

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

EDITORIAL

1 ... Editorial

FICTION

- 2 ... A Deadly Education by Naomi Novik ... Review by Christopher G. Nuttall
3 ... Alien Hunter by Whitley Strieber ... Review by Mindy Hunt
4 ... Alien Hunter Underworld by Whitley Strieber ... Review by Mindy Hunt
5 ... Dark Moon Rising by Cyn Bagley ... Review by Pat Patterson
6 ... Echoes of Darkness by Cheryl Campbell ... Review by Jason P. Hunt
7 ... The Eleventh Gate by Nancy Kress ... Review by Samuel Lubell
8 ... The Family Pride by Christopher G. Nuttall ... Review by Jagi Lamplighter
10 ... Foundryside by Robert Jackson Bennett ... Review by Samuel Lubell
11 ... Ghosts of Baikonur by L.A. Behm II ... Review by Pat Patterson
12 ... The Halo Effect by Tom Ashwell ... Review by Pat Patterson
13 ... Haunters by Thomas Taylor ... Review by Mindy Hunt
14 ... Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy, NYPD, Book 1 ... Review by Pat Patterson
16 ... Kitty's Mix-Tape by Carrie Vaughn ... Review by Samuel Lubell
17 ... Live and Let Bite by Declan Finn ... Review by Jim McCoy
19 ... Qualify by Vera Nazarian ... Review by Pat Patterson
20 ... Study in Black and Red by David L. Burkhead ... Review by Pat Patterson
21 ... The Vanished Seas by Catherine Asaro ... Review by Samuel Lubell

NON-FICTION

- 23 ... Celebrating Robert A. Madle: The First Fandom Annual for 2020
Edited by John L. Coker and Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.
Review by George Phillies
23 ... Interview with Douglas McKim ... By Tamara Wilhite
25 ... An Interview with Kevin Rush ... Tamara Wilhite

PROSE BONO

- 28 ... The Editing Block by Cedar Sanderson



29 ... Gaining Control over Life Cedar Sanderson

31 ... Run, Run, As Fast As You Can by Chris Nuttall

33 ... Wright's Writing Corner: Romantic Tension: Catching the Lightning—Part Three
by L. Jagi Lamplighter

FINIS ... 35

Editorial

We continue our monthly effort to review every SF novel, preferably soon after publication. If you read SF, your contributions to our review columns, or to the shorter reviews published in N3F Tightbeam, will be most appreciated.

We are seeing an increase in books and reviews used to sharpen chainsaws for political disputes. Those books and reviews are being sent over to Tightbeam.

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 stfnal 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, PO Box 143, Tonopah NV 89049 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 Deadly Education by Naomi Novik

Review by Christopher G. Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“I decided that Orion needed to die after the second time he saved my life. I hadn’t really cared much about him before then one way or another, but I had limits. It would’ve been all right if he’d saved my life some really extraordinary number of times, ten or thirteen or so—thirteen is a number with distinction. Orion Lake, my personal bodyguard; I could have lived with that. But we’d been in the Scholomance almost three years by then, and he hadn’t shown any previous inclination to single me out for special treatment.

“Selfish of me, you’ll say, to be contemplating with murderous intent the hero responsible for the continued survival of a quarter of our class. Well, too bad for the losers who couldn’t stay afloat without his help. We’re not meant to all survive, anyway. The school has to be fed somehow.”

One of the fundamental truths of the Wizard School genre is that most wizarding schools are not the sort of places the average parent wants to send their sons or daughters. Hogwarts, for example, would have been shut down years ago if it was accountable to OFSTED and the same can probably be said for Whitehall, Jude’s and every other magic school I’ve created. The combination of poor teaching, poor teachers and magical bullying would be quite bad enough even if the school didn’t have a tradition of rounding out the year with an attack by the local dark lord. This is, of course, part of the point; the schools may be dangerous, from a parent’s point of view, but pretty fun to anyone who doesn’t have to stay there and deal with the horror.

A Deadly Education takes the concept of a dangerous wizarding school to extremes. The Scholomance – a name with a long history in the genre – was founded by a collection of magicals enslaved to provide education for their children. There are no teachers – the school itself provides the education, in a manner that can only be described as perverse. It is also a magnet for deadly creatures of all shapes and sizes, a problem made worse by the fact the school rests within a location that practically breeds the creatures. Nowhere is safe, creating an impression of Harry Potter meeting The Hunger Games and Alien. The kids are forced into alliances to survive, often facing the blunt choice between killing their fellows or being killed themselves. It is deadly enough to make Hogwarts look relatively safe.

The story follows El Higgins, a young girl sucked into the Scholomance when she entered the right age group (among other atrocities, the school effectively kidnaps kids who have no magical background). We are told that El has a dark power, but we see relatively little of it (beyond the fact her long-dead father’s family were willing to kill her as a baby, because of some dumb prophecy). We do see her forming, somewhat by accident, a friendship/romance with Orion Lake and using it to form a circle of newer friends that work together to save themselves. El is an interesting choice for hero, at least at first, and I found her more than a little off-putting. She grows better as the story evolves, particularly as she starts to understand what’s really going on.

Like many post-Potter books, A Deadly Education works to deconstruct some aspects of the universe. The enclave kids are de facto magical aristocracy, with advantages and privileges some of them don’t really understand. This makes them the target of a great deal of resentment from the rest, although – as

El notes – the enclave kids are just doing what everyone else would to survive. The high price of aristocracy is pointed out, as some of the kids desperately fighting to get themselves into an enclave find themselves unwillingly attached to aristocrats who commit atrocities to save themselves. So too is the bitterness that undermines any hope of dealing with the crisis in the school.

It also touches on a hero, Orion Lake, whose position in the school is largely based on being the hero. He's a do-gooder who does good because it's the only way to keep his place. He comes across as ignorant at times, not asking questions about what's around him until El forces him to think ... not unlike some particularly sour impressions of Harry Potter. The relationship between the two is based on a surprisingly solid base – El is the first person who isn't overawed by him – and can be surprisingly sweet at times.

A Deadly Education does manage to pose an overwhelming problem, with a surprisingly neat solution. It both concludes the book plot and manages to leave room for book two (Amazon says there's at least one more coming.) It does point out issues with Harry Potter while forging an identity of its own. Overall, it manages to be a fairly decent (and reasonably clean) YA fantasy. Sex is mentioned, but never seen; the only sexual contact within the book is a kiss between the two characters. It does include a diverse cast of characters, including El herself, but this never drags the book down.

The book's weaknesses, however, threaten to drag it down. El comes across as more than a little unsympathetic at first, as I said above. There's a lot of infodumping in the first few chapters, not least because the story opens with El already at the school and there's a lot we don't know about it. There's also the fact that the system itself is practically designed to be horrible, thus suggesting the magical world is either evil or demented. Indeed, only the fact that kids are practically kidnapped when they're transported to the school explains its continued survival. It makes one wonder what might happen if the school fell to the monsters ...

Overall, A Deadly Education is a pretty good short read, once you get through the first chapters. I recommend it.

Alien Hunter by Whitley Strieber Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Aliens. Hunters. A good combination for reading before bed, right? Nothing to see here folks, keep reading on...

Flynn Carroll is your average, small to medium sized Texas town cop with a disturbingly sad story that jumps you right into action. From the beginning of the first chapter, the reader is thrown right into a situation that ends up driving this young man's path in life, leading him into the most bizarre situation he could ever dream of. He is recruited by the government (maybe, we know how transparent this can be) for a special ops team (of some sort for someone) and, well ... aliens. Teaming with others who've had the same life disturbing incidents, they go on a wild chase across the US to catch those who've turned their lives upside down. Are they successful? I'll let you find that out for yourself because I think it's worth the chase.

Whitley Strieber uses the first chapter to set up the book and how Flynn's mind as a cop and as a human in the worst thinkable situation works. It's been years since I've read a procedural book, planning, plotting, and trying to outmaneuver the bad guy while fighting for your life with no supernatural ele-

ments involved. But this reminded me of why I loved John Grisham books when I was younger. Plus, now aliens are mixed in. Flynn's messed up mind (not a dirty cop, just a person who is in pain) is fascinating. Watching the wheels turn as he tries to outthink his enemy keeps you on your toes trying to understand where he's going. And he toes the line as closely as he can without compromising his integrity as a cop; and this line gets very blurry. For him, it doesn't matter who he is fighting, he keeps his humanity in check even when it's not easy.

So Strieber is taking a Grisham-like story and adding the supernatural to it. It works. There's special or modified equipment that seems legit, nothing too outlandish. Oh, and did I mention aliens? OK, so maybe that's a little harder to grasp but also think of it like *Men in Black*: they could be out there and we just don't know it. That's believable.

Throwing this all together in the carefully crafted way that Strieber has makes this a great read. Fast paced and something that could happen in real life...with aliens. I did read up a tiny bit on Strieber and I see how his own life experiences have influenced the book. I won't say much on this. But I was completely drawn in and went through the book in no time. On the off days, my mind was reeling over whatever had happened and what was going to happen next.

I'm happy to say I do have a copy of the next book in the Alien Hunter series, *Alien Hunter: Underground* and I'm very excited to see where that story will take Flynn Carroll next. If it's as good as *Alien Hunter*, then I know I'm in for a wild ride.

Alien Hunter Underworld by Whitley Strieber Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

When I wrote my review of Whitley Strieber's *Alien Hunters*, I mentioned I was happy to finally start at the beginning of a series. The book captured my attention and I'm glad to say its sequel, *Alien Hunter Underground*, kept with the speed and suspense as its predecessor.

It's been a few years since our last adventure with Flynn Carroll. Since then, he's grounded himself into whatever part of whatever government agency deals with alien criminals. His skills have improved, so much that they're not human. And of course, he's in trouble. First with the alien criminal world, but also with his higher ups. His methods are not admired by his superiors, who believe he's too rogue. But what do you do with an alien that doesn't exactly fall into the justice system here on Earth?

Flynn is not only the hunter in this book; he's also the hunted. We discover that his actions from the first book have put a target on his back. Following a series of crimes that regular law enforcement would never tie together, Flynn follows clues that lead him down a path of self-discovery that he didn't expect, though he kinda did. Plus, in a turn of events he did not expect it leaves both Flynn and the reader wondering at the end of the story: what next for Earth?

