

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

EDITORIAL

FICTION

- 2 ... A Deadly Education by Naomi Novik — Review by Christopher G. Nuttall
3 ... Alien Hunter The White House by Whitley Strieber — Review by Mindy Hunt
4 ... Been There, Done That by Mackey Chandler — Review by Pat Patterson
6 ... Candidate Spectrum by Brian Cato — Review by Jason P Hunt
7 ... Deathlords by Jason Cordova — Review by Pat Patterson
8 ... Eric Olafson: Midshipman by Vanessa Ravencroft — Review by Jim McCoy
9 ... Escort Duty by Tom Rogneby — Review by Pat Patterson
11 ... Fire from Ashes by Sam Schall and Amanda S. Green — Review by Pat Patterson
12 ... Hazardous Magic by Tiffanie Gray — Review by Pat Patterson
13 ... The Last Marine: Books One and Two by T.S. Randell — Review by Jim McCoy
15 ... Like a Continental Soldier by Laura Montgomery — Review by Pat Patterson
16 ... Return to Normandy by John R. Taylor — Review by Jim McCoy
17 ... Star Mountain Sons: Honour on the North Lake by M. Timothy Gray
— Review by Pat Patterson
19 ... Sword's Edge by L.S. King — Review by Jim McCoy
20 ... To Sail Beyond the Sunset by Robert A. Heinlein — Review by Christopher Nuttall
24 ... Trade Winds by Sarah A. Hoyt — Review by Pat Patterson
26 ... The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering by L. Jagi Lamplighter
— Review by Declan Finn
28 ... Unmasked by Kai Wai Cheah and Thomas Plutarch — Review by Declan Finn
30 ... The Unmasking by David Burkhead — Review by Pat Patterson
32 ... The Victims' Club by Jeffery Deaver — Review by Pat Patterson
33 ... Who Can Own The Stars? by Mackey Chandler — Review by Pat Patterson

NON-FICTION

- 35 ... Jack Kirby: The Epic Life of the King of Comics (2020) By Tom Scioli
— Review by Jon Swartz, Ph.D.
36 ... Interview of L. S. King by Tamara Wilhite

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



LITERARY CRITICISM

37 ... Don't Make Me Use My Dad Voice Analysis by Jim McCoy

PROSE BONO

39 ... Wright's Writing Corner: The Payload Moment by L. Jagi Lamplighter

41 ... The Cute Moose: Lessons Learned by Cedar Sanderson

FINIS ... 43

Editorial

Welcome to our new reviewer, Declan Finn. He is a real writer of novels. His extensive blog is to be found at <http://www.declanfinn.com>.

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 prose on creating and marketing sf/fnal prose, art, and marketing. Their articles are an invaluable contribution to the future writing efforts of every reader.



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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 magicians 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, do 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 The White House by Whitley Strieber Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

I have finally finished the third book in Whitley Strieber's Alien Hunter series. I'm glad that I had the opportunity to a complete collection of books, but I can also say it couldn't happen soon enough.

We meet up with Flynn Carroll a few years after the events of the last book. He's moved to Washington D.C. and is deeper into the unnamed government agency. Aliens are still the threat, but they've upped their game. This time it's on the international chess board and Flynn knows they're deep into different governments, but how and why, he's unsure. The knowledge we gained about the alien technology from the previous book comes into play. We find out how they are using it to manipulate humanity. During this discovery, Flynn gains an unlikely ally who has just as much to lose if the aliens succeed. Slowly the pieces come together and it becomes a race against time to stop them.

Like the last two books, the action starts immediately and doesn't slow down. I have no issue with this, as it's a way to get the reader sucked into the story quickly. I knew that this book would be a ride like its predecessors. However, since I've read the first two books recently, I've picked up on Strieber's

formula, at least with these. The farther I got into the book, the more predictable it became. I'm sure if I were reading these as they were released it would be less obvious.

Not only was the structure of the book predictable, but so was the final outcome. I feel Strieber made the "villain" too obvious with the description of this character and their history with other characters. With the first two books, I felt he threw a few curves, but not here. In the last book, I enjoyed Flynn's side trip and it made sense for the movement of the story. This book's side journey...I'm still trying to best figure out how it helped move the story forward except to give us a great action sequence.

I've enjoyed the three books, probably in the order of Underworld, Alien Hunter, then White House. I'm sure that if Strieber wrote a fourth Alien Hunter book, I would get around to reading it, but I would hope that he would mix his formula up a tad and throw the reader for a loop.

Been There, Done That by Mackey Chandler

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

And now, it's story time, with Papa Pat! Gather around me, O my best-beloved, and I will share of my treasure of experience, that your life may be long in the land and your refrigerators full of food.

Lo, long, long these many years ago, long before YOUR time, O my best-beloved, when Mr. Carter lived in the White House -

- What's that, Dougie? You remember Mr Carter in the White House? Well, yes you do, Dougie, for you and I are nearly of an age.

Well, back in that day -

-What is it this time, Dougie? You remember Mr Ford and Mr Nixon and Mr Johnson, too? Yes, Dougie, but that isn't the time of which I speak.

-What, Dougie? You remember Mr Kennedy and Mr. Eisenhower? You're PUSHING it, Dougie! Now unless you need to go to the bathroom, sit over there and don't interrupt me again!

Now, as I was saying, there came a time back in that day when your Papa Pat was appointed as a Youth Shaman, to oversee the spiritual welfare and training of copious youths, ranging from 12 years old to 18 years old. And yea and verily, Papa Pat was sorely perplexed in those time to reach out to the dingbats and knuckleheads with whom he was entrusted. (For, you must know, O my best beloved, he was not yet Papa Pat in those days, but merely Pat.)

And it came to pass that on one evening he desired greatly to teach them of responsibility and leadership. And he chose Jimmy, the most knuckleheaded dingbat of the group as his demonstrator.

Papa Pat brought forth a black robe, with the appearance of silk (but it was really paper; he had graduated from college in it); and he bade knuckleheaded dingbat Jimmy to stand forth in front of the group, and he said,

"Jimmy, I am ordaining you as the Head Shaman over all the people. And they shall come to you when they need comfort; and they shall come to you when they need advice; and they shall come to you to perform their weddings and sacred ceremonies and funerals. And in time of war, they shall come to you and ask for your counsel."

And behold, as Papa Pat was saying these things, he took the black robe, and he laid it on Jimmy's shoulders, and he placed Jimmy's arms in the sleeves, and he hung it over Jimmy's frame, and he fastened the robe on Jimmy, and as he was speaking his last words, he knelt down in front of the knuckle-headed dingbat Jimmy, and fastened the hooks of the robe at the bottom,

And he remained kneeling in front of knuckleheaded dingbat Jimmy, and he looked up at Jimmy's face, well aware of the silence that had come over the group, and he saw the slightest hint of tears in Jimmy's eyes.

And, as he continued to kneel, he said to Jimmy, "How did that make you feel?"

And Jimmy replied, in a small voice, "Like I might be worth something, for once."

And then Papa Pat said "And what would you do if someone came to attack your people?"

And young, knuckleheaded dingbat Jimmy tightened his face, and gritted his teeth, and said in a resolute voice, "I'd FIGHT 'em!"

And this, O my best beloved, is the end of that story. No, Dougie, I am not going to tell another today. Now, y'all go someplace else and try to stay out of trouble; I have work to do.

What is the relevance of this (true!) story to Mackey Chandler's excellent work, 'Neither Here Nor There'?

Just this: knuckleheaded dingbats like Jimmy do not, and could not, exist in the society that April and her companions have developed. There is no room for 'spare people.' Young folks, like knuckleheaded dingbat Jimmy, are not shoved into a classroom and expected to behave for 8 hours a day, then released to their own devices until they are compelled to show up again the next morning. Instead, there is PLENTY of meaningful work, and no one cares that they are young. What matters is whether or not they are competent. And they ALWAYS, ALWAYS have a chance to feel like they are worth something. Not just for once, either. Their contributions are vital to the well-running society.

It's NOT like sending kindergartners off to the coal mine; there is plenty of time for recreation, and education isn't neglected, either. However, if someone has a useful contribution to make, they are allowed to make it, and the money is theirs. There are various ways in which their rights may be protected, should a parent decide to take their income for themselves; however, they don't just jump in and rip kiddies from their mothers' arms, either.

It's a good time to be in this world. There is plenty of work to be done; anyone who wants to can find work, but no one has to grind themselves to death just to pay for food and shelter for the day.

Much of this can be attributed to April's own experience. She had a dreadfully hard time being taken seriously when she started out, and whether it was her intent to prevent that sort of foolishness from happening again, that has been the result of her efforts.

Okay, this post has great symbolic value for me. It's NOT a very good review of the book; I only touched upon one CENTRAL aspect of the plot. There is MUCH more going on. HOWEVER! It's the first book review I have been able to write since September 25. and I'm not going to let the perfect be the enemy of the completed.

Candidate Spectrum by Brian Cato

Review by Jason P Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

What if Superman ran for president?

That's basically the premise behind Brian Cato's *Candidate Spectrum*, wherein the superhero known as Spectrum decides that saving people handfuls at a time isn't good enough. He feels like he can do more, that he should do more, to help humanity on a more systemic level. So he dumps his superhero persona and runs for office using his civilian alter-ego of Grant Goslin, formerly of FEMA.

On its face, it's an intriguing notion. Especially when you consider the question of how a superpowered being can act with restraint and work within a system such as a government. It's hard enough for regular people to maintain self-control in the face of the bureaucratic mentality.

Unfortunately, while the idea is interesting, the execution isn't. The book starts off with Spectrum performing various acts of heroism, but when he finds himself not able to save everyone in a train wreck, he starts to question his purpose. After discussions with Ma & Pa, he decides to run for office. And that's where the book sort of crumbles. The rest of the narrative — all told in third person present tense — feels like I'm reading transcripts of interviews with white papers.

One of the fundamentals in good storytelling is "Show, don't tell" and this book needed a judicious amount of that here. Certain passages gloss over the inner workings and machinations of a political campaign, while in other places emphasis is placed on minutiae. And the conversations that Grant has with people about various topics come across as research papers for a college class instead of real conversations. People talk in short sentences, most of the time, and that's missing here. They also move. And they react. And they change posture. There are a thousand little things that happen in the course of a scene that should give the reader a sense of the space these characters occupy, and that's strikingly absent from Cato's narration.

The frustrating thing about it is that at its core, it's an interesting premise for a story. What would happen if a superhero ran for elected office? Would the power set become a campaign issue? Would there be pushback because of the whole "secret identity" thing? Would there be questions about some kind of registry similar to the Sokovia Accords over in the Marvel Cinematic Universe? Ultimately, Grant's powers don't factor in much after he starts his campaign, and there's an entire branch of story that remains unexplored.

I also think the choice of present tense narration is a mistake, but I think that every time I run across it (looking at you, Wendig), so it's not a complaint that's unique to this book. I can't stand present tense narration for a story. It barely works for oral presentations, and even then it has to be done "just so" in order to be effective.

The story also suffers from the lack of an antagonist, or at the very least the lack of a ticking time bomb. There's no urgency. Grant spends all of his time in conversations and interviews, and there's no real drama such as you would expect in a story about a political campaign. Especially after the drama that we're seeing play out in real time now. Politics are ugly. The people immersed in politics can be just as ugly. There's drama in almost every development of a campaign, and that's missing here. There are no stakes. You get no sense that the election matters, except every now and again Grant worries

about how he can do more to help humanity, and figuring out what that means.

It's a decent B-plot, but there's no main story here. Ultimately, the book suffers for that. Lots of potential here, but it's never fully realized.

Deathlords by Jason Cordova
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

If you had asked me last week, I would have told you that I had read everything Jason Cordova has written. That appears not to be the case, because I can find no record of having read the previous installment in this series.

I'm not going to claim that catching up was super easy, barely an inconvenience, because it's obvious that I missed out on some great story. However, there are no places where I was lost. Part of that is because the scenes themselves are so compelling; you don't spend ANY time wondering what has happened if you come across your destroyed homestead, with dead strangers on the lawn, and dead family inside the front door.

Which is what happens in the first scene.

Nope, as the reader, you are immediately immersed in the character's decisions about WHAT MUST I DO NEXT? That's the way it goes with this story: someone butchers the Espinoza family, and is obliterated in the process; someone else has killed the emperor and his guards. All of that action took place in the prior installments, and the particulars don't really matter, because the focus remains on what happens next.

So: what does happen next? "I seek righteousness, as should we all, but I will settle for revenge." (Spoken to Denzel Washington in "The Magnificent 7")

Yup, it's mainly about payback; however, the actions have triggered a civil war between two political factions, and each one has an identical twin to champion their cause.

Ya don't see that identical twin bit very often any more, do you?

A remaining, deeply undercover Espinoza family member has been given the role of a dilettante Senator to play, and it is a function of his particular Senate seat to approve, or disapprove, a nomination to become head of government. He doesn't really have a good choice in either faction, so he uses a technicality to rule the selection invalid, and proceeds to run away.

People pursue him.

