The N3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillies, D.Sc., Editor
March 2021

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Editorial

We continue to look for more reviewers. We have a fine group of people writing for us, but as time goes on, interests change, time for writing changes, so that long-time reviewers gradually will tend to need to be replaced by new reviewers. Your support in our search for reviewers will be most helpful.

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Fiction

Architects of Memory by Karen Osborne
Review by Sam Lubell

A crew of space salvage workers with their own secrets may hold the key to ending a war with a never-seen alien race in this debut space adventure.

One of the fun, but confusing, aspects of science fiction world-building is that many novels throw the reader into a new universe and slowly reveal the background and backstory. Instead of having characters explain things to each other, the much-derided "As you know Bob...", or starting a chapter with a quote from the *Encyclopedia Galactica* or the works of Princess Irulan, modern novels trust the reader will keep reading through the strange situations until the key concepts are introduced and the setting makes sense. This is what happens in *Architects of Memory*, a debut novel by Karen Osborne set in a corporate-dominated universe where indentured laborers work in space to earn citizenship and first contact with the alien Vai has resulted in a war that has killed millions.

The book has two viewpoint characters. Ashlan "Ash" Jackson is a pilot on the cargo spaceship *Twenty-Five*. She is indentured to Aurora Intersystems, a big step up from her position as a miner for a different company. When she works off her seven-year indenture, by earning bounties for recovering salvage from spaceships partially destroyed in the war with the alien Vai, she will gain citizenship. But before then, any medical care will increase the length of her indenture and a major illness will cause Aurora to kick her out. So Ash hides the fact that she has contracted celestium madness, even though it causes hallucinations, impairs her coordination, and shakes her hands, which makes her a danger to her crewmates. She is attracted to Captain Kate Keller, the other viewpoint character, and the two are in the early stages of a relationship.

The book begins with Ash salvaging an alien weapon, whose loss may have caused the Vai to retreat from a major battle with the humans. This may be a crucial turning point in the war with the mysterious Vai, who, as far as Ash knows, have never been seen by any human. But it is so valuable that one of the crew turns traitor, selling their secrets and allowing mercenaries from another corporation to capture the *Twenty-Five*. Ash and Natalie, the only soldier, fake their deaths and flee to the *London*, the ship they were salvaging. Meanwhile, Captain Keller, who eventually realizes that the traitor has removed her control codes, tries to recapture her ship or, failing that, destroy it with the occupiers still on it.

Ash and Keller have separate adventures for most of the book not knowing that the other is still alive. In the course of the novel, they find out that another member of the crew was keeping secrets, and learn the truth behind Ash's illness, the Vai, and the war.

There is lots of action in the book, but the real plot is the slow revelation of the elaborate backstory behind the action. The characterization of the main characters is well done. Readers understand how Ash's own personal history influences her actions. We do not learn as much about Captain Keller but she too has a consistent, clearly drawn personality.

The book is mostly well written, especially considering that this is a first novel, although there are a few places where more clarity would have helped. I think the captain (or Aurora) should have done a better job vetting the crew members and it was sometimes hard to track how the secondary characters who were left in one place got to the next place where they rejoined the plot. Due to the complexities of

the background, this book may benefit from a second reading.

The sequel, *Engines of Oblivion*, comes out on February 9, 2021. The sequel will focus more on Natalie who was a secondary character in this book.

Readers who like mysteries, conspiracies, and characters keeping secrets will enjoy *Architects of Memory*. However, readers who are not used to the conventions of modern SF may find the initial chapters confusing since not everything is explained at the beginning. Readers who have the patience to trust the author and figure things out as they go will find the book worthwhile.

Artemis by Andy Weir
Review by Sam Lubell

Author Andy Weir faced a problem. His first book *The Martian* became a phenomenon that inspired an excellent movie. So how could he follow that up? His solution was to write a book whose main character, Jazz Bashara, is a petty criminal, a smuggler who, while being exceptional smart, is also incredibly lazy who has wasted her every opportunity. This seems a long way from clean-cut all-American astronaut Mark Watney. At the same time, *Artemis*, named for only city on the moon, emphasizes engineering with lots of technical details and even a struggle to survive on the lunar surface that will make the book attractive to fans of *The Martian.*

Essentially *Artemis* is a caper book. It opens with an exciting scene in which the narrator, Jazz, has an air leak in her spacesuit, which she bought used, and barely makes it to the airlock. As a result, she fails the test to join the EVA Guild, a requirement to lead groups of tourists on the lunar surface. This sets a pattern for the book, Jazz messes up and resorts to something even more dangerous, illegal, or both, to get out of it. Jazz makes most of her money by smuggling in goods thanks to a pen-pal on Earth. When she delivers cigars to Trond, a billionaire living on the moon because the gravity is easier on his crippled daughter, the businessman offers her a million slugs if she can wreck Sanchez Aluminum's harvesters so he could buy the company. Although just a smuggler, not a saboteur, Jazz agrees.

Though complex engineering and a great deal of creativity, Jazz manages to wreck three of the four, not enough to fulfill the contract but enough to get Sanchez's mob owners to kill Trond and send an assassin after her. So Jazz has to figure out what is really going on, survive being chased by both an assassin and the moon's only cop, and perform an even bigger act of sabotage, one that risks killing everyone on the moon.

Weir has thought a lot about the conditions of working-class people on the moon. If there are to be tourists and engineers building things requiring zero gravity, there will have to be cleaning and porting. Jazz is so poor that she lives in a "capsule domicile," about the size of a coffin, eats "gunk" made of algae, and dreams of being rich enough to have her own condo with its own bathroom and shower.

Jazz is an interesting character. Everyone keeps telling her that she has wasted her potential. Her pen pal even writes, "I would give anything to be as smart as you. But I'm not. That's okay. I work hard instead, and you're lazy as hell." Even Jazz recognizes this failing. "…there's no one I hate more than teenage Jazz Bashara. That stupid bitch made every bad decision a stupid bitch could make. She's responsible for where I am today." Still, she does have ethics. She won't break a deal. When she lies to the head of security, he offers her money to tell the truth, knowing "You'll lie all day if we're just talking. But if I pay for the truth, that makes it a business deal. And a Bashara never reneges on a deal."

She also is good in a crisis and better at making true friends than she realizes.

Ultimately, *Artemis* is not up to the standards of *The Martian*. The author is a bit too heavy-handed with the idea that Jazz is a mixed-up failure and sometimes allows the technical details to slow the plot. But it is good enough to show that *The Martian* was not a fluke. I look forward to Weir's next book.

Autonomous: A Novel by Annalee Newitz
Review by Sam Lubell

Autonomous: A Novel by Annalee Newitz is a novel about freedom and autonomy in both obvious and non-obvious ways. Certainly, both robots and human slaves have issues with being autonomous. But so do other humans in a future where drugs can cause people to become addicted to their work. And people's autonomy is affected by their own prejudice and assumptions.

Autonomous is structured as an extended chase. Jack Chen is a drug pirate, "the Robin Hood of the anti-patent movement" who recently cloned Zacuity, a productivity drug. When people start dying from being unable to quit working, she fears she made an error in her copying, but instead discovers the problem is built into the drug. She is being chased by Eliasz, a military agent, and his robot Paladin. The robot is confused by Eliasz's emotional response to it; at times attracted to it and at other times refusing to acknowledge it. Ultimately, it deduces that Eliasz sees it as male but has been socialized to resist male-male sexual relations. The solution is to convince Eliasz that it is female. Since Paladin's type of robots have a human brain, only used for facial recognition, Eliasz becomes obsessed with finding out information about the brain's former human.

Meanwhile Jack has resolved to bring down the drug company that invented Zacuity by proving that it broke the law. When Threezed, a slave Jack rescued, discovers an autonomous medical robot working with a Zacuity patient, he convinces her to join Jack who gets her a job in Jack's former lab, ironically the type of work Jack had wanted to do at that same lab.

So, while Jack, Med, and Threezed develop a cure, Eliasz and Paladin follow clues to track them down, while working on their own relationship.

Autonomous has the action of a police chase thriller but the speculation and ideas of a hard science fiction novel. This book deserves the attention it has been receiving. Recommended.

Crossing Over by Paul Clayton
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Here's a summation: the nation has polarized over politics to the extent that commerce has been interrupted. The kind of riots that hit Charlottesville, VA, in August of 2017 now occur in every location, on a regular basis. Through some undefined mechanism, the sitting president was physically evicted from the White House, and now there are two competing governments, one sponsored by the states in the Northeast part of the country, and the other matching somewhat with states which had football teams in the Atlantic Coast Conference, along with a few SEC areas. (This I found to be far-fetched, BUT it was a plot device needed to make the story work)

Mike McNerny, 60ish and retired, is still trying to make sense of things. Almost all of the local busi-

nesses have closed down. Many of his neighbors have fled, due to their proximity to the city of Minneapolis, where it is reported that teen thugs are roving the streets in gangs. Without another safe haven in mind, Mike must attempt to persuade his wife Marie to load up their gear and flee to Canada, where there is no civil war. (I'm not sure this sort of person has a hope of survival. Essentially, he has done NO preparation; he ESPECIALLY has done no emotional prep work with his wife).

And now we come to the greatest weakness in Mike's plan. They have a beautiful 16-year-old daughter, Elly, tall for her age, who has some sort of developmental delay. She has some cognitive skills at an 11 or 12-year-old level, but my read of the way she seems to understand her environment leads me to believe that her social skills are more like that of a four year old. She is a friendly sort, which means she greets strangers cheerfully; and those, only seeing her physical beauty and her stature, might innocently come to the conclusion that the young woman is fully in control. An evil doer who recognizes her cognitive impairment, might quickly arrange to isolate her from her family, and kidnap her. She can't remember to keep the door locked, and to stay inside.

(As it happens, I have known a young woman very much like this. She was physically beautiful but had no sense of a need for safety. Because she was so cute, well-meaning people at church would talk to her and say "You are SUCH a cute little girl! Why don't you come home with me and be MY little girl?" And Sarah would say "okay," and be perfectly ready to walk out the door with them.)

And sometimes it just doesn't seem to Mike that Marie has a grasp on just how things are on the road. (In real life., this much fighting in a crisis situation means you will die.)

It is the presence of Elly that makes this book different form all of the other 50,000 post-apocalyptic books out there. Mike can't make plans that don't include one adult devoting at LEAST half their attention to keeping Elly from making some innocent mistake that can get them all killed. Unfortunately, even before the crisis, Mike and Marie weren't having a unified purpose; the stress of raising a daughter who learned very slowly compared to others has challenged more than one family; it uses splits them apart or drives them much closer.

There is more to the book, but the inclusion of THAT particular reality is something I don't recall seeing anywhere else. In 2011, the CDC said that 1 out of 7 American school children had some sort of developmental disability. Most are not as severe as that faced by Elly's family, but here's the deal: If you happen to be one of those people who are looking forward to a coming revolution, consider how you will prepare for all the Ellys. Also, consider how you will brawl in the streets, and still provide care of the elderly in nursing homes. If your program for a return to a simpler nation means you plan on allowing the most needy elements of society to quietly be put aside, go ahead and tell us now. If not, show us your plan. We'd love to see it.

I found the book dismal and unrealistic. I couldn't fit Mike and Maria's continued survival to the amount of cash they had on hand. Mike had a .38 Special snub-nosed revolver, but he never once used it effectively. If you plan on using a firearm, you MUST learn how to use it and train with it. The idea that he would be carrying the pistol around in his pocket, yet never mention to Marie that he had it, was unrealistic.

However, the additional burdens that the family struggled under, due to Elly's disability, kept me reading past the point when I would normally have discarded it.

Double Star by Robert Heinlein
Review by Chris Nuttall
http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

"I have never regretted my lost profession. In a way, I have not lost it; Willem was right. There is other applause besides handclapping and there is always the warm glow of a good performance. I have tried, I suppose, to create the perfect work of art. Perhaps I have not fully succeeded – but I think my father would rate it as a 'good performance.'

No, I do not regret it, even though I was happier then – at least I slept better. But there is solemn satisfaction in doing the best you can for eight billion people. Perhaps their lives have no cosmic significance, but they have feelings. They can hurt."