In the first book, we learned why the aliens were interested in Earth and how some of their "science" worked. This book takes a deeper dive into that. Even though Flynn is out to get the bad guy, he uses this pursuit as an excuse to take a surprising side journey (surprising, at least, to the reader) that I found more intriguing. I'm not saying his primary chase was not entertaining, but I personally wish more time was given to this side story. I understand how the two sort of need to be together since trying to get the bad guy leads him to that deeper dive into the science. But I think when the side story comes to a head,

it should have been given more time and depth. Or if there was a way to put an asterisk on it that leads you to an extra hundred pages, that could have been good, too. But that's wishful thinking. Like its predecessor, *Alien Hunter: Underworld* is fast paced; blink and you miss something. Strieber deftly manages to avoid overwhelming the reader with over the top weapon and alien lingo. There's just enough to make you think "yeah, this could be real stuff." He also keeps you on your toes, not too much downtime. And he has remained consistent in keeping the feelings you have (well at least I have) for the characters secure, or in one characters instance, raging anger.

I'm in luck that I get to read all three books (yes! One more to go) in a row. I couldn't imagine having to wait the year between these books and then another for the third. Luckily I don't think it would be hard to pick up the second book and enjoy it without having read the first. Strieber doesn't assume the reader knows everything already and recaps just enough.

Overall, *Alien Hunter: Underworld* is a good middle book moving Flynn's story forward. I look forward to the next, *Alien Hunter: The White House*. Knowing what I know, I can only imagine what's in store for the characters...and this country.

Dark Moon Rising by Cyn Bagley Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Schemes: The few who have 'IT' vs the many who want it

Although this is a second-in-series book, it may be appreciated by anyone who can read and knows how to derive meaning from context. I almost recommend readers to start with the first volume, PARTICULARLY when that first volume is only a couple of mouse clicks away, but this ISN'T one of those cases where that is absolutely essential. The character interaction is either self-contained in the story itself, or there are sufficient references to past events that the reader isn't left confused by seemingly random acts that turn the plot upside down.

If it's because I'm getting old, then I apologize for saying that I believe the strength of the book lies in the characters, and not the action. I don't THINK it's my age, though; at age 10, I was seriously interested in the interaction between Tom Swift, his pal Bud, Chow the cook, even as I thrilled to the adventure in the Triphibian Atomicar. 10 years after that, I picked up *Starship Troopers* for the first time, from the day room of Charlie-Two Advanced Individual Training at Ft. Sam (91A, Medical Corpsman), and while I still thrilled at the power of the armor, it was Johnny Rico's relationships with his friends, family, and fellow CAP troopers of all ranks that made the book resonate with me to this date, nearly 50 years later.

Cyn Bagley understands that, and it shows in all her writing. She has the ability to represent the gnawing longing for a loved one in danger so powerfully that I found it necessary from time to time to turn my head to verify that for this moment in time, at least, I was not alone.

She writes villains well, too. These aren't some plastic space alien types; they are people driven by their own interests and abilities to the point that they see others as artifacts, to be used without consideration for anything but expediency. When the material doesn't conform, it is no longer of interest, and is discarded, and that presents no ethical dilemma for the researcher; those concerns were sacrificed long ago.

I don't recall seeing this particular treatment of were-creatures before, although admittedly, I am not a follower of the genre. If it is written elsewhere that certain gifted weres have the ability to transform to more than one form, I don't think I have ever come across it ('The Thing' excepted, because that isn't REALLY a were creature). I HAVE seen the cost of transformation presented elsewhere, although somehow Bagley makes MY joints ache as the weres transform with nasty crunchy noises. BRRR!

Plenty of room for the story to grow, and that specifically includes the further development of conflict and cooperation between clans. Pick this one up, and TRY, if you can, to ration it out to yourself so the intensity can work inward.

Echoes of Darkness by Cheryl Campbell

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

Picking up shortly after the first book, Echoes of War, the second installment of the Echoes trilogy drops us right into the fray as the Commonwealth/Brigand coalition makes plans to liberate Boston from the Wardens.

Dani, our lead resistance fighter, has managed to impress the right people and get a certain amount of authority, whether she wants it or not. As much as she shies away from the responsibility of leadership, she continues to find herself pulled into the role. With the help of Mary, Miles, Oliver, and Hattie, she maneuvers through both office politics and real-world threats. She seems a little more grounded this time out, settling in after the character development from the first book. Her relationships feel a little more stable, even though it's dodgy with Miles, given their history. Are they an item? Are they not an item?

Relationships play a bigger part of the story this time around, as Dani now has a place in the Brigand community. Her relationship with Miles, though complicated, gives her a grounding that she didn't have in the first book. She feels more like she's found "her place" after the death of her brother Jace. And while she sees her connection with Miles' son Oliver as more of a brother/sister dynamic, from personal experience it feels a lot like the son/step-mother pairing you find when the son actually gets along with Dad's new girlfriend.

Oliver's role in the story can't be overlooked, both in terms of how he helps Dani stay grounded, but also how he becomes part of the team as a matter of consequence. Despite Miles and Dani both making efforts to keep him safe, his circumstances in this Act II demonstrate that no one is completely free from war and the price that has to be paid. (And no, I'm not hinting one way or the other about Oliver's ultimate fate...)

Rowan is a more fully realized villain this time, and we get to see his side of the war a little more acutely both in his interactions with his subordinate and with his family at home. It's adds dimension to Rowan as a character, even though his wife seems bit of a one-note character. I can forgive her simplicity only because she's mainly a "point A to point B" character that serves a particular function. She doesn't quite work to make Rowan more sympathetic, and I think that actually works against the dynamic of showing Rowan's family. There are too few scenes where you see them as a couple before she turns into a flat NPC-type that fills a role more than she advances the story.

Rowan's second, Curtis, gets more to do, and I found myself wanting to get a little more of his machinations firsthand rather than hearing about it "off camera" in dialogue. As he's working the system out

of sight, the politics of the Wardens are only hinted at, and I think there are missed opportunities with that story thread dangling in the periphery.

Other story threads introduced here — the military leaders from other areas, the introduction of Ancients, the power struggle among the Wardens — serve to set up the third book as the threads from the first book get tied up here. This second book, while it tells its own story, seems to be wrapping up loose ends from the first book while laying the ground work for the final act in the next book. It's a "middle" with all that implies.

Without getting too deep in the weeds as far as spoilers go, let's say it was nice to see Dani get more development, and while it would be nice to see her become a little less impetuous, she's still relatively young and has a lot to learn (relearn) about being a grown-up. And as we get to the end of this act and move into the last installment of the trilogy, it will be interesting to see how she adjusts to her new status.

The Eleventh Gate by Nancy Kress Reviewed by Samuel Lubell

Originally in SFRevu October 2020

Nancy Kress is best known for her hard SF stories with strong characters, often set in the near-future using biology-based science. For instance, in her Hugo and Nebula-winning *Beggars in Spain* (which became the *Sleepless* trilogy), genetic engineering creates humans without the need to sleep. She also has ventured away from this specialty in works like her *Probability* trilogy which has humanity exploring the universe through space tunnels. Kress, who will be the writer Guest of Honor at Discon 3, the 2021 Worldcon in Washington, DC, has won six Nebulas, two Hugos, and two Locus Awards.

The Eleventh Gate is a one-volume mini-epic space opera epic with strong soap opera elements. The book is set in a universe where Earth is mostly destroyed and human civilizations survive through the use of ten hyperspace gates allowing for travel among the Eight Worlds. It also has interesting political ramifications as it presents a conflict between unbridled Ayn Rand-style capitalism (one planet is even named for her) and a more social-welfare oriented, but still corporate-driven civilization. In one conversation between Sloan Peregoy, the head of the Peregoy Corporation, and his heir, Sophia says, "Peregoy Corporation has taken care of them all their lives. We provide jobs, basic income, health services, education —" And Sloan replies, "Of course we do! That's what a good government does."

The book opens with Tara Landry, the youngest granddaughter of Rachel Landry, the CEO of Freedom Enterprises, accidentally igniting a shooting war between the Landry Liberation Alliance and the Peregoy Corporation. Jane Landry, another granddaughter has invented a way of attacking Peregoy ships from a greater distance than Peregoy weapons. So when something apparently is destroying ships within the Gates, Peregoy blames Landry. But the timing suggests a more mystical cause linked to Philip Anderson, the object of Tara's obsession, who recently had brain implants to achieve enlightenment. Anderson wants to use his power over the gates to end the war by preventing ships with weapons from using them. Meanwhile, rebellions on both Landry and Peregoy planets threaten the stability of both political systems as do personal weaknesses in the younger generation of both families.

A frequent topic at SF conventions is the scarcity of elderly protagonists. *The Eleventh Gate* is one of a growing number of counter-examples. Both corporate heads are old enough to have adult grandchildren and their age plays a major role in the plot as they deal with health issues and questions of succession. Landry has a heart attack at a crucial moment and Sloan finds his children gradually pushing him out of

power. His granddaughter and second heir even becomes the rebellion's figurehead and Sophia, the main heir, a mass murderer. He even has to emulate old Roman emperors by looking outside his family for a successor. As for the Landry family, even Rachel admits that her granddaughter Tara is unbalanced and Jane, as head of the War Department, launches bioweapons and plagues (allowing Kress once again to show her understanding of biology as a hard science).

One flaw in the book is how both families find themselves in the same position, facing rebellion from the people of the planets and a more ruthless younger generation seizing power from the elderly corporate heads. Kress may be making a point about how both extreme libertarianism and social welfare states both have similar problems, but the result makes it harder for the reader to distinguish between the two systems. It is worth noting that Kress plays fair with both sides, not casting one as the good guys and the other as evil.

The Eleventh Gate is much more plot-driven than is the norm for Kress' books. Perhaps as a gesture to the interests of the usual audience for Baen Books, the publisher of this novel, there is plenty of space action and political infighting. Still, all the many major characters have at least some character development, especially Sloan, Rachel, and Captain Luis Martinez, who is a former fiancé of Sophia. Of course, Kress' fans will enjoy *The Eleventh Gate*. But the book also has much to offer readers of military SF, space opera, and even family sagas. Hopefully, at least some of Baen Books' legion of readers will give this novel a try (helped by a nice cover with a stunning painting of space ships and planets). The book shows how a skilled author does not have to resort to a multivolume series to tell a grand space adventure epic.

The Family Pride by Christopher G. Nuttall Review by Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperserviceSF.com>

The Family Pride is the sixth book in the Zero Enigma series, but it is also specifically tied to The Family Shame, the fourth book which chronicles the story of Isabel Ruben. Book Six is the story of her brother.

The Family Pride opens six years after the events of the first three books. Akin Rubin is a likable and easy-going young man who loves forging—the art of making magic items (not making fake documents)—and would love to apprentice with a master forger. Unfortunately, Akin is the heir to house Ruben, one of the oldest and most prestigious houses in the city.

And heirs have responsibilities.

The story opens with Akin's father calling him in to explain that Akin had just been named Head Boy for the following school year at Jude's Academy. Akin has no desire for such a distinction—or to do the work associated with it—but his father has pulled strings, and now he is stuck. He can't turn it down, but nor does he have the network of supporters normally associated with someone who has earned this top honor. But then Akin did not earn it. His father purchased it for him, something he is not happy about.

