

The R3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
May 2021

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Editorial

First, humble apologies to reviewer Mindy Hunt for an editorial error in the last issue. We mistakenly gave credit for her review of *The Conductors* to Jason P. Hunt. We try not to make mistakes, and can only apologize when we do.

We welcome Robert Kroese of Upstream Reviews to our team of reviewers. In addition to reviews, UpstreamReviews.com offers bargains on a range of ebooks.

The N3F has announced its nominees for the 2021 Neffy Awards for scientificfictional work. Pat Patterson has indicated that he will be doing reviews of the nominated novels, which are: *Storm Between the Stars* by Karl Gallagher, *Unmasked* by Kai Wai ‘Benjamin’ Cheah, *Hussar* by Declan Finn, *Pure Poison* by Hawkings Austin, *Coven* by Declan Finn, and *Gods of Pangea* by John C. Wright.

There ere also nominations for shorter works and works for young adults, namely *Dragon Eye, PI* by Karina Fabian, *The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering* by L. Jagi Lamplighter, *The Lady Heiress* by Christopher G. Nuttall, and *The Shadows of Alexandria* by David Gerrold.



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Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>
Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>
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Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>
Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>
George Phillies <http://books-by-george.com>
Jeffrey Redmond's writings also appear in the N3F zines *Origin* and *Ionisphere*
Cedar Sanderson <http://www.CedarWrites.com>
Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>
Tamara Wilhite also appears at <http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

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

A Pale Dawn Book Eight of The Omega War
by Chris Kennedy & Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I am so far behind on my reading and reviewing that I have just abandoned any pretense of submitting these reviews in any kind of order. I'm just cranking through, and hoping that any spoilers are cryptic enough, that nobody has their reading experiences, well, spoiled.

Along those lines I DO wish to make one POSSIBLE criticism: at the end of the books, there is the excellent feature of providing chapters from future books. Y'all be CAREFUL about those! Some facts not in evidence might get presented, to use some of the legal phrases I picked up from watching 'Law and Order.'

First, for all you military science fiction fans (like me) out there: Even if you have never read a single one of the prequels, you are going to LOVE this book! High tech, low tech; boomers, bangers, boppers and stompers. Plenty of exploding spaceships! SIGNIFICANT military planning, tactics, strategy, and LOGISTICS! If you SHOULD happen to be stuck in some minor corner of the world, and this one comes into your hands, go ahead and read it. When you return to the world, you can get caught up. Yes. My friends, it is that well done.

HOWEVER, for the vast majority who are pulling down these books as soon as they appear, like a pack of ravenous wolves after bunnies and caribou, this answers questions, asks more, and moves the story along in decidedly lovely ways.

Peepo, the villainous villain who has betrayed the entire universe, but Humans most of all, almost seems to be on the ropes. The pesky Humans, despite suffering losses, have had the dice roll their way too many times, and may even be starting an end game. Wonder how she will react to all this bad news?

On the desert rock known as Paradise, Lt Col Walker has to dig in with the few Winged Hussar troops he has, along with a pitifully small defense force, because all of the rest of the troops and equipment had to flee the system in the face of an overwhelming Mercenary Guild force.

Taiko Sato, the inquisitive genius who saves lives and also gets people killed when his plans go wrong, is quite busy. He is attempting to get back into the good graces of his commander, by repairing and improving everything he touches. Even so, he is first on close confinement, then given permission to move about, but ONLY under the direct guard of two Marines, and close observation by a member of the Geek Squad. Nobody could do anything sneaky under that kind of supervision! Could they?

Sansar Enkh has visions; Alexis Cromwell attempts to maintain iron control of herself and her company, despite being all squishy inside at the thought of Nigel Shiraz; and Jim Cartwright is learning more about his Fae Splunk and the Ragnar than he really wanted to know.

And it all leads up to an assault on Earth. Don't miss this one!

Battletech: The Nellus Academy Incident
by Jennifer Brozek
Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

(Author's Note: This review is dedicated to the memory of friend, grognard, and brother-in-gaming Jason Caldwell.)

WARNING, WARNING, WARNING: Blatant fanboying ahead. I've loved Battletech for twenty-fivish years. I make no apologies for it, but you have been warned.

I have, in the past, admitted to possessing a love of both Young Adult literature (I blame J.K. Rowling) and Science Fiction. You were just warned about my fascination with the Battletech universe. (It occurs to me that I haven't been to the Battletech Universe website in far too long.) I guess that's why I'm in love with Jennifer Brozek's Battletech: The Nellus Academy Incident. Seriously. Those are some hardcore cadets. The plot moves. The kids perform in combat and action abounds.

I'll be honest: The beginning of this thing had me a bit worried. B:TNAI starts out as a bunch of cadets from the Nellus Academy find out that they'll be touring a refueling station in space. It sounded like a photo op kind of thing. I immediately became concerned because Battletech novels have always been about fighting. It's not Knitting Tech, it's Battle Tech. Actually, that's not totally true. Ilsa Bick did a BT novel that was a detective story. It was good but I wanted a more traditional BT novel. I wanted to go to war. I wanted to see some serious action. I got over it quick. This book is action packed.

I don't want to get into too many spoilers because that's not my style but suffice it to say that things take a left turn at one point. What seems like a joyride is actually not a joyride. I hate to use a comparison to Scooby Doo, but I think I'm going to have to. The gang shows up in town, things aren't how they originally seem and then everything goes to Hades. That's awesome though. I didn't see things going the way they went but it actually made sense when it did.

Also at the beginning, The Nellus Academy Incident really felt like it was going to be a mystery novel. When the big plot twist hits that changes quickly. This thing goes from a whodunit to a canwesurviveit at the drop of a hat. The kids adjust quickly and that makes sense. The Nellus Academy is a military academy. It's what they've been trained for.

I like the way these kids work together. It feels real. One would expect an author to show her cadets in a panic. It's not realistic when you've got a trained group working together but it's the cliché. Brozek is better than that. I wonder if she's had actual military service because these kids react correctly. They use their advantages unashamedly. They instantly know what their hierarchy is based on existing rank. They don't always agree on a course of action, but they do follow orders.

Another reason that I suspect that Brozek may have some military experience is her firm grasp on the principle of *Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome*. Brozek's little unit manages to find ways to do what they need to do even when they don't have the tools that they're used to. These kids don't screw around. If an opportunity to get closer to their objectives shows itself, they do what they need to do.

That's not to say that the cadets are perfect. They do make mistakes. They don't always move precisely when they need to. They find themselves having trouble dealing with losses. They're people. That's what I want to see in any work: Believable protagonists worth rooting for. And believe me, these ca-

dets are worth rooting for. It would have been way too easy for them to just go with the flow and hope the enemy would show some mercy. They didn't because they were trained better than that. Good for them.

Of course, one of the biggest thrills of Battletech is the 'Mechs. I don't want to spoil too much here, but we do get to see some 'Mech action. We get dropships and aerospace fighters too. This thing goes a bit bonkers at one point and that's not a good thing. It's an AWESOME thing. There is nothing so pleasing in a Battletech novel as when it all drops in the pot and things start to explode. Brozek does a good job of keeping the action that we need to see crystal clear and sharp and the background violence where it belongs... in the background.

