also not completely out of left field.

However, my distraction was Sophie's mind and since I have not read Jayne's other UDA books, I don't know if this normal for Sophie. While she was focused on her job, she was also all over the place. Some clue would pop up and like a child, that was all she would focus on, even if there was nothing to it. Or if something that was important was pointed out to her by her partner, Will, she blew him off because "what did he know" or because she did have her already established bias. There were points when I really just wanted to slap some sense into her, or at least get her to focus.

While it seems Sophie is good at her job, I think she'd be better with more focus. But I don't buy it. There probably could have also been a little more depth into the story, but I'm not sure how much. It's pretty decent as it is. I did like that the climax and conclusion was allowed to breathe through the end of book instead of abruptly ending. I felt there was closure on this story as the final page jumped into what I assume would be the next book.

Overall, *Under a Spell* was a fun quick trip back to high school, even if Sophie didn't feel that way.

## Whispers of the Apoc: Tales from the Zombie Apocalypse

Edited by Martin Wilsey

Review by Pat Patterson

Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Zombies: for when humans aren't a big enough pain in the tookas.

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program several months ago. I don't know when I finished reading it, but I do know that I returned to it on several occasions, usually long enough to hit the second story and be repelled away from reading more. I DID however, read it through, at least twice: once shortly after I got it, and once again today, as I am getting my reviewing machinery cranked up again.

I have mentioned before my LOVE/hate relationship with short story collections. It's "LOVE," because they were the first form I developed my reading addiction with; it's "hate," because the resources necessary to review each story are at LEAST as great as those required to review a book, with the added difficulty of not divulging the twist.

I should divulge that I am not a fan of the zombie story genre. That is the ONLY reason I'm not giving this five stars. Each of the stories is well-done, I just don't like the subject matter, and I can't bring myself to say 'I loved it' even though I thought it was as well executed as possible.

The Markie Mark, by Robert J. Aamoth. Before he became a pretty good actor, Mark Wahlberg was a nasty young person with aspirations to hip-hop stardom, using the name 'Marky Mark.' The protagonist of this story is Detective Tommy Marks; his boss hates him, and always refers to him as Mark. Another main set of characters is newly developed police robots, who have been designated "Jon Jonnys." So, the story had to be named something, right? This one has conspiracy, immunity, and some really perved motivation, but I still found it on the plus side.

All Dolled Up, by Stephen Kozeniewski. The nastiest man in the world does as many nasty things as possible, and then... Not gonna deceive you, I frappen HATED this story. The characters are believable, just really nasty. If you like slasher movies and are fans of horror, this might be right up your path. Me? If I never read anything else like this again, it would be all right with me.

Rocking C, by JL Curtis. And then, after that last bit of nastiness, comes the cleansing prose of the Old-NFO, Mr. J. L. Curtis. These are people who respond to the trauma of the end of the world by a zombie virus by holding on to their basic decency and fighting for survival without losing themselves in the process. This is not the story of a lone wolf; it's the story of how a community can form and bring meaning back into earth-shattering tragedy.

Them or Us, by Alice J. Black. This one starts off drearily, with the protagonists out of food, and on the edge. Despite the main characters being a young female and a somewhat older male, it's definitely NOT a sex-and-stab story. Good twisty ending.

Otis Island, by Kelly Carr. A mother and teenage daughter go to visit granma on Cape Cod when the virus hits. This one uses an existing military installation as the basis for potential survival of a small society.

The Treehouse, by Stanley B. Webb. If you are male, at some point you realized girls were going to kill you, and that seemed like a pretty good deal, because they were so...FASCINATING. And that's how these lads experience the apocalypse.

A Slow Leak, by Cameron Smith. An utterly dysfunctional, but totally sympathetic character, finds an abandoned compound, then discovers that there are people - a few, at least - still living there. But they don't want to let him play. And all he really wants is to be a friend.

From Dead to Dust, by TS Alan. This is a fascinating story, of the life-threads of the members of a small military unit; from their cohesion in the midst of brutal circumstances at the beginning of the plague, to their separate ends. Despite the end of the unit as a single force, the spirit of the company remains.