Worse, on top of the workload required to pass his exams and be a competent Head Boy, his father wants him to undertake the Challenge—a mysterious test given during the final year of school. Those signing up to take the Challenge don't know ahead of time what it's going to be, but they are required to put together a team and to be prepared for anything. Akin's father tells him that the qualities needed

to win this Challenge are similar to those needed to run one of the great houses, and the winner is recognized as one of the top members of their generation. So, if Akin wins this contest, he will quiet those who think he may be too weak to lead a great house.

Arriving at school, Akin discovers that the Head Boy and Head Girl share a suite, and the Head Girl is Alana, the older sister of Akin's fiancée, Caitlyn. (I was disappointed when I realized that Cat was no longer at Jude's Academy and would not be a major force in this book, but...of course, she would not be there. She had no magic and, with her unique (so far as is known) talent of forging permanent magical items, it would make no sense for her to be studying magic she could not perform rather than doing invaluable work only she could do. And yet, I missed her.)

A great deal of this book covered the student's struggles making it through the school year, which is always one of my favorite part of books set in magic schools. Akin must pass his classes, keep the younger students in line, and develop a team to win the Challenge. He does find time, however, to go exploring with Rose. This was one of my favorite passages in the book. Jude's Academy has large unused sections. The wonder of peering into the unknown, the charm of the two of them sneaking away from their daily duties to peek among these unused corridors was quite enjoyable.

The problem is: The Challenge requires a team, and Akin has always been rather a loner. Worse, he can't have Cat help him, because her sister is also competing in the Challenge, and it would be considered a conflict of interests. The same thing for Rose, Cat's best friend, because she is sponsored by both Akin's and Alana's families.

Most of the good magicians in his class have already been snapped up by others from competing houses, who got to work on building patron-client relationships early on. Atkins sister Isabel had been good at this kind of thing, but after she was shamed for becoming involved in a rebellion, she lost all her influence. So, Akin must now build a team out of the leftovers—people who no one else has asked to join them.

Slowly, he begins to flesh out a team. His first member turns out to be easy. Akin's cousin Francis asks to join. Francis is an easy-going young man who's captain of the sports teams. He's kind of mean in the way that boys are often mean, but the two young men seemed to have a good relationship. Both Akin and Francis share a mentor in the form of Uncle Malachi, their aunt's husband who is also the father of their mutual cousin, Penny. Akin also approaches two girls whom others ignore. One is a rude girl no one likes who wants to tear down the aristocracy, and the other is dreamy and unfocused. Her magic is good, but there is something strangely slow about all her motions. Francis also finds two other guys from among the athletes. That makes a team of six.

The team trains hard. Cheating is allowed, so the different teams have to watch to make sure the other teams are not sabotaging them. Finding their secret hideout trashed, Akin tries to take revenge—and ends up as a frog in the ladies' room. Not one of his better days!

Meanwhile, life as Head Boy is made harder when he discovers that his cousin Penny, a dorm monitor, is bullying a first-year student. Akin cannot understand how a kind man like Uncle Malachi could have a such bully for a daughter.

Akin tries to find out more about the Challenge. He learns that his father and his uncle, Francis's father, once tried the Challenge together, but someone on their team died. The two brothers were never friends again. More than that, however, such as what the Challenge is or how the boy died, he cannot discover. He is not even sure that his team is training for the right kind of contests.

During a break in the school year, Akin gets to spend a bit of time with Cat, with Rose as a chaperone. He also arranges a secret meeting with his disgraced sister, Isabelle, who sneaks him an Object of Power to help him with the Challenge. It is crudely made, but Akin is puzzled as to why such an important object had been abandoned in the broken-down mansion where Isabelle is staying. Is there some mystery here?

When the Challenge actually occurs, Aiken must face unexpected obstacles and a question of whether or not what the Challenge seems to be is the real issue. Will his team pull together? Or will he fail to uphold the family pride?

I enjoyed this book very much. It was a delight to get back to the world of Shallot and Jude's Academy. The feeling of kids at boarding school with both the good sides but also the real horror of it are so well done in this series.

One detail I continue to enjoy is the care taken to put across the local tradition that girls under the age of majority must keep their hair braided, and only adults are allowed to have their hair down. This has come up before in the series, but it comes up particularly in this book on a number of occasions, and I thought it was well handled. I also thought that the struggles of Akin and Cat's engagement—with the two young people liking each other, but seldom being able to spend time together unchaperoned—balanced against Akin's life at school surrounded by other lovely young women—was well handled.

A thoroughly enjoyable book.

Foundryside by Robert Jackson Bennett Review by Samuel Lubell Originally in SFRevu March 2019

On one level *Foundryside* by Robert Jackson Bennett is a fun caper novel with dual protagonists and a lot of humor, including a sentient key. However, there is a deeper level delving into questions of identity, slavery, and humanity.

In the world of Robert Jackson Bennett's *Foundryside* magical scrivings (or signs) are "instructions written upon mindless objects that convinced them to disobey reality in select ways". So, for instance, scried carriages move by having signs that tell the wheels that they are rolling downhill even when there is no hill. Bennett has thought deeply about this magical system and invents endless variations and delves into the implications of how it works. Fans of Brandon Sanderson will appreciate this attention to developing the logic behind the magic.

The book opens with Sancia Grado, a thief, breaking into the waterfront to steal a wooden box in exchange for an inconceivable 20,000 duvots. Sancia has the special talent of communicating with inanimate objects by touch, learning their nature, shape, history, and magic. This also gives her near-perfect spatial awareness, making it easy for her to climb walls by knowing its weak points or pick a lock by following its instructions for opening--very useful for a thief. But her talent forces her to avoid skin contact and shun people who might expose her, isolating her from others. One character calls her "bloodlessly practical".

In the process of stealing the box, she winds up setting most of the waterfront on fire, bringing her into conflict with the other protagonist--Captain Gregor Dandolo. Captain Dandolo, the son of the head of a major merchant house, had gone off to war and returned determined to reform the local law enforce-

ment starting with the Waterwatch, hiring professional guards, installing security wards, and running security. He is determined to find the thief, even single-handily fighting the local crime boss and his entire gang to get information. While at first, he seems out-of-place as a law and order type in a city where everything else is for sale (or stealing), he has his own hidden side.

Although she is not supposed to open the box, Sancia does, discovering a key with its own intelligence that speaks to her mentally. The key, calling itself Clef, claims to be able to open any and everything. Clef can not only tell what scrivings were written to do, but he also can talk them into creatively interpreting their instructions. Clef is a fully developed character in his own right and his frequently humorous interactions with Sancia is one of the best elements of the book. But Clef has no clear memories of his own origin which may date to the time of the hierophants, the long-dead ultra-powerful magic users whose half-understood symbols form the basis of the scrivings system.

Sancia needs to draw on Clef's abilities to escape both those who originally hired her as well as Captain Gregor Dandolo, creating a super-powered version of *The Fugitive*. Eventually Sancia teams up with Gregor to uncover a dangerous plot that could lead to war within and between the merchant houses. The only solution is for Sancia and Gregor and their friends to launch an even bigger caper than the one at the start of the book.

Foundryside is a fast-paced exciting novel that reads like a summer action movie. Both Sancia and Gregor are interesting characters with their own morality which they learn to expand into caring about others and what they think is right too. Both characters have secrets in their background that force them to examine what it means to be human and free. This gives the book a bit more depth than your typical caper novel. And the book avoids the obvious romance between Sancia and Gregor as Sancia is attracted to women.

Overall, *Foundryside* is a fun, exhilarating adventure. The tone is definitely lighter than the author's *Divine Cities* series and there is much more focus on the logic of the magic. I look forward to reading the other books in this series.

Ghosts of Baikonur by L.A. Behm II Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

No matter what the setting, a good writer ALWAYS writes about people.

As far as I know, I've read everything that Behm has published. If I've missed any, it's due to carelessness on my part.

Here's the setup: in the generation after the germs stomped humanity flat, little communities have formed for mutual survival; in some cases, the resources are there to allow a little bit more than that. Perhaps we should not be amazed to discover that loyalty to a particular sports team is the unifying factor for communities in the American Southwest. I have seen, first-hand, the loyalty that a college football team inspires in otherwise calm individuals, and thus I will not attempt to re-create here for you the enthusiasm that the military units who serve the Texas A&M, for fear of the two inevitable consequences: 1. I will NEVER be able to reproduce the enthusiasm associated with the chant "GIG 'EM!;" and, 2. Since I am by intent a non-fan, I will inevitably make an error in portraying one of the rituals, and that will REQUIRE one of the Authentic Fans to execute me.

The part which brings life to the entire book: Before the end, Baikonur was the base where the remnants of the Russian Space Force was attempting to bring down the crew of the International Space Station safely. As the base was under attack, and all personnel had to evacuate, a lone American hacker made contact with the console jockeys at Baikonur. As a forlorn hope, they provided this teen-age girl with the software keys, and asked her to keep it aloft as long as she could.

There are several poignant scenes made possible by this charge, and Behm misses none of them. Here's your takeaway, recounting the viewing of the ISS breaking up in the atmosphere:

"I said it was gone, that mankind was stuck on earth. He said, "If we do things right, our grand kids won't be."

Yes, there is a good bit of action, a little romance, and some intrigue. However, Behm never lets you lose sight of the fact that this is a story about people, and that's what makes it interesting.

The Halo Effect by Tom Ashwell Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Not for the humorless or the schizophrenic. Everybody else, get it NOW!

There is something messed up about the blurb on this book, and also with the listing. The author is Tom Ashwell, but the book is listed under the name of Dayna Thomas (editor). That name is listed first under the 'acknowledgements' section, but the list is stated to be in no particular order. Besides that, from the blurb, I would be expecting this to be all space-erie, woo-woo sort of thing. It's not that at all! It's a farcical lambasting of buffoons, and it's funny as all get-out.

Unless there is something wrong with my ability to comprehend, all of a sudden. Well, you read it, and then decide for yourself.

If you like the ridiculous sort of humor found in Monty Python sketches, "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead," or in "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Universe," this book is going to feel right at home for you. It's absolutely RIDICULOUS in its' approach to science, history, organizational behavior, and anything else you happen to encounter. And when I say ridiculous, I mean that in the BEST possible way. It's not TRYING to be serious and failing through pomposity; It's skewering pomposity at every opportunity!

And THAT'S why I say that it isn't for the humorless.

Note: everyone in the book is a human, regardless of where they are from, unless specifically designated as non-human; and even then, you had better check their ID.