Something else that Battletech has always done well, and that Brozek does well, is political intrigue. There are troubles brewing on the border of the Free Worlds League and the Lyran Commonwealth. It's about to get ugly and the opening moves are occurring. This is what our heroes find themselves dropped into. It's the foundation of the entire story. It works.

Oh, and since I mentioned the Free Worlds League...

It's nice to see something set in the FWL. We don't see much of them. They weren't involved much before the Clan Invasion. They weren't really part of the Clan Invasion. I don't remember hearing anything about them in the Mechwarrior: Dark Age either. I mean, they exist but we don't hear a lot about them. So kudos to Brozek for putting her story in an area that really needs a story. I'd love to see more.

Oh, and by the way, I'm excited. Brozek has a Young Adult Battletech Trilogy coming soon. I can't wait to read it. The e-book that I received had an excerpt in it but I don't do excerpts. I will say that if she writes this well in this universe I have more than enough confidence in her to lay down some loot (err... ok, plastic some loot over the internet. I miss having easy access to a local bookstore.) for a copy. I want to see more stuff go boom! Brozek has more than proven that she's got the skills to make it happen and keep it entertaining. I do find it a bit strange that Battletech: Rogue Academy will be the first YA BT trilogy. I did read the blurb though. That looks good. I'm geeked.

I don't really have any major complaints about the book. Brozek did a really good job here. Usually, a blatant fanboy such as myself can find an excuse to bitch about a book because it's not perfectly perfect but I don't have one. So good job, Jennifer Brozek. Take a bow.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 ER PPCs

The Borrowed World Series by Franklin Horton Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

The Borrowed World is a dangerous place to be. There's no power, no law, no order and definitely no place safe. It's a world where kids grow up too soon. It's also a story of survival of the fittest and depending on oneself instead of the government. The Borrowed World is full of people trying to survive any way they can.

The story:

At the beginning of the first book (I've read the first seven I think) Jim, our hero, is on a business trip with friends when terrorists take out the US power grid using techniques commonly used by insurgents

in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have to find their way home and their car runs out of gas along the way because all of the gas stations have closed. Things get worse from there. Ultimately, Jim and friends build their own little community out in the country where they can farm and stay safe from the encroachment of bandits looking to take what isn't theirs. It works for a while and then the government shows up trying to reinstate law and order. Things go downhill once again.

The characters:

The main character is a prepper named Jim Powell. He has been planning and gathering supplies against the day that the Shit Hits The Fan. He is the strong leader type. He sees what has to be done and does it. Jim has strong shades of Rick Grimes, only without the Colt Python.

Along the way we also meet Jim's family, his neighbors, his friends and his enemies. Everyone wants to survive. Some are willing to put the work in to do things the right way. Others would rather take what's not theirs.

There is also a lot of character growth in *The Borrowed World*. Jim doesn't want to be a leader, but he has to be. Others gain strength and learn how to survive having not had the skills when it all went down. Responsibilities are added and some kids are forced to act much older than their actual age.

The world:

The first book of the *Borrowed World* series is *The Borrowed World*. It looks exactly like the US does right now. It rapidly devolves into a dog-eat-dog world of competing people just trying to keep enough in their bellies to see tomorrow. It is a post-apocalyptic world. It's a world where the return of the government after the apocalypse is a bad thing. *The Borrowed World* is a place that is friendly to none.

The politics:

This is the weird part of the books. The first five or six aren't overtly political, but they're some of the most political books I've ever read. *The Borrowed World* is very similar to the story of the American West the way it was traditionally taught: Rugged individualists doing their best to survive in a world that doesn't want to cooperate. It's a world where the police turn their back on their duty, the state and federal governments collapse, and local government abuses its power to keep politicians alive. Money is worthless and help isn't coming, at least for the foreseeable future.

This is the story of a country where people take care of themselves. It is not the modern welfare state. Those that won't work don't make it. *The Borrowed World* is a story of self-sufficiency and struggle. It is, in short, the story of American Exceptionalism written in a post-apocalyptic setting.

Content warning: Graphic violence. Some rough language.

Who is it for? Anyone who likes reading about post-apocalyptic life and competent heroes. Anyone who likes a well-researched and well-written book. Anyone who likes a little action.

Why read it?

If you liked the early seasons of *The Walking Dead* but don't feel a need for actual zombies, you'll love *The Borrowed World*. This is a world that lives and breathes and a writer with a strong voice.

Chasing Freedom by Marina Fontaine

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

I hang out with a lot of political writers. And the most common form of political writing lately is the dystopia, or perhaps dystopia, depending on who's writing it.

And dear God, I am sick of them.

Granted, there have been some solid ones. Daniella Bova's Tears of Paradox, which honestly looked something like it was out of Walker Percy than anything else. There's Ordinance 93, that was mostly an action thriller with heavy espionage elements than a dystopia. There's every John Ringo novel, where the world seems to be in danger of being destroyed at some point. (Reviews forthcoming on all of the above)

But for everyone one of those readable, entertaining dystopias, there are easily ten that don't make the cut. Or drive me to tears. Or drive me insane. I don't even finish them, because I can't. Honestly, it's either the despair, or the writing, and the occasional "Why am I not doing something fun, like having a root canal?"

And then a friend of mine, Marina Fontaine, wanted me to look at Chasing Freedom.

Finally, at long last, something fun.

And this one is a dystopia that's easy to digest, easy to read, and simply enjoyable.

The story:

Chasing Freedom begins in the middle of America the tyranny. The only places of refuge are Amish country and Canada. But this is much like every other dystopia.

The important part of this dystopia is that Chasing Freedom focuses on the counter-revolution fighting the government.

The characters:

Our main characters are Julie and Randy, and we follow them from being teenagers rebelling against a Politically Correct system gone amuck, via blogs and rallies, and watch them blossom into resistance fighters against a totalitarian system.

What's that you say? Sounds like a variation on Red Dawn? Sounds like a TEA partier's worse nightmare? Must be written by some redneck in flyover country?

Oops, sorry, no. Marina lived under the USSR. She's been there, done that, got the t-shirt. You want a tyrannical nightmare, she can build one. However, this isn't Tolstoy. You will not want to read this one with a bottle of vodka.

The world:

Chasing Freedom is different from all the other dystopias for a number of reasons. The tone is lighter

and hopeful, while still retaining an oppressive atmosphere. It's also filled with creative ideas about how to circumvent a dictatorship. For example, Amish country becomes a safe haven for people fleeing the nightmare that is the urban environment (like New Jersey). Also, this is a dystopia that operates on the level of a Tom Clancy novel, following various and sundry people at multiple levels of the resistance and the political hierarchy — from the schlub in the street, to the grunts running the black sites, to smugglers getting people to Canada.

Despite having all of these characters at all of these levels, they're easy to keep track of. They have histories, they have easily traced relationships, and they all connect to each other.

Another difference is that this is not outlandish. This is not a delusion. Much of the tyrannical elements are visible from here. You can see these coming. And when you see the ones at the start of the novel, the ones to follow are easier still to see.

And the best difference? This is one book. Sure, there could be more novels, but this is basically it, one novel, one story — a history of a resistance, encapsulated in a few hundred pages. I honestly can't name you one person who's done that.

The politics:

You mean aside from a fight for freedom against the forces of Big Government, Big Tech, and a tyranny that isn't impossible to imagine? That would involve spoilers.