Heinlein, like many early science-fiction writers, knew relatively little about the solar system and its (lack of) inhabitants. Indeed, most of his early works included inhabited versions of both Mars and Venus that simply never existed. Mars, in Heinlein's works, was inhabited by two different races; the super-advanced intelligences of The Rolling Stones and Stranger in a Strange Land and the older, but considerably less advanced Martians of Double Star. It is these Martians who provide the catalyst for a very human crisis that threatens to undo everything mankind had achieved over the last few hundred years.

Double Star is focused on Lawrence Smith (aka 'The Great Lorenzo), a man who happens to be a brilliant actor and mimic. Unfortunately, Lorenzo is also a self-absorbed racist (in the sense he is prejudiced against aliens, Martians in particular) and, when the story opens, he is very much down on his luck. Desperate for work, he is hired to impersonate one of the most prominent politicians in the solar system, John Bonforte. The real Bonforte has been kidnapped and his political allies are desperate to keep this hidden while they conduct a quiet search for the man. Complicating matters is that Bonforte is going to be adopted into a Martian family – and being late for it will be seen, at best, as immensely insulting.

Lorenzo, somehow, manages to play the role well enough to go through the adoption ceremony, only to discover that Bonforte has been released … with a damaged mind. Worse, the previous government has resigned, forcing Bonforte to take the reins until an election can be held. Lorenzo finds himself playing the role again and again, as each successive crisis pushes him further and further away from his true identity. When Bonforte finally dies, after 'winning' an election, Lorenzo reluctantly embraces the role permanently and gives up his old self. Twenty-five years later, as he notes in the postscript, no one outside the original group knows the truth …

… But it doesn't matter, as Lorenzo has abandoned his old beliefs and grown into the role.

Double Star is a very character-focused story, to the point that – while there are few true surprises in the storyline – it doesn't matter. The real story is focused on Lorenzo's slow change from narcissistic racist to a genuine reform politician, from reluctantly accepting the role and planning to give it up as soon as possible to embracing it and putting his past self to rest. (He snidely notes that the 'Great Lorenzo' was found dead in a boarding house, after being unable to find any more roles.) At the start, Lorenzo's only true virtue is his belief that the show must go on; later, he understands the importance of his role in a way I wish more modern politicians grasped. Bonforte is not a wishy-washy man who allows the media to dictate his every move, but someone who works hard to be decisive. In his own words:

"Take sides! Always take sides! You will sometimes be wrong – but the man who refuses to take sides must always be wrong! Heaven save us from poltroons who fear to make a choice. Let us stand up and be counted."

Heinlein manages to take some pokes at racism along the way. Lorenzo has an almost physical reaction to Martians, a reaction that requires hypnosis to suppress and eventually overcome. It takes time for Lorenzo to come to realise that the Martians may be primitive, but they have a strikingly advanced culture in their own right. Sadly, for better or worse, Heinlein doesn't dwell on this as much as he could have done. Mars is the backdrop for a political crisis that threatens to start a war, either against the Martians or a human civil war.

We get fewer details on this crisis than we might have wished, although we do get enough for Heinlein to make a number of points. One faction wishes to give Martians equal rights, another – either paternalistic or evil – wishes to provide 'guidance' instead. Heinlein spares no punches here, comparing this to the slaveholders of the past … who claimed to love their slaves while punishing them for daring to want to be free. The conflict between those who want to control others – for their own good, of course – and those who just want to be free runs through plenty of Heinlein's novels, but it is rarely enunciated as clearly as it is here.

Heinlein – through Lorenzo – also makes the point that the public has a limited tolerance for 'reforms,' however defined.

Each period of reform is followed by instability and reaction, for want of a better term; there are limits to how much change you can demand, in a very short space of time, without alienating vast numbers of people. It is an interesting point, although I know people who will insist that injustice must be rectified immediately. And yet, it is difficult to end one injustice without creating more.

Double Star is less successful with its supporting cast. Some of them are very well drawn indeed, including the Emperor (who is the only person to see through the deception) and some of the staff. Others, however, are weaker; there is only one female character of any note in the book, as far as I can tell, and she is effectively nothing more than a stereotypical 1950s secretary with a crush on her boss. (She eventually ends up marrying Lorenzo, who has settled into his role by then.)

A handful of roles continue Heinlein's tradition of 'quiet diversity;' one man, mentioned in passing, is specifically described as coloured. It's amusing to realise that space travel, and contact with non-human races, might have finally put an end to human-on-human racism.

It does lead to some jarring moments. One of the staffers – a man called Bill – feels constantly slighted by being passed over for important roles. After being rejected one final time, he leaves and tries to betray the secret. It's an odd point, because Lorenzo – who talked about resentful underlings in the past – should have been able to see it coming and deal with it, not least because there are no apparent reasons to deny the staffer a promotion. That said, it might also have been a reflection of both just how far Lorenzo had come by that point and, perhaps worse, of the complacency that had been affecting the staffers. Bill's resentment should have been handled before it became dangerous.

Like most of Heinlein's books, his technological predictions were way off. Interplanetary spaceships coexist with record spools, rather than computers. There's no suggestion of forging a digital face, rather than hiring a live actor, but a CGI impersonation couldn't shake hands and kiss babies. But, also like most of Heinlein's books, it doesn't matter. There is something timeless about the story, even though – in some ways – it is an adaption of a far older story.

But never mind that. On the whole, and putting aside the problem with technological development, Double Star is one of Heinlein's best works.

Glory Road by Robert Heinlein
Review by Chris Nuttall
http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

"ARE YOU A COWARD? This is not for you. We badly need a brave man. He must be 23 to 25 years old, in perfect health, at least six feet tall, weigh about 190 pounds, fluent English with some French, proficient with all weapons, some knowledge of engineering and mathematics essential, willing to travel, no family or emotional ties, indomitably courageous and handsome of face and figure. Permanent employment, very high pay, glorious adventure, great danger."

I cannot decide, after finishing Glory Road for the first (and probably the last) time, if the book is a poor fantasy novel or a brilliant deconstruction of the genre. On one hand, I disliked large swathes of it intensely; on the other, I noted a number of interesting points where Heinlein invites us to see just how absurd the characters are. Glory Road is not completely unreadable – and, like most of Heinlein's works, it had its good points, but it has simply not aged very well. There were times when I cringed while reading and that is not a good thing.

Glory Road's 'hero' is a man of many names (I'll stick with Oscar) who spends the first section of the book bumming around Europe after being discharged from the US Army, hoping to find meaning in his life. After a brief moment of feeling rich when he lands a jackpot lottery ticket and trying to come to terms with the problems such wealth would cause him, Oscar sees a girl who catches his eye immediately. But he doesn't catch her name.

Shortly afterwards, he answers a classified ad for a 'hero' and finds himself roped into a quest for the Egg of the Phoenix by the girl, whose name is Star. Accompanied by Rufo – a squire and jack of all trades who seems to like dirty fighting – Oscar is dragged from crisis to crisis on his trip down the Glory Road, eventually convincing Star to marry him shortly before he proves his hero credentials by successfully recovering the Egg. At this point, Star reveals that she is actually the Empress of the Twenty Universes, Rufo is her grandson and Oscar is now her consort. The Egg is really a collection of memories belonging to the last rulers of the universe.

Oscar is welcome in her home, apparently, but he really doesn't fit in, eventually coming to the conclusion that he isn't any better than a gigolo. (An irony, given that Star originally condemned Earth's habit of prostitution in all its forms.) The life of a retired hero is not all it's cracked up to be. He goes back to Earth and discovers that he really doesn't fit in there either. Having got into the habit of having adventures, and resolving not to die in his bed, Oscar sets out along the Glory Road again …

The problem with Glory Road is that the relatively strong first and third sections are badly let down by the middle. I came very close to simply deciding it wasn't worth continuing, for reasons I will detail before; in hindsight, there was a logic behind the aspects I found objectionable, but I thought twice about reading far enough to learn what it was.

Oscar starts the book alienated from his society, wandering the world in desperate search of something meaningful to do with his life. He comes across as both sympathetic and unsympathetic, his wry observations on society contrasting oddly with a cold-blooded attempt to dodge military service (presumably in Vietnam) and a complete lack of loyalty to anyone other than himself. It's easy to feel sorry for him.

And yet … he also acts like an entitled brat on the Glory Road, bickering with Star (who, to be fair, acts childish herself during that section). He marries Star and seems to think he has a right to dominate her, yet he doesn't ask the right questions when it seems as though Star is willing to do anything for him. This actually weakens the book in more ways than one. Quite apart from the misogyny, we are simply not told why the Egg is important until after the quest is over.

The deconstruction commences at the same time. What does the hero do after the quest is over? Oscar, it seems, never thought about it. He finds the sudden role reversal between Star and himself to be more than a little disconcerting; he is bound by customs and social mores that simply do not apply to Star and her people. Oscar is now the child and Star, over two hundred years old, is now the adult. He wears it poorly. In many ways, Oscar reminds me of the jock who won a football game in high school … and is still talking about his amazing victory decades later, after everyone else has moved on. On one hand, it's easy to feel sorry for him – and to understand his annoyance at pettifogging regulations when he's back on Earth – but, on the other, it's hard not to see him as an ungrateful brat. He reminds me of some of the Culture's citizens, whining about the lack of meaning in their lives. There are lots of people here who would happily trade places.

Star is, at first, almost a parody of the standard woman in fantasy tropes. She is alternatively encouraging and bratty, both helping Oscar to overcome his nerves and berating him for mistakes he didn't know not to make. When Oscar mans up, she shifts into submissiveness … something that nearly made me throw the book aside … until the end of the second section, where she resumes her role as empress. It rapidly becomes clear that she was having a holiday romance with Oscar – she had the chance to let her hair down and pretend to be someone else for a while – and that things will not be the same. It's difficult to tell if she actually loves Oscar or not, but I think she doesn't. She certainly treats him very unfairly – he married her without knowing what he was really getting into.

As always with Heinlein, Glory Road includes a great deal of social commentary. Oscar points out that, if you spend years beating the patriotism out of children, you can hardly complain when the grown-up children refuse to fight for their country. This is noted in ways both overt and covert, from the lack of support for war veterans (at least until the GI Bill is expanded again) to Uncle Sam's money-grabbing habits. Oscar concludes that the taxman will take two-thirds of his lottery winnings and, while it's hard to feel sorry for that attitude, it must be noted that a person who genuinely earns the money will see it vanishing and grow to resent paying the government, particularly when the government doesn't seem to offer anything in return. He also notes that customs in one part of the globe are not the same as customs in another, something that gets him into trouble on the Glory Road. But really, who would have expected an innkeeper to be offended when the hero refuses to sleep with his wife and daughters?

The politics in the book are also particularly odd. Star's system of government – all-powerful empress who keeps her hands off as much as possible – is held up as superior to democracy, but that assumes that the emperors and empresses will always be good people. Even Star cannot grasp everything, which means her decisions – handed down from a distance – will always be flawed. Democracy is not a perfect system either, but it does provide a way to remove unsuitable leaders.

At the same time, the book also includes a great deal of pointless titillation. I can't decide if Heinlein was genuinely trying to write sexual material or not, or if he was still writing under restrictions from the gatekeepers, but it comes across very poorly. Writing erotica was not one of Heinlein's talents and, again, it shows. One may regard Star's society as ideal, in some ways – there is no prostitution because there are no controls on women – but one may also view it as a poorly-drawn ideal society. That said, Heinlein does manage to poke fun at a few sacred cows; what's the difference, Star asks, between paying a woman for sex and taking her out to dinner first? There is a bluntness around their society which

is oddly refreshing.

Panshin called Heinlein's third period (1959-1967, which includes Glory Road) the Period of Alienation. And, while I disagree with Panshin on many issues, I think he might have had a point. Heinlein, I suspect, was coming to realise that many of the wonders he'd written about were not going to materialise as quickly as he'd hoped. Flying cars, lunar bases, starships and even immortality .. they were trapped in the future, while Heinlein himself saw the world getting smaller and society threatening to collapse. Indeed, there is a profound sense of alienation (a word I have used many times) running through Glory Road, to the point where it is hard to tell if Heinlein was blind to Oscar's failings or expected us to see them for ourselves. (He did the same thing later, in Farnham's Freehold, but there the subtext is clear that we are not supposed to sympathise with Farnham.) Heinlein was aware that society was moving and changing and, like all people raised in traditionalistic societies, he found the process uncomfortable. All the old certainties could no longer be counted upon, for better or worse. The urge to go back to a simpler time, warts and all, can be overpowering at times.