Example of the skewering: a book ("Loam in the Lurch") becomes wildly popular on planet Loam, and everyone becomes convinced that Loam is about to be destroyed, and that it's the fault of people, those horrid despoilers of all that is lovely and pure. And that makes them feel guilty. So, after doing all the minor-league things (converting to solar, sustainable blah blah blah), they are STILL overcome with guilt because they are STILL PRODUCING CARBON EMISSIONS! Which is to say: they are exhaling carbon dioxide. Solution: they all must die! So, they set about a massive suicide project, with each

body being zapped by a disintegrator ray, so as not to leave any messes behind. Please get in line, single file. No pushing, please!

This is the sort of problem that our intrepid hero, Harvey Johnson, must solve. And solve them he does, with the aid and assistance of all sorts of fancy technology and genius android assistance, and an imperative from the Boss. And a spaceship that can (and WILL) do EVERYTHING, if you only can think of what it is you want it to do.

And THAT is why I say that the book is not for the schizophrenic: this stuff is so crazy, and grandiose, that if you are having basic questions about the nature of reality, you are likely to start thinking that the book is THE truth. You know, the '42' class truth. You will become afraid that the room might really grow teeth and eat you. (Well, that DOES happen, but it leaves the eaten one not really the worse for the experience. Just covered with room slobber.)

It is QUITE the yock, for those with a more solid grasp on reality, or access to the right medications. It's a grin all the way through, with a few chuckles and giggles thrown in the mix as well. It did, however, pose one existential question for me:

Does the enemy have a sense of humor?

By the enemy, I mean the sort who are dedicated to the idea that humans really are despoilers, and that world population of people ought to be limited to 600,000 or so; not sure of the exact number they shoot for, just know it means that we are going to have to put a lot of kids in the gas chamber to make the limit. I'm thinking 'enemy' is the people who cannot tolerate any other opinions than their own. And the reason I'm asking that question is this: we read books like this, and laugh our heads off. The enemy reads a book like this and says "THAT'S NOT FUNNY! THIS IS SERIOUS!" and then entertains a motion that this is hate speech.

I don't know. All I know is, WE are laughing, when we read this sort of farcical story. And I hope, I truly hope, you will find the time to take a break from all the serious things that are going on, and pick this book up. And let's laugh together!

Haunters by Thomas Taylor Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

They say not to judge a book by its cover, but when the cover has a Flash-like character running through a hole between blue and red with the name Haunters, you get curious. So I admit, I went with it and it has to do with ghosts (per the tag line of "Does History have a ghost of a chance?"). I'm glad I did because this was a fun book to jump into.

Thomas Taylor doesn't give you time to breathe. He just drops you right into the action of World War II London and takes off. But it's not that simple. The story is told between two characters, David and Eddie. They are friends but not in the normal sense. Eddie lives in 1940 London, while David lives in current day London. So how can they be friends? David thinks it's all just a dream whereas Eddie thinks David is a ghost. What David eventually learns is that dreams are just time travel portals and while they're in a real place in a real time, to those real people around them, they're a shadow of the future. With that type of knowledge, imagine the power a person can have over history and people. As

David learns more about this ability he has, the more he realizes how one thing, or one person, can change the entire future of the world, and he sets out on a mission to save his friend.

First thought? WOW.

I may have looked at the cover to pick this book to read but I admit, I opted to skip the flap with the teaser and go straight into it. So I had no idea what ride I was getting into. The story is fast paced, quickly catching you up with what we are allowed to know about David's life before he's brought into the dreamwalking world, which is what it is called when you travel in the dreams. Even though Taylor has to explain a lot about the situation at hand as well as the "physics" of it, he is fairly thorough and clear about it. At no time did I feel left in the dark about something. This is good for a YA novel since the dreamwalking science could get out of hand.

Luckily, the explanation also is driven by the story. Young David has to learn all of this to prepare him for his task, which also explains why he's drawn to young 1940s Eddie. Taylor leaves very little down time and when there is, there's a sense of urgency in David, his surrounding characters, and the reader. There were points when I was even saying "you need to keep moving!"

I enjoyed that the story was told from both David's and Eddie's perspectives. Like the Game of Thrones books, they each got their own chapters to keep it organized. Occasionally a third character had a chapter but that was to help better understand the villain.

There were a couple of ideas that I had expected to be more important, but they were never played out. One in particular, but I will overlook it.

The story came to a good close and even one of the bigger questions about the villain was answered, which I really liked. And Taylor left it open for a possible sequel. I would be interested to see what he could do with where he left off.

Haunters was a fun book I didn't expect to get so wrapped up in. Give this YA book a chance and you won't look at your dreams the same way ever again.

Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy, NYPD, Book 1 Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A great good morning to all my friends and neighbors out there in Internet Land! And, to any family members who drop by, I've got some GREAT fried chicken left over from last night in the fridge (it was \$0.99/pound for leg quarters yesterday).

So, yay! Another long-overdue review! I actually got this book a year ago yesterday. I read it right away but was just not able to review back then. If the information I have is correct, this is Book One of Seven (so far?) in the series.

Prefatory materiel! I MUST point out something about perceptions of reality before going into the specifics of the plot and characters. Due to some technical problems, at this moment I can't see how the book is classified for marketing purposes on Amazon, but I suspect it's listed as fantasy.

This may sound a bit weird to you, but: there is nothing in this book that would place it beyond the realm of everyday reality for the orthodox Christian believer. That's a pretty bold statement, and feel free to dispute it if you like. It's true, though, that classic, traditional Christianity teaches that angels, resurrection from the dead, demons, and a variety of miracles, are absolutely valid. Those beliefs are discussed at length in theologically oriented books, which are readily available. Similar themes are found in some popular movies and television shows.

Where Finn stands apart is that his protagonist, Tommy Nolan, is a good guy, an average blue-collar guy, working as a police detective in New York, who suddenly finds that his work combating conventional crime is "enhanced," shall we say, by the tools and desire to combat authentic demons from Hell.

And: YES! That can be said to be COMPLETELY CONSISTENT with my belief systems. I'm not the same 'flavor' of Christian that Finn is, BUT, as I said earlier, the things he puts forward have traditionally been orthodox teachings of the mainstream Christian churches. If that seems too outrageous for sane people to believe, I recommend you look closer at the history of the Church, PARTICULARLY the foundation documents, including the Biblical accounts.

And now, to the book: As stated, Tommy Nolan is a good guy who finds himself gifted with superpowers so he can fight evil in physical form. That's the premise, and I have to say that I found it delightful, perhaps largely because of my Christian perspective.

A very few days ago, I was given the opportunity to watch "Constantine," a movie which shares some of the same themes of power, demons, Heaven and Hell. However, the additional themes of betrayal, isolation, and unforgivable sin combined to alienate me, and I stopped less than half-way through.

What I liked about "Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy NYPD" is his constant virtue, in the form of his dedication to his wife and son, and his compassion even for the criminals he has to arrest. Long before he found himself in the role of A SAINT (!), Tommy was investing himself in his community and the people he encountered. This is NOT the story of a worthless, ineffectual dweeb who discovers a magical weapon in the desert and is transformed into a great American hero. This is a story of a regular guy, who commits himself to BEING a great American hero to his family, friends, prisoners, and anyone else he encounters, just with the tools of his hands and feet, mind, and heart.

While the reason he was selected for sainthood and superpowers isn't disclosed in this installment, I believe it was simply a recognition of who he was becoming on his own.

A couple of closing remarks.

1. I don't read horror. There were elements of this story, in describing the crimes of the Bad Guy, that were horrifying. They may not be tolerable for those who are squeamish, and I would not recommend this to my 15-year-old Kenneth. However, those grotesque elements were essential clues to the nature of the killer. So, I hung in there, but I'd kind of like some brain bleach.

2. Although Tommy Nolan is a practicing Catholic, I didn't see this as a distinctively Catholic novel. True, Tommy DOES use some strictly Catholic elements to battle evil, but it's not so obscure that it can't be understood by this non-Catholic. If you have to look up the definition of a word, do it.

3. A couple of real-life murderers are mentioned as patterns/examples for the method the Bad Guy uses to murder his victims. I suggest you do NOT research their names; the crimes were horrific, and the failure of regulatory/supervisory agencies to intervene is likely to cause you to lose faith in certain systems which should be guarding public health. Again: I'd like some brain bleach.

Kitty's Mix-Tape by Carrie Vaughn

Reviewed by Samuel Lubell

Originally in SFRevu October 2020

Kitty's Mix Tape is a collection of short stories featuring Carrie Vaughn's popular series character Kitty Norville, a werewolf radio talk show host, and her various friends and enemies. Carrie Vaughn, who was a returning Guest of Honor at Virtual Capclave 2020 in October, first wrote about Kitty in a short story, "Doctor Kitty Solves All Your Love Problems" in *Weird Tales* #324, Summer 2001. Kitty has appeared in fourteen novels and one previous story collection.

This collection has seventeen stories with author notes and a music playlist for each. Fellow urban fantasy writer Emma Bull contributes a nice introduction. Four stories are original to this collection and two previously appeared on Vaughn's website. The others originally appeared in magazines and anthologies. Six stories feature Kitty.

Fans of Kitty will welcome her reappearance here especially since the author had said the series was finished. Readers new to Kitty and her adventures will find this book a decent way to start their acquaintance, although they will miss some aspects of the stories if they do not know who these characters are and what their connection is to Kitty. Still, some of the stories are about the early history of the characters, before they meet Kitty, and Vaughn successfully provides information about the major characters in Kitty's life.

"Kitty Walks On By, Calls Your Name" is about Kitty and her husband Ben attending Kitty's 10th high school reunion. This shows how she has divided her life into before becoming a werewolf and after. There is a bit that comes a little too close to a certain movie, and having a character comment on the resemblance does not excuse the borrowing.

"Kitty and the Full Super Bloodmoon Thing" is a cute glimpse of the relationship between Kitty and Ben that shows what happens to werewolves when a supermoon (when the moon is closest to the Earth) and a lunar eclipse happen at once.

In "Kitty Learns the Ropes" Kitty has to decide whether to "out" a champion boxer as a werewolf. Is it fair for a supernatural creature with enhanced strength and healing to compete at a sport with regular humans?

"Kitty and Cormac's Excellent Adventure" has Cormac, a bounty hunter specializing in supernatural creatures, ask Kitty for help with delivering a message. This leads to a mysterious quest that may be part of someone else's story; unfortunately, this mysteriousness deprives the otherwise interesting story of a meaningful ending.

In "Kitty Busts the Feds", two agents from the Paranatural Security Administration burst into Kitty's

recording studio in the middle of a broadcast, demanding that Kitty share recordings of the show and identify the vampire masters of various cities.

"What Happened to Ben in Vegas" only has Kitty at the very end although she is very much on the mind of Ben, who is kidnapped on the day of his wedding to Kitty. The notes say this story reveals what happens to Ben after he goes missing in *Kitty and the Dead Man's Hand*.