Tiny nutshell statement: The brothers and a father, nobody know where anybody else is or what they are doing, but it's all key to the survival of humanity. And it MUST be resolved, because Evil Factions have managed to marginalize and enslave a significant fraction by casting aspersions on their genetic integrity.

This book will be of particular interest to those who follow the series, because some SIGNIFICANT plot points are resolved. Others remain open questions, and the story is moving at high velocity when

we come to the end of the book.

TRUE FACT: Lots of fascinating military technology here, including mecha suits worthy of Johnny Rico and his buddies; nasty aliens perform experiments on helpless human children, giving at least one of them spooky brain power.

HOWEVER, it isn't the flash and dazzle that drives this story line along; it's the commitment of the family to honor and each other.

Get the entire series.

Eric Olafson: Midshipman by Vanessa Ravencroft Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I love a good space opera. It's pretty much impossible that I wouldn't. I mean, I grew up on Star Trek: The Original Series and then got into every iteration that came after. It's in my blood. That much being said, I'd like to say this: Thank you, Vanessa Ravencroft, for upholding my faith in my favorite sub-genre of Science Fiction. Seriously. Eric Olafson: Midshipman knocked it out of the park. I'll get to why in just a bit, but for now the disclaimer:

This is the eighth book in the series. I was able to follow 95% of it easily. It was all entertaining. I'm really only mentioning this because I know some people (and I happen to be one of them) prefer to start a series at the beginning. If you're looking for book one, it ain't here. If you're looking for a rollicking good time though, look no further. This one owns it.

Eric Olafson is not your typical midshipman/cadet. He has decorations that many senior officers don't, including the equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor. He seems to be beloved by just about every race of aliens in the galaxy, including the mysterious ones that no human seems to understand. And believe me, no one who is not a Narth really understands the Narth, but they love them some Midshipman Olafson. Seriously. That's really cool though because we get to see all kinds of alien races. With apologies to the Honor Harrington saga, the best Space Opera always includes aliens. Trek, Wars, Green Lantern, etc. It's an old tradition and it gets carried on here.

I want to praise Ravencroft for something else as well: Many authors have characters that are either gay or have some kind of weird gender but very few get it right. Ravencroft does. EO:M is a story about a person named Eric Olafson who has two genders (I may be describing this wrong, I'm not an expert on the subject) but the story is about his second and third years at the United Stars Naval Academy. This is not a story about someone having a mixed gender, it is the story of a mixed gendered person. It's a good story. Very rarely have I seen books with mixed gender and/or gay characters that actually managed to tell a good story but Ravencroft pulled it off. Kudos to her.

There is something else that works with the whole mixed gender thing. Eric thinks that no one knows, but everyone does. They just don't care. He's in the closet for no reason. I like that. Most people have no problems with a person being mixed-gender and/or homosexual in today's society. A lot of the supposed transgressions committed by those of us who are not gay (although certainly not all) are more a matter of the way things are perceived. Ravencroft seems to get this.

The story of Eric Olafson: Midshipman focuses on the titular characters second and third years at the

naval academy. Olafson and his friends get into more trouble than the Harry Potter gang. Really. These guys could walk into a Kool-Aid tasting and walk out with a collection of black eyes and scalps. It makes the book fun. If you're looking for action look here because you'll find plenty.

Olafson alternates between extremely humble and a take no shit attitude. It fits though. I want to know how Ravencroft pulled this off. One minute, Olafson is like "Aw shucks" and the next he's like "Yes, I am an officer and I earned these medals. Follow my orders, dammit!" It's impressive.

The book offers several interludes. These switch point of view and location of the narrator. This is a good thing. This is the exact technique used by just about every movie or TV show ever. More authors should do this, because it gives the reader a much better understanding of what is going on in the wide world without necessarily informing the main character or something he doesn't need to know. And let's face it: We all love to squirm when the MC acts without knowledge that we have as readers/viewers. It just works.

Some of the gadgetry in the book is just plain cool as well. Every Space Opera ever (I may be exaggerating) has a device that produces a pressed uniform on command, but only the Galactic Chronicles has a device that will put your outfit on you. The power armor in the book includes rockets so that Marines can work/fight in space. The list goes on. I like SF doohickies. Chalk this one up as a win.

I'm confused though. This book is clearly labeled as eighth in the series, but there is only one other book available. I want a chance to read the rest of these books and I'm willing to pay for them, but I can't. That's frustrating. I want to give my money to read the books. This should be a fairly easy thing to negotiate. I mean, I know some authors get frustrated with the whole "Shut up and Take My Money" thing but damn. Where are the other seven books?

While I'm kvetching about things that have nothing to do with the story... I received this book as an ARC for review in e-book form. Yet, when I check Amazon I don't get a link to an ebook. I have nothing against a hardcopy release but I'm confused. The work has already been done. Why is there no e-book available? It seems to me that she'd make more money selling both for whatever that's worth.

My only complaint about the actual story is one that has been made over and over about heroes in stories. Olafson is way too good at, well, everything. He doesn't seem to have a weak spot. He out battles one of his friends who comes from a race that is supposedly invincible in hand to hand fighting. He commands the biggest starship in the fleet on his first day as a cadet and gets through his first combat almost perfectly. He boards another ship in combat and comes back alive and victorious. I mean, this guy couldn't mess up if he tried. Oh, and he's a diplomatic wiz too. The various alien races in the book all recognize Eric as one of their own, even though he is clearly human. Overall though, the story was awesome and the flaws forgivable.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Auto Dressers

Escort Duty by Tom Rogneby

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I should have known I was in for something unusual when the graphic of the book cover only took up the bottom half of the page in my Kindle Library. Wasn't really expecting THIS, though; six short stories, in WILDLY divergent settings. Admittedly, I already knew Rogneby was a author with an unusual

ability to write about different worlds, and make them believable. My first exposure was to his book of the Lost Legion, Via Serica, in 2015. That book was so good, I literally got lost in doing research to supplement my appreciation of the text, so much so that I forgot to write the review until two years later. Bad, Bad Reviewer! No Cookie!

I've also got a huge affection for his Daddy Bear stories. If you haven't discovered the loveliness of a mashup of suburban life and medieval magic, then stop reading this now, and go get Tales of the Minivandians. I love the stories for their own sake, BUT I also used them to drown out my screams and whimpers during more than one long session in the dentist's chair, as beautiful women stabbed me in the face with sharp pointy things.

The following is the sum total of my Amazon review:

"Escort Duty," the first and longest of the stories in the collection, could very well have been set in Daddy Bear's universe. It's the story of a powerful and powerfully determined princess, determined to achieve her goal without understanding all the details and sacrifices that have to be made; and it's the story of a not-so-glamorous dude on a horse, who has certain skills and talents, and who has pledged his life to see her safely home. Bad things happen. Will good things come of that?

"Grandma's Kitchen" is the next story, and I still don't know whether to be warmed and comforted at the example of the sweetness of a sanctuary, created by a grandmother's love; or to be horrified at the prospect of a reincarnation to make good the things we did wrong in this life. For some, the concept of reincarnation may not be terrifying but for me? Brrrrr. HOWEVER! This is a fresh take, and Rogneby has the ability to make you feel the warmth of a Grandma's kitchen, whatever it represents.

"Plaza of Pain" is over the top. It's so over the top, it ALMOST aggravated me, until I realized it was deliberately over-stating every cliché of smash-em bop-em love-em shoot-em fiction, and then turning up the amp to 11. And that's when it got FUNNY.

"Sacrifice" is beautifully moving. Rogneby takes a minor liberty with time, altogether excusable, given the cast of characters, and ties together two foundational stories of sacrifice and redemption. This is one you need to spend some time with.

"Victory Garden" is a sad, post-apocalyptic tale of a guy just trying to get by, and they won't let him. Figuratively, they have strapped his hands down and covered him with lice, and now they hit him when he wiggles. The society he describes must have closely resembled that found in the earliest years of the USSR, but is made more poignant because the level of prosperity in the United States didn't require anyone to riot because they were starving. We just did it to ourselves because we could.

"The War," the last selection in the book, concerns the aftermath of a series of terrorist attacks in the United States. It's a very, very unpleasant scenario, but in my opinion, there really isn't anything we currently have in place that will prevent it. The United States is a haven for people who want a better life, and if they can walk into the country, so can bad actors. And we really have been at peace for so long that it seems it will never end, but that's simply not the case. Rogneby merely takes incidents that occur regularly in, for example, Israel, and has them take place here. At best, we respond in the way he describes.

This was a tough book for me to review, largely because it covers so much ground. Regardless, it's a GREAT read, and I strongly recommend it.

Fire from Ashes by Sam Schall and Amanda S. Green

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I may as well tell you up front: I got the book MONTHS ago, and it was supposed to be read and reviewed before Dragon Con. However, those awards took precedence, and then I hit a combination of Reviewers Block and Life Events; thus, the delay in reviewing must fall entirely on my shoulders, and is no fault of the author or her work.

This is the fourth book in the series, which evidently is planned to be completed in a fifth book. And thus, the bookworm's dilemma: I really, really want to find out the end of the plot lines, so I want to get to the end, BUT I also am so fascinated by the story that I don't want it to end. I KNOW it has to end from my own experience. However, we who are bookworms always want MOAR!!~!~!!! Well, not ALWAYS. If I never read another word GRRM writes, it will bother me not at all.

Ashlyn Shaw isn't the first female hero I've followed, but she is the first female hero that had me examining the difference in my literary heroes at age 10 and those of age 65. Is it a simple formula? Do you just take Sergeant Rock, add 55 years, and you get Ashlyn Shaw? Let's face it: there are some amazing resemblances. They both care about the troops under their command. They both are HIGHLY mission oriented. They are both, unequivocally, Good Guys. And say it I must: they are both bad-asses, of cosmic proportions.

At the beginning of this penultimate (perhaps) installment of the series, Ashlyn has risen in the organization from being the commander of a single company at the beginning. More significantly, she has been completely exonerated of the charges and suspicion that she was a traitor to her nation/planet of Fuercon. Those who set her up in an attempt to bring Fuercon down are in prison, where she can't get at them. And the evidence, that it was a professed ally who put the entire scheme in motion, is mounting.

It's the development of these themes that comprises the bulk of the book.

Not all that has hurt her command and her country has been a result of enemy action. Sometimes it was simple incompetence; other times, nepotism has put people in command of combat units, when they would be better off commanding a messkit-repair depot.

That latter approach, by the way, of putting people in command for reasons other than ability to command, has a mirror image in the career formation of the enemies of Fuercon. In those cases, it appears that terror, in the form of fear of death at the hands of a vexed supervisor, is regarded as the appropriate command strategy. That alone would make them repugnant enough to fight, regardless of their policies toward conquered planets. Fortunately, it's a strategy which does not make for an efficient military in the long-term.

As long as Amazon utilizes a single five-star scale for rating a book, reviews are going to be affected by too many factors to be truly accurate. The characters and the story are of the sort that keep me coming back for more, but there are too many copy-proofing errors for me to give the fifth star. Those are easily filtered out by the reader, however, and I knew what the author MEANT to say from the context. My end impression is of a well-told story that needs \$25 worth of copy-editing paid to some reasonably competent high school senior, who can also use this for extra credit in Senior English. YMMV

Hazardous Magic by Tiffanie Gray

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I only had one bad moment with this book: when I looked down at the progress indicator, and saw that I was at the 93% mark. "Oh, no! This isn't a book, it's a SHORT STORY!"

Alas, this is ONE of the problems with shifting from books printed on dead trees, and books printed with motivated photons: There isn't any PHYSICAL clue as to the size. It's only when a read becomes a problem that I ever check the page count. In this case, the problem is that I wanted MOAR!!!

The subtitle tells me that this is a 'Terran-Subterranean' story, and that's a universe with which I was previously unaware. It really doesn't matter for the enjoyment of this work; the incidents in which conflict arises stand on their own, and you don't need to know the history to have a big yock at what's happening. All that you NEED to know of the back story is revealed as you go along. Specifically: The ONLY questions you have at the end of the book are of the 'Where can I find more of this?', NOT "What the heck did he mean by THAT reference" or "Why in the world did the character do THAT?"

Some time in the not-too-distant past, creatures who had been living UNDER the surface of the earth emerged to daylight; conflict ensued. I am not sure whether to other non-standard beings and creatures appeared at the same time, but hopefully, future writings will make that apparent.

Protagonist Ace Anshelm is a private pilot, nicknamed 'Demon' for his uncanny ability to fly safely in places where "angels feared to tread." Despite the moniker, he is 100% human; he is merely gifted with good reflexes, and a pilot's eye and ability to analyze. After military service, he started up his own air cargo airline, but the few contracts he was able to win from established lines resulted in more damage than his insurance company would stand, and without insurance, there is no way to make a legitimate living in air cargo.

He was saved from signing up with a big airline by a company specializing in transporting Hazardous Magic. He has observed their operation over the years, and is impressed with their procedures and equipment, so despite the name, he has no qualms with joining up with them.