Content warning:

It looks like weaponized current events, even though it was written years ago.

Why read it?

A dystopia so easily readable I breezed through it without once feeling like I needed to slit my wrists. I enjoyed this book, much to my surprise.

Directorate School by Pam Uphoff

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

So, sometimes works in the Fantasy genre are based on popular tropes. I'd go as far as to say that most are. The thing about any trope is that it became a trope because it's entertaining. So yes, Pam Uphoff's Directorate School is, at its heart, based on a trope: It's a boarding school for kids. And yes, J.K. Rowling used it too. Rowling has sold only God knows how many millions of books though and that's because it's a good trope. It works. And Directorate School is a good book. I like the whole "Let's go to school and save the world in my spare time" thing. Who didn't think their problems were world ending as a teenager? Of course, in this book they're probably right, but why nitpick?

The Directorate Series, so I have been told, is a continuation of the Wine of the Gods series, which started with Outcasts and Gods. I have to confess that I have not read as many of the books in the series as I would like to. I'm working on it. I damn sure plan to own them all at some point. Despite the fact that Directorate School is a follow on to an earlier series, I had no problem whatsoever understanding what was going on. There was less heavy world building than I've seen in other books to be sure, but I liked that. The fact that we missed the lecture on the middle name of the emperor's sister's, cousin's,

cat's, dog's, pet goldfish's little brother is a good thing. It kept things moving and the book has multiple sequels, so it's not like she had to squeeze it all in. Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed John Ringo's *The Last Centurion* and I'm a David Weber fan (and sometimes I'd like to see a Weber of words meaning a huge infodump the same way people refer to a Weber of missiles) so it's not like I don't enjoy some background. I just don't think it always needs to be there and Heinleining in details works.

The upshot of avoiding needless exposition is that we get additional action. Directorate School cooks with grease. There is always something going on. Whether it's schoolyard battles in the dojo or actual combat, something is happening. And there is the usual teenage thing going on in the background. I can't believe how grateful I was that I didn't have to save the world right before that big math test. I mean, I didn't KNOW how grateful I was, but I was totally grateful. Seriously, these kids do great.

And that's part of what works about Directorate School. The kids are just that: kids. They do things that every kid does, and they sweat about it. When Magic class finals roll around, they start to sweat. When school starts and they have to face off in Martial Arts class to decide who's best, things get interesting. There are high school style cliques. One of them causes the problem that pushes the plot. It all makes sense.

Our heroes end up involved in things that should be well above their pay grade as cadets. They rock it out anyway because they're the heroes. Seriously, it's a bit surprising in one respect. Magic is an integral part of the world that Uphoff has created, but our characters are in their first year at the Directorate School and don't know how to use their magic yet. I can't wait till the next book when they learn how to because it is on like a neck-bone. These kids are bad asses now. When they have all of their tools, look out. I mean that. I can't wait to see it. Uphoff intentionally disadvantaged her main characters this time around but when it's go time and they actually learn what they're doing it's going to be scary. It's weird how they're all going into separate specialties too. It's almost like they're going to need multiple talents to overcome problems in future books and she's working to make that believable now. Hmmmm...

A lot of these kids are important kids. Don't get me wrong. Those of you out there who hate any mention of *The One* are going to be okay here. There is one kid who seems to be more powerful than the rest, but for the most part, none of them seem to be prophesied or anything. They're just kids doing what they need to do because they're stuck at ground zero of a terrible event. I would hope that I'd be able to do the same if I were in their position. And, upon more mature consideration, it may be two of the kids that seem more powerful than everyone else. So, either there is no Chosen One, or there is, and he hasn't been born yet. I haven't read any of the sequels yet, so there is a ninety plus percent chance that I'm talking out of my third point of contact but hmmm...

Probably my only complaint about Directorate School is that it's too short. I mean, I know there are like elebenty bajillion sequels or something and that's awesome but what happens here could have been more detailed. I know one particular occurrence that I would have liked to have seen that happened off-screen. I was a bit frustrated by that. I'm sure Uphoff had her reasons but some things are better shown than told. It kinda irked me a bit. It didn't ruin the story. It was definitely believable. It just happened where we couldn't see it. Then the big reveal hits and I was left feeling a bit cheated.

The story is a good one overall though. I plan on picking up a copy of the next book as soon as possible. Uphoff can really write. Her worlds live and breathe. Her characters are entertaining and have believable motivations. People underestimate that. The fact remains that a character only makes sense if the reason that they're doing what they're doing for an at least semi-logical reason (semi because some emotional motivations don't make strict logical sense even if they are understandable) and Uphoff nails that. In reading Directorate School, I never stop to wonder why someone would bother.

Do No Harm

by Robert E. Hampson, Chris Kennedy, and Sandra L. Medlock

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

First of all, they are NOT squids, neither the Human Navy type, nor the squishy, squirty version. And neither are they octopi, okay? They are utterly different, being from another planet...somewhere. Not sure where, actually.

They are Wrogal. Now, in knowing that, you know more than the first one we met knows.

Todd is the first one we meet (except for some juveniles in the prologue). His story is the most mysterious; he is an adult, with a wiped memory, who is the sole survivor of a battle-wrecked spacecraft that drifts into the Azure system. Through his story, we discover certain fascinating characteristics of the Wrogal. For one thing, they all seem to be savants, of one sort or another. Todd has the ability to repair machinery, as well as repair damaged people. He is able to communicate without sound to the translators worn by humans. He reproduces asexually, by budding. And he adopts 'Human' as his species.

Next, we meet Verne. All he wants to do is become a mercenary, which he believes to be his right, having identified as a human from his...budding. When his first efforts are foiled, he sets about proving he is worthy. Nobody can repair equipment like Verne, and he is a crackerjack designer as well. CASPer for Wrogal? Why not?

Marinara, our next character, happens to be my favorite. While possessing very little of the true chef talents, I HAVE been captivated from time to time by cooking shows, and Marinara uses ALL of his natural gifts to cook. Nobody can slice and dice like him, and he has the ability to concoct dishes that no one else could conceive; and even if they could, who would dare a ghost-pepper and cardamon sponge cake? I learned, by using my google-fu while reading, that there really DOES exist such a thing as molecular gastronomy, which is one of the areas of study for Marinara. And his love of learning cuisine takes him to meet some amazing people; occasionally, some quite deadly people.

Molina is our next Wrogal, the name a tribute to Alfred Molina, the actor who portrayed the character 'Doc Ock' in the 2004 Spiderman 2 movie. A being on the run, he has become a surgeon for the damaged, who branches out to installing the pinplant technology in humans. And he seems to stay in trouble.

Harryhausen, named after Ray Harryhausen, the stop-action genius, decides he wants the most difficult job in the world. Personally, I believe that to be a domesticator of housecats, Harryhausen settles for Peacemaker. To make it just a bit more difficult, he is paired with a Besquith. And, because sometimes he needs mobility, a trench coat and a hat disguise him perfectly on Earth, blending in with all of the other hard-eyed private eyes from the 1930s who are three feet tall. True to the genre, he walks away from official procedures when the mission requires it.