"Kitty and the Super Blue Blood or Whatever Moon Thing" is another Kitty and Ben conversation before moonrise.

The other stories involve other characters from the Kitty universe.

"It's Still the Same Old Story" stars Kitty's vampire friend Rick as he investigates the murder of an old friend who witnessed a crime in 1947. It also features Detective Hardin, a policewoman who knows about the supernatural.

"The Island of Beasts" tells a survival story of the lone female werewolf trying to maintain civilized neutrality while marooned on an island with two warring packs of male werewolves.

"The Beaux Wilde" answers the question "What would life be like for werewolves in Regency England" as a very shy lady "of great fortune and little accomplishment", but a secret talent, encounters the Misterys Wilde, three brothers who are really werewolves.

"Unternehmen Werwolf" shows how the Nazis trained werewolves for special missions, in this case killing a witch, giving the history of a minor character in *Kitty Goes to Washington*.

"Sealskin" is about a Navy Seal with webbed hands and feet who goes to Ireland to learn about his father, about whom his mother only said that "he was like something out of a fairy tale".

"Defining Shadows" features Detective Jessi Hardin who tries to solve a murder case involving half a body. This is an excellent mystery involving a rather obscure bit of folklore.

"The Arcane Art of Misdirection" is another mystery as casino blackjack dealer Julie and magician Odysseus Grant confront a card cheat who is a master of illusion.

"Bellum Romanum" shows what led Gaius Albinus to become a world-threatening villain.

Reading this book caused me to remember how much fun is in the Kitty books and I've started re-reading them, which considering the size of my to-be-read pile is a strong endorsement for this book.

Live and Let Bite by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

First off, the warning: Yes, Live and Let Bite is book three. Yep, that means there are two books before it. You should check them out too. I've reviewed them here and there. They're worth checking out. I mention this simply because you're going to want to read the first two books before reading this one. I really enjoyed this book and I'll talk about why below, but I'm not at all certain that this book would work as well as a stand-alone. There are a lot of references to what has come previously and it may be a

bit confusing if you're not familiar. This is not a bad thing. It just means that you need to start at the beginning.

Live and Let Bite is the story of our hero, Marco Catalano and our heroine Amanda Colt, the world's finest female vampire and their battle against existential evil. This time our evil takes the form of an ancient vampire assassin. She is a little off mentally and very impressive physically. In a universe where the bane of vampires is fire, she takes a daisy cutter to the face and keeps running. She shrugs off things that should kill her and just keeps fighting.

Let's take a second to talk about our villain: Nualla is dark and mysterious. She comes straight at Marco and he doesn't know why. She may work for a Council which may or may not exist. What we do know is that she is definitely an evil vampire (and one of the things I really like about these books is that vampires exist on a scale similar to the Dungeons and Dragons alignment system) who is extremely powerful and has a vendetta against Marco. The reason she gives (nope, not gonna spoil it) is nebulous at best and helps set up the next book (which will get here soon, I hope).

I don't generally do spoilers. They're not my thing. But I'm going to break the rule here: MARCO AND AMANDA ACTUALLY GET TOGETHER!!! And FINN DID IT RIGHT. When an author hints long term at a relationship it always makes me nervous when they finally let it happen. It often turns into a total cheesefest. The last episode of JAG comes to mind here. But Finn makes it believable. He makes it fun. He makes it awesome. This is a payoff worth waiting for. How things are going to work between a twenty-five-year-old mortal and a century old vampire is yet to be seen but at least they've admitted that they're both interested. Things are still in the early stages but I can't wait to see where this goes.

Finn once again delivers with the fight scenes. They're well planned out and vicious. I would not want to meet these guys in a dark alley. Well, meeting Marco in a back alley might not be all that bad. He tends to save the innocent, but the villains in this book are bad news. I do have a kind of complaint here though.

Marco and company have a tendency to prepare a battle space to a "T". This makes sense but it seems that once they've prepped a space the fight always goes the way they thought they would or at least close enough. The enemy gets a say in what happens and sometimes I think Finn forgets that. That doesn't mean it's not exciting. It doesn't mean that the good guys have won just because they think they've won. It's just really tightly plotted.

Finn has a healthy disrespect for government, and it comes through. One of our main characters reveals that they were a government agent hunting the supernatural in the nineties and got downsized. Now another of our favorites has become the new guy with a much smaller department and budget. So even with the lives of its citizen on the line, the US government found an excuse to cut the budget. I'm sure they managed to give a few phones away with the savings though. I got a good chuckle out of that.

A huge part of what I enjoyed about this book was that it always looks forward. Finn is building something here. The storyline is racing ahead and things are hinted at. There is a constant interest building. Finn is building a world one step at a time here. Things are opening up slowly and I'm following along amazed. He has very obviously planned out an extended plot going on here.

I did a post awhile back about Hollywood and some books that need to be turned into movies. In this case though, I'm going to suggest that maybe this series gets the Game of Thrones treatment. There's a television series here. I mean that. We may need to give Finn a bit of time to get a little further ahead

before it gets started but this makes sense as a series. It's written that way and it works that way. I have zero pull in Hollywood but if I ever get some (about as likely as my getting hit by lightning twice on the same day as I hit the lottery) I'm going to make Finn an offer for this one.

So anyways, I'm totally waiting for the next one. Hopefully it will be here soon. I want to find out what the bigger threat is. I'm wondering if I'm right in predicting that we're going to see Marco go through a Luke Skywalker type storyline in the near future. His attitudes, his love for a vampire lass and Finn's alignment system have me wondering if we're not going to see a redemption story soon. We'll see how that goes. I'm anxious to see if I'm right.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Vials of Holy Water

Qualify by Vera Nazarian
Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

It's 2047, and we are all about to die; the Sweet Meteor of Death, which we had all longed for during the last presidential election, has been sighted, and it's composed mostly of heavy metals, so there is no way we can divert it with our nuclear arsenal.

However, just as the winter brings the snow, and the dead rhinos bring the hungry vultures, so the impending arrival of SMOD brings back our long-lost relatives: the folks from Atlantis. It seems that they escaped the sinking of their civilization by going to the stars, where they have lived and prospered; now, seeing Mother Earth about to be smashed into planet juice (pulp included), they have returned with a fleet of space transports to rescue a remnant.

Alas, it is ONLY a remnant. They don't have the space to take everybody, and they are also concerned that the Earthlings will have some difficulty in adapting to their culture, so they have determined that only people between the ages of 11 and 20 can be considered for rescue. Furthermore, they insist that the selection process be competitive. There will be a series of screenings and competitions, which will decide who gets to board the spaceships, and who becomes Meteor Chow.

Four children of the Lark family seek selection. Their parents, who obviously harbor a deep hatred for their children, have given them all names beginning with G: George, Gwenevere, Gordie, and Gracie. The children, in a pathetic attempt to make light of the mark of Cain branded on their foreheads, refer to each other as G1, G2, G3, and G4. You can't REALLY blame the parents, of course; the father is a professor of antiquities, and the mother was an opera star before cancer took away her ability to sing. With that kind of parentage, I suppose the children should be grateful that their names aren't Abelard, Heloise, Brunhilda, and Igor.

The story is told from the POV of nearly-seventeen Gwen, who feels herself to be an ugly duckling, with no hope of becoming a swan. She excels in academics, but is not confident socially, and has neither skills nor experience with athletics.

The Atlanteans provide very in the way of information about the testing program, and some of the tests seem nonsensical. The entire program is mysterious, bordering on creepy, and there is inevitable backlash to the idea of teenagers being swept off into the sky, leaving behind everybody else.

I can already hear someone grumbling out there. You say, 'why, this is derivative of "The Hunger Games."'

Nope. It ain't.

Yes, they do share the feature of a life-and-death struggle between young people, but that's the ONLY thing they have in common. There are supposedly only some very small number of unique plots anyway, right? What makes a book valuable is not having some exciting new plot twist. Those are RARE. It has been some time since I became aware that some of the greatest stories were simply older stories with the serial numbers filed off.

Nope, what makes a book a GREAT book is the way the story is told. And I have to tell you, quite honestly, that I didn't think I was going to like this story. For one thing, most of the characters are teenagers, and I was a middle school counselor for 16 years and am raising teenagers #5 & #6 at the moment, and frankly, the little monsters aggravate me. Wonderfully, there is only enough of that teen-age emotional storming to remind me that they ARE teens, and not so much as to make me want to drown them. But, even with that bit of prejudicial disfavor, I found myself DEEPLY involved with the story. Nazarian is one HECK of a good writer, and I think this would be an excellent book to take along on a long plane flight, drive across country, or to curl up with and turn the real world away. Actually, I tend to forget that not everyone reads a zillion words a minute, the way that I do; this volume in itself might make for some nice reading on a weekend getaway, and the entire series might last you Earth People for an entire two-week vacation at the beach. You could surely do a lot worse!

Study in Black and Red by David L. Burkhead

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I think the last work of Burkhead's I read before this was 'Oruk Means Hard Work.' I KNOW he has written other things, and without looking back at my reviews, my recollection is that I have applauded every one; but 'Oruk' and this one are something special. In both of them, his writing is like a song that bears you away gently, to a sleep which is filled with nightmares; and then, POW!!! He adds in one perfectly written scene, and you realize you are not in Kansas anymore, and your little dog, too.

There MUST be others who do this "utter transformation of reality" thing well; if so, I'm just not familiar with their work.

Here's the set up: Leslie Jefferson is a struggling artist, in a budding relationship with Karen, a financial adviser. Something solid is developing between them, but it's not solid enough for him to tell her a troubling secret: paintings that show every sign of being his work are appearing in his inventory, and he has NO recollection of having painted them.

And those paintings are of devastated cities and landscapes, with marks of catastrophic, civilization-ending destruction everywhere.

Because he is not a great fool and does not wish to be tossed into the booby hatch while girlfriend Karen looks at him with fear and regret, he hides the paintings, and keeps his mouth shut about them. However, his good friend Ed, an amateur astronomer, is taken by one of these mysterious works, because the night-time sky is rendered so faithfully, with an attention to detail that he is not accustomed to seeing in art. And Leslie can't explain it, of course, because although it is OBVIOUSLY his work, he has absolutely no recollection of working on it.

I'd love to tell you more, but to do so would be to enter Spoiler Land.

Now, the story could be used to illustrate any number of life lessons, but it's not written as a life lesson. I tend to go "ICK" when I encounter a story that is written that way. This is just written as a good story; a CREEPY story, certainly, but one you will remember, just as everyone who has read "The Cold Equations" and "A Pail of Air" remembers those. You can tell life lessons with those stories as well (actions can have consequences far out of proportion to intent; determination finds a way), but those aren't the images that run behind your eyelids when you read those stories right before you go to bed.