This story describes one flight. An UNUSUAL flight, to be certain, but only slightly so. It seems that the materials or the process for securing the cargo has not been all that it could be, and assorted entities emerge, to do damage. AFTER the aircraft is in the air. With only Ace and his giant co-pilot to fly the plane AND control the mayhem.

If you look on the net, you can find the actual recordings of crew on the flight deck as they encounter 'challenges.' For that matter, the actual recordings of the Apollo 13 crew are available. Forget the movie; the emotional tone of the Apollo crew and the flight controllers was so mild, you might expect them to fall asleep at the end of every sentence. And wondrously, Gray manages to put this composure into the interactions between the flight deck and the tower, as the giant co-pilot fights nasties in the cargo area and Ace/Demon struggles to keep the aircraft from turning into a bit of inefficient mining equipment.

There is a note somewhere to the effect that this is a YA book. I rather despise that appellation, since it makes me think of stupidly simple plots and characters. However, it often is also a code for 'no explicit sex, no explicit language.' That's the case here. It's a highly amusing story; I MAY make my 14 year old

Kenneth read it to see if it's a fit for him, but it is certainly a fit for his 65 year old Papa.

Now, won't you join me in banging on the table with the handle of a broom, and gently urging the writer to provide us with MOAR!!!!!!

The Last Marine: Books One and Two by T.S. Randell

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Listen, I'm a fan of Science Fiction and Fantasy. I've been an SF fan since my dad sat me down in front of a TV with Star Trek on it. Science Fiction literature had to wait a few years, because I hadn't learned to read by the age of three days.

SIGH

It's a failing on my part I know, but can't you cut your boy some slack?

With fantasy, it started a little later when I first saw the animated version of The Hobbit in like first or second grade. Not my fault that time, I hadn't been exposed.

Anyway...

As a fan, there are some universes you'd love to live in. Star Trek comes to mind, although I would perhaps prefer a place not up against one of the Neutral Zones. There is no such thing as a Harry Potter fan who doesn't want to attend Hogwarts. I'm not convinced that Westeros would be my favorite place, but Valdemar just might. I don't trust Jayne, but I'd love to work for Captain Mal. And, let's face it, I'd run spice with Han and Chewie if I thought I'd make enough to make it worth my while.

But when it comes to the universe that T.S. Randell created for his series The Last Marine I think I'll stay home if given the choice. If. Given. The. Choice. The problem being that I may not be. See, the United States of The Last Marine is a wokesters paradise. In other words, it's a Communist Hell.

The society of The Last Marine is divided into Elites (people who have the right politics and express them in ways that benefit the Democrat Party) and everyone else. The Elites get the best food, the best drinks, the best seats on a plane...

You get the idea. It's remarkably close to the Marxist society of the Soviet Union, where the average worker got a tiny apartment and Josef Stalin got five dachas and a chauffeur driven limo because SOLIDARITY COMRADE!!!

Yeah, it's scary because it's so close to coming true.

Of course, we didn't just happen to get there by accident and Randell's world-building is amazing.

Wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. I hate it when I do that...

The story starts out with a young reporter trying to make something of himself. His name is Joel Levine and he has a mission: He is to interview the last known living member of the United States Marine Corps, one Sean Harris, and show the citizens of the United States, indeed the entire human race, what

a bunch of violent, misogynistic, homophobic, racist baby killers the Marines were.

And yeah, I know I don't do spoilers but this all comes out in the first chapter so it's not reeeeeeeally a spoiler right?

WINK

Most of the two novels are told by use of the flashback technique, following Harris's real world experiences through a war and his return home, which was not all that he could have hoped for. There are reasons for that which I don't want to spoil, so let's just say that it ain't pretty if you're a returning GI. I feel bad for these dudes and I'm not really the empathetic type if you wanna know the truth.

Randell's use of the flashback, and corresponding occasional return to the present, is amazingly effective. It's like watching someone's memories in the Pensieve, ala Harry Potter, and then being able to discuss what you've just seen with that same person. He makes you feel like you were there. Harris has been through a lot, having experienced war and all its horrors first hand on top of a rotten homecoming. It's seamless. There were times when I almost forgot that I was reading a book and felt like I was sitting there WITH Harris and Levine. Spellbinding sounds like a good term. I'll go with that. It was spellbinding.

I've taken a look at Randell's Amazon biography and it says that he teaches, or possibly taught, history. I'm guessing this guy has studied the time period around the Vietnam War because what he's got here rings true and is reminiscent of accounts I've read written by Vietnam vets. The Last Marine has spots that are enough to make me a bit uncomfortable, so if you lived that mess go in prepared. Oh, and while we're list bona fides, let me mention that Randell's Amazon page states that he is a Marine and a veteran of Desert Shield/Storm. This is some slimy civilian who doesn't know what he's talking about. He was infantry and it sounds like he's been there and done that. He gets it right.

I'll admit that I find myself wondering if Randell wrote The Last Marine, at least partially, out of a desire to be the guy who got to interview the vet. Seriously, I have a degree in history myself (albeit only a BA) and I've always wanted to conduct this type of an interview with a vet: Just me and him and his stories about the war. No historian wouldn't recognize the impulse, although many would interview someone from a different occupation, but still: The people who were there are the greatest primary source and Levine gets access to the last one. I find myself a bit jealous of a person that doesn't exist. I suppose I'll get over it.

I do have one complaint about the works and it's why I decided to review both books together instead of only reviewing one: The first book doesn't really have an ending. I don't mean it ends on a cliff hanger. I mean just cuts off. It was kind of like watching a VHS and having the VCR eat the tape halfway through the movie. It really threw me. In a way, I guess that's a good thing. I didn't know I was at the end of the book and I wanted more, but it really jarred me. That much having been said, it didn't jar me hard enough to make me not want to read the next book. As a matter of fact, thanks to the magic of the internet, I got the Book Two seconds after I had completed Book One. I couldn't wait. That's a good thing in and of itself. But seriously, when you download the first one, download the second one too. It'll be worth your time and you'll be glad you saved yourself the trouble of having to pause in between. Except that there's a sequel on the way and you'll have to pause for that, because it's not out yet.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Scarred Faces

Like a Continental Soldier by Laura Montgomery

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A variation on 'In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king,' is that brand of lovely escapist literature (and movies) about being in possession of advanced technology among primitives. There are LOTS of ways to make this happen, from time warps via messing around with superstrings, as in the 1632 universe, or Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen, to landing on a primitive planet, as in a million movies and Twilight Zone episodes, to all of the post-apocalyptic stories, regardless of the nature of the apocalypse.

Now, while I PERSONALLY would favor being provided with lots of weapons, ammo, and magic healing devices if I were to be dumped in a pre-industrial society, what I prefer in reading is how advanced technology is re-introduced, and it seems a lot of people agree with me. I take the 1632 for evidence of that; not only do we have the BODACIOUSLY large number of novels and nonfiction books published in that universe, there is also the Grantville Gazette, which is, I believe, up to Issue #80. They never thought it would go that high, and I support THAT statement by pointing out that they started by numbering the Gazette with Roman numerals.

And thus, the series that Laura Montgomery has brought us, "Waking Late," is something I enjoy tremendously. She manages to insert time travelers into the story without having to have time travel, which I really appreciate, since I think time travel stories are too full of malarkey to be much fun. Her time travelers are colonists and soldiers who went into long-term suspended animation in order to make a lengthy space passage to a new planet. Unfortunately (details are in the first book), they didn't make it.

At the time of the three books, the descendants of the first people awake have devolved into a ferociously tyrannical monarchy, and most of those who are not rulers are serfs or slaves; they may not be called that, but that is their existence. Labor saving technology has not been introduced, and thus muscle power, either human or human directed, is what brings in the crops.

I speak now as one who was seduced at age 18 by the myth that 'living off the land' was a good thing; it's not. The best thing that science and engineering ever did for us was to free us from back-breaking, continuous labor needed to feed ourselves. While it required legislation to legally free the slaves in this country and others, it is technology that made that a viable alternative.

The society of First Landing, with the brutal monarchy in charge, REQUIRES slave labor to exist. Their ability to control the population is dependent on the inability of the slaves to fight back, and that's what the protagonist Gilead brings. There is minimal use of spaceman technology; only a few communicators exist. So, how is the conflict created and resolved?

This is where we MUST give proper homage to the author, and to her diligence in doing her research. I was fortunate to visit with a gunsmith who specializes in working on antique firearms. He walked me through the evolution, handing me examples of each, from matchlock, to flintlock, to percussion cap rifles. It's the NEXT step that makes the difference, and Montgomery was faithful in her reproduction of the Spencer rifle, introduced in our timeline just before the start of the Civil War. Her account of

some of the battles in the book mirror some of the conflicts in that war, when the rebel forces were limited to muskets loaded with ramrods, and the northern troops armed with fast-firing Spencers. The fact that she is a SPACE LAWYER (although not a lawyer in SP-A-A-CE!), and not any kind of fire-arm expert, makes the reading all the more delicious.

Return to Normandy by John R. Taylor

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

There is very little in the world as satisfying as reading a work of military science fiction written by a veteran. They can portray things in a manner that is believable and authentic because they've been there. The relationships between the characters work on a level that can't be faked. The tactics make sense. The characters are neither cowardly nor psycho gung-ho and eager to die. They are, in short, just like members of the real life military. All of this is true of John R Taylor's Return to Normandy. He nailed it. I really enjoyed this book.

The premise of the book is pretty simple: In celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion, several of the nations that participated in the battles on D-Day, including the Germans, send paratroopers to drop on Normandy. This actually happened in the real world. In Taylor's version the lead plane is filled with American paratroopers who are transported back in time to June 6, 1944 and arrive before the invasion troops. They have period weapons and uniforms as part of the festivities, but no ammunition. Things get interesting quickly.

Our heroes don't know what to do at first but that makes sense. They were planning on landing in a wide open field in front of a huge crowd of spectators and instead they're getting shot at by Germans at night. I can't help but think that confusion is the only possible reaction. It's not like this was some kind of experiment intended to transport them. I mean, when they first hit the ground they don't know when or where they are. Once they figure it out they can't figure out how they got there and a few members of the platoon reject the idea. It's natural and believable.

I don't have the details of Taylor's actual military service (his bio lists him as having served in the 101st Airborne just like his characters) but I'm guessing he never made high officer rank. He seems to have a healthy dislike of those who give orders and get soldiers killed. That makes sense too. According to his Amazon bio, Taylor served in combat in Vietnam and obviously lost some buddies. I can't blame him for being bitter. High command was hated in Vietnam and for good reason: A lot of the men giving the orders behind the lines had no clue what conditions were for the troops they were issuing orders to. They understood the war they were fighting from an academic point of view but not what it was actually like since they hadn't been in those conditions. I'd hate to be the officer he patterned some of these characters on but that's neither here nor there. It does bring up a good point though.

I'm as big a fan of stories like the Honor Harrington saga as anyone, but sometimes it can get a bit frustrating when everything is told from the top down. One of the things that I really enjoyed about this book is that it's told from the point of view of the common soldier. The main character is the lieutenant but he's still a man in the field facing the same dangers as his men. I love that. He gives the orders but he's no Dwight Eisenhower, leading from hundreds of miles away. That is, in my opinion, the best way to tell a story.

I don't do spoilers, but I'm going to this time. Taylor's men meet up with the men from Easy Company, a la Band of Brothers. Talk about a good time. They actually know who they're meeting up with since

they've seen the show. It's a good time for them and for the reader as well. I found myself grinning like an idiot when it happened and it fits so well that it didn't throw me out of the story at all. I got a big kick out of it.

Getting back to the point about officers: At one point, Lieutenant "Spike" Wilson gets an order to take out a mortar emplacement. It should be a good order. Americans are dying because they're taking shells and someone needs to take it out. He's told that there should be a company defending the mortars and that he's supposed to take them out with sixteen men while massively outnumbered. He's a soldier so he follows his orders - right up until he realizes that the enemy is in battalion strength and he has no chance of success. Once again, what we're seeing is the battle between officers in the field and their commanders. One knows what's going on and the other doesn't. As someone who has studied the Vietnam War (but has no actual combat experience) this seems to match up with what I've learned about the way things worked there. The realism here is palpable.

My only complaint about Return to Normandy is a weird one. The first chapter of the book takes place in Afghanistan. I get it on an intellectual level. It focuses on an elite airborne unit in the modern US military that would have deployed into combat zones for obvious reasons. It sets up the relationship between Spike and his platoon. Spike shows how much he cares for his men and that is key to the rest of the story. I should be okay with it, but...

It threw me. I was looking for a story in Normandy and I ended up in the rock pile. I felt lost and disoriented for a bit. It's not that it was poorly written. In actuality it was very well done and entertaining. It just wasn't what I expected. I actually went back and checked to make sure I had ordered the right book. (Yes, most of my reviews come from people who have sent me their books in exchange for a review but I didn't have anything that would have worked for a Memorial Day review so I bought one. I'm glad I did.) All in all though, this story still kicks ass. It just took a few more minutes to get through the first chapter than it would have ordinarily.