At base, Glory Road is about a man searching for meaning in his life. Oscar yeans for adventure, which he puts into words:

"What did I want?

"I wanted a Roc's egg. I wanted a harem loaded with lovely odalisques less than the dust beneath my chariot wheels, the rust that never stained my sword. I wanted raw red gold in nuggets the size of your fist and feed that lousy claim jumper to the huskies! I wanted to get up feeling brisk and go out and break some lances, then pick a likely wench for my droit du seigneur—I wanted to stand up to the Baron and dare him to touch my wench! I wanted to hear the purple water chuckling against the skin of the Nancy Lee in the cool of the morning watch and not another sound, nor any movement save the slow tilting of the wings of the albatross that had been pacing us the last thousand miles.

"I wanted the hurtling moons of Barsoom. I wanted Storisende and Poictesme, and Holmes shaking me awake to tell me, "The game's afoot!" I wanted to float down the Mississippi on a raft and elude a mob in company with the Duke of Bilgewater and the Lost Dauphin.

"I wanted Prester John, and Excalibur held by a moon-white arm out of a silent lake. I wanted to sail with Ulysses and with Tros of Samothrace and eat the lotus in a land that seemed always afternoon. I wanted the feeling of romance and the sense of wonder I had known as a kid. I wanted the world to be what they had promised me it was going to be—instead of the tawdry, lousy, fouled-up mess it is."

Say what you like about Glory Road, that is a pretty evocative passage.

In some ways, Glory Road speaks to me because I wanted adventure too, when I was a kid. There is a part of me that would be tempted, if the call to adventure came now. But there's also a bit of me that knows that adventure means being in deep shit, far away; adventurers, whatever the cause, leave dead bodies, broken lives and worse in their wake. The romance of adventure is gone. And, in some ways, this is a bad thing. We, as a society, need a frontier, a place to go and grow. Instead, governments are getting bigger – which means stupider – and intrusion into private lives is growing ever worse. These days, the Fellowship of the Ring would be buried in paperwork before they ever got out of the Shire.

And, of course, there's a bit of me that cringes at the sexual elements within the book.

My feelings about this book are decidedly mixed, as I'm sure you've noticed. It has its moments, but

the middle section lets the other two down badly.

Most of Heinlein's books, if I may borrow a line from the Holy Rewatch series, have aged like fine wine. Glory Road has more than a hint of rancid vinegar.

The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes
by Suzanne Collins
Review by Jim McCoy
http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

Suzanne Collins is an amazeballs author. I mean that seriously. It took me longer than it should have to start reading the books (Not my fault. By the time they were on my radar, I had heard that they were just like Twilight. I tried Twilight. I can't do it. Bella is everything I teach my daughters not to be and I can't read a series with a MC that I have no respect for.) but I saw the first movie with a girl that I knew and I was hooked. The books are even better. Some people will hate on Ms. Collins because she writes in first person present tense. Some people can kiss my butt. I get so sucked into Collin's writing that I forget to eat. I'm a three hundred and seventy pound man. I NEVER forget to eat. I often eat when I shouldn't. But when I get locked into one of this woman's books, as they say on the streets of New York, "Fugetaboudit." She has kept me up all night a few times too. That probably makes her evil on some level, but this is the kind of evil that I fully condone.

I was, however, kind of hesitant with The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes. Why? Because it's the story of President Snow from the original trilogy and that guy was a villain's villain. I mean, who wants to read about a dude who slaughters children as part of his job? But then, I mean, it was Suzanne Collins and my oldest daughter did love it and...

Well...

I caved, okay? I'm not proud of it but I totally gave up my inhibitions and through myself face first into the book. I'm glad I did though, because I had been acting like a total turdface. Listen, this is a good book if you just like... read it. It also helps if you think of the character by the name Coriolanus Snow (his full name as given in Ballad) as opposed to President Snow.

What Collins has done here is two things:

1.) She kept in mind the single most ubiquitous thing about every human being and their mindset: We are all the hero of our own story. From the outside looking in, what Snow will do later (and, indeed, some of what he does in Ballad) is evil. But to him, it's a necessary evil. The Hunger Games trilogy depicts Snow as an evil man, doing what he wants. Ballad not so much. Here we see a young man (or maybe boy is a better title) doing what he has to do because he has to do it.

and

2.) The Greatest Harm is Often Done with the Best Intentions. Seriously, the Hunger Games terrorized twelve Districts full of people. It's how they're kept in line. It's how society continues and, honestly, what are the rights of people as compared to the rights of society? Snow is, in short, a believer in the Social Contract. And like many other followers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (that's the guy who wrote the actual book called The Social Contract for those of you who don't have degrees in history) he simply

believes that killing people is an acceptable way to enforce it. I mean it worked for Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot right? And, I mean, seventy-five years of The Hunger Games killed a lot less people than the Reign of Terror in France, right? And that was, after all, the first massacre conducted due to Rousseau's teachings.

At any rate, in his own mind Coriolanus is working for the good of all and to prevent another war like the one that ruined his family, destroyed his country and killed his father. I mean, it was a really bad time not just for Panem but for Coriolanus personally. He went from seeing his father on TV and leading parades to being raised by his grandmother. It couldn't have been easy.

And that's the magic of The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes. Collins has taken a man that I hated and turned him into a sympathetic character that I could root for. I never would have believed it possible but she did it. The Snow in this book is really a guy you can root for. Once you understand his intentions, what he's doing becomes, well, not admirable but at least understandable. After all, as badly as life sucked in the Capitol during the war, the Districts got it worse. Of course, it helps that she shows Corio as being capable of loving another human being.

That's not the impression I got from the original trilogy.

Of course there's more to Ballad than just that. The story revolves around the Tenth Hunger Games, long before Katniss Everdeen and her time in the arena, or even her birth. And it's weird to say this, but it's kind of cool to see how small the games were when they started. The arena is small and not all that well equipped. Muttations are not really a thing yet. The same arena is used every year and it is not in good shape at all. The Games are not very popular and there are no such things as sponsors or betting yet. These Games are similar to the Games that Katniss played in some ways, but they're so much smaller. It's almost eerie.

There is plenty of good, old fashioned violence to keep a fan of the original trilogy engaged as well. There is action both in the arena and outside of it. It wouldn't be a Hunger Games story if someone didn't get it in the neck at some point and that's what happens here. I mean, we all know that only one of the Tributes is going to make it back to their District. I'm not going to reveal who it was, but that remains, well...

Not the same because this time it actually is only one.

But that's neither here nor there. Seriously, go buy the book and read it. Then come back and thank me for recommending it. This is some seriously good stuff.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Worrisome Essays

Invasion: Book I: Resistance
by J.F. Holmes
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

If I can drop a rock on your head from a sufficient height, I need no other strategy.

The book was a finalist for the 2017 Dragon Award in the category of Best Military Fiction or Fantasy

Novel. I can't imagine a year in which there would be so many good works of this nature that it WOULDN'T make the final list. It's really that good.

The Invaders came down and just pounded us flat. They took possession of the high ground (which happens to be space, for those who have recently emerged from a 70-year nap), and they have superior technology in a couple of respects.

That made all the difference.

They have a few other tricks, but the ability to drop an orbiting crowbar on anything they find undesirable is, literally, the killer app. Afterwards, the rules are: no more than three humans in any one location, UNLESS it's in specifically designated towns.

Violators are eaten.

The humans' last attempt was to have some super-brains take over the defense of the planet.

Unfortunately, there were some in power who didn't support THAT plan, and in this case: 90% wasn't a passing grade. The commander, a young man in his teens, was arrested when it all went wrong. However, there was ANOTHER plan, which was kept from him, and the few scrapings that are left have determined, once again, that he is essential.

Magic for Liars
by Sarah Gailey
Review by Sam Lubell

At first glance *Magic for Liars* may seem like a Harry Potter-inspired magical school book except with a murder mystery. In reality it is a character study of Ivy Gable, Private Investigator. Ivy's sister has magic and teaches in the school so when the school's headmaster wanted an outsider to investigate the mysterious death of a teacher, after the magic cops called it an accidental death due to magical experimentation, she turns to Ivy as an investigator who already knows about magic.

But Ivy barely graduated from high school and mostly investigates cheating spouses. She lives up to the worst stereotypes of hard-boiled, hard drinking P.I.s (think Jessica Jones without the superpowers.) And she has not seen her sister in years.

But in the process of investigating this case, she winds up living at the school (in the dead teacher's apartment) and pretending to be part of the magic world, even dating another teacher, while getting to know her sister. She deals with the anger and jealousy she still feels towards her sister and gets a taste of what her life could have been if she had had magic like her sister does.

Of course, this is also a high school story and the author has the headmaster makes the point that even though this is a school of magic "at the end of the day, we're just a high school." Gailey creates believable pictures of the students and the teachers. One boy is convinced that family prophecy makes him the Chosen One who will save the world of magic. A girl uses her powers to influence teachers and create a clique of 'friends' who obey her out of fear of the rumors she can start. And there's the 'cool' teacher and the teacher who is full of himself.

At the same time, this is a murder mystery and Ivy does investigate by talking to students and faculty. Gradually, Ivy learns that her sister had been in a relationship with the dead teacher and may have lied about her whereabouts at the time of the death.

Both mystery fans and readers of magical school books will enjoy *Magic for Liars* as long as they recognize that this is a character-driven novel rather than a novel of plot.

Man-Kzin Wars XIV
by Larry Niven (Editor)
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

It is my custom when reviewing an anthology to write a few lines on each story. I'm not going to do that here.

First reason: Although I vastly enjoyed MOST of the Kzin stories, I'm really only reviewing this volume as preparation for the NEXT volume. If you are a Man/Kzin War fan, that will be a great event for you, and you've already read this volume before my review came out.

Second reason: One of the stories just poked its thumb under my ribs to tickle me so hard, it's gonna color my perception of every one of the other stories. Homage, satire, or pastiche, I do not know, but it's extreme enough that you either want to feature it in a parade or bury it in a hole in the ground.

However, here's what you get, in addition to that story:

Tales of Wunderland, after the liberation, during the rebuild. Bad guys get second chances, and cowards become heroes.

Buford Early has powers FAR greater than he, force him into action, then taunt him, playfully.

Revelation of long-term hidden mysteries in literature.

On a hidden planet, perhaps the deepest secret of all lies waiting.

And I absolutely refuse to protect the thumb-in-my-ribs from ALL spoilers, but I will limit myself to this: " like Robinson Crusoe, as primitive as can be."

And I absolutely CAN'T believe that none of the other reviewers even commented on the flagrant pun/pastiche/whatever foul in the 'Heritage' story, by Matthew Joseph Harrington.

Man-Kzin Wars XV
by Larry Niven (Editor)
Review by Pat Patterson

http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Seems like decades, but it's only been six years since the last Man-Kzin Wars collection was released. SIX LONG, MISERABLE, STARVING YEARS!!!!! Maybe that's a good thing; they say "Absence makes the heart grow fonder", but that's only the pathetic solace sought by one who has been denied access to the object of affections.

And there is SO much that we can be affectionate about when it comes to the war cats. To the best of my knowledge, the Long Peace, those 300 years in which humanity was lobotomized out of studying war, produced exactly ONE story: "Safe At Any Speed." Those who are SMOFs will correct me on this matter (or rather, they would if they read my blog) in the event that I'm wrong; I'm just basing that statement by Larry Niven that it's the only story from that time that he wrote, because: it's so BORING.