Nope, you'll be seeing an empty airlock, and mysterious lights moving where nothing can live. That's because those stories are powerfully written. The fact that every project engineer would resign and threaten mass suicide and/or homicide before they signed off on a ship with the limitations found in "The Cold Equations?" The unlikelyhood of Earth's atmosphere freezing out in an undisturbed mega pousse-cafe? None of that matters, because these are good stories.

And here's what I have to say: "Study in Black and Red" is every bit as good as either of those classics. You read it, and if you disagree, then I will give you space on one of my blog posts to call me an idiot, and express your contrary opinion until your spleen is thoroughly vented.

The Vanished Seas by Catherine Asaro Review by Samuel Lubell

Originally published in SFRevu.com Sept 2020

Catherine Asaro is a Harvard-educated scientist, dancer, singer, tutor, and yes, a writer too. Her main series, the *Saga of the Skolian Empire* is a complex, multi-generational saga about the Ruby Dynasty, the telepathic rulers of the Empire. While many of her books have strong Romantic elements, the books are hard science fiction; so hard that Asaro published a paper in the American Journal of Physics describing the science behind the Empire's star drive. After many books about the ruling elite of this society, the empathic Ruby Dynasty, Asaro decided to write a sub-series about a character as far from the elite as it is possible to go.

Major Bhaajan, a former military officer turned private detective, grew up in the Undercity, where the people are so poor they do not know what money is and who are despised by others in the City of Cries. She is the first person to have grown up in the Undercity, gain an outside education, leave the planet, and carve out a successful life outside the Undercity. This gives her an important role as the only person who truly understands both cultures, and she works to help the residents of Undercity become more accepted in the world above.

Bhaajan is an interesting character as she travels between these two cultures. She has aspects of a noir detective in her stubbornness and ability to keep going after being injured. Of course, she has an advantage in her fights and her investigation as she has specialized biomech from her military days making her stronger, faster, etc. She also is linked to an Evolving Intelligence (really a form of AI) named Max who helps her find information. Max is actually a great character too. Also helping is her boyfriend Jak, who runs an Undercity casino that is the only part of the Undercity to get visitors from Cries.

The Vanished Seas opens with Bhaajan attending a party for the heads of the Scorpio Corporation, a conglomerate with commercial and military contracts. The party's Guest of Honor, Mara Quida, Scorpio's VP for Sales and Marketing mysteriously disappears in the middle of the event. Colonel Lavinda Majda, third in line to the Majda throne, asks Bhaajan to investigate, much to the annoyance of Detective Talon, the head of security for Scorpio. While waiting for a flyer to take her home, Bhaajan is at-

tacked. And the attacker keeps coming, despite the city's defenses and protection from the Majda, which raises suspicions that Majda may be behind everything.

Bhaajan investigates Mara's husband, corporate rivals, and fellow employees competing for the same promotion. She also breaks into the Majda's palace to find out if there is a reason why they might want her dead. Then, when a couple more people disappear, Bhaajan expands her investigation. After discovering that all the disappeared had connections to an elite private club, the Desert Winds, she talks to Jak and learns that they also have a history of gambling at his casino. Gradually she learns of a secret plot involving the members of the Desert Winds and the ruins of the starships that originally brought their ancestors to this planet.

A major subplot is Bhaajan learning about her empathic abilities. In a previous book, Bhaajan learned that the ancestors of many of the residents of the Undercity were empaths who needed to isolate themselves from all the minds in the crowded City of Cries. Inbreeding amplified these traits. So the Undercity has the highest percentage of empaths, including Bhaajan, in the Empire. However, one of the things that make the Major Bhaajan books different from the other Skolian Empire books is the focus on an ordinary, albeit cybernetically enhanced, person instead of the psi-powered rulers of the empire. So developing Bhaajan's own telepathic abilities seems to be blurring this distinction.

The Vanished Seas is the third mystery novel about Major Bhaajan, following *Undercity* and *The Bronze Skies*. While the author provides enough information that the reader does not have to read her entire Saga, especially as this book takes place early in her timeline, I recommend that people read the two Major Bhaajan books before reading *The Vanished Seas*.

The Vanished Seas works both as a mystery and as science fiction. Fans of Asaro will like this further chapter in the adventures of Major Bhaajan. There is plenty of action and strange puzzles. Mystery readers who are willing to venture into science fiction, such as readers of J.D. Robb's *In Death* series (and there are strong similarities between Eve Dallas and Major Bhaajan) will enjoy this one too.

Non-Fiction

Celebrating Robert A. Madle

The First Fandom Annual for 2020

Edited by John L. Coker and Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D.

Review by George Phillis

<http://N3F.org>

Many decades ago, the first fen walked the earth. They formed clubs, they created the first fanzines, they staged the first conventions. Alas, they also staged the first fan feuds.

Several decades later, they formed an organization, First Fandom, open to all fen who had been active in fandom...prior to January 1938. First Fandom was formed to keep the history of early fandom in front of modern SF fans. It still exists, with membership eligibility expanded to include fen active in fandom for more thirty years.

One of its activities is an annual issue honoring a fan of long ago. This year's issue honors First Fan Robert A. Madle, who has been a fan since 1931 and is now the last living co-Founder of First Fandom. This 8.5x11" center-stapled, 64 page volume is a tribute to his contributions. Included are 20 pages of his own recollections of fandom as it happened, most of a century ago, a half-dozen pages of photographs of ancient and recent fen, and a collection of appreciative anecdotes from friends. The use of high-gloss paper gives the photographs sharp clarity. Christopher O'Brien gives us a 20-page bibliography of Madle's sfnal writings, centered on an amazingly detailed list of works from the 1930s and 1950s.

Celebrating Robert Madle is a tribute to a great fan, not a critical biography. It hits high notes of his long path through the scientific world. *Celebrating Robert Madle* was published by John Coker in a limited edition of 10 numbered copies and 26 lettered copies. The volume is available from John Coker, 4813 Lighthouse Road, Orlando FL 32808 for \$30, which includes packing and shipping.

Interview with Douglas McKim

By Tamara Wilhite

<http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

I had the opportunity to interview fantasy and young adult fiction author Douglas McKim. He's written two fantasy novels: "Just Plain Old Jeremy" and "Are You Man Enough?"

Tamara Wilhite: "Just Plain Old Jeremy" reminds me of a Conan cover. Is it swords and sorcery or sword and planet?

Doug McKim: In truth, I was inspired more by the Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. My father was a huge fan of Burroughs. Dad passed away in January of the year I began working on JUST PLAIN OLD JEREMY, and the novel was dedicated to him.

There are other elements which motivated and inspired JEREMY. I also wished to tell a story of a fara-

way land which is being fought over by nations hoping to exploit its natural resources. As well, we have an allegory concerning the athlete dying young.... An individual of great promise who, despite his considerable talents and abilities, becomes overwhelmed by events greater than himself. Jeremy Kentworth is forced to accept changes and challenges facing him, whether they involve growing up, the horrors of war, the death of a loved one, the loss of innocence. Jeremy is forced to make decisions he doesn't want to face, such as needs to leave the comforts and safety of home. It is a coming of age tale, with often tragic consequences.

Tamara Wilhite: The sequel "Are You Man Enough?" puts the central character of the first novel in a military school of sorts. Can you tell me about it?

Doug McKim: Jeremy Kentworth does not appear in ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH? A few minor characters from the first story does. MAN ENOUGH is a sequel, of sorts, since it takes place in the same world, though it's story more based in reality. The planned third entry of this series, titled INFERNUS, will send our characters from ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH? to the location of the first novel, JUST PLAIN OLD JEREMY.

But where JEREMY is inspired by the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs, MAN ENOUGH is harder-edged and brutal. I had always wanted to write an anti-war parable. The death of a family member in Afghanistan motivated me to write a tale of war's effects on youth. ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH? is an ensemble piece, and the majority of its characters are young adults and children.

Tamara Wilhite: Is the young adult novel you're working on a continuation of this series?

Doug McKim: No. The story I'm presently working on, HARVEY MADDEN, is the third of a series concerning at-risk and troubled youth in contemporary eastern Oregon. I had been a volunteer and later paid tutor and mentor for kids who stemmed from broken homes. I dealt with children who, despite their backgrounds, were regarded as "salvageable." My job was to keep these children in school while also offering them guidance and proper role models.

The first story in this series, ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF MARTY MCKENNA, involves an angry gay teen who learns that vulgar language, caustic behavior and violence are not the best solutions to handle adversity. The second story, LOVE, DEATH, AND ART deals with an aspiring young artist who is the target of frequent bullying.

Finally.....

A weekend in the Wallowa Mountains becomes a journey of self-awareness and discovery for teenager HARVEY MADDEN. This is the tagline and brief synopsis for the third tale. I grew up in rural Oregon, near the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area. Hunting, fishing, hiking, and camping were the leisure activities of my own youth. In that regard, HARVEY MADDEN is my most personal and autobiographical story.

Tamara Wilhite: Have you had short stories published anywhere?

Doug McKim: Only in my high school and college newspaper, back in the 70s and 80s. Darn it.

Tamara Wilhite: How much of your work is influenced by your history degree?

Doug McKim: My college education had influenced my work a great deal. I have a degree in history,

with minors in English and education. ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH? in particular, found much of its basis in nations which had undergone major political, social, economic, and technical changes. Much of my research involved everything from the Russian Revolution, to the United States at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Tamara Wilhite: And what else has influenced your writing?

Doug McKim: I watched a great deal of Italian Neo-Realism Cinema while I worked on ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH? This included classic films such as SHOESHINE, OPEN CITY, GERMANY YEAR ZERO, and THE BICYCLE THIEF. As well, I'd like to cite Bernardo Bertolucci's epic masterpiece 1900. Once more, I studied nations and societies during period of transition, and I found these movies to be very helpful.

Tamara Wilhite: What do you like to do in your spare time?

Doug McKim: I enjoy walking a great deal. I'm fifty-eight, and I hope to maintain good physical health into retirement and old age. I've always had dreams of walking across America, but it may only happen in my dreams. Darn it.

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

Doug McKim: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to chat with you. I'd like to place eastern Oregon on the literary map. I can only hope that my example and influence will motivate more artists in the rural Pacific Northwest. I'm extremely grateful for your interest in my work.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

An Interview with Kevin Rush

By Tamara Wilhite

<http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

"It's my opinion that if you look at the world around you, you have the choice to either be dispirited or inspired. If you're looking for inspiration, it's there in abundance."

Kevin Rush is a busy Catholic author. While many of his works are coming of age novels set in the 1970s, he's also written science fiction and horror.

Tamara Wilhite: Can you tell me about your 'Nauts series?