Oh and, for the record, I'm pretty bitter. If I had read this before I did my Dragon nominations I'd have put it up for Best Alternate History. Oops. That's just plain bad timing on my part.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Missed Drops

Star Mountain Sons: Honour on the North Lake

by M. Timothy Gray

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This book FEROCIOUSLY needs to have some other books written by the author to go along with it. It's an only child, and it shows.

First, the minor and trivial complaints:

1. It needs another run through by a copy editor. It is far from terrible, but there are too many places in which we need a correct use of the comma, to set a phrase apart, an incorrect form of a word is used, or a construction is clunky. Here is an example:

"And he intended to lighten it greatly and enhance it in other ways with Power Workings he had spent

long hours considering and working out in his mind; a tricky undertaking on a Power Working-resistant hide."

This particular sentence should be spit into two, or perhaps three, separate sentences.

2. In some places, the descriptions are just too long for the value they bring to the story. For example, starting around location 1812, the weight and height of the dvergs and the Axe Wolf Warriors are compared and contrasted, and the description just goes on until my eyes glazed over. This is ONLY an issue when discussing mundane issues, which could be condensed into much fewer words. On the other hand, around location 106, the author goes into great detail in describing the nature and uses of different arrows the protagonist carries. I found that to be quite interesting, because it gave details to essential equipment that I know nothing about, and those descriptions were useful in describing the combat. In general, though, the descriptions were too wordy. Again, a minor and trivial complaint.

Here's the big complaint I have: The text is too fat at 370 pages. This might NOT be a problem if you are taking the book on vacation, or on a long trip, but it's too much for a regular read. Here is where I think some cold-blooded slashing would be good for the book. I'm a FAST reader, and I've started on this yesterday and devoted most of my reading time today on "Star Mountain Sons." I'm only half-way finished, and I just can't, in good conscience, give the story any more time.

Second, the major compliments:

1. The author clearly knows his source material. If he is making up the words that get tossed into the text, he's doing one heck of a job in faking it. At one time, I had a fair command of German, and I recognize enough of the root words to know that the language has a great deal in common with real languages. The structures of the societies ring true as well, as do the rites of passage described. Every sign points to a LOT of research going into the book.

2. I like his characters. One of the other reviewers made a comment that the protagonist was too perfect. For some readers, perhaps. However, SOMEBODY has to be the best at everything, right? Why NOT have them as characters in your book? Bob, the vacuum-cleaner salesman, might ring more of truth than Gunjolf the Warrior-Skald-Shaman, but I've BEEN a vacuum cleaner salesman, and there just isn't a lot of story there.

3. When we move past the too-exhaustive detail and the interminable lead-in, there are some really good action scenes. The initial fight with the orcs, the killing of the silver rager (an interesting beast, that) and the ambush to free the dvergs are all first class, in my opinion.

I have said that this book needs brothers and sisters. It might even need to be killed and turned into twins. I notice that the book was published five years ago, and that so far it is the only work published by this author. This is WRONG!!!!!! Nobody who can tell a story like this needs to tell only one story. Chop this book into ten pieces, then toss in enough battle scenes and character development to make each of those pieces a 200 page book. That will help THIS story, but it will also help the author refine his craft. The basics are there. I've read enough BAD writing to be able to form an opinion about whether someone just doesn't have the goods, and that's not the case here. That's a big part of my justification for awarding the book the fourth star; it's on the basis of potential. This is a book that I will quite likely come back to, and finish, when I hit one of Those Times when my ability to read and review is in abeyance.

I will be disappointed if I do not see more work by M. Timothy Gray in the future.

Sword's Edge by L.S. King
Review by Jim McCoy
<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I love Science Fiction. I love Fantasy. I've seen Star Wars, with its setting that is primarily SF (Lightsabers, FTL Travel, Aliens, Giant Space Stations, etc.) but partially Fantasy (The Force), but L.S. King has done the opposite in *Sword's Edge* (*Sword's Edge Chronicles*, Book One). She's created a setting that is primarily Fantasy (Rangers, Psychic Powers, Nobility, etc.) and partially SF. (Nope, not saying why. Read the book.) So I guess, in a way, it's reverse Star Wars, except that it takes place on one planet. Then again, that makes it even more reverse Star Wars, right?

So yes, the setting does a lot for the story. *Sword's Edge* is a book that works based on the world where it's at as much as it does on its characters. (More on that in a minute.) The politics of the world move the story, as does the science fiction aspect of it, which we really don't get all that good a glimpse of at first. We're kept guessing for quite awhile as to certain aspects and I like that about it. We get hints here and hints there, but nothing concrete for quite awhile. And, getting back to the politics, they're complicated, convoluted and corrupt. There are only two political figures in the entire work that read as not evil and treacherous but that's necessary to the plot and makes a lot of sense given the internal logic of the book.

Our main character is a girl named Tamissa, Tam for short. Tam is a young girl who has been raised in seclusion by her father. She is a member of the Ranger clan, which is responsible for both police and military duties in the Lairdom, but was brought up believing that she had no family. She belongs to the Clan but knows nothing of it. In short, King seems to have used a technique very similar to one used by a certain Mrs. Rowling: Her character is accepted as a member of the society she is in, so we can see her functioning within it, but she views it the way an outsider would. Another apt comparison would probably be Data. Everyone seems to know how to fit in, but her.

This leads Tam to be a bit naive about some things, even for a girl in her early teens. This can cause a bit of consternation among those of us who were born into a more egalitarian age. Tam knows nothing of romantic love and less of sex. She has no real concept of marriage. She can't even recognize her society's version of a wedding ring for what it is. She has no idea why women fear men, since she had no fear of her father and no interactions with any other man. But the thing is, she is actually an extremely intelligent young lady. She learns quickly, but has had no context.

That's not to say that Valdor didn't teach his daughter anything: She can read. She can write. She can grow a garden, hunt and cook the proceeds from both endeavors. She knows uses of spices and herbs both medicinal and nutritional. She can make a poultice to cure a wound and identify plants that are harmful. There's got to be something else, too. I feel like I'm missing something...

Oh yeah. Tam can fight. Tam will kick your scrawny (or fat, well proportioned, heavily muscled, etc) ass barehanded and won't feel bad about it. In the Rangers, they call it matching and it's basically like Mixed Martial Arts (watch the backfist bro, trust me) except less formalized. She also seems to know quite a bit about swordplay and archery to go with a working knowledge of tracking. In short, she's every bit as tough as any man in the book, but it gets more complicated from there.

King has done her research well. *Sword's Edge* features a type of reality that everyone else misses: Tam suffers the mental consequences of succeeding in battle. Here in the real world, Planet Earth, circa the last probably hundred and ten years at least, the leading cause of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder among

combat veterans is that they were forced to kill. Having studied history (and I got one of them fancy pieces of paper what has my name and the words "Bachelor of Arts in History" written on it) I can attest that everything I've read agrees to that fact, but most authors and play/screenwriters ignore that fact. It makes me a little batty sometimes watching a hero make his first kill and walk away like nothing happened. The act of killing effects people. Kudos to King for looking the real world in the eye and not backing down. Other authors would do well to follow her example.

That's not to call *Sword's Edge* overly maudlin. The plot moves quickly. Points of view bounce around at times and we see things when we need to. The fight scenes actually gave me a burst of adrenaline at points. There is no navel gazing. There's no time for it. Tam is hard-core and even when she is relaxing it seems that there's always a prankster around to keep it interesting. Somehow, she makes it through the novel without developing a love interest, even though I had two separate dudes picked out at her at different points in the novel.

The only weird part of *Sword's Edge* was that it didn't end when I thought it would. I was reading it on an app called FB Reader. Page numbers appear in the lower right corner of the screen and often don't match up with Kindle or print page numbers. When I got to what I thought was the end is still had fiftiesh (I think) pages left. What followed was both fun and interesting and ended up with me being very frustrated with my dispatcher at work (Seriously, if the whole day sucks and I'm not making anything don't interrupt me just when the weird stuff starts. It makes me cranky.) but in some ways it felt like it was more set up for the rest of the series than it was part of the story I was reading. Then again, it must have been a good ending because I've already snagged a copy of the omnibus edition containing not only *Sword's Edge* but also the sequels *Children of the Enaisi* and *Laws and Prophecies*. Maybe if you're lucky, I'll let you know what I think about those too.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Bells and Stars

To Sail Beyond the Sunset by Robert A. Heinlein

Review by Christopher Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

I cannot help, but wonder if Heinlein knew that *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* would be his last completed novel before his untimely death.

He must have, I think. Taken as a story, *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is a very strange book. Taken as one final chance to outline his philosophy – and address some of the obvious issues with his thinking – it makes a great deal more sense. *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is both story and semi-dramatised lecture, construction and deconstruction ... a final grim look at the state of the world and a paean to how technology can make everything better (as well as bringing new problems of its own). It reads as much more of a dramatised autobiography than anything else, in my opinion, but there is enough meat in it to get one thinking, even if one doesn't agree with Heinlein and/or his characters. As such, like so many of Heinlein's books, *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is worthy of respect.

That said, it does have issues that should be addressed up front. *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is divided into two interlocking sections and, while the first can be read alone, the latter practically requires you to have read the other books Heinlein wrote in his final years. Too much of the latter section of the book makes no sense at all without prior knowledge – and even with that knowledge, there are sections which are somewhat incoherent. It also ties into some of Heinlein's earlier books – as he tried to retroactively establish his future history – and while this served as an effective (if flawed) narrative device

in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*) it reads as somewhat clunky here. Hazel Stone's cameo in *TMIAMH* is sweet, if ill-fitting, but linking *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* to *The Man Who Sold The Moon* devalues the latter. *YMMV*, of course.

The story opens with Maureen Johnston waking up to discover that she's in bed with a cat and a corpse. Completely bemused, as one might expect, Maureen calls for help ... only to rapidly find herself accused of murder and locked in a prison cell. This is merely the opening stage of an adventure that ties into a war between the time-travelling corps – led by Lazarus Long, of whom you may have heard – and a mysterious force of revisionists. (Heinlein never really had the chance to develop this aspect of his universe any further, I think.)

However, this is merely the framing device for Maureen to think back to her childhood, growing up the daughter of a doctor in Missouri. Maureen's father, a deep thinker in many ways, teaches his daughter to both think about the fundamental reasons behind social and religious laws and how to break them, when necessary. As Maureen grows to adulthood, she turns into something of an ethical slut, enjoying sex and yet being careful not to run into real trouble through mistakes. Her father tells her about the Howard Foundation, which will pay Maureen and her future husband (eventually Brian) for having babies ... babies with the potential for a very long life. Maureen eventually marries, has children (including Woodrow Smith, who grows up to be Lazarus), divorces, reinvents herself as a successful businesswoman and eventually gets hit by a truck ...

... And wakes up to find herself in the far future, where she meets her son and joins the time corps. At this point, the two storylines converge and turn into a rescue mission, dedicated to saving Maureen's father from death in World War Two. And then they all live happily ever after.

In some ways, that is a very poor summary. A great deal happens to Maureen and her family that should be mentioned, but – at the same time – not all of it is important. The recounting of her life is entertaining, yet it also strips out doubt ... will she survive? Yes, obviously. Like I said above, *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is really more of a philosophical work. Maureen gives us her opinions, based on her life in a rapidly-changing country, and invites us to question them. I have a feeling that too many later readers will focus on the questionable parts of her life, rather than the philosophical thoughts. And that is a shame, because there are aspects of *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* that have striking relevance – and importance – today.

Heinlein does a very good job of bringing the world of 1882-1970 America to life, showing both the joys and sorrows of growing up in an era without the technology we take for granted today. There are many nice touches that show, not always clearly, how people's lives are restricted, both openly and covertly. 'Mrs Grundy' – the woman who peeps from behind curtains, just waiting for a chance to spread nasty rumours about young girls – is an ever-present threat, as is the danger of an accidental pregnancy. Maureen learns to embrace the hypocrisy of being a picture-perfect girl in the open, then being something else altogether in complete privacy. For all the claims that Heinlein was a sexist, he is far more understanding of the limits placed on young women of that era than many modern writers. (Maureen cannot go study at a nearby (by our standards) college because it isn't a safe trip for a young woman.) And he also attempts to explain why they exist in the first place.

He also had a very good understanding of male psychology, something often lacking in modern-day works. A man takes pride in being a good provider, in putting food and drink on the table for his wife and kids. Attacking that pride is often taken far harder than a physical attack – and doing it in public can destroy a marriage for good. (That said, Maureen has no qualms about disagreeing with her husband – calmly and reasonably – in private.) Men need applause and emotional reassurance, particularly

when they're feeling vulnerable (such as when they're having sex.) There are elements here that, in the wake of sexual liberation, should be studied. Maybe men – and women too – should be something, but they're often not. Understanding why is the key to longer-lasting change. One can easily read Maureen as being submissive, but one can also read her as being practical. She doesn't waste her time tilting at windmills when she can find a way to go around them.

Indeed, it is clear that Heinlein had a deep respect for traditional 'women's work.' He makes no bones about how hard it can be to bring up children and keep house, particularly in an era where so much was lacking. Maureen may not be a strong woman in the sense she goes out and kicks ass, but there is no doubt she's strong-willed and very clever. Seeing her develop as a person is genuinely fascinating, particularly for that era; she switches roles without ease, perhaps, but with a determination that keeps her going.