I wish to make this point perfectly clear: I would VASTLY prefer living during the Long Peace. I rather doubt that I would ever vote in a government that promised to socially engineer us to that point, especially since there are several billion people who don't share citizenship with me, and thus would not be subjects of that engineering, but still: if I were PERFECTLY assured (and there's the problem) of living in peace with all, I would be willing to forfeit some irascibility. I've got grandchildren, you see, and I'd like for them to be able to live as the first generation of my family who didn't HAVE to go to war. I am proud of the four generations of veterans! But war is not what I would choose for my life.

It IS what I choose for my escapist reading, however. I do not wish to read stories of interesting conversations all the time, as amusing as I find "The Importance of Being Earnest." It's a pleasant diversion, but I rather need the smell of horse sweat, the clack of the Winchester as I jack another round in the chamber, the 'voom-voom" of the light saber.

So, HOORAY for Man-Kzin XV! These Are the droids stories we were looking for! Even if we DID have to wait six years!

And now, to the stories:

"Sales Pitch," by Hal Colebatch, one of the strong veterans of the series. I suspect he knows more about this aspect of Known Space than anyone else. Whether everything he knows is TRUE remains to be seen, but he tells an excellent story. In this one, he provides deep, deep, deep background to the conflict between Man and Kzin, giving us another reason to despise those who pull the strings.

"Singer of Truth," by Martin L Shoemaker, another long-time writer. This tale is set relatively early in the Wars, before much of the self-centered nastiness of the human race has been stripped away by the desperate need to unite for survival. A human psychotherapist risks his life and well-being in order to make contact with the Kzinti, especially those who don't wish to make contact with him. His biggest struggles come from his own people, who fight over their own privileges as if that were the biggest deal in the world.

"The Third Kzin," by Jason Fregeau. WHO IN THE HECK IS JASON FREGEAU??? When I first

heard about this volume, I went looking, and I could find NOTHING he had written. And yet, he does one of the most elaborate combinations of classic films and Man-Kzin conflicts I have read. I love this particular method, although I am partial to the Humphrey Bogart movies.

This one, though, is just wonderfully satisfying, combining the best elements of the movie (including the zither) with the story of Wunderland after the war. I found "The Third Man" on a streaming service, and watched it in parallel with reading the story. I think that served to enhance my experience; YMMV. But, don't miss this one, and I hope we get more Jason Fregeau in ANY lit form.

"Excitement," by Hal Colebatch and Jessica Q. Fox." Both authors are veterans of this world, and it shows. I love the way in which they take pre-existing characters, ask 'What WOULD happen?' and then proceed to answer the question. In this case, it's the WunderKzin Vaermar-Ritt, who may yet solve the problem of a universe with both war cats and monkeys.

"Justice," by Jessica Q. Fox. As mentioned above, Fox is a MK veteran, and in this particular selection she appears to show some significant history with another thread that I don't recognize. Her characters seem to me to be too well developed to be created just for this story. The Kzin morality is their primary influence on the plot, which involves probably the nastiest villain I have seen in Known Space.

"Saga," by Brendan duBois. I'm having difficulties remembering if I have duBois' name associated with the MK universe, and the fact that I have to pick up my daughter for a cheerleader function in 29 minutes prevents me from taking advantage of my usual google-fu. Regardless, the snapshot of a particular point in Kzin development rings just as true as anything could. There have been numerous stories about the change from sentient to non-sentient females, but this strikes EXACTLY at the cusp. Even better than that, it inserts Kzin into one of the oldest myths humans have.

"Scrith," by Brad R. Torgersen. This is my personal favorite in the book, for at least three reasons. In the first place, Torgerson, a fellow POG, has written magnificently of the way in which a POG (Person Other than Grunt) can be the source of the human race being saved from a novel-type BEM. Secondly, I loved Ringworld, as well as the other novels in the series, and this goes very far in answering some of the itch from "but what about" questions that linger after Niven closed the last book. Finally, it does a Wonderful job of covering new territory, while reading EXACTLY like Niven. It is UTTERLY faithful to the entire series. If you read Jurassic Park II, you know that one of the serious questions was "How did they get this dino-clone thing right straight off the bat?" Well, same question goes for the Ringworld.

As mentioned above, I have to be elsewhere (now in only 19 minutes) so I will not take the time to proof this, nor will I attempt a brilliantly succinct summary paragraph. Gert the book!
Peace be on your household!

Mississippi Roll (Wild Cards)
Edited by George R.R. Martin and Melinda Snodgrass
Review by Sam Lubell

Shared Universes were once fairly common in science fiction/fantasy. In a shared universe, multiple authors write in the same setting, sharing characters so that a story by one author can have appearances by characters created by the other authors. Almost a decade after Robert Asprin originated this concept

with *Thieves' World* in 1978, George R.R. Martin turned a superhero role-playing game he ran for his author friends into the *Wild Cards* story anthology (1987). This series is still ongoing, with 26 volumes, long after *Thieves' World* and other shared universes have ended. Perhaps there is something about superheroes that makes them especially suited for this shared storytelling as most comic book heroes are part of long-running shared universes.

Many of the books in the *Wild Cards* series are "braided novels" in which a group of related short stories is interwoven into a reading experience much like a novel with multiple characters that jump from storyline to storyline. *Mississippi Roll* is not quite a full braided novel as only one story is broken up and used to form the backbone onto which the other stories, complete, are attached. Still, this works well, giving context to the stories, which do share characters.

The premise behind the *Wild Cards* universe is that in 1946, aliens used Earth to test a virus that left 90% of the infected dead, turned 9% of the infected into jokers (the term used for victims with disfigurements, frequently grotesque), and the lucky 1%, the aces, have superpowers. Most of the books in the series have focused on the aces, but the last three books have featured the jokers, a few of whom reappear in *Mississippi Roll*.

This book is also a bit of a change in tone. While the previous book, *High Stakes*, was very dark, *Mississippi Roll* is much lighter. Most of the book takes place onboard the *Natchez*, one of the last of the true steamboats on the Mississippi. The backbone story, "In the Shadow of Tall Stacks" by Stephen Leigh, tells how the boat is haunted by its former captain, Wilbur Leathers, who was exposed to the virus in 1946, but did not show any signs of being infected until 1951 when he seemingly died in a fight with a moneylender, only to rise again as a steam-powered ghost. He is unable to leave the *Natchez* and can communicate with others and manifest a ghostly form, only when he absorbs steam. So he becomes quite worried in October 2016 when he learns that the boat's new owners are planning on removing the boilers and mooring the boat to turn it into a floating entertainment center. Meanwhile, the current captain is using the *Natchez* to secretly transport a band of refugee jokers to sanctuary cities along its route.

The other stories tell tales of the crew, passengers, refugees, and others on the boat. "Wingless Angel" by John Jos. Miller, featuring series regulars Billy Ray and the Midnight Angel, sets up the refugee plotline and deals with Angel's post-traumatic stress after the events of *High Stakes*. "A Break in the Small Time" by Carrie Vaughn, one of my favorite stories in the book, tells how Andrew, an ace who uses his power of generating illusions in his singing act, gets a taste of what it means to be a hero, only to find out that people prefer him as an entertainer. Cherie Priest's "Death on the Water" tells how Leo Storgman, former Jokertown cop turned private investigator, looks into an insurance case of a singer who died on board the boat. He is helped (sort of) by a team of ghost hunters. Kevin Andrew Murphy, in "Find the Lady" tells how Roger Washburn, a fake joker who uses stage magic, gets involved with the refugees. His raven is my favorite character in the book. "Under the Arch" by David D. Levine features Jack, "an ugly old Cajun bartender" whose growing attraction to Timur, one of the refugees, and the budding relationship of two young refugees, and the disapproval of the girl's father, causes him to expose his own secret Wild Card power. Ultimately, the book ends with all the subplots, and the fate of Wilbur and the *Natchez*, nicely resolved.

Mississippi Roll shows that a superhero story does not need to be about saving the world, or even a city, to be interesting. Although the book is part of a long series, it stands alone very well. Most of the characters are original to this volume and enough of the *Wild Cards* premise is given that a new reader should be able to follow these adventures without missing anything.

Readers who like superheroes (and others with special powers) done with more sophistication than in most comic books will enjoy *Mississippi Roll*. Those who are apprehensive about starting a 26-volume series will find this an approachable jumping-on point. This is a fun adventure that touches on political issues, most notably the refugee crisis, without letting the politics overwhelm the story.

Monster Hunter: Guardian
by Larry Corriea and Sarah Hoyt
Review by Jim McCoy

http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

(Author's note: I have been informed by one Mrs. Sarah Hoyt that I should not be paying for anything I blog about. I'm not saying she's wrong. I'm just saying that I wanted to read this and then I wanted to tell you all about it and well...)

I was walking down the street one day, and some dollars fell out of my wallet and when I bent over to pick them up there was a book laying on the sidewalk. If it just so happened that it happened to be something she helped write, how could that be my fault?

That's my story and I'm stickin' to it.

Oh, and I don't review covers but, as an old-school GI Joe fan, I can't help but look at that and think "SWEET BARONESS PIC!!!! Uhh... oops.)

It's not my fault okay, I mean except for the part where it IS my fault, but it's not, right? But I MAY have a small confession to make. It's POSSIBLE, just possible you understand, that when I first picked up a copy of Monster Hunter:Alpha I was a bit disappointed at first. It's not that it was a bad book. It was an awesome book. It's just that I had kind of come to think of the Monster Hunter series as being the story of Owen Pitt and when the main character was not him...
Poor little Jimbo got his world rocked. I mean seriously, it was weird. Of course I kept reading and I loved it, but for a guy like me who really just bought it because of the author and the series and hadn't read any snippets or anything.

Yeah, I got junk punched.

Of course, we've had another novel since then starring Agent Franks from the Monster Control Bureau so maybe it should come as no surprise, especially with her picture on the cover, that the star of Monster Hunter: Guardian is none other than Mrs. Julia Shackleford-Pitt, wife of Owen Pitt, heir to the ownership of the Monster Hunter International company, super-sniper and all around tail-kicker. Seriously, I wouldn't cross Julie if you paid me. I'm not kidding. She's not only a phenomenal long-range shot, she's also super loyal and able to overcome her fear of just about anything. Oh, and she's no stranger to using violence to complete her mission.

Those who follow me here at Jimbo's know that I love a strong female protagonist, so it's no wonder that I loved MH:G. Julie is the kind of woman that we can follow anywhere and when someone takes her infant son it's ON. She'll do what she needs to get him back and she's not particularly worried about what that is. If she ruffles a few feathers in the process of getting little Ray that's just too bad. And well…

I mean...

That's a LOT of feathers, but at least they're not MY feathers. So it's okay right?

And it's weird because, although the Illustrious Mr. Correia does have children, he's nobody's mother. Hoyt is though, and this is a story written from the point of view of not just a world beating sniper, but a mother. Listen, I've got kids but it's different for dudes. We've got a different hormonal balance and different brain chemistry so we don't think, feel or act like a woman would in most situations. I'm not saying that's a bad thing or that anyone is doing anything wrong. It's just a fact. So, while I can definitely see moving Heaven and Earth to get my kid if someone stole them, it would be different for me emotionally.

Hoyt nails the differences, probably because she actually is different. Everything Julie goes through feels right even though it doesn't match with what I would go through. So I'm sold, even though I'd probably be more rage and less pain. It makes sense.

Julie also learns some things about herself that the rest of us have been wondering about as well. I don't want to give up more than that and it's probably too much anyway. The fact remains that there is something she needed to know that we needed to know. What it is makes sense in a weird sort of way. And if you don't do weird, you don't do MHI, so I know you'll love it.
Of course, in an MHI book, you expect more than just the emotional stuff and Hoyt and Correia deliver. There are the usual gunshots and explosions. There are some truly bizarre things going on. We're not really sure what all of them are, but that's good. You never know what might show up again later. An old villain resurfaces for the eight hundred and ninety seven millionth time and it's good to see them, even if Julie is a little less than happy about it. Maybe especially since Julie doesn't like it, because what fun is a story where the characters run around happy all the time?