Needs Must, by John L. French. The only person in the world who might be able to stop the zombie plague, and her two sons, are stuck on the seventh floor of a hotel overlooking a beach crowded with the infected. It falls to a unit of the Maryland National Guard to effect the rescue. The successful extraction of the doc is the only thing that matters.

Zombie Stress, by David Duperre. Humor of the dark sort. When hipsters fall, they are concerned about the strangest things.

In the Valley of the Dead, by Alexei Kalinchuk. Another hipster story, this one isn't funny. Escaping from a burning city full of ravenous zombies, a young white man and his Hispanic female friend discover an Asian boy of middle school age in their get-away cabin. Except it's not really THEIR'S, is it?

Stuck in the Middle With You, by Lou Antonelli. I could tell you the bare bones of the story, and it would be utterly boring. It's the decisions that ALL of the people make, at all points of the way, that really make this story of escape from a wrecked city hook your emotions. (And nobody gets their ear cut off.)

A Walk in the Park, by Chad Vincent. If you have ever lived in a trailer park (I have), you will recognize these surroundings, and you might even recognize this protagonist. When he was young and stupid, he went to war, and learned lessons he kept with him when he lost everything else. And now, all he wants to do is drink away the time, but there appear to be zombies knocking at his door.

Crave New World, by Adrian Ludens. There is nobody to like in this story, nobody to feel sympathetic for. The protagonist supplies something nasty to people who want it. She may very well have been a nice person at some point, although that's doubtful, but she's just twisted now.

Blood in the Water, by Emmet O'Cuana. Don't EVER make the mistake of believing there is only one threat. In fact, sometimes, EVERYONE and EVERYTHING is a threat. Of course, certain weak sorts are more likely to be threatened than others. But just because people are being eaten by zombies, that doesn't mean they can stop paying their rent, now does it?

The Bridge, by Martin Wilsey. A couple on the run along the Appalachian Trail; they are experienced in survival, and as well-prepared as can be expected for the time when it all falls apart. But they have no place to lay their heads, and no backup.



# Prose Bono

## Deep Characters By Cedar Sanderson

I had the rare privilege, last night, of sitting and chatting over dinner (and after dinner, since the conversation was so pleasant) with friend and fellow author Tom Rogneby. It was the first time we had met in person, but since we've known one another online and talked there about our books, it was a very comfortable get-together and highly enjoyable. Social things aside... we did talk a little shop.

There's something very invigorating about talking writing with someone who understands what you're doing, what you are hung up on, and can from an external perspective point out what the snag is. I don't know if I helped him at all, but he certainly pointed out in one phrase something that made me go 'oh!' that will work...

We wound up talking about series, and our philosophies regarding them. I've written a couple of shorts (and a novella, Lab Gremlins) that could be knitted together into one world, and probably will be in time. I didn't do it on purpose, but as Tom pointed out, these disparate stories all feel like they are set in the same place, with characters that could meet up and work together without breaking the universe rules I created.

Both of us, we discovered, had similar problems with long-running epic series. You run out of escalations. I think I've written about this before, but you know what I mean – eventually the series jumps the shark, and then it jumps back over again while the shark has a laser strapped to its head. He was talking about his BoogeyMan stories. There are three of them, beginning with The BoogeyMan, and I highly recommend them (more to the point, they are some of my First Reader's favorites). Tom tells me he is working on a fourth, and his plan at that point is to take the four novellas and combine them into one contiguous volume, which will also be released in paper. Then, he said, he plans to stop writing in that world.

I both agreed and disagreed with him. My long-time readers will know that I wrote a planned, set trilogy with Pixie for Hire. I got a lot of cries for 'more!' when I ended it. But the story I wanted to tell had been told. Now, what I did do, and this book will be out by the end of the year, is go on and tell the story of another character in the same world. I plan something similar with the Tanager series – there is a plotted trilogy arc, but there are other books I plan to write following secondary characters in the same worlds as the first three.