That said, her character is slippery at times. She is smart, but careful not to appear too smart; she is capable of educating people, yet works to convince them to follow her covertly, instead of positioning herself as a teacher ... in some ways, she's a little manipulative, although that isn't always a bad thing. Convincing someone to learn on his own can be more effective, in the long run, than handing down advice and orders from on high. And yes, she is intensely sexual from an early age. By modern standards – save for a point I will discuss later – *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* is remarkably clean, but it was no doubt incredibly shocking for its era. Maureen acts – in her own words – like a cat in heat.

On a personal level, *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* touches on many important truths of how to make a relationship – even an idealised semi-open marriage – work. Good communication is important, but so too is allowing the other party some room to retreat. Maureen enjoys a semi-open marriage with her husband for quite some time, including a handful of gay and lesbian trysts, before Heinlein deconstructs it by pointing out one of the more obvious dangers. Your partner might (eventually) decide to marry the other woman.

The book also – and this is the dubious part, even today – is somewhat approving of incest, providing that all partners take precautions. (Maureen has a very secret affair with her cousin – and, unknowingly, her time-travelling son – as a young woman; she also has an ill-disguised crush on her father.) Heinlein may have been looking to shock, as well as inviting us to question our assumptions; he makes no bones about the dangers of inbreeding and other entanglements that can have baleful effects many years into the future. And, indeed, he deconstructs such a relationship by using Maureen's youngest children to showcase the dangers. Call me a prude if you wish, but the idea of incest revolts me. Real-life communities that practice second-cousin marriages have immense problems with inbreeding. The science, at least in this case, is settled.

Part of the problem – both on a local and global level – is that, as Maureen notes, society changed during the course of her life. The old model – traditional households – had become outdated to many, but the new model had yet to sort out the teething problems that always come with the birth of a new order. (Many people would argue that we haven't solved them either.) Traditional religion was having problems – Heinlein predicted a religious dictatorship after Maureen's era (Revolt in 2100 predated *The Handmaid's Tale* by quite some time) – and it was apparently incapable of solving its problems. People were, as now, torn between the old and the new, between a comforting repressing and a terrifying freedom. The world seems incapable of balancing itself between the two.

On a greater scale, *To Sail Beyond The Sunset* touches on issues that people on both sides of the culture wars would be well-advised to study. On one level, you need to break ideas down to basics for

greater understanding – and to explain them to people who don't share your experience. And, if you can't break your ideas down so that anyone can understand them, there's a very good chance that there's something wrong with them. An unspoken – and thus unchallenged assumption – that brings the whole edifice crashing down. Maureen sets out to explain stock-broking to her readers – just as Heinlein himself explained politics in *Take Back Your Government* – and succeeds, at least in part, because she's good at relating financial concepts to the real world.

More seriously, it is easy to alter laws (relatively speaking), but harder to alter cultural attitudes. The modern-day Mrs Grundy, decked out in Social Justice Bully garb, should be aware of how hard it can be to get everything 'now.' Naming and shaming 'call-outs' – or even simple bullying – might win the battle, but it doesn't win the war. Indeed, such tactics only strengthen hatred and power the eventual backlash. Does this mean turning a blind eye to injustice? No, but it does mean accepting that someone who trespasses against the new order may not be irredeemable evil.

Maureen herself showcases it when she becomes a director on a corporate board; she asserts herself, but she doesn't use her momentary advantage to destroy her opponents. Nor does she turn into a bully, the sort of person who will (hopefully verbally) castrate a man for daring to hold the door open for her. A radical feminist may take some satisfaction in lashing out at what she may see as condescension, but her poor victim will remember it – and not open doors (literally and figuratively) for women in future. Activists who go out of their way to alienate potential allies will look up, one day, and discover that the world hates them. And while that may well be deserved, the world will also hate their cause.

Heinlein also briefly discusses the concerns and fears of people faced with migration, although he talks in terms of the American black population. As I noted before, in *Farnham's Freehold*, Heinlein was far more understanding and sympathetic to black people than many other people of his era, but he also understood the concerns of whites as well. One might well understand why someone would want to leave a shithole, to borrow Trump's crude but accurate remark, but others might fear that the newcomers will bring the shithole with them. Modern experience tells us that this is a valid concern.

The book also takes the chance to outline some of Heinlein's darker predictions for the future, many of which were trends in his day. Revisionist history – in the sense that the US was responsible for all the evils of the world – is a plague on our society, made all the worse by the simple truth that a small degree of revision is required as new research is carried out or documents are declassified and released to the public. The willingness to coddle childish behaviour from grown adults – and even countries – has led to more of it; surprise, surprise. Maureen had no tolerance for emotional blackmail, which may make her seem harsh at times, but more practical than many modern day politicians and teachers. Worse, perhaps, is the growing belief that celebrities are somehow important and their opinions are more relevant than the average person's. But this may have taken a hit even before #METOO, as there is a wry argument to be made that celebrity endorsements may actually have cost Hilary Clinton the election. What does the average Hollywood starlet know about the real world?

Like he does in *Take Back Your Government*, Heinlein also proposes solutions. Local control of schools can keep them from being destroyed by bureaucrats so far away that they have no real concept of what is happening at ground zero. Ruthless enforcement of drug laws and a willingness to expel students who don't qualify for higher education or break the rules can make life better for everyone else. He also believes that the government should be as limited as possible, with good reason. The larger the government becomes, the more it works in its own favour, rather than that of the average citizen. Precisely how well these solutions would work in the real world is open to debate, but many of his ideas are worth trying.

Part of the problem, of course, is that society is endlessly balanced between Conservatism and Liberalism. Both sides have their extremes – too much of one without the other is bad for society – but they also have their good points. Heinlein tried to find a way to strike a balance between the two, a balance we must also find. ‘Spare the rod, spoil the child’ is on one end of the spectrum of bad parenting advice, but ‘be your child’s best friend’ is on the other. Rejecting one rule – one means of social control – doesn’t mean we should reject them all. That way leads to chaos or tyranny.

In the end, it’s difficult to rate *To Sail Beyond The Sunset*. It is good – very good – in places and weak in others. It has insights, but also moments of iconoclastic delight – smashing icons and taboos for the sake of smashing them. Heinlein glosses over many of Maureen’s problems, while lingering on points that would be better glossed over. And yet, it cannot be rejected or praised. Heinlein’s greatness is still present, but so too are the weaknesses that plagued his later writings. His star was in decline and I think he knew it.

And yes, there are people who will read this book out of context – and with little appreciation for either Heinlein’s era or the time span of Maureen’s life – and declare it problematic. And yes, there are moments that even I would declare problematic. Heinlein was a man of his era and, in many ways, he never quite grew out of it. He was trying to ask questions that needed answers, but the answers he came up with weren’t always correct. In some ways, he was ahead of his time ... and then, suddenly, he was behind his time. He never had a time of his own.

But as I reread the closing section of the book for the last time, it struck me that – in some way – Heinlein was making a droll point of his own. Maureen and many of his other characters doubt the existence of God, choosing to regard religion as a means of social control rather than a pathway to heaven. And so – aided by super-advanced technology – they built a heaven of their own, where they are forever young and no one ever dies. And they all lived happily ever after.

To Sail Beyond The Sunset is a strange book. It isn’t one I will reread time and time again. But, like all of Heinlein’s works, it is worthy of respect.

Trade Winds by Sarah A. Hoyt

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Making things up out of whole cloth. I want to talk about the cover first. Some 50+ years ago, when I was 15, the husband and wife of the family I was living with at the time were experiencing marital discord. So, they sent me to a psychologist. (I learned later, in my own graduate studies, that this response is common enough in dysfunctional family systems that it has a name.) One of the first thing the doc did with me was administer the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which is allegedly a series of ambiguous pictures for the client to make up stories about. Well, THESE pictures weren’t ambiguous in the slightest! Every picture was about a teenage boy murdering people in his house, and getting revenge on all who had harmed him. I wasn’t ABOUT to tell THAT to the doc; he’d think I was crazy!

I’m giving you this background so you will take my perception of the cover with a grain of salt.

It’s a beautifully executed cover. An attractive woman of indeterminate years (long graying hair, but an unlined face) stands with her head turned away from the cathedral-type window, which appears to be executed in stone. (I’m sure there is a more precise term, but architecture isn’t my thing.) Through the window, we see starry skies, and a departing spaceship, shown to be such by the blue exhaust.

The woman is wearing a sky-blue garment; it MAY be a jacket, as there is a hint of darker color at her neckline. On the right shoulder of the jacket is a circular patch, depicting an ancient sailing ship of the longship or birlinn type, single-masted, with three oars visible.

I conclude: she is a naval officer, who has chosen, with regret, to be left behind in port when her ship leaves. I say officer, instead of ordinary seaman, because of the length and condition of her hair; swabbies don't like to have to fool around with the long stuff, because it gets in their way, gets caught in capstans, and who has time to take care of it when yer swabbing decks and chipping paint? Since she is an attractive woman, this MUST be a matter of the heart; physical beauty in literature is never wasted on the uninteresting. The regret is evidenced by the fact that she has turned her head AWAY from the departing ship, and the utter absence of a smile.

And now, the reviews. Nice intro by Sam Schall. I'd like to see more of those done.

And Your Little Dog, Too. I love that phrase from "The Wizard of Oz," and use it frequently. However, in this story, it sort of applies. An aerospace engineering student with interest in flying saucers picks up an old hitchhiker and his dog on a lonely country road. Nobody gets slashed! However, the old hitchhiker has some interesting ideas about contacting aliens, and he is..strange, somehow. And his little dog, too.

Who Goes Boing? Eccentric genius nerds with high technology at their fingertips and a commanding officer from 'the REAL Army' have to explore a new planet. Cartoons are funny, aren't they? Here, have a cigar. I'll light it for you.

A Cog In Time. Anytime you can hang out with David Drake is a good time. I was appalled when I realized I spent a year living in Chapel Hill and never crossed paths with him. He MAY have been involved with other things, at the time. Or maybe it was another time.

All Who Are Thirsty. Not nearly old enough to have been an authentic Hippie, but of that genre anyway, she really wanted to be an archaeologist and study ancient cultures. Until the aliens landed. And whereas all of the classics films had them giving us advanced technology, and sometimes eating us, NONE of these BEMs wanted anything except to discover God. They had never HEARD of such a concept until Earth entered their lives. But she's an atheist! Selling crap in a New Age bookstore!

Yearning To Breathe Free. Since it's pretty much determined that humans arose out of Africa, EVERYONE in the United States has ancestors who immigrated here from somewhere else, whether it was a land bridge from Siberia, on a boat, or, for a fortunate few, on a plane. You think we would have adapted to the problems of immigration by now. Evidently not. These undocumented aliens will get eaten if they are deported, though. Should that matter?

Calling The Mom Squad. Those of us who have actually had to shuttle kids to soccer practice, ballet, scouts, karate, and attend orchestra concerts on the same night we are at a cheerleading function know this: it ain't no picnic being a soccer mom. These particular moms also have to fight dragons, though. Yeah, I'd take the dragon fighting, too, except it's NOT "do this OR do that." It's "do this AND do that." And keep it a secret, too, okay?

On Edge. In what was SUPPOSED to be discovering new ways to deliver packages for Amazon, the geniuses discover how to open up doors to other times and other worlds. Here's a helpful hint for you, should you be working on the same thing: don't be the first guy through the door.

Some Other Pieta. Okay, here's a thought problem for you: what kind of child would a marriage between Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa produce? That's not what happens in this story, but I would encourage you to consider the ramifications anyway. One other thing: the bad guys have six arms.

Leaving Home. All across America, you can find little ghost towns that faded away when the railroad came through in the 1880's, or when the Interstate was built in the 1960's. What happens to the junction points in future travel, when you can cross light years in a moment? And then, something better comes along?

Flying. Earth is maybe an okay place to be for most people, but some folks must emigrate or they will die. However, the government controls the entire system of moving off-planet. If YOU were the head of government, would YOU let just anybody move into your bright and shiny new planets?

The Big Ship and The Wise Old Owl. I don't think Robert Heinlein invented the idea of the generation ship, but he sure did more to popularize it to my generation than anyone else has. I've read several stories using the idea of the generation ship as a basis, and most involve the idea that the people on the ship have forgotten what's really going on. In this variation, nursery rhymes have a special meaning, for those who are able to hear.

And Not To Yield. If you are already a fan of Sarah Hoyt, you know about her novels dealing with the society run by the Good Men, who are anything but. This is a story set in that universe. For the novice, this is a story about a revolution against tyranny, when the USA is only a distant memory, repressed by a few who hold ultimate power.

Trade Winds. I LOVE alternate history! In this story, Hannibal won against Rome, and Carthage became the primary cultural influence. Their society was founded on trade, rather than conquest, and civilization has advanced faster and farther. Even so, some people are still treacherous.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering

by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Here we go again.

If you haven't seen the other books of Rachel Griffin ... this is a very long story. And I have other reviews that you're going to want to look at.