Here is a lovely, lovely thing: there are three contributors to this book. Chris Kennedy wrote the 'Verne' character, because he is a master of mil s/f. Sandra Medlock wrote the 'Marinara' character, because she knows about things like molecular gastronomy. And the gent who wrote everything else, but especially 'Molina' and about implants in particular, is none other than Robert E Hampson, who just HAPPENS to be working on the real-life applications of that technology. Is that not marvelous?

Farmer in the Sky by Robert Heinlein
Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Farmer in the Sky has the odd distinction of being the only one of Heinlein's juveniles that didn't really appeal to me when I was a preteen. I'm not sure why that was the case. It wasn't very exciting, by the standards of some of the other books I was reading at the time, but The Rolling Stones wasn't that exciting either and I loved it. Perhaps it was the simple fact that I didn't like the main character very much. There is something about William (Bill) Lerner and his widower father, George, that irritated me. Or perhaps it was the fact that I didn't like my experiences in the Boy Scouts – I didn't stay for very long – and Bill's obsession with scouting in all its forms is a reminder that misfits like me don't fit in very well with such groups. It was – and still is – harder for me to empathise with Bill than Max Jones or Rod Walker.

The basic plot is quite simple. On a crowded future Earth, where food is carefully rationed, teenager Bill is surprised to discover that his father is planning to emigrate to Ganymede, the largest and most inhabitable of Jupiter's moons. Convincing his father to allow him to emigrate too – and discovering, to his horror, that his widower father is marrying again – Bill prepares for the trip, then sets foot on the interstellar colony ship Mayflower for the voyage to Ganymede. It takes him some time to get used to Molly, his stepmother, and Peggy, his stepsister.

Arriving at Ganymede – after a brief adventure during which Bill saves the ship from an impact with a tiny piece of space debris – the colonists discover that the farms they were promised simply don't exist. (The authorities on Earth basically dumped four times as many colonists on Ganymede as the colony was expecting). Bill's father goes to work for the colony administration – he is apparently a pretty fair engineer – while Bill goes out to set up the farm. Unfortunately, Peggy takes ill very quickly on Ganymede. She just isn't suited to life on the rough world.

The family struggles on, even after a disastrous quake nearly wrecks the colony (and kills Peggy, one of the few truly emotional parts in the book.) Offered a chance to go back to Earth, Bill decides to stay and, after repairing the farm, joins an exploration mission where he discovers evidence of a former civilisation. The story ends with a reflection of the prospect of war on overpopulated Earth ... and the observation that Ganymede and the other colonies will survive.

Like most of Heinlein's juveniles, the core of Farmer in the Sky is about a young man growing to adulthood. Bill's scouting gives him a chance to learn to lead and then lead himself, although he doesn't have the patience – yet – to be a proper leader. He goes through the worst part of adolescence while moving to a new environment, which is – in many ways – the making of him. The self-righteous prat we meet in the early pages – there is something of a Teacher's Pet about Bill, although he'd deny it – gives way to a rugged adult. Bill – like some of Heinlein's other characters – has a habit of making credible mistakes, some more irritating than others. He's also oddly unaware of girls and women, to the point that he blithely dismisses Gretchen's irritation when Bill puts his foot in his mouth. One reviewer has even suggested that Bill is a racist. There may be some truth in it.

Bill's habit of blithely disregarding everything he doesn't understand leads to some of the book's more amusing moments. In the early pages, Bill cooks for his father and himself ... and then asks himself why women make such a fuss about cooking. It's easy! The fact that Bill is doing nothing more complicated than heating precooked food in a proto-microwave seems to have completely slipped past him. Cooking from scratch is a great deal harder, as I can testify. Later on, he assumes that a shuttle captain is pulling his leg about pirates in space – and is aghast to discover that the man was actually telling the

truth. Bill also manages to miss his father's shiftiness when discussing the need for families to emigrate, although he really should have picked up on something.

His relationship with his father is also odd, although it is far healthier than the later relationship between Hugh and Duke Farnham. George is an oddly shifty person when it comes to emotional matters (like a few other engineers I've met) and doesn't tell Bill he's getting married again until it is almost too late. It is never easy for a young man to step out of his father's shadow, or for the father to recognise that his son is an adult, but George makes it harder than necessary. A wife and mother might have been able to bridge the gap between them, but Bill's mother died some years before the story. It's nice to see Bill grow to accept his new relatives, yet ... Heinlein really doesn't give this the space it needs.

I don't know how accurate Heinlein's view of the colonisation of Ganymede actually is, but a fantastic amount of thought and detail was woven into the book. The mechanics of actually getting to Ganymede and turning the world into a habitable place to live are discussed in great detail, perhaps way more than I considered necessary when I was a child. Heinlein tells us about the importance of things like insects and suchlike for turning the ground into soil, as well as the logistical limitations of shipping stuff from Earth. (Bill made me smile when he argues that his accordion should be considered a cultural item, rather than a personal one; it lets him bring the instrument without it cutting into his weight allowance.) Everything from Earth costs a fortune on Ganymede. I'd be surprised if Heinlein didn't get quite a few things right.

At the same time, the colony also seems to be playing host to a number of people who are very poor colonisers indeed. Peggy gets ill, as I mentioned, but others feel (rightly) that they were swindled when they boarded the Mayflower, only to arrive and discover that the promised land simply doesn't exist. George tells Bill, when he questions this, that a number of people were probably allowed to pass the test through political connections, rather than actual competence. (Bill's friend, who changed his mind about going, had a father who couldn't move his business to Ganymede.) He also states that Ganymede will wipe out the weaker ones, sooner or later, a statement that comes back to bite him when Peggy dies. At least one of these people becomes a lesson in the dangers of allowing bitterness to overcome you.

Bill's obsession with scouting, as I said, irritated me. But it does lead to some amusing moments. Having set up a 'Ganymede Scouts' on the Mayflower – and given a shining demonstration of why I never liked the Scouts, as they exclude someone whose only real crime was being annoying – Bill confidently announces himself as a Ganymede Scout ... to a real Ganymede Scout. Needless to say, this does not go down well at all. Bill finds himself in hot water as the original Ganymede Scouts have no intention of allowing the newcomers to simply take over. He does overcome this problem, but only with some help from a friend who realises – probably correctly – that the originals have a lot to teach the newcomers. It's nice to see Bill get a comeuppance that taught him a useful lesson, without doing permanent harm. I don't know if he realised it himself, though.

Heinlein's wider world has its odd moments. It is a world where teenagers have access to flying cars, but also starvation rations. The food rationing system may seem perfectly normal to Bill, but Heinlein's readers would have understood perfectly why Bill wanted to leave for good. Bill actually complains, at one point, that the Chinese are constantly having more and more babies, leaving less food for everyone else. (This has an ironic echo in people complaining about more and more pettifogging environmental regulations over here, while China is pumping out more pollution without restriction.) Trying to ship even one percent of the population to Ganymede is futile and there's little point in trying to ship food back. It is later explained that certain people believe that war is inevitable and that they're trying to save as many humans as possible.

Overall, *Farmer in the Sky* is an odd book. It has a lot in common with the *Little House* books (only IN SPACE); it preaches self-reliance and independence, as well as the importance of community and doing what you can with what you are given. And yet, I cannot help thinking that it is one of the weaker of Heinlein's juveniles. Heinlein did not develop Bill sufficiently, in my view, to make him a decent character. Nor are we invested enough in his stepmother and sister to feel much for them, although Peggy's death is genuinely emotional.