Tom was funny. He looked at me, smiled, and said, well, I'd like to tell more of the story of... and he told me that he wanted to further explore a secondary character in the BoogeyMan world. But, he said, I don't want to make her into a caricature. He wasn't sure he could fully develop a character of a different gender and culture than his own. I will admit I gave him some side-eye for doubting himself, and he laughed. But then he explained that what he wanted to do was to fully develop her in a way he hadn't been able to, yet.

It's a good point. I write male characters as comfortably as I do because I can bounce them off my First Reader at any point to make sure they don't come across as a gal with a swinging dick. Having read

enough of Tom's work, I have no doubts he can pull off the female portion of his character. The other part... I had asked a friend for some reading and listening recommendations recently. I wanted to explore the full depth of the cultural divide that has led to the unrest currently stewing in our cities, and I trusted her to point me in the direction of some solid thinkers, not superficial activists. She gave me the names of three podcasts, and I'm passing them on to Tom, but also to you, readers, as I suspect you'll enjoy them as much as I have.

Lexicon Valley with John Whorter – an excellent, funny, and informative podcast full of language, origins, music, and a very excited guy telling you all about them. This one I recommend for a deeper understanding of word use, phonetics (you write dialogue and dialect. Yes, you do, and if you don't, start). It's also great for understanding the roots of culture as steeped in origin.

The Glenn Loury Show, a fascinating take on some of the hot topics and current events. I really like this show because while Glenn has a very clear vision of what he believes, he brings on guests who don't always agree with him. They then have a lively and respectful debate. It is a joy to listen to, and the perspectives are invaluable if you want to grow your take on the world, as they range all over the map.

Conversations with Coleman I enjoy in no small part because the take here is of a young person. I'm not old (cough) but I am not hep to the scene, if you know what I mean. I don't always agree with him, but he is articulate and passionate. Also, his is a show that like Glenn's, has conversations with deep respect but not always agreement. And it is often a window into a culture I have glimpsed before, of the academician.

And with that, I have an in-person conversation to attend to. I'll leave you with this – if there's a character you want to write, but worry that you can't put yourself in their head to fully develop the persona? Do your research. Don't let the stereotypes and easy thumbnail sketches lure you down the path of cardboard cutouts. And don't assume that if a person is from a culture, they are ironbound by that culture. We all have the odd kicks in our gallop.

## Romantic Tension Part 1 By Jagi Lamplighter

Romantic Tension: To make a character seem attractive to another character (at least to women) list a character trait of character A and an emotional reaction to this trait from character B). (example: she had an air of mystery that intrigued him. Or, her shy retiring manner made him wish he could protect her.)

Okay, folks, we are on shaky ground here.

The truth is I know almost nothing about writing Romantic Tension. This tip I wrote for myself above was my first insight into the topic.

I love romance. When I was young, I would devour whole books just because there was a hint, a whisper, of romance promised in the pages. From those few whispers, I would weave elaborate fantasies. Back then, I would have 'shipped with the best of them. But, alas, there was no Internet, no way to ever meet anyone else who read the books I read. So, I was left merely thinking about these things on my own.

I love romance novels, too. I used to love all romance novels. Nowadays, I only read one or two favorite authors. But for those authors, I buy everything they put out. There are no fantasy or science fiction authors left alive who I can say that about.

The only kind of romances I have not been able to get myself to read are the paranormal romances. I do not know why. You would think they would be exactly to my taste...fantasy and romance together. But I nearly always find the fantasy part so undefined and ill-thought out that it ruins my enjoyment of the book.

(I have yet to see a paranormal romance that you could run a roleplaying game from without your characters instantly unbalancing the world. Player characters always immediately abuse any possibly loopholes. This does not mean that there are not paranormal romances out there with well thought out magic systems...just that I have not yet seen one.)

But when I set out to write a novel, I picked, for no particular reason, a young woman who worked for a unicorn, and therefore, had to remain a virgin. This severely curtailed her romantic possibilities.