Book 1: The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin

Book 2: The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel

Book 3: Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dream Land

Book 4: Awful Truth about Forgetting

By this point, we should all realize that I'm still reading them at book five, so it's a good assumption that this book, too, was awesome, and you should read it. And if you don't read it, you are a bad person.

For those of you who are not up to speed on this series: L Jagi Lamplighter has created a magical girl from a magical family at a magical boarding school with her magical friends. Her best friends include how a Dickens character should look after going through the foster care system (less like *Oliver Twist*, more like the Artful Dodger), a magical Australian with a magical stick up her ass, and Victor von Doom -- I mean Vladimir von Dread.

Imagine if JK Rowling had done a deep dive and actually built a world from the ground up, and every character had a full range of emotions and conflicting thoughts and agendas, while there are actual stakes that amounted to more than just the existence of the school, but existence itself.

That's the short version of the Rachel Griffin novels.

Also, it's so nice to find a fantasy novel that includes other magic traditions and mythology outside of the UK and continental Europe. If there's a myth or lore or type of fantasy magic that Jagi hasn't thrown in yet, I haven't heard of them.

I'm going to avoid posting the description of the book here for one simple reason: It spoils events in the second half of the book, something I've found jarring since as long as I can recall.

When Book 5, *The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering*, opens, Rachel's school, Roanoke Academy, has a problem: the local wild fey are loose. The wizards were supposed to keep the local wild fey psychopath under lock and key. But now it's loose, and the local fey no longer need to adhere to their bargain. If the Heer is not imprisoned again, and the fey put back in their place, Roanoke Academy will close.

One must admire Jagi's restraint with book five. It opens a whole two days after the end of book 4 -- usually the next book will open the same day as the last book ended, giving Terry Goodkind a run for his money on "the morning after" opening of *The Sword of Truth*. And there is so much blowback here, yikes.

What can one say about the book that I haven't already in prior reviews? Her brother is Lord Peter, her family estate is in Dartmoor -- they have a local beast that is not specifically referred to as a dog, a hound, or even a Great Dane. Rachel's family use microexpressions both to read people and to mislead them.

The pace is only slightly more relaxed than usual. The opening threat wasn't lethal, which is about as relaxed as the book gets. The rest of the novel has an undercurrent of multiple threats, spread out along the length of the book. The pacing hurries along at a quick gallop, slowing here and there for world and character building. And then get out of a way before being run over. As I've said in previous reviews, if Rachel's days go any faster, she'll have to change her name to Jack Bauer. Hunting fey on the Roanoke Academy grounds makes for a wonderful subplot. It ties in nicely to the second subplot later on.

No, I'm not sure if there is a main plot anywhere along here. There are basically two major subplots jammed together, but they fit so well you don't care that the only main thread is the series plot, not a main plot for the novel.

We have Ankh-Morpork style football, a magical government that makes sense, sports team names that don't (show of hands: who wants your sports team to be named *The Maenads?*), Jim Butcher Scooby-Doo jokes, and students armed with a Bowie knife... which is an odd complaint given that they're all

armed with wands, but seriously, who let that guy have a Bowie knife? Heck, Jagi even spells out the difference between the Seelie and the Unseelie... which I don't even think Harry Dresden explained.

It's so nice to see that in a world of magic, hydrogen peroxide is still used to remove blood from clothing.

Oh yes, and Death? Death shows up. And of course, HE SPEAKS IN ALL CAPS. BECAUSE OF COURSE HE DOES, TERRY PRATCHETT HAS PROVEN IT TO BE SO.

There are problems, of course. Mostly with some of the characters being ... themselves. At least one magical princess needs to be smothered with a magical pillow; then they issue her a bodyguard with Omega beams. Rachel's best friend (of her own age) might be one kid who needs mild sedatives for everyone else's safety ... or he needs to learn restraint, perhaps with a butterfly net.

I think the problems of the book can all be summed up as, well, high school is one big problem.

Rachel also has flaws ... largely in that she has to stop reading classic romance novels; when she starts thinking romance, the narrative voice goes into prose so purple, I swear the text color changes. And she is such a kid. Despite saving the world enough times that even the adults listen to her when she says there is a problem, Rachel has very definite ideas of what should happen. She has this idea that she should have a womanly figure ... at 14. (pardon me while I head desk).

And then her PTSD kicks in, because really, after the skeleton baby incident, we should be worried if she didn't have PTSD.

Also, seriously, in a world where magic is a day to day thing, you'd think someone would have taught them to be really REALLY careful, and very specific, about the wishes one makes.

But you can say one thing about their characters flaws -- these characters have characters to actually develop, which is more than I can say for certain other books. Heck, there are some characters in this series who I didn't know had characters to develop.

Anyway, 5/5 stars. Go buy the book now. Thanks.

Unmasked by Kai Wai Cheah and Thomas Plutarch

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In the Heroes United world of Silver Empire Press, Kai Wai Cheah's character Adam Song has been described as the Punisher.

In Unmasked, that comparison becomes closer.

I described the first book in Kai Wai Cheah's Song of Karma, Hollow City, as Larry Correia and Michael Connelly writing a superhero police procedural. Complete with gun porn and noir stylistic writing. This time, our hero, Adam Song is back. By the time we're done with the first chapter, it feels very much like Richard Chandler, with knife porn instead of gun porn, and superhero action on par with a Hong Kong Wu Xia film.

It is not a spoiler that Unmasked begins with Adam Song outed as the SWAT superhero Amp. Due to Hollow City being a cross of the worst of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago, he's being prosecuted for murder of a gang-banger and his girlfriend, largely because of political hacks who are all too eager to throw him and the police under the bus. With the pressure building from anti-superhero group "Cape Watch," and anti-law enforcement hate groups, their first instinct is to throw the book at Adam Song. It's so bad, the restaurant owned by Adam's family is under siege by Cape Watch and the gang bangers friends.

Lest you think that this is being inspired by recent events, I read an ARC of this novel in January. Any and all inspirations from real life were at least five years old before everything old became new again this summer. If Kai Wai Cheah becomes any more predictive, he's going to give me a run for my money.

The trial segment is as well written as any trial written by Michael Connelly, and he's done more than a few. For anyone who has followed the series, the court sequences feels like Connelly's Harry Bosch is on trial ... again. And the trial sequences are all very well put together, and used to great effect. One of the opening trial bits was a great bit of recap. And the trial itself is fast paced and entertaining. Despite how much of the plot it is, the trial itself is only four chapters.

But while Adam is being prosecuted for murder, he has other old friends pulling at him. "Don Peterson" (assuming that's his real name) is a part of Adam's old life in wet work and black bag operations, offering Adam a Faustian bargain to make everything go away if Adam just came back to government service, taking down the supervillains who are too powerful to merely throw in jail. It's a nice bit of spy thriller that reminds me as the classic Adam Hall Quiller novels, with the sort of deal that will remind the casual reader of Suicide Squad.

Meanwhile, Adam is keeping busy with a paying job. An old friend, a Buddhist monk, is being pressured by the People's Republic of China to come to China ... and if he won't accept the invitation gracefully, they intend to force the issue by any means necessary. It seems like an easy job for a SWAT superhero—until the Chinese reveal a superpowered minion of their own. (I await some people to cry racism against China... until someone realizes that Cheah is a Singapore native.) In short, the People's Republic of China has not changed in the slightest. China is still China.

Cheah does a great job of balancing the three plots—fighting China, the trial, and the espionage aspects brought in with the character of Don Peterson. And when they collide in the finale, it will blow you away.

Or, as the book itself says, "Riots, gangsters, spies and supervillains. It's going to be a perfect f***ing storm."

And it is.

Over the course of the book, we see Adam balance being a law enforcement officer, versus facing overwhelming threats. Despite edging closer to becoming the Punisher, Adam is still a cop by training, and works hard to stay on the side of the law, even when the lines become just a wee bit blurry. And while the plot may feel like a closer start than the first book, that's only because the last half has twice the action as the entire first novel.

And the writing is wonderful to read. The character development is great. All the little touches paint

quick, complex characters with ease. I even think the primary Chinese villain here comes from *Fist of the North Star*, but my anime is rusty. Cheah brings in a large cast of characters, and more of them are original to this novel. It's a superhero team up story without a large body of characters spread throughout the universe. The descriptions are... well, one villain is referred to as "The Shadowless Ghost," with "low friends in high places." Two cops are "a teddy bear paired with a wolf."

One paragraph I feel compelled to quote is the opening of chapter one.

"Everybody wants to be a superhero.

They want the fast life, filled with adrenaline and excitement and superpower showdowns. They want to haul in the bad guys, show off their scares, earn the adoration of the faceless masses on the Internet. They want the sponsorship deals, corporate paychecks, Gucci gear, crowdfunded patronage. After that, it's easy street all the way.

Funny thing is, it never works out that way."

Tell me that isn't a great opening.

Ceah also has more humor in this one. The chapter headings are entertaining.

This corner of Silver Empire's series has great world building from the aspect of law enforcement and espionage in a world of superpowers. It's nice to see that the FBI... is still absolutely useless (while they have a Hostage Rescue Team for superpowers, it's a superpower conflict. By the time they get to the scene of the incident, it's all over but the screaming. And a lot of the screaming is over too). Cheah goes into the licensing and training for superheroes, and it is ... very California. Even the elements with Don Peterson has a very rigorous logic of assassination. Worst of all, Cheah delves into how many superheroes, or "primes" go into public service, and it is so very human.

And of course, there is the end, which brings together two threads of this universe together with a bang.

In short (I know, too late), five stars out of five.

The Unmasking by David Burkhead

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I wish I'd taken notes on this read, and every time the author got something spectacularly right, just jotted the reference down. However, had I done that, this review would be even longer than usual; and I am known (for better or worse) for the length of my reviews.

Did you ever wonder: "If vampires can do all that they are said to be able to do, why do vampires not rule the world?"

You will find the answer here.

Burkhead re-writes the book on vampires, and in doing so, rationalizes the world of blood-suckers. First, he demolishes the sparkly romantic vampire genre, in which the sexy looking vampire languishes for love, blah blah blah. Nothing romantic about blood suckers in this novel.

Then, he goes after the errors which crept into the literature with the publication of 'Dracula', by Bram Stoker.

He has another source, or sources, which he uses to create this world, in which vampires are wicked and powerful, but can be overcome by someone with the right skill set and the right tools.

The particular someone is a young woman named Dani Herzeg. Her job? Vampire Killer.

Her boss? A vampire.

Why would a vampire wish to hire someone to kill vampires? And why would that someone be Dani Herzeg?

I'm not going to go very far with the answer, because I don't want to cross the border into Spoiler Land, but I do believe it's okay to say that Dani is the Dhampyre referred to on the cover. I'm NOT going to tell you what a Dhampyre is, though; it's the key to her story.

With respect to the reason for a vampire to wish to kill other vampires, I want to point you to a quote from the movie 'The Usual Suspects:' "The biggest trick the devil did was to convince the world he didn't exist." As long as people don't BELIEVE in vampires, they won't mobilize to fight against vampires. So, the majority of vampires, particularly the oldest among them, wish to remain a secret. If some segment of the vamp population wants to go public, it threatens war. Hence, the title: "The Unmasking."

At the risk of being termed a gun nut, I wish to point out a problem with a staple of vampire mythos: the silver bullet. As it happens, I reload ammunition. I make my own bullets, and I make them out of lead. Lead is heavier than silver, softer than silver, and it melts at a third of the temperature that silver requires. Thus, lead is much easier to work, will take to the rifling in a barrel, and will deform easier when it hits the target, thus causing more damage.

Oh, whatever shall we do? For we have vampires to fight, and we must use a gun! Heavens to Murgatroyd!

For a solution to that conundrum, the guy who knows his way around a soldering gun points out: there is a thing called silver solder. It's not MUCH silver (I think the roll I have is 3% silver) but it IS silver. And it can be made to fit nicely into a bullet with a hole in the end (we call them 'hollow points'). This is, I believe, a unique solution. At least, I haven't see it elsewhere.

What follows is a bit of a rant, but it's in praise of this book:

I wince when I see a foolish mistake about the use of firearms. It doesn't matter if the author refers to a small, rimfire beginner, plinking, & training caliber as a "22 mm," or the man with the gun cocks the hammer of a 1911 in order to intimidate, or the impact of a handgun round throws the person targeted across the room. All of those are errors which should have been caught by someone; and, if you are an author who knows nothing about firearms, but MUST include them in your story, then HAVE SOMEONE WITH KNOWLEDGE READ THAT PART OF YOUR WORK!!! Usually, I just say 'ouch' and move on, but sometimes an error can take me out of the story, especially if it has an impact on the plot.

I don't have to worry about that in a book by David Burkhead. I have no knowledge whether he is using his own brain to get the facts straight, or if he is using an expert, or if he is just capable of research

(little snark there at the expense of those who write of the safety on the Glock), but every time a firearm is involved, he is on target.