But, in many ways, it is still a remarkable piece of work. There are moments of genuine humour – including a couple I think sneaked in by accident – and it lacks the bombast of some of Heinlein's later works. It is a good reminder that space colonisation is dangerous, but worthwhile. It's well worth a read.

Guardsman by Pam Uphoff

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

When I began reviewing on a regular basis about five years ago, I discovered the beginnings of the series "Wine of the Gods." At the time, writers in the Human Wave had been subjected to some INTENSE attacks by ...another segment, let us say. I was getting rather tired of the name-calling, and I decided to use my review of "Outcasts and Gods" as a platform to express my discontent with the way words were being used. So, I crafted a review which totally missed the point, to which I gave the title "Crypto-rapist writers' ideological basis exposed!" It was my attempt to poke fun at the critics (formal and otherwise) who persisted in drawing their own, bizarre conclusions about Human Wave writers, who were, in another context, wrongfans having wrongfun.

Even with that feeble intro, I soon devoured everything I could get by Pam Uphoff, and to this day, I do not know how many of her excellent works I have read and reviewed. However, I DO know that at some point, I lapsed into a momentary loss of concentration regarding the series. Not intentional! And it was only for a minute!

And then I came to the other day and saw that she was on volume FORTY THREE!

Prepared or not, I had to return. And I dived off the cliff.

Here's what I discovered: a character called Lucky Dave has emerged from stasis/healing into the far future, and he has to figure out what is going on from context alone. For reasons best explained by others, he is NOT able to get a full brief on what has changed from his timeline. Actually, I found this plot point helpful, as I also had no clue about the world into which he had emerged.

Fortunately for both of us, the clues came slowly and regularly.

This was my introduction to the character, and so I discovered that he was given the name 'Lucky Dave' because he had shown that by 'chance,' he would make choices that resulted in a favorable outcome for the people under his protection. He gets an uneasy feeling, and steps off the sidewalk just as a piano crashes down from the penthouse. After that sort of that happened a number of times, the people around him recognized that somehow, Lucky Dave had a type of precognition that put him in the right place to prevent a Bad Thing from happening. He has some other skills as well, which are shared by other defenders and warriors, but the 'Lucky' part seems to be his alone.

Dave is not the only person who is living time in interrupted stages. By virtue of time-retardant (or ac-

celerated) bubble dimensions, all sorts of modifications to the life cycle are permitted. In at least one case, parents are using the tech to raise children closer to the same age. It's also used to stash criminals to get them out of the way.

It's not without problems, though. In one case, a married couple have been separated for so long, that the wife believes her husband dead, and remarries. Then he emerges. In another case, with slightly creepy overtones, the little girl he once knew has instantly grown up to be Pulchritude Personified, and his attraction is evident and reciprocated.

An election is proceeding, and there is duggery among the skulls. Good guys, bad guys, confused guys, and a pacifist woman named "Beautiful Flower" who breaks a microphone over the head of her opponent. (That's the MILDEST form of violence, BTW).

I do NOT recommend that you start with book 43! However, even if you DO miss a couple of dozen installments, there is sufficient story that is self-contained that you can read happily.

(Hate those four-letter names, though. I have enough difficulty remembering Juan and Owen and Faith and Kendra. But Wqrl? Is that a radio station, or what?)

Oh, and be sure you add 'convoluted' to your dictionary. One of the things Robert A Heinlein was famous for was drawing timeline for his stories (with that eerie block labeled 'The Crazy Years'). I imagine the story line for Uphoff's stories as a three-dimensional hologram, with colorful lines, glowing in space, making all sorts of connections at the level of up, down, strange, charmed, beauty, and truth.

It's a lovely place to visit; would NOT want to live here, but I WILL be back for more, and hopefully, more frequently.

In Human by Eric Leland Review by Jason P. Hunt

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

The jungles of Vietnam have been host to a number of stories that demonstrate just how dangerous it was for American soldiers. Eric Leland's debut novel, In Human, is no different in that category. But just to dial it up to eleven, he adds a bit of demonic possession for spice.

What begins as a search-and-rescue mission quickly turns into a fight for survival against a supernatural force that's been held prisoner for centuries. The story follows a Special Operations Group, under the command of a newly assigned Captain Brandon Doran, an Army officer with a black mark on his record and a guilty conscience. As Recon Team New York is looking to recover Team Florida in the jungles of Northern Vietnam, someplace American soldiers weren't usually to be found. Florida was there looking for a "High Value Target" of interest to the CIA.

And you know with them involved, it's going to go about the way you expect. Right?

Besides being the new guy, Doran is also the officer, and the rest of the squad doesn't like him very much. So when everything hits the fan straight out of the gate, not only is New York facing a very for-real threat from without, but they're also having to deal with trust issues within. And in a firefight, trust is paramount to making sure everyone makes it out alive.

Along the way, they meet up with Jaran, the youngest generation of protectors of her village. Descended from a family of shamans, she's entrusted with a secret task, and if she fails it could unleash a terrible destructive force upon the world.

(Remember I mentioned demonic possession...)

Eric Leland's prose is tight and effective, and his time in the military serves him in good stead here. Not only is he able to capture the feeling of being in a war zone, with all the paranoia and fear that comes with it, but he's also able to convey the military life in a way that's accessible for those of us who haven't served. And while the book clocks in at five hundred sixty-four pages, it's a fast read. The story moves along at a brisk pace.

My only quibble is that I would have liked to see more of Jaran's story. She's set up in the beginning so that I was expecting her to have more of an arc. She still plays an important role, but it almost feels like there's part of her story left on the table, as it were.

I'm not a big one for horror, normally, so I was a little uncertain whether or not I would like this one. I was pleasantly surprised, and I'm looking forward to seeing what Leland has planned next.

Kingdoms of Iron and Stone Edited by Ellen Campbell

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Confession: I don't care for fantasy, in general. They break too many rules, and when you can break rules arbitrarily, then booga-booga, there is no story and no conflict. Furthermore, I frappen hate wizards. I also have enormous contempt for mighty-thewed conans, wielding huge swords, etc. (Exception: "The Magic Goes Away," by Larry Niven. I liked that series for the same reasons I don't like the others.) And finally, when I see that someone has taken "The Lord of the Rings," and painted over the serial numbers, and scratched out all of the morality at the core? That's a book that is going up against the wall.

THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS. But the rule is: I don't like fantasy.

You should DEFINITELY read the Foreword, by Michael J Sullivan, who brilliantly demonstrates the error in my perspective.

Now, as to this particular volume, the text is ALSO sprinkled with drawings of fantasy-themed items. I shall not comment on these at length, as I have no skill whatsoever as an art critic. I liked them, though, so there. Further, I shall not go, even to mention their titles, interspersed throughout the stories.

NOTE: Absolutely NONE of the stories in this volume break Too Many Rules! Just enough to sustain the story.

Unchosen by Rick Partlow. What an absolutely brilliant story to open the volume! Kingdom is about to fall, due to violations of long-held truces. The last hope is in the hands of the One True Deliverer, yet to be revealed. Ya know how in the Matrix, Neo doesn't think he is the One? This story is different.