Kevin Rush: I've always loved science fiction, as long as it was rooted in the human experience, and wasn't all about the gadgets. I read a lot of H.G. Wells, Robert Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke in my youth. With 'Nauts I saw an opportunity in the emerging private sector space race to tell a story of competition between capitalist entrepreneurs and crony capitalist/Socialist corruptocrats. It's sort of in the libertarian vein of Heinlein, but with more natural dialogue and less overt lecturing. There's a Texas company, Lone Star, that contracts with the government for work in space, but is frustrated at every turn by a ruthless oligarch, D'Arcy Sinclair, who has her own politically connected aerospace enterprise. It's a contest between brilliant innovators and brilliant schemers, as technology advances to the point where interplanetary travel becomes possible. The cast is diverse, the characters are rich and com-

plex, and there's plenty of action and suspense.

Tamara Wilhite: Is that your only science fiction series?

Kevin Rush: Yes, but I'm far from done with the genre.

Tamara Wilhite: Your “Los Lobos del Malpais” novella has been called a werewolf western. What is it about?

Kevin Rush: I think it's fun to merge genres once in a while. Lobos is in many ways a classic western: a desolate man pushes west to for a second chance at life. But instead of encountering the privations of the wilderness, Indians and bandits, he runs afoul of a pack of werewolves. It's kind of a fleshed-out movie treatment, and I'm sure readers can imagine James Stewart (or Joel McCrae), Walter Brennan, Jean Arthur (or Barbara Stanwyck) or some of their other favorite western actors in the roles.

Tamara Wilhite: How does story-writing compare to stage plays? You've written several of those to date, at least one of which won an award.

Kevin Rush: Being a playwright is sort of like being a sketch artist who hands his canvas over to a colorist for finishing. It's a wonderful collaborative process where you benefit from the talents the director, actors and set designers, etc. bring to the production. When you write fiction, you've got more control, but more responsibility for supplying details for your readers. Theatre is difficult these days for Conservative Catholic straight white males.(chuckles) From sea to shining sea, American theatre is one hive-mind of liberal group think. There are a few exceptions, (Phelim McAleer, Max McLean and Robert Cooperman come to mind. Search them and support their work!) and God bless them for the pains they endure to provide a space for dissenting voices. I fear for the future of the American theatre, which is going through the middle stages of Stalinism at the moment.

Tamara Wilhite: You also write quite a bit of coming-of-age fiction like “Earthquake Weather” and “The Lance and the Veil”. Would you like to talk about those?

Kevin Rush: Earthquake Weather was my first novel. I wrote it because I was teaching at a Catholic parochial school at the time, and was disappointed that our library had no books for them that were relevant, entertaining and edifying. They were reading Goosebumps and I Know What You Did Last Summer. I decided to write a realistic teen romance/crime drama set in a neighborhood like theirs and filled with kids like them. This was in the early days of self-publishing, when there was a great amount of upfront cost. Not a financially sound move for a guy on a teacher's salary, but I believed there was a need that should be filled. Maybe someday, I'll break even on the venture, but in the meantime, the reader response has been very gratifying. As for The Lance and the Veil, I was intrigued from an early age about the legend of Veronica's veil. Then when I learned about the miraculous properties attributed to the centurion's lance that pierced the side of Christ, I thought it would be fun to place those two stories in one historical drama. I originally wrote it as a film script, but then converted it to novel form.

Tamara Wilhite: How does the marketing and sale of that genre differ from science fiction and horror?

Kevin Rush: I'm sure it confuses my audience! And most marketers would say it's a major faux pas. Everything is about branding these days, which often means you have to choose a narrow lane and stick to it. If you're writing for a Catholic/Christian audience, you're expected to sanitize human experience to a certain extent. I reject that notion. Two of my favorite Catholic novels are Dracula and The Exorcist. I'll probably never go as far as Blatty in detailing the horrors of evil, but if you dilute evil, then

where's the victory when good triumphs? If I have to pick a lane, mine would be probably conservatism, whether it's religious or political, because I believe in the ancient wisdom that has stood the test of time and I believe strongly in individual freedom and a government whose primary duty is to protect liberty, not run lives. So, those are my bedrock principles, but I reserve the right to explore various genres.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you currently working on?

Kevin Rush: I'm about to release a novel. It's a contemporary drama with sci-fi/fantasy elements that takes aim at the current cancel culture.

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

Kevin Rush: At some point I'll be getting back to 'Nauts. I've got plenty of ideas for further adventures. Given the state of theatre and film these days, I'm going to spend most of my energy on fiction, and I've got plenty of projects in the pipeline. I hope folks who read this will follow me on Goodreads or find/like Kevin Rush Author on Facebook.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Kevin Rush: It's been my pleasure. Thanks for your interest.

Prose Bono

The Editing Block
by Cedar Sanderson
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

We writers tend to complain about writing blocks. What if we get an editing block? I've got one that is going to delay my next novel's release by... I don't know how long. I haven't been able to sit down and do the very basic level of post-composition revisions and polish that will enable me to send it off to an actual editor. She's good, but she's not a mind-reader, and it would be unfair to send the ms in this state.

So I'm left with this. Sitting at my desk when I have carved out time to work on the edits, staring at the words on the screen wondering what the heck is wrong with me. I'm tired (I'm always tired. That's a constant state for me), I'm stressed (who isn't, this year?), and although my creative brain has been spun up into overdrive since about July, the editing part of me? Gah. It's busted. I can't fix it.

Although that makes me think of something else. It's impossible to repair a break you can't see. And sometimes repair is not expedient, simple replacement is best. Like the modem this Friday. I got home from work, sat at the kitchen table working on second art (I'll explain later) and talking to my husband while he cooked us dinner (he's a master of an omelette: I told him I was craving salt and got one stuffed with olives and feta. It was so so good). The internet went down, so I walked into the office area and tried to restart the modem. 'Have you turned it off and back on again...?' went like this: unplug, plug back in, and suddenly, there are no lights at all on the modem. Two tech support calls later, and a flying trip to the store, and I had the 'net back up, because they replaced the cheap little modem that had suddenly fried. It was toast. Toes up and not even the satisfaction of the magic smoke coming out to let me know it was thoroughly dead. Ah, well.

I can't replace my brain. I'm not even certain I'd want to. Who knows what I'd wind up with instead of this one I at least understand sometimes? Abby N. Ormal more than likely, given my luck. What I might be able to do is figure out what's busted and then wire up a workaround to that. I've done that with other things in life. Brain doesn't like to be bored? Podcasts. Brain hates housecleaning? Make it a game. Lungs lock up at the smallest allergen and certain perfumes? For that, we have albuterol. Speaking of which. PSA: if you are asthmatic or even like me and 'pre-asthmatic' then craft stores and even freakin' Aldi are off limits from now until post-Christmas. I complain every year that the cinnamon pine cones in the entry way are a health hazard. They make polite noises and ignore me, and I know I'm not the only person who reacts to the stinking things.

Anyway, stepping off that soap box. I was talking about rewiring my brain. And I mentioned above I'd come back to the art. Last week I'd had an idea. That's nothing new, I have ideas all the time. This had to do with my sister Juniper, though. I decided I was going to create a picture book for her Christmas Present. Ulp. I have a little over a month! Can it be done? I talked to my other sister. Should it have a plot? I asked her. Yes, she said.

Crap. I just talked myself into writing that children's book I said I couldn't do. Some time later, a whole lot of words that rhyme with moose, a absolutely hilarious thread sequence on social media about moose poetry, and sitting at the computer writing truly bad doggerel ala Theodore Geisel, and I

had it. I had written a picture book story. It's rhyming, but there's a plot. Not too much tension (drama upsets Juniper) and yes, there are words that no four year old could be expected to know, but it's designed to be read aloud as Juniper is still trying to learn how to read, forty years later. I hope she never gives up. And I hereby publicly apologize to my mother if Juniper decides she wants this story read aloud over and over and...

I'm working on the art, a minimum of two illustrations a day. Three, yesterday. That's the easy part, oddly enough. I had this mental block about being able to write a story on a level for a child. It's not easy. To do it well, you must boil the thing down to it's essences. You don't have the room for the words you can be lazy with like you can in a novel for adults. To convey much with very little... I'd convinced myself I couldn't do it. I'd fobbed it off on my mother, earlier this year, by sending her 400+ illustrations, and saying 'write a story around some of these.' Actually, Mom, I still want you to do that. I'd love to coauthor with you.

Anyway. I'm sure I can figure out how to break through the editing block. I hope. I have to! It's either that or abandon a complete novel to just... sit there. I do have a second one finished, I suppose I could work on that and come back to this one later? But I have rambled on long enough here.

Oh! I switched days with Dorothy. In case you noticed this is Sunday. If you hadn't, now you know. If you were convinced it was still Saturday and you had a day left of weekend, I'm sorry!

This is a portrait of my sister Juniper, with a cute moose hoodie on, as her favorite joke is to make hand antlers and declare she's a cute moose. And the header image is from the storybook I am writing and illustrating, A Cute Moose.

Gaining Control over Life Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I know I'm getting old – I managed to pull a muscle under my scapula getting out of bed this morning. Also, I had a birthday earlier this month. I wasn't thinking about either of those when I planned to write this post, though. No, I was thinking about control, and how feeling completely out of control and powerless affects the human psyche.

As a writer, it's something I can do to galvanize a character: back them into a corner with calamities that both they triggered, and some that were entirely not their doing. It's up to them to seize some control, whatever they can, and come out fighting. If they curled up on the floor and submitted to their fate, well, I don't want to tell that story.

Sometimes my writing gives me a way to look at my Self. This spring I stepped on the scale, recoiled from the number (it wasn't the highest it has been in my life, but it represented a lot of lost ground) and decided that if I couldn't defeat a pandemic, a dying father-in-law, ailing dog, loss of husband's income, and various other calamities, I could at the very least lose some goldurned weight. And then I turned to some people I trust implicitly, and they helped me through the last six months, and losing 33 lbs so far – I want to drop another 5 at least.

The other thing I seized control of this year was my writing output. I wanted to write. I toyed with giv-

ing it up entirely – I’ve talked about this several times, so I won’t bore you again – but ultimately I chose to control my own output. I have succeeded. Both the writing and the weightloss share some traits, and that’s what I wanted to dwell on. Small successes breed larger successes. By getting the loss started, I could step on the scale, and see progress. A little at a time, at first. But over time it snowballed. I got smaller – nearly six sizes to date – and the wordcount got higher. I will exceed a quarter million words written by the end of the year even with modest projections through the next two months, and that will be just the fiction. Non-fiction will add another 150K words to that, as I have not been as focused on the blogs (although I am definitely contemplating a book of collected essays, it’s a project for next year).

I’m winning. It’s not something you could write into a story – I certainly wouldn’t, it would be boring as heck! – but the feelings that went along with all of this I can and will use for characters who are dealing with much more transient and critical crises. There’s been whining – my accountability partners would attest to that. But I have also been trying to be positive about it, because if I lose sight of the end goal, and how much progress I have made, I’ll wind up quitting and curling up in a ball on the floor. I’d like to live up to my stories.