It's obvious that Correia put in his time on the novel as well because, while Hoyt can do the weird and uncanny as well as anyone in the business, there is no one who can gun geek like Correia. And there is some gun porn here. Not as much as you would get in some other MHI novels, but definitely enough to keep an MHI fan happy and scratch that itch. I get it too. Sometimes you just need a cool firearm to get you through your day and keep you going strong.
One thing that was really interesting to me was that part of MH:G takes place in Portugal. Hoyt is an immigrant from that ancient land and it's really cool to see how she compares her new homeland (she is now an American citizen) with her old one. Oops. Spoiler alert? Part of the story takes place in Portugal. I'm not going to say what happens there though.

There are fairly constant references to the MHI novel before this, Monster Hunter Siege. They're not all pervasive though, and a knowledge of MH:S, while a good thing to have in general, is not necessary to understand or enjoy the events in Guardian. Suffice it to say that Julie is worried about some people she hasn't talked to in a long time, including her husband. Given the fact that they're off fighting it should be fairly obvious why she's worried. That's all you need to know. That's unless you WANT to read the previous book, which is an awesome read as well.

Other than that though, pull up a chair, get a barrel of Cheez-its (HOOOON!) and enjoy the only existing collaboration of the International Lord of Hate and the Beautiful, But Evil, Space Princess. You'll thank me later. Of course, if this is your first MHI book *GASP* your wallet will hate me when you feel yourself compelled to buy and read the rest of the series, but I'm here for you, not your wallet.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Auctions

Penric's Travels
by Lois McMaster Bujold
Review by Mindy Hunt
http://SciFi4Me.com

Unlike some of the previous reviews I've had, jumping into the middle of a series, this is a welcome dive. Lois McMaster Bujold has published several books as well as short stories. This particular book is a collection of three novellas about Penric, a sorcerer who is also the host of a demon, Desdemona. They are happy partners, the demon lives within the host until they die and then will jump to another host. Even though the three stories were not written as a series, they each are tightly linked, or as the author states "the Cedonia triptych." A reader is able to enjoy without having to know the history of the characters but will be able to learn what is needed as they proceed and, as the author hopes, become interested in Penric's younger years that are told in other stories.

So was a good arc or not so much?

Minor spoilers ahead…

"Penric's Mission"

We meet Learned Penric as he journeys to another country to do the secret bidding for a rival Duke. What he doesn't know is that his arrival is not a secret and things do not go as planned. This gives the reader a good chance to learn more about him and his chaos demon, Des, since they're alone and the dialog for this situation is internal. He is later acquainted with the party he was meant to find, a general named Adelis who recently had the misfortune of becoming blind. With the help of Adelis' sister, Nikys, Penric and Des heal Adelis' and escape from their country and those who seek to harm them.

"Mira's Last Dance"

The next story picks up hours after "Penric's Mission" ends. The journey for Penric, Adelis, and Nikys is not over yet. They still have to cross the border to safety and this means getting past a military unit who would know Adelis. This story deals out fun shenanigans, with our heroes having to disguise themselves. Much of the story follows the essence of a previous host for Desdemona, Mira. I won't go into much detail, but she does get to let her hair down and have fun. The siblings also get a better understanding of how the host and symbiote can interact together. This intrigues and scares Nikys as the feelings between her and Penric bloom. Where does Penric end and Des begin? Though their antics are quite unusual, the three of them continue their journey to a safer place and the beginnings of a new life.

"The Prisoner of Limnos"

The trio have settled into the new country, resigned that this is their new home, except for Penric, who is wanted back at home with his former employer. He keeps stalling for one reason: Nikys. He would gladly stay if she will have him and she is not sure of having a third wheel with Desdemona. But this takes a back burner when she learns her mother has been placed in prison for no reason. Nikys asks for Penric's help to rescue her mother. With the help of some old friends of Nikys and sly thinking from Penric and Des, breaking into a female only prison on a female only island is easy enough with some twist and turns. And what happens with Penric and Nikys? You'll have to read to find out.

This is what I highly suggest you do. These stories are charming.

One thing that Bujold stated in her author's note was these stories are a complete read, no need to circle back to Penric's Progress about his younger years to appreciate (though she hopes to spark the reader's curiosity). The tight story arc is not her usual way of doing these novellas, and she admits taking time between "Mission" and "Mira" to write another before "Prisoner". But you can read them separately and have a complete story in itself. After her foreword, I was not expecting the stories to work as closely as they did, but it didn't matter, I loved it. I'm glad, too, because there was no getting off the path; the story just kept going and going.

Lately I've been watching Stargate SG-1 and Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, both of which feature characters with symbiotes. I think this helped me to respect the relationship between Penric and Desdemona. Part of me thinks it would be neat, but then I'd have someone else in my head….so a toss up. But like most of the characters in the TV shows, these two work very well together and are as one as much as they are a human and a demon. So the red flags Nikys has about entering a relationship with Penric are understandable. The conversation between the two women are fun and I would love to be a fly on the wall for any future dealings they may have. (Plus think of the love Penric must have to be able to live with two women, especially one that's inside his head).

The overall story is fun with its highlights. There were plenty of times I was annoyed by Nikys' brother, Adelis, but that will happen in any story and shows good character building by Bujold. Some of the politics did go over my head, but that's true even in real life. I would definitely be interested in reading more about Penric, as I think Bujold did a great job at making him interesting enough to carry these stories yet has left me wanting to know more about him.

Penric's Travels is a great way to be introduced to a smart, amusing, and complex character as well as a very engaging writer.

Psychic Eclipse (of the Heart)
by Amie Gibbons
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

At the end of my review for the last book in the series, "Psychic Spiral (of Death)," I wrote:
"I'm wondering: 'how in the heck is she going to write her way out of THIS?'"

And the answer: she gets into more trouble, that's how.

The story contains (almost) all of the necessary elements to make a good 'Psychic' book work, by which I mean spells, visions, gunfights, and sweaty sheets. I did miss the sense of playfulness and devotion that I found in the earlier books, but I guess I expected that; it's necessary for the story arc.

Ari's para-normal detective agency is sponsoring a conference.

Now, a bad thing happens at the conference, and everybody gets put to sleep. BUT: I have been a part of an organization that sponsored conferences. It's a royal PITA. If you ever do such a foolish thing, you must know that the best venue, the best topics, the best presenters, and the best audio system are not going to get as many comments as the fact that everybody didn't get a cookie at break time. Here's

what happens: you have X people attending the conference, so you pay the venue to provide X time 2.2 of their delicious cookies for the afternoon break, at the cost of $3.00 per cookie. And you place a LARGE sign at the cookie table: "PLEASE ONLY TAKE TWO COOKIES!" And what happens? One session dismisses early, and all of those people grab two cookies, and then TWO MORE cookies, saying loudly 'I'll get Helen's cookies, because she has to make a phone call," and one session dismisses LATE, because the topic was so compelling, and by the time those folks get there, there are no cookies left. And when the conference evaluations are done, the most common complaint is 'I didn't get my cookies!' So, Ari truly has very little to worry about from the attendees about being put to sleep. as long as everyone gets their cookies, that is.

She and her crew DO have to follow up on the reason for the intrusion, and it turns out to be:
A wicked and depraved person in Fairy Land has raped and despoiled a certain Emily, who then promptly lost her mind to the point that putting a conference to sleep seemed like the next right thing to do.

Ari has been destroyed by an affair of the emotions/hormones gone wrong.

AB, her best buddy, has been destroyed by an affair of the emotions/hormones gone horribly wrong.

And now Emily is destroyed by an affair of the emotions/hormones gone horribly wrong.
There is no doubt that each character's narrative is absolutely spot on. Nobody is lying about what has happened to them. HOWEVER, since we ARE dealing with perpetrators who have a great amount of pathological power, can we really trust what these three are believing to be the case? That's something the reader has to accept as fundamental to all the stories. They are written very clearly, with great power in the scenes where various characters relate, or process, what has happened in their lives. The only way to know that is to follow the series, because you simply cannot tell from the evidence given whether there will be further developments as the story goes on.

This is the sixth installment of the series, and it is, by far, the most painful. Installment 5, 'Psychic Spiral (of Death)' came reasonably close, but the emotional load in 'Psychic Eclipse' is so significant that it is nigh overpowering.

I wonder about the message of the covers. Each book in the series has exactly the same branding in the cover design: there is a human silhouette, and one or two additional figures silhouetted in the background. For this book, the hair style is more feathery, whereas prior hair styles have been smooth. Is this an indication of the state of mind of the protagonist?

Rimworld — Militia Up
by J.L. Curtis
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

In 1996, I was part of the security team for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, although not in a high-activity area. The man who recruited me was, however, and he met the border patrol team who came from Nepal to provide security. Their caps bore the logo "Death Before Dishonor." As a parting gift, they presented him with a cap.

When could you wear such a thing?

Although there are MANY players in the book, some with an indeterminate number of appendages, and some who aren't particularly organic in nature, I found the Ghorkas to be the moral skeleton of the book. You really can't call them uncompromising; early on in the book, a weapons master does not kill a member of an opposing team, although he has the ability and a legal foundation for doing so. Instead, he settles for maiming them (a temporary state), which provides them an opportunity to learn from their mistake.

Keep this in mind as you read the book: unshakeable loyalty. That's the Ghorka ethos, and that's what people who work with them gradually absorb. The SHAZAM!! moments in the book, which are HIGH-LY readable, whether they involve sentient computers, mind reading, or new defensive perimeter sys-tems, are just as delightful as I have come to expect in a J L Curtis book, but this couldn't have been written with a WWII penal battalion in mind.

I had a small SHOCK moment, because at 39%, the book makes an abrupt jump in POV, with no lead-in, that I can recall. Some of that, undoubtedly, is the fault of my dismal reading discipline. It was enough of a jump that I actually went back to the table of contents, and re-read the intro material, to make sure this WAS a novel, and not a collection. It all resolved, however, and I TRULY don't regard this as a defect.

I don't know how long Mr. Fargo expected to be able to keep his secrets, but those walls are coming down. He need not fear that his loved ones, nor his fellow combatants, will use the information to bring difficulty to him.

They would choose death before dishonor.

The Sacred Nutcracker: A Cat Among Dragons Story
by Alma T.C. Boykin
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

5.0 out of 5 stars

The best kind of magic is the kind we make ourselves.

Once upon a time...

Once upon a time, there was a Cat named Rada, who was, for some period of time, a trader.

Things happened; she lived for a long, long time, and she became things other than a trader, and she travelled all over the galaxy, and had many adventures.

She became very wise in the course of her adventures, and sometimes she was so wise, that she was put in charge of things. Whenever that happened, she always worked hard to see that people had enough to eat, and could get good jobs, and go to school; and she never liked it when big people picked on little people, just because they could.

And sometimes people may have wondered how she became so wise.

And perhaps this story tells us of one of the first times that she was wise; but she didn't know she was being wise. She just thought she was being kind.

And perhaps being kind and being wise are very much the same thing.

Even if you are not a fan of 'The Nutcracker,' you will become a fan of this story. I'm a Grinch, and I loved it. I don't know if it's the kind of story that I will read to my kids on Christmas Eve, but I might just try it.

A Talisman Arcane by J.M. Ney-Grimm
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

May I tell you a beautifully sweet story?

Once upon a time, there lived a little girl who had few friends. It wasn't her fault; she was a perfectly nice young lady. It was the fact that there were people who resented her, because her father was important (and her mother was beautiful).

And, in an old mansion in the middle of town, there was a wicked witch! Except, she wasn't wicked, not even a little. But she was afraid that the villagers would find her where she lived in seclusion and kill her.

And there were bad things happening...

If this sounds like a fairy tale, GOOD! Because the book reads like an EXCELLENT fairy tale for adults and the YA market. Ney-Grimm has created a universe with rules and roles for all KINDS of people to play around in, and I found this a most lovely read.

In fact, I read it to my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA one evening. She drifted off to sleep and had sweet dreams.

Those in Peril
by Chris Kennedy (Editor)
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

Now, I have something else to make known to you: I know NOTHING about naval warfare. I DO have an uncle (Cecil) who was a career sailor, but if I ever met him, I don't recall it. And my own experience with Things On The Water includes one cruise ship, some time on a house boat, and trying to learn how to ski at age 14. Other than that, it's all bathing-suit experience. Well, I DID play Battleship at one time.