King Edrick and the Dragon by Kacey Ezell. Kacey Ezell is a naughty, naughty young lady, who writes perfect stories with perfect sentences. Late one night, I read the Ballroom Entrance scene to my gift-

from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, and she wasn't even a LITTLE bit upset that I kept her from going to sleep. THAT'S good writing! Ezell not only brings to life the Perfect Dragon, she also has now doubtless influenced all of the other dragons to follow this example; kings everywhere are in danger! I TOLD you she was naughty!

The Beast of Balmonna by C.Steven Manley. This warrior has a mighty sword, but he is no Conan. Instead, he's a little bit of a Sherlock Holmes, but not as irritating. When a monster preys on a town, gobbling up the innocent, he's exactly the person you call, because he WILL accomplish his task. Whatever the cost. Keep that in mind!

Brothers by Nathan Hystad. Personally, I think the phrase 'blood is thicker than water' is true in a literal sense, but I DON'T think it means that we are doomed to be bound by accidents of birth. In this tale of two brothers in conflict, it's rather hard to know where the boundaries are.

The Prince, the Thief, and the Dragon by Paul Summerhayes. This story is NOT about the nature of reality. Maybe it is; but it isn't. It's just that some things are too fantastic to be true, and fat little princes can't ever be heroes, because they are losers. With imaginations that run wild.

Blueback Flight by Dean Floyd. Spoiled, mean-spirited children of privilege don't really have adventures; they just pay hard-working peasants to make them look good. But tease the system long enough, and it's likely to bite back. Literally.

Thirty Silver Pieces by Monroe Todd. Take 'The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly,' throw monsters and magic in the mix, and turn it up to 11. Then, add a dangerous and fascinating woman, because why not?

Black Tongued Heathen by Kalene Williams. Another blood-thicker-than-water story, this time between two sisters. I think two sisters can be meaner than two brothers, don't you? How far would a sister go, to get her rightful due?

On the Hunt by Wayne Ligon. ALL of the stories in this volume are twisty. This one MIGHT just be the twistiest. When your city is in despair, falling into ruin, and some flea-bitten mercenaries show up to solve your dragon problem; well, you'll do what it takes, right?

Little Mage by Cassidy Taylor. It's not fair when the weight of the kingdom rests on the shoulders of children. It's not fair when children are set against one another. It's just not fair. It happens, though.

The Wrath of Khazafel by Blake Peel. Oh, to be able to convey the impact of this story without spoilers! The basic bones: old dude seeks to prevent the destruction of the world. If you read this, as I did, and think, "hmmph, very straight-forward," then just wait a minute or two or three. So very, very subtle. (Did I say too much? SORRY!)

The Guardian by Amanda Kaye. Villagers who are rescued by fantastic heroes REALLY need to keep their bargains. It's the cheapest possible way to solve the problem. Trust me on this, okay?

The Nightmare Tree by James Evans. Ya know, it's not really the tree that is the nightmare. If you do not wish to discover more, at the very least, don't create orphans for profit. Some of them will remember you.

The Westfield Line by Scott Moon. If you consider this a Cinderella tale, but with boys instead of girls; and if you include the nastiest elements of "Snow White;" you'll be ABOUT a third of the way there. You'll need SIGNIFICANT elements of fortitude to make it to half-way, and that's about as far as I can take you.

DESPITE the fact that I Don't Like Fantasy, I loved this collection. I liked "Pulp Fiction" as well, and Vanessa still doesn't understand that. I think maybe, in both cases, it's because (mostly) Zed's dead, baby. And we might just have his chopper.

Lay of the Legionnaire by Chris Sommerkorn

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This book is an example: getting it was a risk. It did NOT come recommended. The author appears as a red shirt in several books in the Four Horsemen franchise. His name was just TOO SPECIFIC for a throw-away character, and his depredations too intense, for me to rest without exploring further. That lead me to this book.

I think this book represents the BEST and the WORST of indie publishing, particularly on the model we have discovered with Amazon.

Here's the best: an average guy, one without rich parents, or uncles in the publishing industry, gets to put his book out there for a reaction. I think that's GREAT! There are a LOT of great ideas, and great products, that are available, and having a marketplace that is open to anyone who can afford the minimal costs required for access is the VERY BEST way to go.

Here's the worst: The cover art is lovely, done skillfully by a person unknown to me by the name of Kevin Heptinstall. I do not know who the person on the cover is. Admittedly, I QUIT READING HALFWAY THROUGH THE BOOK. So, maybe at, say, 51% of the way through the book, it will become clear that the person depicted on the cover is the primary Point of View character for all that follows. Could very well be the case.

But I'll never know that, because I'm not reading any more. And THAT is a failure of the indie publishing model: there is no one experienced enough to demand that the cover have a close relationship with the content.

I did NOT stop reading because of the disparity between the cover and the content. That's just an illustration. I stopped reading because the protagonist, one Marcus Muller, gives every sign of being Superman without Kryptonite, and that just doesn't work. Superman without Kryptonite may be desirable, but there is no story. No matter how many Lex Luthors you put in his path, he always wins. And while the BEGINNING of the book IS compelling - Muller racing against the explosions on his spaceship, worrying about his comrades, great start- we all too soon discover that he is not only a super soldier, he is an elite super soldier, and before we can get accustomed to that, he turns out to be something very much like a god. There is no tension in that role.

True, he gets stomped on in training, but always to the refrain of "you are doing things no newbie should be able to do!" And I found that I no longer cared for the character.

It's a major problem with indie: there is no one to tell you that you can't take your product to market. Further, there is no one to get you lots of publicity. I don't know if people who have never try to market something have any idea how difficult it is to get the eye of the consumer. I do; I've had to market high-

er education, mainframe computer peripherals, vacuum cleaners, and bullet keychains. So, I have an appreciation for the difficulties in the path of the person who sets out alone. I don't write books; I review them. And, it often makes me sad that some of the most excellent works aren't getting the attention they deserve, especially after I've read some popular drivel that is on the best-seller list.

This book is NOT a total loss. I read the (four) prior reviews, and they all mention formatting errors. I didn't detect any of those, so I guess attention was given where it was needed. The action scenes were well-written, and I BELIEVE that's a strength that turned out to be a weakness; it was after the last (training) action scene that I gave up. I don't know, and will not find out, how the rest of the book develops, but I'd take a very sharp red pencil to the first half, cut out every scene that makes a point the second time, and make CERTAIN that every scene remaining moves the story along.

Three stars does NOT mean the book is horrid; it means: it's okay. This book MIGHT be exactly the ticket if you were stuck in a hotel room for too many days with no other entertainment. But it really needs a better hero, one who ISN'T a Superman without Kryptonite.

Middlegame by Seanan McGuire
Review by Sam Lubell
Originally in The WSFA Journal

Middlegame is not your typical urban fantasy. For most of the book the fantastical element is low key, twins separated at birth who can communicate telepathically even though one is in Boston and the other in California. But there is a lot more going on that the twins only learn about through the course of the book and in the end the magic proves to be quite powerful.

At this stage in her career, McGuire should be beyond the old trick of starting a story (or novel in this case) with an exciting scene from the ending and then jumping back to tell most of the story as a flashback. But that is what she does, opening the book with "Book VII: The End" Timeline: five minutes too late, thirty seconds from the end of the world. Dodger is dying and Rodger is shocked by the amount of blood. At this point the reader does not know who these characters are or anything, but that Dodger could calculate the amount of blood on the floor while Rodger is not reassured by words the way Dodger is by numbers. Then the book cuts to a quote from an invented children's story *Over the Woodward Wall* by Deborah Baker, which is the source for the quest for the Impossible City mentioned throughout the book, and a quote from Asphodel Baker to the American Alchemical Congress. Later in Middlegame, the reader learns that the children's book was written as a way for Baker to communicate her alchemical ideas.