There is a romance in the Prospero's Daughter series, but it is not the main emphasis of the story, it is kind of a side plot. Or, rather, it is part of the "Miranda wants to be a Sibyl" plot, but not the main emphasis of the story. So, while I did get to play around with romantic tension a little, I was not really put to the test.

So...even though I have read many romances and I have enchanted and dazzled players with romance plotlines in roleplaying games for years (melodrama seems to be my specialty as a game moderator) I am really not quite certain how to write romantic tension.

So, rather than advice, this particular post is just going to contain some observations.

In reading Romances, here is what I have noticed.

The more masculine a hero acts, the more sexy he seems. But what does "masculine" mean in this context? I have carefully studied this and discovered that it means: difficult.

Arrogance. Obnoxiousness. Contrariness. Pig-headedness. The more bull-headed the guy, the more devoted to what he wants to do/thinks is right, the less concerned about the dictates of society, the more interesting and attractive he is.

The more uninterested in what others want, the more he moves like a lazy panther, the more he sneers, and mocks, the more sardonic and satanic, the more he does everything you really would not want a guy you knew to do (except for maybe the lazy panther part) the more he stands out on the page.

You could fill a book just with the names of romantic heroes who are called "devil" or "satanic". Nearly all the best ones are.

And, if you do this part right, the author hardly has to say how the hero affects the heroine, because it is the reader who is really being seduced.

Want an example? How about Rhett Butler? He is the ultimate romantic hero. (Gone With The Wind is to the romance genre as The Lord of the Rings is to the fantasy genre.) He is surly, arrogant, bold, un-

caring, brave as sin, carefree – everything that everyone in the society around him is not. And that is what makes him stand out on the page, what makes him so desirable. Every action of his screams “hard to tame” and the harder the fellow is to tame, the more intriguing it is to see it happen.

Readers cannot help yearning for Scarlet to wake up and realize that he is the one.

What is the difference between Rhett Butler, who practically could walk off the page, and the average romance novel, where the hero is unusually forgotten as soon as the book is over?

Rhett stays difficult.

Even when he is in love, even when he is married, he is still his own man: difficult, opinionated, arrogant.

In romance novels, the authors do a good job of showing us a devilish rake at the beginning, but it never lasts. As soon as the heroine gets to know him, he is almost always the same good-natured, child-loving, do-gooder as every other romantic hero. He becomes the perfect family man and loses all his individuality.

I think that is why *Slightly Dangerous* by Mary Balogh is my favorite romance novel. The Duke of Bewcastle never changes. He remains his irascible self.

Because what really causes romantic tension is a promise...that promise that drew me along when I was 12...the promise of reaching through all the shields and prickles to touch the softness beating like a bird within. The harder this is, the more we wish to see it happen. The harder it actually is, the more rewarding the story.

Okay...that is all I have so far. What about you guys? What makes romantic tension work for you?

## Ask A Writer: Sex and Writing By Chris Nuttall

ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

How much sex (and details) should a writer include in his book?

To be honest, this is very much a subjective question and answer. I can only speak for myself.

As far as I am concerned, you can – for the purpose of this question – divide books into two categories: Erotic Fiction and Everything Else. In the case of the former, they are effectively books about romance and sex, either in terms of a wider story (boy meets girl, etc) or a very short erotic encounter. I don't write them, so my opinions are probably valueless.

For everything else, the answer is a little more complex.

In my opinion, sex in books exists to either drive the plot or showcase character development. I don't go into great detail – most of the time – because I don't see it as necessary. I don't write erotic fiction and many a great series has been derailed because the author decided it would be better to write more

erotic sections than action and plot. Obviously, different people will have different ideas of what actually derails the story. I have a habit of simply flipping through the sex scenes in a number of otherwise good series I like to read.

A major consideration here is just what the audience expects. They didn't pick up the book to read erotic fiction. (Unless they did, in which case they probably knew what they were getting <grin>). I once downgraded an otherwise excellent book because the author included a scene I could best describe as 'tentacle sex.' People who want an SF or fantasy book probably don't want elaborate zero-g or hot vampire sex.