Just one example: The protagonist is not in her home state, and she has had her personal weapon taken into evidence after using it to protect others. The problems of obtaining a firearm across state lines are ACCURATELY DESCRIBED, and the solution is ALSO accurately described. Furthermore, as a side benefit, the alleged "gun show loophole" is shown to be a fraudulent straw man, and it's done WITHOUT making this a book of gun porn. Firearms involve maybe five percent of the story, at the MAX, and they are given EXACTLY the amount of attention they deserve.

End of rant, and my conclusion:

Good and believable characters, who are ferocious in action, can be hurt, and who care about other people.

Very nice rationalization of the vampire myth.

Get this book today, and read it.

The Victims' Club by Jeffery Deaver

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I grabbed it and read it, because it was quick, but I DIDN'T Amazon review it at that time, because I was WAY past deadline with some other reviews (of book-length work) I had promised, and I didn't want the writers of those books to know I was sneaking in a little quickie on the side.

Well, I've essentially caught up with the work I'd taken on now, and so I'm fessing up. Not so much out of guilt, but because I really want to say this:

Don't tell me there is no market for short fiction anymore.

Jeffrey Deaver is the author of WHO KNOWS? how many novel-length works of fiction, published by traditional publishing. For this one, however, he goes indie.

Why, you ask. Don't know, I answer. I DO believe the answer lies in the fact that the set-up costs for a print run are so high as to make publication of a single short story impossible; that waiting until an author, known for long form, has enough short stories to justify an anthology might be a LONG wait; that collecting short works from various artists requires an editor, assignment of blah blah blah.

Against all that, IF THE CONTRACT PERMITS IT, an author can do a LITTLE bit more than click a few buttons, and self-publish. Bingo, it's out there to be read by his fans, generating income for him.

So, if your excuse for not writing short stories is that there is no market for them, fie on that.

OK, the story:

Senior detective Avery catches a nasty case: nekkid pictures of a professor at the local college are

showing up on the internet. She claims she was drugged, but doesn't know who did it, or how. And nobody admits anything.

Detective work ensues. A non-standard ending, but seemingly satisfactory.

And it doesn't have to involve murder, love stories, conspiracy, 'more-to-it-than-meets-the-eye', or any of that other stuff that **MUST** be included to make a book-length work. This is high quality writing, and something that years ago would have appeared between the pages of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

Readers, read this because it's a good story.

WRITERS, read this because **THIS** is the solution to the loss of the pulps.

Who Can Own The Stars? by Mackey Chandler Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

A great good morning to my friends and neighbors in Internet Land! And to family members who have dropped by, remember to keep limber, and move around every hour.

The cover art was executed marvelously by Sarah A Hoyt.

This is installment #12 in Mackey Chandler's "April" series, in which the astounding lady makes friends of people with no social skills, and enemies of countries with nuclear capabilities.

Installment #12; keep that in mind!

Twice, I've been tasked with writing reviews of books nominated for a Dragon Award. Frequently, those were installments in a series; so much so, that I think a separate award category ought to be established for them. Unfortunately, in some cases, the work was nearly opaque to me, as I had not read the prior material.

Now: in an installment number TWELVE, I would have expected that there be at least **SOME** aspects of the story that I would find confusing. After all, there have been eleven books setting the stage.

THAT WAS NEVER THE CASE.

There was **NO** preexisting story element missing that prevented me from knowing what was going on. That's amazing, especially when you consider just how many stories are being told at the same time: financial skullduggery **AND** development (those are two different story lines; families in conflict; conflict with Earth government(s); conflict with Martian government(s); technological discoveries; the fate of people re-establishing a community among the ruins in California.

In every case, Chandler (somehow) manages to present the reader with enough background so that there isn't a single bit of confusion, and each one of those stories is **INTERESTING!** I think it's because he spent his life working with things. He **MADE** things. He **FIXED** things. And he doubtless had to **EXPLAIN** things to people who didn't share his expertise. He didn't learn how to tell stories from a

university class in creative writing.

Anyway, that's my theory.

Now, on to the book review; this part will be submitted to Amazon and posted on Goodreads:

"Who Can Own The Stars?" is a nice, catchy title; it's also expressed as a question. While I will disclose that the question is answered in the course of the narrative, I will NOT spoiler by telling you the answer, or the page number on which it may be discussed.

Multiple story lines, some intermingled, are all presented coherently, and without requiring that the reader have access to the first 11 books in the series. These include:

The financing and occupancy of a space habitat, designed for near-self-sufficiency.

The problems encountered by survivors of a near-total collapse of civilization in parts of the former United States.

Trade interactions with a break-away Martian government, still in turmoil; in possession of potentially destabilizing alien artifacts, which they are fanatically determined to keep a secret.

At least THREE story lines involve individuals with social skills deficits; they range from predatory/vindictive, to merely clueless but potentially lethal on a global scale.

An exceedingly interesting series of events highlighting the difficulties of trade between governmental entities that have little or no common ground; thus, fiat currency, based on trust in a government is functionally useless in trade.

I found that each of these story lines was so compelling, that I almost shoved the conflict mentioned in the blurb, between the Lunar government and that of North America, into the background.

While there is much left to tell with the stories presented here, it's not a cliff-hanger. Yes, I want to know more about what happens, but I don't feel cheated in the slightest that I'm left with unanswered questions.

A note: I read FAST; I always have. Evidently I encode content-free words (such as proper names) and numbers into smaller units for transmission to wherever I process stories. Thus, I can recall a PLOT quite easily, but can't tell you the names of the characters. With this book, I found it necessary to keep a log of people and places; there are enough characters and settings to make that essential for me to write a coherent review. YMMV.

Non-Fiction

Jack Kirby: The Epic Life of the King of Comics (2020)

By Tom Scioli

Review by Jon Swartz, Ph.D.

This hardcover graphic novel-style biography of Jack Kirby (1917 – 1994) -- creator or co-creator of some of the most popular comic book characters published by DC, Marvel, Harvey, and other comic book publishers -- seeks to tell the full story of the legendary “King of Comics” and his creations.

Needless to say, such a goal is impossible to reach in comic book form, but Scioli has made a gallant attempt to do so. Subjects covered in the book’s 208 pages include Kirby’s early life as Jacob Kurtzberg in New York during the Great Depression, his early struggles to succeed, his military service in Europe during World War II, his marriage, his 20-year partnership with Joe Simon at Timely (now Marvel) and then at DC and other companies, his work at Marvel during the 1960s with Stan Lee, his unhappiness with the way he was treated by publishers for most of his career, his later life, and his death and legacy. Characters created by Kirby and/or worked on during his career are presented in great detail.

One of the most interesting sections of the book for me was the time Lee returned to the Marvel Offices as a completely new man. The balding, pasty-faced, middle-aged man who had been crying -- when Kirby returned to help Marvel out of its doldrums -- had been changed into a tanned hipster with a mustache and beard, a styled full head of hair, and flashy clothes. This persona was the one that Lee would present from that time on at conventions, on TV, and in the movies -- as he became the face of Marvel Comics and took credit for just about everything Marvel Comics accomplished.

Graphic novelist Thomas Scioli, based in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania has done other commendable comic work, such as *Godland*, a Kirby-esque space opera that was nominated for an Eisner Award. His drawing has been favorably compared to Kirby’s. One thing I didn’t like about his art, however, was his exaggeration of Kirby’s eyes. None of the other people included in the book were treated in this cartoon-like manner.

The publisher, Ten Speed Press (an imprint of Random House), states in an Author’s Note that this book is not authorized by the Jack Kirby Estate, DC Comics, or Marvel Entertainment.

Nevertheless, this biography of Kirby should be of interest to all those interested in the history of comic books, especially the role of superheroes and supervillains in this history. In addition to the characters worked on and/or created by Simon and Kirby and then by Lee and Kirby, many other comic book characters are presented and discussed. Some of these characters still are with us today in comic books and graphic novels, on television, and in the movies.

I was pleased to read that Kirby, as a young boy coming home from school, found a copy of Gernsback’s *Wonder Stories* in the gutter and became a science fiction fan and collector. His passion for the genre was shown in the many science fiction stories he did for comic books and newspaper strips during his lifetime.

Another recent comic book about the life of Kirby, from Tidalwave Comics, is Tribute: Jack Kirby by Jon Judy (writer) and Paul Cox (artist) and takes only twenty-four pages to try to tell the same story told by Scioli. Cox's drawings of Kirby are certainly more realistic than those of Scioli. While Kirby's life story can't really be told in comic book pages, few or many, this effort by Judy and Cox is worth the price of the book.

Interview of L. S. King by Tamara Wilhite

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

L. S. King is the author of both the "Sword's Edge" science fiction / fantasy series and the "Deuces Wild" space opera series. She's also a martial artist and mother to four homeschooled children.

Tamara Wilhite: What makes the Sword's Edge series science fiction instead of fantasy?

L. S. King: There is no magic in the Sword's Edge Chronicles. Instead, it's long-forgotten technology, some of it alien in origin.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to write the prequel to your Sword's Edge Chronicles, "Unlikely Prophet"?

L. S. King: The broad history of the Teldheri people came to me as I first started to write in that universe. I began making notes on their history and before long the story of how they were saved from their dying planet began to evolve as a novel.

Tamara Wilhite: On your website, you give a shout out to Dr. Johnathan Crofts as "your very own physicist". How has he helped you keep the physics in your science fiction series realistic?

L. S. King: I have known Jon for decades. We were on something called The Lyst (an email list about the Myst and Riven games), and I put out a call for someone to help me make sure my science wasn't completely off track. The poor chap replied and has been stuck since. Every bit I write that has to do with science I send to him so he can tear his hair out trying to correct me or try to make it work. His favorite question when I contact him is, "What laws of physics are you trying to break now?"

Tamara Wilhite: What is the "Deuce's Wild" series about?

L. S. King: It's a space opera series that started as a monthly serial novel done as a proof-of-concept in the now defunct Ray Gun Revival online magazine. It's basically a space opera/ western mash-up about a cowboy and a space gunslinger-type who have to join forces because they are being hunted by the same bad guys. In the course of the first novel, they end up forging an unlikely and often humorous friendship.

Tamara Wilhite: Your bio says you've been a fan of shows like the Twilight Zone, Outer Limits and Dark Shadows. Which science fiction works had the greatest influence on you personally?

L. S. King: Boy, that's tough! For television, Twilight Zone and Star Trek I think were the ones that influenced me most while growing up. As far as books go, it was Tolkien and Heinlein, definitely.

Tamara Wilhite: And which ones influenced your own writing?

L. S. King: Another tough answer. Besides the above which definitely have affected not only me personally but my writing, everything from Babylon 5 to Asimov to McCaffrey to Bujold and more I cannot even think of at the moment I do know have impacted my writing.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you currently working on?

L. S. King: I am almost finished with the third Deuces Wild book. It has taken a sharp turn and surprised the snot out of me. I am wondering what my readers will think of it. I hope they don't throw things at me!

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

L. S. King: We're going through strange times, some even say it's rather like Heinlein's The Crazy Years. Keep your chin up, look up, and find creative ways to use your energy!

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

L. S. King: You're welcome, and thank you!

Literary Criticism

Don't Make Me Use My Dad Voice

By Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFreviews.blogspot.com>

There are two types of Science Fiction and Fantasy fans in the world:

- 1) Those who acknowledge both new and old works as being relevant to the genre.
- 2) Those who are wrong.

Yep. That completes the list. That's everybody. I don't know where you fall into the list, dear reader, but you're on there somewhere. I don't get why anyone would denigrate either, but there it is.

Some readers are never going to like certain authors. That's the way it should be. The fact remains that not liking an author doesn't make them irrelevant to the genre.

This rant started because of things I've read recently after seeing them linked on Facebook. I can't seem to find them. One had an explicit statement that anything published more than fifteen years ago is no longer relevant. I believe that it was written by a young person. I understand the hubris of youth and the belief that history started the day that person was born, but no it didn't actually happen that way.

Everything in SF/F builds on what has come before. The roots of modern fantasy go back at least as far as The Epic of Gilgamesh. (And possibly farther. Since it's the oldest known written document it's hard to say for sure but that's the way I'd bet.) Science Fiction goes back to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Everything in either genre derives from those two works in some way, shape or form. Everything. ALL OF IT.

Now don't get me wrong. Lots of work is still happening in both genres and it's all relevant too. Harry Potter is a bit older now, but it has legions of fans. The boom in Young Adult literature (much of which kicks ass) is attributable directly to J.K. Rowling. Authors like Veronica Roth, Suzanne Collins, and Rick Riordan have all benefited from the popularity of someone else's series. (Please understand that I'm not demeaning any of the above. Their work is awesome. I'm just stating that Harry Potter created a market for them to get the recognition they deserve.) This is a good thing for SF/F and those individual authors alike. It's also good for a guy like me, who likes a good story regardless.

Speaking of the Hunger Games trilogy and the Divergent series, I'll offer dystopic science fiction as a case in point. Darren Allen has an excellent post on this very subject here. I won't go into the types of dystopias he has mentioned. He does a terrific job of that himself. My point is the relevance. Those older works are relevant based on the influence they still have on work today.