The alchemist Asphodel Baker has animated a man, James Reed, from pieces of the dead to prove her right and do what she cannot. In turn, he creates pairs of children who will enable him to control the universe through the Doctrine of Ethos divided into component parts of mathematics and language. Two of these children, mathematical genius Dodger in California and linguistics genius Rodger in Boston make telepathic contact as young children. The sections on the loneliness of gifted children ring true.

The two stop communicating at times, once when Reed's assistant pretends to be a doctor who threatens to remove Rodger from his home unless he gives up the delusion and once after Dodger attempts suicide. But then the two are reunited at college and start living up to their potential including the ability to turn back time. They are aided by Dodger's murderous roommate, a spy for Reed. Gradually, through attempts by Reed's assistants to interfere with their lives, they discover their alchemical origins and decide to use their powers to save the world.

Although the main characters are children for the first quarter of the book and graduate students for the remainder, this book does not have the normal concerns of YA fantasy – romantic triangles and proving oneself an adult. There is the self-discovery of what they can do, but this is more equivalent to a superhero learning his powers (that can happen at any age) rather than a young person trying to determine who he is as an adult.

Middlegame was a Hugo finalist and deserves the accolades as one of the best books of the year. If this is what Seanan McGuire can do when not writing one in one of her series, I hope she does many more of these experiments. Recommended.

Operation Flash, Episode 1 by Nitay Arbel
Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Nitay Arbel's other book-length work published as a Kindle Unlimited selection is a sweet, romantic tale about real-life lovers in a stressed-out university setting, drawn together at first by a common love of music "On Different Strings", reviewed here. It's really a delightful story but has nothing to do with Operation Flash Episode. However, his short work, included in the sadly under-appreciated short story collection "Freedom's Light", reviewed here greatly presages this series. In that (fictionalized) account, entitled "The Tenth Righteous Man," he tells of another assassination attempt on Hitler. The ONLY defect in that work is that it was far too short.

Now, he gets to rectify the situation; Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr [Baron] von Gersdorff (a real person) is successful in blowing himself up with Hitler. I don't know how long this series is intended to run, but 'for a long time' is a good answer.

I was born almost exactly 8 years after VE Day, and so my early life was filled with returned veterans, slightly older Baby Boomers, and movies and television shows about the evil Germans, the Krauts. Comic books featured Sgt Rock holding a .30 cal machine gun, hosing down enemy troops by the score, while a little bit later, Vic Morrow re-fought the European campaigns every Friday night on "Combat."

It actually took my own tour of duty as a medic in the Stuttgart vicinity from 1973-75 for all of those old ideas to get washed out of my head. One of my coworkers was a former German Army soldier, and the secretary of our section had been in the Luftwaffe. I rented an apartment from a retired architect who had been a part of the German units sent to aid Franco during the Spanish Civil War. And in every case, I enjoyed their company, and found them to be decent people. While I may have been exposed to a non-random sample, my experience is that these people were not all monsters.

And that, in a nutshell, is the operative truth contained in this work.

By combining historical figures with fabricated point-of-view characters, Arbel gives us a behind-the-scenes look at a history that was ALMOST ours. It's really a matter of moments that prevented this scenario from taking place, and it's a story that deserves wider attention.

What separates this book from any number of shoot-Hitler books is the exposition of the plans which actually were in place to form a coalition to end the Nazi regime. The revulsion American civilians felt as we learned of the horrors of Dachau was also the driving force for many of those who were complicit.

it in this, probably the most organized of the 42 documented attempts on Hitler's life. This was no stray bomb dropped on an isolated forest preserve, with accidental consequences as portrayed in "Himmler's War;" this was a concentrated, focused attempt by a group of highly placed individuals to decapitate the government.

As a mechanism to discuss the response of the English to the attempt, Arbel invents the character of Diana Slater, a German expatriate serving as a secretary to Churchill. This gives us some additional private observations of what MIGHT have been taking place as a result of the assassination and resulting chaos.

I'm not sure exactly how he does it, but to me, Arbel seems to be writing of that time as a contemporary writer would. The scenes and characters seem to me to be thoroughly authentic, and NOT 21st century moments rotated backwards 80 years. Some of it, I'm certain, has got to be his familiarity with the language and the scenes, as they were in this period. I will leave it to others to dissect his technique; I find that to be a tiresome exercise, much like trying to teach a cat to obey. However, if that sort of thing is what you enjoy, feel free to find it elsewhere.

I was utterly fascinated by this work. I confess, with no small amount of remorse, that as soon as I downloaded this book I jumped it to the head of my reading list, and I devoured it in one session. It's that good. I am looking forward, oh, yes I am, to more in this series, and I also hope that Arbel's work gets the attention it deserves. As stated earlier, I found his previous work delightful, and a perfect example of the truth that talent and fame are but distant acquaintances. For the benefit of all, I hope a much broader audience finds its' way to this series; it's just too good to languish in obscurity.

Pirates of the Electromagnetic Waves Review by Rob Kroese

<https://upstreamreviews.com/?p=270>

Pirates of the Electromagnetic Waves, the first book in Fenton Wood's Yankee Republic series, is a quick, delightful read. There is also a full series omnibus edition, which you can order in Kindle format from Amazon or as a paperback direct from the author. I've seen the books compared to The Hardy Boys, Tom Swift, and the Mad Scientists Club. For me, though, the most apt comparison is to the works of Ray Bradbury, particularly Dandelion Wine. Don't let the rather bland cover fool you; there's something wonderful inside.

The story:

The story revolves around the boys' efforts to build a pirate radio station. And that's... well, honestly, that's pretty much it. There's almost no overt conflict; just a series of challenges—technical, physical, interpersonal, political, and logistical, that the two boys and their friends have to overcome. And yet, between the detailed descriptions of the process of setting up the radio station, the likeability of the protagonists and the sweet-but-never-cloying sentimentality that infuses the book, it's just so much fun.

The characters:

The main characters are two teenage boys, Philo Hergenschmidt and Randall Quinn. Randall is something of a raconteur (not to say fabulist...), while Philo is a bit more grounded (to make an appropriately electrical pun).

The world:

Pirates is set in a small town on an alternate timeline where America's past, as well as a little of our future, intermingles with the present day. As one reviewer put it, the world of Pirates "went right everywhere we went wrong." Fenton Wood immerses the reader in his world, gradually and expertly revealing subtle differences from our own—and hinting at more. The result is a setting that is simultaneously comforting and unsettling.

The politics:

There's no overt political angle, though Wood is clearly big on individual freedom, community, family and personal responsibility. Wood's depiction of the idyllic 1950s-esque town is subtly subversive (or rather, superversive). Pirates makes the reader wonder what our world might be like if we had managed to hold onto more of our freedom.

Content warning:

None. This book is appropriate for all ages.

Why read it?

It's fun, fast, easy-to-read, and leaves you with a big smile on your face.

Who is it for?