Beyond that, there's also the question of age. A book written for children or teenagers should probably contain less detail – Harry Potter never went further than a few kisses, Hood's Army had the hero and heroine sharing a bedroom, but no actual details. The more detail you have, the greater the possibility of putting someone off. Personally, I don't think it's appropriate to discuss sex and sexuality in books aimed at children. Even with books aimed at older readers, it's possible to give false impressions or unfortunate implications – Edward of Twilight is a stalker, not a 'one true love.'

## Non-Fiction

Author Frank Luke, An Interview

By Tamara Wilhite

LibertyIslandmag.com

Frank Luke is a prolific fantasy author. He writes both modern and medieval fantasy. He's had short stories come out in several Planetary Anthology books by Tuscan Bay press. And I had the honor of interviewing him.

Tamara Wilhite: Which genre sells better for you: medieval type fantasy like "Hall of Heroes" or modern fantasy like your story "Joshua's Pawn Shop"?

Frank Luke: Modern fantasy has sold better for me. Honestly, that was kinda surprising.

Tamara Wilhite: Why do you think that genre is more popular?

Frank Luke: I started writing "Joshua's Pawn Shop" on a sudden inspiration. I gave very little thought to its popularity. As I've started treating writing more as a business, I pay more attention to what's popular. But, I think modern fantasy sold better for me because people want to think the fantastic is just one step away. They identify with the situations better.

Tamara Wilhite: You met your wife in seminary. You write non-fiction for your denomination. How does that influence your fantasy works?

Frank Luke: I write for more than just entertaining the audience. Though, if they aren't entertained, they won't buy another. I also write to unveil God's truth; it's another way for me to teach. I love to dive deep into Scripture, and I want what I learn there to come out in my writing.

Tamara Wilhite: What else in your life influenced your writing?

Frank Luke: The two books series I've read that I imagine come forward the most in my writing are Lloyd Alexander's Prydain series and the first six books of Weis and Hickman's DragonLance setting.

Tamara Wilhite: Your story "Crucible" is described as lit-RPG. What does that term mean?

Frank Luke: Lit-RPG stands for Literary RPG. Stories in the genre usually take place in worlds that run on rule systems like pen and paper or video games. The references to the RPG system may be subtle like the Guardians of the Flame series or more obvious like in "Crucible." They're usually a portal fantasy where someone from our world goes into the other world. "Crucible" mixes the humor of adjusting to the rules with a serious issue for the main character. I can't say much more about it. "Crucible" is actually my second Lit-RPG, but will come out before "Fun and Games".

Tamara Wilhite: Your Amazon author profile is dominated by short stories in a variety of anthologies. Yet you've written novels, as well. What is your novel "Rebirths: A Tale of Azuran" about?

Frank Luke: Rebirths tells the story of a man of God who falls away while grieving. He gives in to despair and turns to black magic, hoping to bring his dead family back to life. The book certainly qualifies as high fantasy as it takes place in another world, unconnected to our own with a high stakes battle between good and evil. It's been described as "CS Lewis writing Narnia after playing Elder Scrolls." Incidentally, I have never played Elder Scrolls.

The most important thing to remember about Rebirths is how no matter how far he has fallen, redemption is still possible. I used "Once Called" for the title of the final third. That's short for something a companion tells him near the start, "Once the Father calls, He does not uncall." The scene where our hero embraces that saying and accepts that he is still to be a prophet gave me chills when I wrote it.

Tamara Wilhite: You have short stories coming out in the "Fantastic Schools" and "Planetary Anthology Series: Sol". Do you have anything else coming out in the near future?

Frank Luke: I have four short stories under consideration at different places right now. Still waiting, I also have "Joshua's Pawn Shop" with an editor who is interested in taking both it and "Lou's Bar & Grill".

Tamara Wilhite: What else would you like to add?

Frank Luke: I have found that writing Christian fantasy is a great way to connect the reader's heart and head. By showing the characters acting out their faith and the journey to get to that point, it both teaches and encourages the reader.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Frank Luke: It was my pleasure.