But I don't know what a cruiser is, nor what makes something a battleship. I know submarines go UNDER the water, and I'm pretty sure aircraft carriers are the key to modern naval power. I know PT boats are small, and that there are such things as destroyers and frigates. Could not provide you with any oth-

er detail.

Thus, I missed some of the significance of some of the stories. I WISH THEY HAD INCLUDED AN APPENDIX WITH PICTURES, TONNAGE, WATTAGE, SHIPPAGE, OR WHATEVER THEY USE TO DESCRIBE THEM!

Sorry. But, except for Uncle Cecil, the aforementioned sailor, and Uncle Andrew Lee who was a Marine, we have all been Army.

And that's why I really could not award the fifth star. There is NOTHING wrong with the stories; they just aren't a match for me.

Preface by Chris Kennedy. I don't normally review a Preface, but in this case, I'll point out that Kennedy uses the opportunity to let us know that there are additional volumes, dealing with war in the air and war on the ground. I look forward to those, because I actually might have a clue.

“Naked” by Kacey Ezell. Ok, first of all, I NEVER AGAIN wish to write 'Naked' and 'Kacey Ezell' in the same sentence. I already adore the young lady's writing, and helicopter pilots have an extra-special place in my heart, due to experiences recounted elsewhere. So, let's NOT edge the kindly grandfather into the dirty old man category, shall we? Having gotten that one out of the way, this story in the Minds of Men universe pays tribute to the character of those who risk all for others, and to one young man in particular, via hyperlink.

“Captain Bellamy’s War” by Stephen J. Simmons. Here's one of those stories I simply don't have the background to appreciate. As an adventure story, it works, if you like pirate stories. Regretfully, I do not have the knowledge of the history of the Caribbean to even know if this is a real event, or a nicely done alternate history.

“A Safe Wartime Posting” by Joelle Presby. WWI was SUCH a screwed-up mess; it likely wouldn't have taken much for this story to have reflected the alliances which appeared. There WAS a significant pro-German faction in the US. This particular story speculates on an alternative alliance and confrontation in Africa.

“Beatty’s Folly” by Philip Wohlrab. Even though I DON'T know a dreadnought from a donut, I still enjoyed this story. It appears that this history diverged from our timeline with an intervention by France in the Civil War. US vs Britain.

“Martha Coston and the Farragut Curse” by Day Al-Mohamed . A bit of a combination of chemical/technical whiz-bang, along with an exposition of why women shouldn't be fettered.

“The Blue and the Red: Palmerston’s Ironclads” by William Stroock. A British journalist becomes a war correspondent during another US vs Britain story.

“Far Better to Dare” by Rob Howell. Howell is SUCH a good storyteller, and he blends the real with the fictional in this story of a sea battle off the coast of Cuba.

“Off Long Island: 1928” by Doug Dandridge. US v Britain; air power is a factor in this one; as in, discover a lovely new way to die, with millions credits worth of the wrong hardware.

“For Want of a Pin” by Sarah Hoyt. Quite a bit of a heartbreaker, here. Little children are ALWAYS

the most innocent victims of war-time devastation. Usually, that comes in another form, but it's true in this case as well.

“Nothing Can Be Said Sufficient to Describe It” by Meriah Crawford. I'm not quite sure what to make of this one. As it happens, I just watched” a documentary of the Eddystone Lighthouses, and I can't make out what the 'alternative' part of this story is. It's a great story, though, but it will never work as fiction, because it is too unbelievable.

“Corsairs and Tenzans” by Philip S. Bolger. The Japanese and the Americans ally against the Germans. Empire building always results in a clash.

“For a Few Camels More” by Justin Watson. The 'camels' referenced here are not the four-legged variety, but a cigarette, much appreciated by a Japanese sub commander. I can't reveal ANY of the twists that make this a great story, So, just read it.

“Per Mare Per Terram” by Jan Niemczyk. WWII didn't work out so great, and the Soviets are being nasty.

“Fate of the Falklands” by James Young. Yup, it's about the Falklands. And it's a good story. However, once again my ignorance of history and military hardware prevent me from seeing the divergence. I THINK this is a story about the perils of not keeping current with military hardware.

Verdict: some I liked more than others, but good reading throughout. Too many times, I just didn't have the depth of knowledge to appreciate what I was reading. I think you should get it, though, even if you DON'T know a boat from a broom. If you have to, you can always look up the terms, right? I do wish they had added that appendix, though...

Trace the Stars
by Joe Monson (Editor)
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

I received a copy of this work from the editor, who requested a fair review. I was happy to oblige, as at the moment I was watching my daughter cheer for her middle school basketball team, and any distraction was welcome.

Proceeds from the sale of this work were used to sustain the ability to offer students attending the Life, The Universe and Everything conference a much, much reduced entry fee. That's worth doing, so, buy this one, okay? The authors DONATED their work to this cause!

I've never been to LTU&E, and just from the reading I've done as prep for this review, it seems to me that the overall theme is this: what we do matters. Decisions must be made ethically, even if no one knows about it. I may be utterly wrong about that, but in my blog post I include a couple of links so you can read up on it yourself.

To which we now turn our attention:

“Angles of Incidence,” by Nancy Fulda. The good doctor Kittyhawk – call her Kitty – is perfectly hap-

py dealing with dead things, whether it's pieces of beings or pieces of structures. They don't bother her with disturbing intrusions into her space; they just sit there, at peace and in pieces, and allow her to discover their secrets at her own pace. So, it's bothersome to her when she is pulled off her field site and asked to solve a question under a deadline; particularly when this is a literal deadline. Deadly serious actions, with elements of comedy.

“The Road Not Taken,” by Sandra Tayler. It's likely that every one of us have spent time wondering (or fixating upon) what would happen had we made a different choice. We think we would be happier, if we had gone the other way. I've read several stories revolving around ways to make the choice differently, and it never works out, but this is the first story I've seen with this approach. I DO hope the author was going for 'creepy' in the reader reaction, because this one sent chills.

“Log Entry,” by Kevin J. Anderson. He's really a masterful writer: gives you (almost) the punchline, then tells the story. It is an engrossing tale of resolve, youthful expectations meeting reality, and a very strange alien ecology. This is one of my favorites in the collection, as it speaks directly to my love of military sci-fi.

“The Ghost Conductor of the Interstellar Express,” by Brad R. Torgersen. If he knows how to write a bad story, I have found no evidence of it yet, I've just reviewed his short story 'Scrith' in the recently issued “Man-Kzin Wars XV,” (it was wonderful) and then I was pleasantly surprised to discover he has a story in this collection as well. WOOT! I don't QUITE know how to describe the feel of this work; it's a bit melancholy, almost. The protagonist, Caddy Brenton, was removed from her parents as a young child, and sent with an older brother on a centuries-long journey to colonize a planet that there was only theoretical evidence of. When the ship arrives, there is, in fact, a planet, but it is totally devoid of life and the chemicals needed to create or sustain life. The solution: send out comet-catchers, to snag long-period comets and divert them to orbit around New Olympia, where their raw materials will be used to bring a garden where there is only desert. And that's what Caddy's beloved older brother was doing, when he vanished. Just him; his ship returned without him. She has to find out what happened.

“A Veil of Leaves,” by M. K. Hutchins. It's her wedding day, and to her great joy, the star-man arrives! The star-people have provided them with power and light; who knows what beneficence will come this time? Surely it will be something wonderful!

“Freefall,” by Eric James Stone. Anyone who has read “The Cold Equations” will never forget it, and it has such an emotional impact that you overlook the fact that it's utterly preposterous. It's entirely possible you won't ever forget “Freefall,” either.

“Launch,” by Daniel Friend. Charity Penland is on the witness stand, to give testimony that will convict a co-worker of negligence or sabotage of the colony ship that carried away, among others, her treasured baby sister.

SPOILER FOLLOWS:

This one is over the top, in my opinion; it produces a visceral reaction, but at the expense of distorting how humans handle guilt and grief. No one can tolerate living with such strong emotions as are expressed here without blurting out a confession. Just my opinion.

“Glass Beads,” by Emily Martha Sorensen. I've read a couple of good treatments of First Contact where the inequality of trade is a factor, starting with "Liberation of Earth" (1953) by William Tenn, with the lovely riff “Any lendi, dendi?” It wasn't until years later that I heard Glenn Miller's band play “Got a

penny, Jenny?" More recently is the entire Four Horsemen series, which MUST have reached a hundred volumes by this time (at least, it seems that way). However, I haven't seen the treatment done in quite this way, and really, it's a very good read.

"Sweetly the Dragon Dreams," by David Farland. Space Monsters wish to destroy all life in the galaxy; on a distant planet, humans and allies fight back. That sounds like science fiction, but this reads like fantasy. I NEVER read fantasy if I can help it. If you like fantasy, I expect you will like this.

"Working on Cloud Nine," by John M. Olsen. Loved this one; didn't think I was going to at first, because it took me a while to understand the plain words on the screen. I have no excuse for that; it's a GREAT read! Sabotage on a space station, having to solve the problem before the rescue team gets there because unauthorized experiments; GREAT stuff!

"Fido," by James Wymore. I was deeply taken into the world of the protagonist, a human on an alien spacecraft. He volunteered to go, because he felt he had nothing to hold him to Earth. After he discovers he was wrong, it's too late to return. And they are messing with his mind... Upon reflection, perhaps this is a horror tale; it's certainly of Twilight Zone quality. Very well done.

"Knowing Me," by Eric G. Swedin. In 20+ years as an educator, I encountered more than a few kids on the Asperger's/Autism spectrum that required modification of their educational program. A very few of them were also extremely intelligent. Only one came anywhere near the limits and the abilities of this protagonist, and he wasn't even that close. What I find best about this selection is the sympathetic way in which he is treated by the author: this is not a monster or a freak. He is a highly gifted individual, with no social skills to speak of, and an overarching need for routine. It's through no fault of his that he was chosen to save the world, and that his selection cost him all that he had. Beautiful story.

"Making Legends," by Jaleta Clegg. There are all sorts of ways in which we are denied our heart's desire. Fortunately, there are all sorts of ways we can find it, as well. Wonderfully wacky story.

"Neo Nihon," Paul Genesse. China has a population bomb that has already exploded on them; it's just that the shock waves haven't reached their limits yes. That's a truth, and this work uses that as a basis for the story. It's set in a far-distant time, and on a far distant planet, but it strongly evokes the Rape of Nanking, which some believe to be the true beginning of WWII, rather than the German invasion of Poland. I wonder if the author had the rape of Nanking in mind when he wrote this?

"The Last Ray of Light," by Wulf Moon. You MUST read the Editor's Note and the Author's Note on this story! The author was 15 years old when this work was published. Seen with that perspective, it's a work of genius. Otherwise, it's merely good, and the 'merely' qualification comes only because the characters' names are Xenon and Argon. That's the kind of thing a 15-year-old inserts into the story to highlight the science fiction nature of the writing; it's not something an adult writer would do. Well, except for Isaac Asimov. The other noticeable discrepancy of the story is a function of the time in which it was written (1978); charmingly (to those of us of a certain maturity), the computer ends each sentence with 'STOP.' I am grateful they decided to release it in this form, instead of editing it to remove what would cause dissonance today.

"Cycle 335," by Beth Buck. I really can't say very much about the plot of the story without spoiling it horribly, and I won't do that. I will say that the author sticks in nicely disconcerting thoughts in the protagonist's head. I'll also say that this is one of the worst wide-awake nightmares to have.

"Sea of Chaos," by Julia H. West. All of the science in the world won't make a good story if the charac-

ters aren't real. As far as the science goes, you really aren't asked to make too many leaps of faith. The first one is a standard, which is that there exists a FTL drive, in this case referred to as 'overspace.' However, the charming aspect of this particular drive, is that it is managed by a navigator using a VR interface that simulates the long voyages taken by the Polynesian explorers. Both of those are merely an excuse to bring the real joy of the story, which is of an old dog and some new tricks.

The Violet Mouse
by Cedar Sanderson
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

"It’s just that there’s not much hope for me right now."

(Sanderson, Cedar. The Violet Mouse, p. 13. Sanderley Studios. Kindle Edition)

Among the good writers, there are writers of great beauty. Not EVERY good author writes great beauty, and that’s okay; desirable, even. I’m not sure we could take it if EVERY writer stamped great beauty on every page.