The relevance of the more modern work is probably more evident to a younger person. The wave of modern day dystopic fiction probably started with the success (and yes, that's key) of The Hunger Games. The books and the movies related to Suzanne Collins' work is long and becoming longer. She re-popularized the sub-genre and sent it higher in popularity than anyone who came before her. She deserves a ton of credit. The fact remains that her work built on a foundation established decades earlier. It's all relevant.

The same can be said of works like The Time Machine and Journey to the Center of the Earth by Jules Verne. The Time Machine opened another entire sub-genre of SF/F: that of time travel. Journey to the Center of The Earth introduced science fiction to the ancient concept of the fantastic journey. Seriously, every SF work that contains space travel owes a debt to Jules Verne. Every episode of Star Trek, every Star Wars movie, every Green Lantern comic book and all the rest can trace their roots back here, with an assist to the French silent film A Trip to the Moon.

So go ahead and play Halo. Enjoy it. It's relevant to a new generation of fans. Just don't think you invented space travel or power armor. Power armor has been around since at least the debut of Starship Troopers by Robert Heinlein. It's awesome. It's fun. It's just not original. But relevant? Oh hell yeah. Have you seen the hype this game generates? Have you watched the movies or read the novels? (No, I haven't read the novels but if anyone wants to let me know where to start, I'm there. The influence of this video game on an entire generation of fandom is immense.)

Oh, and since I'm rocking out with my dad voice...

There has been a movement recently to add more women into SF/F circles. This in and of itself is a good thing. What is not good is the bullshit people are peddling when they try to highlight their cause. Are you paying attention here people? I have a statement to make:

If someone tells you that women have historically been ignored or pushed aside in SF/F they are either a liar or an idiot.

As a matter of fact, if they're dumb enough to believe that anyone who knows anything about the genre is ignorant enough to believe their bullshit they're probably both. I spent five minutes on the Hugo Awards list site compiling the following list of Hugo Awards won by women before 1980:

Weyr Search" by Anne McCaffrey [Analog Oct 1967] Best Novella 1968
The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin [Ace, 1969] best novel 1970

The Word for World is Forest by Ursula K. Le Guin [Again, Dangerous Visions, 1972] best novella 1973

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas by Ursula K. Le Guin [New Dimensions #3, 1973] best short 1974

The Dispossessed by Ursula K. Le Guin [Harper & Row, 1974] Best Novel 1975

Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang by Kate Wilhelm [Harper & Row, 1976] Best Novel 1977

Eyes of Amber by Joan D. Vinge [Analog June 1977] best Novelette 1978

Dreamsnake by Vonda N. McIntyre [Houghton Mifflin, 1978] Best Novel 1979

There have been others since, but I've got to work in a bit so that's as far as I took it. Also, I didn't look into the retro awards, so there may have been some there. To be fair, there may not have been as well.

And let's not forget that Mary Shelley was the FOUNDING AUTHOR of Science Fiction. The technology in the work may appear dated to modern eyes, but the book was first published in 1818. No, that's not a typo. 2018 was the two-hundredth anniversary of the first published Science Fiction work. It was also the two-hundred anniversary of the publication of the first ever Science Fiction story written by a woman. A woman who has at least three separate awards named after her. Seriously. Please, people learn something about a genre before you bash it. Check your fucking assumptions and do some god damned research before you start spouting horse manure. Really. The number of books, movies and toys that come from Shelley's work is beyond my ability to calculate.

Prose Bono

Wright's Writing Corner: The Payload Moment

L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Payload: Every scene/fight/sex scene should have some moment that moves the plot along or heightens awareness, drawing the reader into something greater. Villains should reveal something important during a fight, and romantic partners should learn more about each other or reveal secrets.

Also, every character should have at least one paragraph/scene where they reveal their inner motivation.

Payload. Probably the most important concept in these Writing Tips. If I had to rank them from most important to least important, this one would be number one.

Payload as expressed above falls into two categories: scene payload and character payload. Today, I will talk about scene payload and save character payload for a later post.

The last couple of weeks we talked about romantic zing—that moment of heightened awareness of the relationship that gives the reader a jolt, such as a first kiss. In many ways, Payload is plot-related zing—that moment when the storyline intensifies and is raised to a higher level.

Sometimes the Payload moment is caused by the revelation of unexpected turns of the plot. Other times, it happens because the ideas in the story are suddenly revealed to be on a deeper level than it had previously touched. I will give an example of this:

Last night we were watching a show where the main character was about to be executed by a rival. At the very last minute, as the curved blade lowers to strike the head off the poor imprisoned lad, the rival was struck by lightning. A character who was watching was seriously impressed by this (and by the fact that the kid about to lose his head smiled the whole time). He became convinced that destiny wanted this boy to live.

What was so impressive about this scene was that destiny had never been mentioned in this show...and we were on episode 52. Adding the question of whether Heaven might be on the main character's side gave a whole new dimension to the story. It suddenly seemed deeper, wider, more important than it had before.

That was the Payload moment, not only for that episode, but for the entire season.

(Kudos to anyone who can recognize the show from that description.)

As in the example above, the Payload is the thing in the scene that makes the scene come alive, that makes you sit up and say "Wow", that makes the story intensify or deepen. It can be something related to the general universe, like Heaven is on your side, or a twist of the plot, a new revelation about the nature of the situation.

Most Payload moments are like zing, a tiny jolt like the kind you get when you touch a metal doorknob after walking on a carpet. John and I recently watched a movie where the payload moments were so powerful, they were like the thunderous retort of a full-strength lightning bolt. The movie was called *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*. I am going to use it below as an example, but PLEASE!!! If you think you might ever want to see this movie, skip this part of the article. The power of the story will be severely lessened if you already know what is coming.

Spoiler Alert

The Five People You Meet In Heaven proposes the idea that when you die, before you get to go on to Heaven, you meet five people who show you what your life really meant, who explain the mysteries you never understood in your life. The particular story is about an amusement park maintenance man named Eddie who has lived and worked at this park his entire life, except for a stint in WWII. He had had plans, dreams, but when he came back from the war with his leg permanently damaged, those dreams slipped away from him.

Eddie dies (trying to save a little girl) and he meets his first person, a blue-skinned man who was a freak at the carnival that was included with the amusement park when Eddie was a kid. We already know enough about Eddie's life to know that this person was someone he only knew in passing. Yet, for some reason, this guy, not his brother or his mother, is the guy who meets him first.

The blue gentleman fills Eddie in on the five people thing and they chat a bit. Then, casually, Eddie asks, "How did you die?"

"You killed me," the man says.

"You killed me." With those words, suddenly everything changes. It is like being electrified. This blue man who meant nothing, a stranger chosen at random, is suddenly inexorably tied into Eddie's life.

Eddie's second person is his Captain from the war. They talk, they go over many things. What a good soldier Eddie was, what happened when their band of brothers got captured, the horrible way they were treated by their captors, how they escaped, how they burned the bamboo buildings they left behind, and the moment when Eddie's leg got shot.

Finally, Eddie asks, "Why you, Captain, why are you the one here to talk to me?"

"Because I'm the one who shot you."

This is the one that really hit us like a thunderbolt. (Probably the same thunderbolt that saved the character from the show we saw last night.) Suddenly, everything changed, everything about Eddie's life from that point on became different.

The captain goes on to explain why he did it. I will not tell you any more. If you have seen the movie, you know. If you have not, you should not have read this far anyway.

Spoiler End

Not every Payload moment has to involve thunderbolts. But a good Payload moment will draw the reader further in to the story. They are the moments when the point of the whole thing becomes clear, the moment that rewards the reader for the effort made so far, the moment that draws the story together and makes it something more than an anecdote.

How do you create Payload moments? That is another issue entirely. One we can discuss next week.

The Cute Moose: Lessons Learned

Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I'm so excited to announce the release of my first children's picture book, *The Cute Moose*. It has been well-received, both by my lightning-fast beta readers, and the people who have read it as an ebook, and I heard yesterday from the first person to have a paper copy in hand that it looks good. So!

That's not what this post is about. I wrote up some of the story over on my blog, why I wrote this book, and how both my sisters were a huge influence on it. This post is where I lean my elbows on the table, drop my chin into my hands, and admit that Oh there were a lot of mistakes made on the road to greatness with this book. In case anyone else is planning on making this crazy trip, I thought I'd document them. May your journey be smoother than mine! And may you end up in the same place, with a #1 best selling new release in your category.

The first big mistake I made – and it's a doozy – was as an artist. See, I started work on the art for this book almost before I knew what the story was going to be. I wanted to play on my sister's favorite joke about being a cute moose. And I was doing a daily art challenge, which gave even more interesting structure to the art. I knew, from experience as a mother and a librarian, that picture books are commonly landscape oriented. What I did not do, and I should have done immediately, was look to see what print sizes were supported by KDP print. With the Inktil books, I'd been making them portrait, and as large as possible for max coloring space. So my mind assumed that I could flip that, and have a

book 10" wide, by 8" high. Standard print size, and on my digital painting app, a good sized file for printing. Well. I got all the way through laying the book out and getting read to upload it when I discovered that KDP print only supports printing at 8.5" wide. No more. Also, in order to keep my layout proportional, I had to create a custom size, which lost me the ability to sell through expanded distribution (ie libraries and schools, daggone it!).

Sizing art down is, at least, easier and less likely to lead to print quality issues than the other way around. First lesson: check available print sizes. I'm planning at looking into Lightning Source for sizes, and hardbacks, for future uses. This time, I was in a hurry.

The preferred format, people told me, was text on one page of the spread, art on the other. I filled in the text pages with some cute line art that wasn't necessarily story-related (as you see, Inktaill made an appearance!)

Which was my second challenge. I'm not sure I'd call it a mistake. I decided I wanted to give my sister this book for Christmas in the first week or so of November. The print version came out December 8, to give you the scope of the project. I did the whole thing in a month: 28 pieces of full-color art, well over a dozen pieces of line-art, text, layout, multiple reformatting, and uploads. Originally when I decided I was going to make this book for my sister's Christmas present, I was thinking I might print it up at home, put it in a cover folder... and then I realized the simplest, and probably cheapest, was just to go ahead and publish the thing.

Second lesson, then, was to do a whole lot more planning ahead. Like a year. LOL! I crunched through that book so fast, and some of the mistakes could have been avoided with more time to think and research.

I did much of the art with text in mind, leaving space for it.

Another lesson was a good one. I was posting the art as my daily art, most days. As such, I was getting feedback while I went. Plus, I was talking with my mother and my sister Manya about the project. Making sure I got Juniper's favorite things into the book was some of it: Highland Cattle, pink horses. But we also talked about font, and what would be a good, readable font (serif) while still being a little playful to suit the book. We wound up picking Cheboygan because the name amused us. I also crowd-sourced the moose rhymes. Sure, I could have just used a rhyme dictionary to come up with words that rhyme with moose, but having live people toss out ideas gave me ideas of what might be offbeat and quirky to throw in there (like pamplemousse, and Scaramoose which is, no, not a real word. But fun to say!). Also, as I was formatting I was putting images in my art group and getting feedback (like: don't put text and art on the same page, unless the art has a good deal of open space for it). Also! Make your text large enough for easy reading, which in this book was no less than 20 pt font.

The book came in at 59 pages, with front and end matter. My friend who is a librarian and beta read it for me pointed out that it is long for a picture book. Also, there were words in it small children will not understand. Heck, I told him, I suspect some parents might not be familiar with some of those words. In context I'm sure they will figure them out... and I didn't write it for small children, although I do believe it will appeal to them. My sister is forty, with the innocent mind of a child. With the next book (and yes, there will be a next one. I'm already working on it with a collaborator) we will do a few things differently. Make it shorter, for one.

And the color interior. This wasn't, really, a mistake. I knew what I was getting into when I designed

the thing, because a while back I had helped my grandmother with her memoir (Alaska Bush Mother) and saw what a full color interior cost to print. I'll put it this way. When I set the pricing for The Cute Moose, I wanted to keep it as low as I could. Which means that at the 9.99 price point, I make a dollar in royalties. Eh. This project was for my sister, and learning, and I accomplished both. However, a black and white interior would be a whole lot cheaper to do!

Final lesson? Kindle Create does a great looking picture ebook. That was a delightful surprise. It was easy to make, too. You download the program, feed it your formatted pdf you created for the print edition, and it spits out a very nice ebook that is responsive to screen size. I do not recommend trying to read The Cute Moose on a phone screen. However, on a tablet or the computer it looks good, and the page-turning animation is smooth.

Ebooks all have a download fee. With a novel you're not going to notice it, it's a few cents. The Cute Moose? That costs me \$1.83 of my list price when it's downloaded. The interesting thing here: you don't get charged the download fee if your book is in the 35% royalty range. I put Cute Moose in at 70%, at 3.99, but I suspect I would get the same royalties (maybe more) at the lower range. I did put it in Kindle Unlimited, despite the short length, because why not? With future books, I'm going to play with the pricing structure more. But if you ever wondered why children's picture books were expensive, boy howdy. I know why now.

I'd do it all over again! I had a blast with this, my sister is going to love it, and I learned so much. I hope this helps someone!

~Finis~