DC Comics Before Superman:  
Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's Pulp Comics  
by Nicky Wheeler-Nicholson  
Review by Jon Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

This book is an excellent, and even at times exciting, read for fans of the old pulp magazines and the early comic books that evolved from them. It deals with the life and work of Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson (1890 -- 1965), who is credited with being the person most responsible for today's DC Comics, and perhaps for all the superhero comic books ever published.

Comic book legend Jim Steranko provides a Foreword in which he credits the Major with the idea of presenting original comic strips in comic books, rather than reprinting comics from newspapers. He wrote that the Major should be saluted "for his uncompromising bravado and vision."

This is a beautifully illustrated compilation of some of the Major's comic strips before DC Comics' introduction of Superman in 1938. Written by the Major's granddaughter, this work has been described as "the secret origin of DC comics."

In the midst of the Great Depression, Wheeler-Nicholson contributed original comic strips to the comic books of his National Allied Publications (later Nicholson Publishing, and still later, DC Comics). These early comic books, such as New Fun Comics (later titled More Fun), New Comics (later New Adventure Comics, and then simply Adventure Comics), and Detective Comics became outlets for such future superheroes as The Spectre & Doctor Fate (More Fun), Superboy & the Sandman (Adventure), and Batman (Detective), as well as many other comic book superheroes.

The Major's rarely seen early comic book strips reproduced herein are "Barry O'Neill and Fang Gow of China" and "Bob Merritt and his Flying Pals" (with art by Leo E. O'Mealia); several pre-Superman comic strips by Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, who were given their start in comic books by the Major; and other early "pulp like" strips the Major wrote: "Blood Pearls," "Foe of the Borgias," "The Golden Dragon," and "The Monastery of the Blue God." Artists involved in these four strips included Munson Paddock, Sven Elven, and Tom Hickey. Artists Creig Flessel, Whitney Ellsworth, and Vincent Sullivan did many of the covers for the Major's early comic books.

In addition to accepting/publishing strips created by Siegel and Shuster, the Major also suggested new strips that he wanted them to develop. One of these was "Slam Bradley," a strip featuring a tough detective. Bradley and his side-kick, Shorty Morgan, were seen for years in strips in Detective Comics that starred Batman & Robin.

The Major wrote many of the strips featured in the tabloid-sized New Fun Comics #1, dated February, 1935, including the cover-featured western strip "Jack Woods." The Major is credited with over 250 comic book stories before he was forced to leave the field. Even after he left comics, however, he continued to write adventure stories and books on military strategy. Many of his comic book strips had been based upon earlier pulp stories he had written.

Although not dwelled upon in this work, it is a shame to me (and many others who have written on the subject) that the Major was forced into bankruptcy, with his "business partners" taking over the comic books he had begun.

Nicky Wheeler-Nicholson has had experience editing and publishing in today's popular culture media. She is reportedly working on a biography of her grandfather, who was inducted into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame in 2008.

**Life and Death Beyond Earth, an Analysis**  
**by Tamara Wilhite**  
LibertyIslandmag.com

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

### Introduction

We know that space travel is dangerous. You can die all the normal ways, and there will be an amazing number of new ones, as well. Whether you're living in a space habitat, the Moon or a brand new world, the question of how to deal with the dead will inevitably arise.

### Disposal Out the Airlock

Science fiction regularly features the threat of throwing someone out the airlock to a terrible death. It is also presented as a way of disposing of bodies quickly. In reality, this is bad almost everywhere. If you're in orbit around Earth, you just introduced a moderately large piece of space junk that you had control over. On a space ship traveling at a fraction of the speed of light, it may create a navigational hazard for anyone who may follow you.

Space burials best exemplified by Spock's example in "Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan" will be reserved for the elite or they will never happen at all. Launching spacecraft requires energy in addition to the materials to build it. If you have a human-sized craft, you'll send a valuable passenger or a similar volume of valuable trade goods before you crash it into the nearest planet or send it into the Sun. Then there's the waste of resources that many space-dwellers need like water and salt. No, they won't be throwing bodies – dead or alive – out the airlock.