Why? Because when you encounter great beauty in a passage, you have to put the work down, and whisper in a very small voice, “wow.” Or, perhaps you have to grab the book, and run to find your beloved, and read the passage to them. Or maybe you just sit, flummoxed in your chair, at the personal insight you have been given.

It’s almost always a personal insight; I don’t know that a writer of beauty ever cares about trivia such as international relations. I’ve got six lines from more-or-less obscure-ish works (not on the NY Times Best-Seller’s List) that I could probably quote to you verbatim. Half of those are from three different authors; the other half come from the eclectic genius we know as Cedar Sanderson.

To the best of my knowledge, I have cherished most of these in my heart, at least in the beginning. They have been too intimate for me to record them in a review, at least as first. There was one exception, where I referred to a passage I’d found in a preview of her work in progress

as “A Diamond The Size Of Your Fist.”

Now, you may be eagerly awaiting the revelation of what beauty-writing I have found in THIS short work; get used to disappointment. I may not tell you. Not WILL not; MAY not. That’s because it would be an unconscionable spoiler. It’s the fourth line from the end of the story, though. DON’T go there first! What are you, eight years old?

Sanderson, to whom I once awarded three Nobel Prizes (Literature, Physiology, and Peace) after a long period of sleep deprivation has acquired multiple skill sets over the years, but for the recent past, has been employed in a laboratory where Science happens. As she has done in previous works, she uses her experience to bring out a richness of characterization, while constructing a solid plot.

In this story, three laboratory workers proceed with an ethically and legally risky next step, after discovering that the covert work of one of them has permitted a complete color change on two select rats.

And that's VIOLET, as in purple, lilac, etc.

Although I first read it as including an 'N,' making it a VIOLENT mouse.

I wonder if the story had an origin with a mouse that beat up the other mice, and bit fingers?

1632 by Eric Flint
Review by Jim McCoy
http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

Ok, so maaaybe I'm a guy who grew up in Detroit, but has family in West Virginia, and maaaybe I've squeezed the trigger on a pump shotgun a few times. It's even possible that I've played the odd war-game in my life. I even grew up listening to my dad tell stories about a cave in that happened in a coal mine when he was kid and "a bunch of crying women." (Yeah, I came by my "that guy" streak honestly.) So, it's entirely possible that I may have a few more reasons than some people to love Eric Flint's 1632 and that most of them have nothing to do with how easy it is to type the title. (I am, after all, pictured in the dictionary next to the term "man, lazy".)
Still and all though, it's a book worth buying and reading, even if there are a whole bunch of other books that come afterward some of them with amazing co-authors (I originally read 1632 because I wanted to read 1633 due to the fact that David Weber's name was on the spine and I don't read out of order if I can help it.) and it's probably going to want you buy all of those and read them too...

Look, if you didn't want an enabler for your Speculative Fiction habit you wouldn't be here.

Anyway...

One day some cool stuff is happening and the totally fictional town, well sort of totally fictional town of Grantville, West Virginia and next thing you know - hey presto!- the town and all of the people and things in it are transported to Germany in the year 1632. If you're familiar with that time and place, then you're familiar with the problem here. If not, that puts them in the middle of the Thirty Years War and surrounded by the fighting. It's not a friendly place. It is, however, a good place to be armed with a modern firearm if you happen to have one.

This book has it all. It's got action and adventure. It's got romance. It's got sex. Heck, there's even a nerd who gets laid. Seriously. There's even some politics. Actually, there are a LOT of politics because a town full of modern-day Americans who aren't in modern-day America anymore have some things they need to deal with. That could have been a problem for me because, put bluntly, I have about as much in common with a self-avowed Communist politically as I have with an alien from the planet Zargon, where voting rights are determined by how often you bud to create another Zargonian.

And yet...

Flint, unlike many of his co-religionis.. errr... fellow Marxists, is actually not in a hurry to throw the bill of rights away. Yes, I really mean that. If you're really interested I can send you something I wrote about it. Anyway, there's a lot of it. Flint's stereotypical conservative is kind of a douche, and Flint appears to be as unwilling as any of his fellow leftists to admit that the right actually does differentiate between legal and illegal immigrants, but hey it's his book and honestly there are a lot of other things going on. It doesn't really detract from the book for more than a second or two.

Honestly, I think the part of 1632 that I like the most is that the government is so small. Even in a town of only a few thousand, it's not the top-down society envisioned by most Leftists. The government doesn't try to control everything. Part of that is because the people running the government are smart enough to know that they can't and therefore don't try and that puts them ahead of at least ninety-eight percent of today's Democrats. A certain amount of government is necessary, even if it is a necessary evil. Too much is just evil and Grantville doesn't have the layer of bureaucracy that modern governments are so enamored with. That's why it works.
More important is the society that is built and the way it's done. Even Flint's far left radical finds herself forced to compromise. This is a good thing. It's inevitable and it's realistic. I talk about this a lot but it's something that I think has to be in good fiction: Flint's characters have realistic and understandable motives. Now, the reader my not always AGREE with the motives of the characters in the book but you can tell why they do what they do.

Yes, Flint's people are people and they live a breathe on the page. There are three young guys in particular who, aside from their love for motorcycles, remind me a lot of myself at the same age. Mike Stearns is a man who I could respect even if I wouldn't agree with everything he does. His wife Rebecca is a scholar's scholar and a woman I have a lot of admiration for. Mackay, the Scotsman, well...

My family is actually Clan MacKay so maybe I'm a bit biased here. I'd still buy him a beer if he actually, like, you know, existed. The thing is that it almost feels like he does.

As the guy with the history degree, I have to point out that what Flint wrote matches up with what I know about the time period in which the majority of 1632 takes place. Granted, I'm not all that familiar with the Thirty Years War as I do mainly US history starting at around the mid eighteen hundreds, but it all works. His depiction of the standard battle tactics of the day is sound. The nobles in the books are all legitimate. He admits to creating a German town that never really existed but 1632 _is_ a work of fiction after all. I also believe that he may have read a book or two about World War I tactics and the effects of machineguns on massed troops, but what do I know?

But for the most part, 1632 is really just a rollicking good time. This is a story that moves from beginning to end and never drags. It's one of those "UGH, STOP GIVING ME TAXICAB RUNS!!! I'M TRYING TO READ AND I DON'T HAVE TIME TO MAKE MONEY RIGHT NOW!" kind of books. That's why I finished it for the third time on my one day off after working seven in a row and why I felt compelled to blog about it. Now go forth and read it!

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Pump Shotguns

Non-Fiction

An Interview with Rich Weyand
by Tamara Wilhite

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

Rich Weyand is a science fiction author, computer consultant and digital forensic analyst. He's the author of the "Empire" series, the "Childers" series, and the newly launched "Colony" series. And I had the honor of speaking with him.

Tamara Wilhite: I presume digital forensics is your day job. What does that entail?

Rich Weyand: I retired for the most part from the digital forensics work in 2017. I have all the tools and the skills, and, for the right case, I would consider doing the investigation. I analyze the computers of the people involved in court cases, looking for the digital evidence of what really happened. The emails they sent and received, the websites they browsed, the files transfers they did. But I'm done with technical expert testimony. You know, getting up on the witness stand in court. It's very hard on you. It's long days, living in a hotel room, in some big city's downtown, plus all the stress of testimony and cross-examination. It takes a lot out of you. You make a lot of money, but you earn it. When I retired, I started writing. I just finished my eighteenth novel in less than four years.

Tamara Wilhite: Has it informed your writing, aside from your nonfiction book "Trade Secret Asset Management"?

Rich Weyand: The court experiences certainly did. I have legal issues come up in some of my books, most especially the Childers book "Campbell: The Problem with Bliss" and "EMPIRE: Reformer." In "The Problem with Bliss," William Campbell is actually a forensic investigator tracking down a spy ring through the digital evidence, but using futuristic tools. In "EMPIRE: Reformer," there is a legal case, much of which revolves around process and discovery issues, with which I'm very familiar. In other books, the legal issues are smaller, but they do come up, such as the court of inquiry into the Kodu Disaster in Childers.

Tamara Wilhite: "Childers", book one in the Childers Universe, came out in 2017. You put out four more in rapid sequence. What is the series about?

Rich Weyand: Childers is about the incredible space navy career of Jan Childers. At the opening of the series, she is a starving 14-year-old orphan living in the slums of Houston. But there is a star nation, the Commonwealth of Free Planets, that has a citizenship test you can take at any Commonwealth embassy or consulate. If you pass, you're a citizen. She passes the test - she has genius-level IQ - and pays back her adopted country with a stunning career in the Commonwealth Space Force. Her story is a trilogy, packaged in two volumes. There is also a sequel a century later, a prequel a century before, and two side novels about her husband, William Campbell. Of those last two, I wrote one and Stephanie Osborn wrote the other.

Tamara Wilhite: What do you consider the first book in the "Empire" series?

Rich Weyand: "EMPIRE: Reformer" is the first book in the series. It introduces the new Empress of Sintar, and covers the steps she takes to reform an Empire whose bureaucracy is out of control. It also introduces the main characters who dominate the next eight books, Deanna Grace Dunham and her brother Robert Allen Dunham IV - Dee and Bobby.

Tamara Wilhite: Your "Empire" series is not the first example of an interstellar empire held together by a monarchy. That's a feature from "Dune" to the CoDominium universe. Swear loyalty to the emperor or empress, minimize bureaucracy by having one titular head. And you can get said system just by having a military junta pass leadership successfully to an heir or political and economic elites merging into one royal family. How does your Childers Universe turn into an Empire with an Empress?

Rich Weyand: Childers and EMPIRE are actually two different universes. One doesn't lead into the other. I wrote myself out of a job in Childers. Jan Childers solves the problem of interstellar war, which makes the universe much nicer for the people who live there, but a bit boring as a venue for fiction. The basic problem is that I gave the hyperspace in Childers too much horsepower, and Jan Childers figures out a way to use that to put an end to war, at least on the interstellar level. She's clearly smarter than I am.

EMPIRE is a separate universe. The hyperspace in EMPIRE is much tamer than the one in Childers, and more amenable to a long series. The Sintaran Empire in EMPIRE is different than the empires in most other fiction. The founders of the Sintaran Empire took a lesson from the Five Good Emperors of ancient Rome. There is no royal family, no inheritance of the throne, no royal bloodline. Each ruler names their heir, and puts them through an apprenticeship to the throne. They select the best person they can find to be their heir - a commoner - who is elevated to the throne when they die. That commoner swears on his knees before the throne to do well by the people, and by and large, the rulers of Sintar carry through on that oath. That's a big difference from someone who thinks he has a claim to the throne, who thinks he is entitled to it by birth or status or class.

Tamara Wilhite: And what is the "Empire" series about?

Rich Weyand: The rise, decline, and renewal of the First Galactic Empire. For the first time, all of humanity is united in a single polity. That single polity declines over time, then is restored to its former greatness. The series takes you from the corrupt, bureaucracy-ridden Sintaran Empire to the height of the Galactic Empire in its glory, how it fades, and how it is renewed.

Tamara Wilhite: You just launched the "Colony" series. How would you describe it?

Rich Weyand: Childers is five hundred or so years in the future. EMPIRE is thousands of years in the future. COLONY, in contrast, is barely two hundred years in the future. When it starts, humanity is still limited to a single planet. A couple of far-sighted men see that as a tremendous danger, as mankind faces racial extinction if there is a planetary cataclysm. One of those men is a computer whiz who is experimenting with extending the limits of artificial intelligence. He unwittingly steps across the singularity. So what happens when the world's smartest computer confronts mankind's biggest problem?

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

Rich Weyand: A bit about my writing style and method is probably in order. I am a pantser. When I start a novel, I have no idea where it's going to go. Literally no idea. I tell the story as it occurs to me. My plots can be more twisted and surprising because of it. More complex. There is no way I could have

plotted Childers or EMPIRE in advance. I just told the story on the fly as I made it up. My education is in physics and business, I was in the computer industry for many years, and then in the litigation support area, and those experiences all inform my writing.