Speaking of which! Supernatural Streets, the anthology that has an Amaya Lombard (Witchward, Snow in Her Eyes series) story in it is on sale through the end of today. Happy Halloween!

Also, thank you to everyone who bought, read, and reviewed *The Groundskeeper: Raking Up the Dead*. I see twelve reviews on that already. It’s kind of amazing. Gives me hope! And makes me want to keep writing.

Excerpt from *Child of Crows*, found only in the Supernatural Streets anthology:

Life has a way of kicking you when you are down, letting you get up, and then kicking you again. It wasn’t fair. I was happy, even with the usual madness of getting off the plane and collecting my baggage. I was smiling, right up until I saw my captain waiting for me outside bag claim. I locked eyes with Sean, still smiling, until I saw who was standing with him. The smile slid off my face and I felt it shatter into ice crystals as my heart froze.

She was smiling. No. She was smirking. Just like she had the last time I’d seen her, standing next to my late Aunt Delia. Delia’s High Priestess, or whatever title she’d claimed. She’d come for my help and my dear aunt had backed her request. I’d gone, and had come back with my world ripped in half. Now my world was looking a lot like it was healing, up until this second, when I faced Krystal Nerborn again. Ridiculous name cloaking serious, even deadly, power.

“Sean...” I greeted my boss, ignoring the crowds of travelers around us. No, not my boss, I reminded myself. Maybe never my boss again. A decade of habit was not going to be easy to break. I didn’t greet her. She was nameless to me. I could see her, though. On both planes. Mauve and mustard billows of color tangled around her, dark streaks like anti-lightning, tying them to her.

“Amaya. I have bad news...” He started to speak, and I caught my breath and put my cop mask back on. “There’s been a case come up. I know you’re due back in Kentucky in a week...”

“This won’t take long,” she chirped. I could see on her smug face that she was enjoying the situation hugely. I ignored her and angled my body, so I was only looking at him, talking to him.

“I will be returning to Kentucky on time.” I told him. “I have a lot to take care of...”

She interrupted again. “Nothing the coven can’t do for you.”

I felt the rage rise in me in a crimson wave of heat. It was a cliché for a reason. As the blood rushes into your eyes when you face your enemy and prepare for mortal combat, it colors your vision. I saw red for a moment, then felt Sean’s hand on my elbow as he started to lead me away from where we were standing.

“No, thank you ma’am.” He addressed her far more politely than I was capable of. “We can take care of Detective Lombard.”

“Agent.” I spoke, my voice soft but more even than I’d feared it would be. I would not give her the satisfaction of seeing how deeply she had affected me. “Special Agent Lombard now.”

“Right.” He grinned and put on the surfer dude persona he liked to affect. “Like, totally rad, dude!”

I found a smile for him. He didn’t need to know the history. I’d do one last case for him. He’d been a great boss and I was going to miss him. Her... Putting a continent between us wasn’t going to be enough. I wasn’t alone, though. Mark had my back. If I wasn’t on that plane in a week, he’d come for me. I squared my shoulders, and found a real smile backed by that assurance.

Sean loaded me into his unmarked car, and briefed me on the way to the station. Krystal, in her billowy gauze with pink crystals, had drifted into the station the day before. She wanted to report a theft, she told the desk sergeant, who gazed at her over his readers and then shrugged before sliding a clipboard through the slit in the bulletproof glass with a report for her to fill out. One of the patrolmen who happened to be in the office had regaled everyone with the story later. She had, it seemed, pulled open a voluminous bag, and emerged after a brief rummage with a quill and a bottle of pink ink.

Run, Run, As Fast As You Can ... by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

... Because you don’t want to be tricked like the gingerbread man!

I apologise for the doggerel, but there is a point here.

A couple of days ago, a friend of a friend posted a question to a writer’s group on Facebook. The good news was that he’d been offered a contract by a traditional publisher. The bad news was that that the publisher wanted him to pay in advance. The editing, marketing, and publishing would cost \$350, they said; the contract stated that they wanted \$395 as the first payment, then ten more payments of \$295 every month regardless of the book’s actual status (published or not.)

I took one look and wrote a simple response. “Run, run, run!”

Greater writers than I have said this before, but it needs to be repeated time and time again. In traditional publishing, money flows downhill to the author. The publisher pays for editing, marketing and such-like in advance (and then takes it out of earnings before they pay the author anything more than the advance). The author does not pay a single penny (or cent) to the publisher. Full stop.

Put bluntly, if the publisher expects you to pay in advance, they're scammers.

Writers want to be published. We want to see our name in print. And that can make us suckers, ripe for exploitation. It is very easy to fall for the 'sunk cost' fallacy and keep shelling out cash, while the so-called publishers do nothing – or do it very poorly. Writers who get into these sort of messes often discover that the editing is sub-standard, the marketing consists of a handful of Facebook ads and the printing is terrible. Worse, they are often expected to buy huge print runs of their own books – which are then unsellable – or discover that their contracts entitles their publishers to first call on anything else they happen to write. Getting out of these contracts can be a nightmare.

Let me say it again. If the publisher expects you to pay in advance, they're scammers. You are being scammed.

These companies do not make money by publishing books. They make money by exploiting hundreds of people like YOU, people who were so captivated by the idea of having their name in print that they didn't recognise or heed the warning signs. Their whole business model is based around insisting you need services and then forcing you to pay for them. I know what it's like to be an unpublished author, desperate to break into a hard market; I understand exactly how a newbie writer feels. But it is important to recognise that any newbie writer is a potential target for exploitation. A publisher who wants you to pay is not your friend.

Now, this obviously isn't true of indie publishing. There, you buy services on contract – I hire editors and cover designers for my books. (I think the most expensive book I ever put out cost me around \$1500.) But I also don't have to split the proceeds with an agent or a publisher. Nor do I have to stick with a contractor whose services are not up to par.

If someone offers you a contract, do your due diligence. Check out Writer Beware and other online resources for writers. Read reviews of work your publisher has put out – not paid reviews, real reviews. Insist on reading the contract – perhaps even chatting with other authors (and make sure you find their contact details yourself) – before you do more than express interest. Perhaps even check out the free samples so you can see their editing for yourself.

If you get involved in a scam, it will cost you your book (and perhaps any future books) as well as your reputation. You do not want to look like a sucker. I've seen far too many authors shrilling for their scammers, all believing that a great payday is just around the corner. It's an easy mistake to make, but you don't want to make it.

So ... warning signs.

If a publisher asks you to pay for having your book published, RUN.

If a publisher insists you sign a contract giving them complete and open-ended power over the book, and/or demands first refusal rights for anything else you might happen to write, RUN.

If a publisher asks you to pay for services (editing, cover design, etc), RUN.

If a publisher promises you the sun and the moon tomorrow, but never today, RUN.

If a publisher tells you that he isn't one of those evil vanity publishers, RUN.

I don't mean to rain on anyone's parade. I understand the urge to get published and see your name in print. But it is important to remember that the urge makes you vulnerable and there are people out there who will try to exploit you. Do your research, keep a wary eye on anyone who claims to be your friend instead of taking a business-like approach and, for the love of God, learn from other experiences before you become the next cautionary tale for new writers.

Believe me, there are plenty of those out there already.

Wright's Writing Corner: Catching the Lightning – Part Three

L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperserviceSF.com>

In this installment, we are continuing our discussion of the zing moments...those moments of heightened intimacy in a romance that produce a sudden jolt in the reader. First kisses. The moment she says, "I love you." (preferably not followed by "I know." As a child, I could not think of anything more embarrassing than finally baring one's heart only to receive a "I know." That's an anti-zing moment. An ack, rather than a zing.)

What moments produce zing? What moments could the author beef up to give more zing?

In the comments from the previous week there were some very nice examples of zing, as well as some thoughts on what might be the catalyst. For instance, putting the beloved in danger is a great way to have the hero or heroine suddenly realize the depth of their affections—a great zing moment.

In my efforts to conquer the Everest of romantic tension, I have been keeping a list of zing-producers. Here are my two versions of the list:

Spot
Meet
Brush hands
Touch
Thoughts linger
Resist
Body responding
Resist
Thoughts hung up on
Resist
Heart responding
Resist
Heart entirely lost
Discover love

Or

Meet and or notice the other person
Realize that one has noticed the other person

Resist this fact
Realizing that one is 'a bit taken'
Resist this fact
Realizing that one cares what the other thinks of one.
Resist this fact
Realizing that one is really quite serious about the other person
Resist this fact
Realizing how vulnerable one is around the other person
Resist this fact
Realizing one does not know if the other person feels the same way
Fear of being rejected
Fear of losing the other person
Realizing that they are in love
Resist this fact
Fear of never feeling this way again
Admitting their love—to themselves
Admitting their love to the beloved
Discovering that they are loved in return

A great deal of romance is about resistance. “He is the last man I would marry” is just as much an indicator to the reader of the romantic struggle going on in the heart of the heroine as “He’s the man I want.” In fact, more so. There is very little tension in a story about two people who already want each other. Most romance is about overcoming the reasons that they don’t want each other.

Maybe another time I will do a post on the importance to romantic tension of resisting the lure. Perhaps, I will call it: To Heck With The Borg! Resistance is Essential!

Each of these steps...and the others I have not yet thought of...are opportunities for the author to zing the reader. Can a given book make use of every single one of these steps? Probably not, though it might be possible. But many books could make use of more of these steps than they do.

Many authors, even romance authors, just breeze past the zing moments without taking advantage of them. They often do not realize that just pausing briefly to have the character think: “Hey, maybe I like him!” Or “Whoa, I don’t recall feeling this way before. Could something serious be going on here?” can be enough to bring out the zing factor, making the very same scene that much more pleasant and re-readable.

(I go back and reread some of my favorite zing scenes, at least in my favorite books. And others must, too, because some of you folks posted just such scenes last week.)

So, in closing, zing is that sudden moment of increased intensity between a couple that electrifies the reader. Romance readers read for the zing, but even regular readers enjoy an occasional zing to spice up their action adventure or their grizzly horror story. (Well, maybe not the grizzly horror story.)

One can add more zing by deliberately highlighting such moments, recognizing them in the story and drawing them out on the page. The more such moments the author pauses to showcase, the more the story zings the reader.

So, take the list above and move down it like a locomotive juggernaut, relentlessly bonking the reader with every single stop on the list, cramming in as much zing as humanly possible, while adding fifty

new stops of your own.

Oh...wait...

Seriously, take the list above and glance at it. See if anything in it inspires a scene or even a sentence that might heighten a moment that already exists in your manuscript.

And if you do think of fifty more zingable moments, please share them with me!

~Finis~