### Recycling

Composting of human bodies promises to be an eco-friendly burial solution. On Earth, we have plenty of locations where we can do this safely. In space, it may not be so safe. For example, the dissolution of a body to goo and burying it in a garden on Earth doesn't create the risk that you'll be exposed to their gut bacteria the next time you go walking through the only local green area. Composting bodies could introduce mutated pathogens or simple prions to the food production system, since you're likely growing crops in one or two rotations of the soil. This makes composting very unlikely on space stations and enclosed ecosystems.

You probably wouldn't want to bury composted human bodies off-world, either. All the bacteria and fungi on and in our bodies would escape into the local ecosystem. We'll set aside the risk that you've completely destroyed the local ecosystem without sufficiently building up the replacement, rendering the new world uninhabitable. Instead, the greater risk to humans is that one of those trillions of human-compatible pathogens mutates on exposure to the local ecosystem, maybe even swapping genes, and

becomes a threat to colonists.

This makes burying a human body without completely sterilizing it too dangerous to consider in most cases.

### Internment

If you're on an alien world, locking the body away in a coffin and burying it in a tomb wastes time and resources. If you're on the Moon, it could be a cheap way to store bodies before you send them to Earth or cremate them. In an airless environment like the Moon, internment is practical since you have so much free space. On a space station, it is unlikely due to space constraints, pun intended.

### Cremation

This method of disposing of the dead is increasingly popular in the West. The cost of funeral plots is rising. With weakened family ties and some seeing history itself as oppressive, there is less interest in burying the body of a loved one where it could be visited by grandchildren. The solution for many is cremation. This is also an excellent solution for those living off-world.

If you're on a space station, cremation sterilizes the body. The ash could be set aside in urns, mixed in concrete to build protective structures for the colony, or recycled in potting soil. If you're on the Moon or another airless body, cremation minimizes the disease risk dead bodies pose while you don't have to travel so far to inter the ashes if so desired. And you're just as free to mix them in the soil of your memorial garden.

The colony can harvest the water from the body and recycle that precious resource. A majority of the ashes could be recycled, too. A small fraction of the ash volume could be dedicated however the family wants. Whether the cremains are stored in a memorial urn or turned into an artificial diamond depends on what is available, as well as personal preferences. Scattering the ashes in the local garden doesn't pose the health hazard that composted human bodies would.

If you live on an alien world with its own ecosystem, cremation sterilizes the remains of a human body. You could have a cemetery filled with cremains, each one buried in its own spot and marked for future retrieval or visitation. Yet there is no risk that the mild virus that killed one settler mutates into the next pandemic.

This is why I think burials taking place anywhere off world will take the form of cremations. All the alternatives are too dangerous to the living.

The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on  
Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction  
Edited by Grant Wythoff  
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)  
Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

This book is a collection of out-of-print writings of famed editor, writer, and inventor Hugo Gernsback (1884 - 1967), work that he published in various outlets over his long career. As most Neffers know, science fiction's Hugo Awards are named for him.

In his writings over the years, Gernsback touched on many diverse topics, including the development and regulation of radio, the emergence of television, various gadgets he improved and/or invented, and – a topic of interest to most science fiction fans – speculations on the future. Wythoff argues that Gernsback developed a means of describing and assessing the cultural impact of emerging media long before media studies became an academic discipline.

The book is copiously illustrated with photos of Gernsback and others at work in his laboratories, the covers of the various magazines he edited/ published, and blueprints and diagrams of the many inventions on which he worked during his career.

As Mike Ashley and Robert Lowndes have pointed out, recent years have seen a renewed interest in the life and work of Gernsback. For those interested in learning more, *The Gernsback Days* (2004) by Ashley and Lowndes; and *Hugo Gernsback and the Century of Science Fiction* (2007) by Gary Westfahl, also are worth reading.

Editor Wythoff was a postdoctoral fellow at Columbia University when this book was published; he is currently at Princeton University, where he teaches a course on global science fiction.

Finis