I also do quite a bit of research as I write, because I want things to be correct, whether it's about orbital mechanics, or Chinese culture, or how to herd cows - all of which are in the current book, Quant, the opening volume of COLONY. But I don't do any outlining, or plotting, or back stories of the characters, and no rewrite when I'm done. I actually publish my first draft after a typo check and a quick read-through. That's why I can write so fast: I skip all the slow, tedious parts of writing. I have tremendous fun writing my stories and I hope that leads to the reader having fun reading them.

Tamara Wilhite: Thanks for speaking with me.

An Interview with Doctor Michael Rectenwald by Tamara Wilhite

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

Doctor Michael Rectenwald's most recent book is the dystopian sci-fi novel "Thought Criminal" which I read as part of the Unsafe Space book club. "Thought Criminal" is his first science fiction novel, but it is far from his first book. He's the author of eleven books including "Google Archipelago: The Digital Gulag and the Simulation of Freedom" and "Beyond Woke". And I had the pleasure of interviewing him.

Tamara Wilhite: The world-building in the novel "Thought Criminal" is fantastic. You explain how they could use a nanotech virus to literally control human thoughts, while the measures to control the virus are used to control the general population. Did you write this novel during the coronavirus lockdowns?

Dr. Rectenwald: Thank you, Tamara. Yes, the lockdowns really sparked my imagination. The desolation was otherworldly and surreal. I knew I had to write about this aspect of the Covid crisis, and fiction seemed to be the best way to do so. I've treated other aspects in non-fiction essays but fiction serves as a much better vehicle for treating the experiential. The virus also struck me as a profound metaphor for thought control. As I observed the mass control brought about by the Covid response, it occurred to me to figure the virus not only as a biological threat in the novel but also as an ideological one. After all, if nothing else, SARS-2 is being used to control thought and behavior.

Tamara Wilhite: I've read about Fintech considering using your search history to create a better credit score and banks like Chase deciding to stop doing business based on "reputational risk". Could that lead to a Sesame Credit type system here? And what happens if businesses and/or the state have access to all of that data?

Dr. Rectenwald: I think we are well on the way to a social credit scoring system in the West, and I imagine that the Corona viruses/vaccines will be the pretext for instituting it here, but I can see the possibility that one's online behavior could also be figured in. After all, it's already happening. As it is, Google uses our searches as means for manipulating us and nudging us to the "correct" ideas. Surely they are using algorithms that effectively rate us on a social justice credit scoring system. It's just not being used against us yet, as far as I know.

Tamara Wilhite: Can you tell me about your book “Google Archipelago”? I believe that’s along the same vein.

Dr. Rectenwald: “Google Archipelago” (hereafter GA) traces the metastasis of social ideology into the digital realm. It may be regarded as the second in a series of installments on social justice, a series that I began in “Springtime for Snowflakes”, and which I continued in a third book, “Beyond Woke”, thus completing a trilogy.

The book represents a study of the vastly extended and magnified manifestation of the leftist authoritarian-totalitarian ideology as it expands into cyberspace, extends throughout the cyber-social body, and penetrates the deepest recesses of social and political life. In GA, I connect Big Digital's politics with its technologies. I argue and demonstrate that the technologies are intrinsically leftist and authoritarian.

For reasons I give in the book, the only way to make sense of the politics of such organizations as Google, Facebook, Twitter, et al and how this politics is reflected in its technologies is to see Big Digital as the leading edge of an economic and governmental conglomeration that aims to monopolize human life on a global scale. Big Digital represents the ideological communications apparatus for establishing a two-tiered system consisting of global corporate-cum-state monopolies on top, with “actually-existing socialism” for everyone else. I call this two-tiered system “corporate socialism,” which I choose over the term “techno-feudalism,” used by others. I have very good reasons for adopting the name corporate socialism rather than techno-feudalism, not the least of which is the penchant of the monopolists for using socialist rhetoric and ideology in their attempts to bring the two-tiered system into existence. Ultimately, corporate socialism would amount to a singular, one-world state, with vast globalist monopolies controlling production, as is the case in “Thought Criminal”. These monopolies would be paralleled by a socialism or "equality" of reduced expectations for everyone else.

In GA, I suggest that we no longer "go on" the Internet but rather live within it. It is ubiquitous and all-encompassing, so yes, this ties the book to “Thought Criminal”, where every move and even every thought may be known and even predicted by the controlling technocracy.

Ultimately, Big Digital attempts to replace reality with a digital simulation or simulations, simulacra posing as substitutes for reality—to introduce simulated and faux realities or simulacra that displace and replace the real.

Tamara Wilhite: You’ve written nonfiction critiques of social justice such as “Beyond Woke” and “Springtime for Snowflakes: “Social Justice” and Its Postmodern Parentage”. What led a Professor of Liberal Studies and Global Liberal Studies at NYU to write these books? It is quite a departure from an analysis of the history of British secularism.

Dr. Rectenwald: Well, to be frank, the social justice warriors themselves led me to write these books. After I criticized wokeness in an interview for the NYU student newspaper in the fall of 2016, I was roundly attacked and condemned. This attack really woke me up, as it were. It caused me to rethink my entire worldview and orientation. I had a complete gestalt shift. My political outlook went from Marxist to civil libertarian, almost overnight. I found a new mission and research agenda and began analyzing social justice--just where it came from, and what its assumptions and objectives are. That's what these books explore. Springtime for Snowflakes is a memoir that traces the roots of the social justice movement vis-a-vis an exploration of my own master's and doctoral education in Critical Theory and Postmodern theory and related fields.

Beyond Woke is a collection of stand-alone essays written over a four-year period beginning in 2016, when I had my falling out with the academic and broader left. “Beyond Woke” has been described as the "greatest hits of Michael Rectenwald" by a reader. “Springtime for Snowflakes” was highly praised for the interleaving of biographical and theoretical material. I suggest that readers new to my work begin with one of these two.

While I'm fairly happy with these three books, I must say that “Springtime for Snowflakes” is the best of them, as I see it. But it does involve treading through some dense theoretical ideas in the two central chapters, Chapters 5 and 6. I'm almost never satisfied with my writing, but I am pretty close to being satisfied with this one.

By the way, there is a connection between my work on secularism and my work on social justice; I see social justice as a religious movement and call for a higher order "post-secularism" in order to manage it.

Tamara Wilhite: What are you working on now?

Dr. Rectenwald: I'm writing a series of essays on the Great Reset for the Mises Institute, and articles for other outlets. I'm also giving a lot of interviews and recharging my batteries while gathering my thoughts for my next book-length foray. I may or may not publish a book this year.

I hope I can be excused if I don't; I published four books over the past two years. My son admonished me recently that I actually need to slow down my production. I'm trying to decide whether to write another novel, perhaps as part of a series beginning with Thought Criminal, or to go back to non-fiction. It's a tough choice because fiction is much more difficult for me, although more satisfying in many ways.

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

Dr. Rectenwald: Give “Thought Criminal” a chance. It's an allegory for our times.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

Prose Bono

Taking the Wrong Turn at Albuquerque

Cedar Sanderson
http://www.CedarWrites.com

Decisions, decisions. We make them constantly. Most of the time, they are thoughtless decisions. Once in a while, though, you founder on the shoal of a big one, one you know has the power to change your life forever, that can make or break you. It's at these points, as a writer, that you have to make a decision which overarches the character's choice.

Ultimately, even as an extreme pantser, the character's decision is mine the author's. I've gotten stuck on stories when I had the character take the wrong fork in the road, and realized it some time later, that I'd written myself onto a dead end. Some of this is that, just like in real life, we don't think of all of the ramifications. Consequences ripple out from the movement in life, and bounce back from unseen obstacles, sometimes swamping us. Which makes for great plot conflict in a story, but really sucks if you're living through it.

Which is why I get swamped sometimes while trying to decide. There is so much weight pressing on the pivotal point, I start sinking into the mud of 'what if?' and finally just FIDO. Which isn't necessarily the right way to do things… but again, in writing this can be used to explain some particularly dumb choice a usually smart main character has made.

The other thing that can happen is excessively farsighted decisions. This is the phenomena of having your eyes fixed on some distant dream or goal (vengeance! reunion! peace!) and completely missing all of the stumblingblocks that litter your path in the shorter term. So you start on the straightest path to your heart's desire and *thud* you're down on your face in the dust. This is the kind of thing that plays well in a story, too. Picking your character up, dusting him off, and having him try again only a little twistier this time makes for the classic try-fail plot sequence. In real life? Better to avoid the faceplant and stand still a little longer, looking from your feet out to that distant horizon of promise.

It's rare, in real life, to face the need to make a decision where you don't have the time to stop and think it through. To talk with family, and trusted counsel. In stories, though, we push our characters into corners they have to fight back out of, so we can have the drama. Sometimes life doesn't leave you many choices, but one thing I have learned: you usually have more choices than you can see. Outside perspective can be very useful when you think you're in that corner.

Just like in real life, a character is sometimes going to wonder what life would have been like, had they not taken that particular fork in that particular road. Stories about this yearning have been written since the beginning: time travel, in some form or another, is ultimately about this desire to explore the other forks. The roads not taken. In reality, we don't get to backtrack and do over. By the time you've gone up a ways, there is no going back. That intersection of opportunity was only there for the fleeting moment you stood at it. The very instant you chose, and stepped onto the road you wanted to take, the other way was gone.

No wonder we hem and haw over the decisions we have to make.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Robert Frost

Ping Pong Dialogue
By Jagi Lamplighter
http://SuperversiveSF.com

Several people have asked me for a post on writing dialogue. This is not it. But it is a post on writing a specific kind of dialogue, a kind I only recently discovered.

Ping-Pong Dialogue: Have some dialogue go back and forth quickly, taking less than one line on the page – leaving white space – to increase readability.

I always thought of myself as being good at writing quick pithy dialogue. It was the one skill I came with. All other writing skills I had to learn by slow, difficult labor. So, when I first heard about ping-pong dialogue, I thought I would be a shoe-in.

Then I sat down and actually looked at my dialogue. Perhaps, it was pithy, (someone other than me will have to make that call,) but it certainly was not short. Even my 'brief exchanges' consisted of scenes like this:

"Very glib, Ma'am." Mab was only half paying attention to me as he spun the steering wheel.

"Must you drive so wildly? In the air, you're an ace. On the road, you're a terror!"

"Don't worry, Ma'am. I've been darting in and about things longer than men have drawn breath. It's second nature to me."

"As a wind, certainly. But you're not a wind at the moment! You're a fleshly body driving his employer in a car! If you're not more careful, someone's going to report us to the police!" My voice rose as Mab performed another near miss. "How can you be sure the car can take this kind of abuse?"

Nothing to worry about, Ma'am. Back at the rental place, before we left the airport, I had a chat with the oreads making up this car and the salamanders manning the engine. They won't let us down," Mab replied, jerking the steering wheel hard to the left.

"It's not the oreads I'm worried about!" I clung to the armrest and squeezed my eyes shut.

Witty? Perhaps. Pithy? Debatable. But short? No.

Or, rather, it might be short compared to paragraph-long speeches, but it does not meet the definition of short necessary to qualify for ping-pong dialogue.

What is ping-pong dialogue and why does it matter, you ask?

Good question.

Ping-pong dialogue is dialogue that pops back and forth so quickly that no sentence fills an entire page. The virtue of this kind of dialogue is that it is really easy to read. The white space at the end of each sentence gives the eye a bit of a rest, making the page a pleasant experience for the reader.

Some modern writers use almost entirely short stucco dialogue. This tends to work only in genres where the readers are intimately familiar with the background and setting. With genres where the author needs to put across unfamiliar customs or laws of nature, more in-depth conversation is often needed, especially if using the dialogue to replace exposition, which would be even longer and dryer.

A spattering of ping-pong dialogue, however, like spice in a salad, can really pick up the speed and readability of the story. It does not need to be on every page, but an occasional ping-pong exchange or two per chapter is worth striving for. It makes the page more welcoming to the eye.

Like this:

"Are you ready?"

"I am indeed."

"Then, let's do this!"

"Enormous rhino made of cheese, here we come."

Note for yourself which of the two examples is easier to read at a glance.

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