Anyone who doesn't hate goodness and fun. If you're a fan of Ray Bradbury, particularly his more Earthbound work, you really should check it out.

The Powers of the Earth Review by Rob Kroese

<https://upstreamreviews.com/?p=259>

Imagine a mashup of the best elements of *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* and *Atlas Shrugged*, with a little Neal Stephenson and David Brin thrown in for good measure. That's *The Powers of the Earth*, a novel too good to be any author's first foray into long fiction. It's certainly no surprise that this book and its sequel, *Causes of Separation*, won back-to-back Prometheus Awards. They're just damn good books.

The story:

The title comes from the U.S. Declaration of Independence ("When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth..."), so as you might expect, TPoTE tells the story of a revolution. And since it's sci-fi, that revolution naturally takes place on the Moon. Corcoran clearly modeled his novel on *TMiaHM*, but TPoTE is no mere pastiche. Corcoran riffs on and remixes the elements of Heinlein's masterpiece and adds much that is uniquely his. Warning: TPoTE is a loooooonggggg book (Amazon says the Kindle version is 663 pages), and it's only the first book in the series. The second is out now, and Corcoran is rumored to be working on a third (and final?) book.

The characters:

As befits a tale with the scope of TPotE, there's a sizeable cast of characters, including an AI reminiscent of the supercomputer in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, the U.S. President (an insufferable former talk show host), and a group of uplifted dogs. If there's a main character, it's driven, principled and somewhat antisocial Mike Martin, the founder of the Aristillus moon colony. An ex-soldier named John, who fled to the Moon with the aforementioned sentient canines to save them from being murdered by the government on Earth, also gets a lot of screen time. As with most novels dealing with the Fate of Humanity, the characters clearly exist solely to propel the story, but Corcoran does a fine job of making each character feel distinct (although I did have some trouble remembering which dog was which).

The world:

Corcoran's dystopic vision of Earth's future is vividly portrayed and seems to be inching closer to prophecy with every passing day. He gives us a world so constrained by red tape, regulation, taxes and political correctness that fleeing to the Moon makes perfect sense. The first time I read TPotE, about three years ago, I thought the inclusion of the "alternately abled soldiers" was a bit of a misstep, pulling the narrative a little too close to satire, given the cold realism of the bulk of the story, but as I watch people argue in dead seriousness that pregnant women (sorry, pregnant persons!) should be allowed to be fighter pilots, I'm starting to think the world we live in is a much sillier place than Corcoran's future.

The politics:

TPotE is unapologetically libertarian (or perhaps anarcho-capitalist) in its outlook. The heroic characters are rugged individualists, and the villains are scheming tyrants, benighted pawns, or something in between. That said, Corcoran takes a much more subtle approach than, to pick a name completely at random, Ayn Rand. There are no eighty-page monologues on the value of the individual or the evils of collectivism. If you're of a more left-leaning persuasion, though, this book will probably piss you off.

Content warning:

There's a fair amount of profanity (f-bombs and other cursing), as well as a moderate amount of violence, as one might expect in a book about a war.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys Robert Heinlein, particularly *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and fans of Neal Stephenson and Ayn Rand.

Why read it?

Who doesn't love a story about plucky underdogs (heh) standing up to tyrannical overlords? Judging by the sales of YA fiction, pretty much everybody. But instead of a cartoonish future drawn in broad strokes, à la *The Hunger Games*, Corcoran gives us a world that feels almost too real. This is hard sci-fi done right.

The Silver Mage: Book Four of the Silver Wym
by Katharine Kerr
Reviewed by Sam Lubell
Originally in SFRevu

Note: This review was written before the author revived the Deverry series in 2020.

When a fantasy series has been going on for nearly a quarter of a century (the first book in the Deverry saga was published in 1986) and reaches 15 books, it needs a spectacular ending. (I regard the 2020 revival as a separate sequel series set in the same universe with different characters.) The Silver Mage, the last book in the long-running Deverry series, is an above average entry in the series (although still not up to the standard of the first four) but falls short of the rousing conclusion an epic like this demands. While many plot threads in Kerr's Celtic knot of reincarnations are resolved, some, including the threat of the Horsekin, are left dangling. Still, this is a satisfying volume that wraps up an unusually complicated and slow-moving series.

Katharine Kerr's Deverry series is based on the idea of wryd (destiny). Characters' souls reincarnate and their fate in one life is determined by their actions in the previous life. Most characters do not know this except for a few with magic, called dweomer, who through meditation are able to access pieces of their old lives. Kerr writes these novels jumping back and forth in time to show incidents from characters' previous incarnations, creating a Celtic knot tapestry. Just to add to the confusion, some characters, notably the dweomermaster Nevyn and the elves, live extended lives, so they may interact with the same soul under different names and struggle to remember that this is a different person.

Dweomer is usually low-key, the seeing of spirits and omens of the future, limited shape changing, and illusions. The early books are noteworthy for having a physically strong female protagonist, "a lass with a sword" and giving her a convincing explanation for how such a character could fit into a quasi-medieval society. But such warrior women are far more common in fantasy now than in the 1980s (common enough that books now rarely even try to justify this in terms of the setting) and recent Deverry books have lacked a warrior-woman-type character.

Most of the Silver Mage takes place in the 1160s, about 100 years after the events of the original four books, but there is a past life sequence that goes back to 71 C.E., meaning the book has both the oldest and newest material (at least before the 2020 novel). The books have a heavy Celtic influence although they largely take place in an invented world (with the occasional bridge to ours).

The Silver Mage is about the efforts to recover a book that has the secrets to reversing the transformation of Rori, the half-elf who once was the silver dagger (mercenary soldier) named Rhodry, into a dragon. Much of the book is focused on the redemption of Laz, a magic user who had been a villain in previous incarnations and sufficiently cruel in this life that the good characters are uncertain how much they can trust him. He wants to learn more about his past lives while the other magic users fear this information may cause him to revert to his old ways. Despite this distrust, he agrees to join a warband as a scribe so he can hunt for the book. Another plot line explains what happened to Kov, a dwarf who was captured by the Dwrgi (the otter people) as he tries to escape only to wind up leading the Dwrgi in an underground assault on the Horsekin. Meanwhile Neb (the current incarnation of Nevyn, the old dweomermaster of the original books) discovers the existence of germs that cause illness and infections, which he uses to heal Rori the dragon. Ultimately, all characters converge on Haen Marn, a city that can travel in space and between universes, a Celtic Brigadoon, to discover its secrets and to cure

Rori, if he decides to give up being a dragon.

As frequently the case in this series, the past life sequence is the best part of the book. The original incarnations of Rhodry (then called Rhodorix) and Cullyn (then Gerontos) and Nevyn (Galerinos) turn out to have traveled from a Dark Ages to this alternate world where magic is much more powerful (as Galerinos finds to his surprise). There they meet the original incarnation of Jill (then Hwilli) who becomes the first human to learn the dweomer, the elves' magic, and helps with the ideas for Haen Marn. Rhodorix fights some of the early battles against the Horsekin and teaches the elves about horses.

The author Katherine Kerr has said in the past that everything would ultimately tie together with the last past life segment in the last book tying into the first present-life segment in the first book. This did not take place (perhaps to the book's betterment, as the origin of Haen Marn fits better here.) While many plot lines are settled in the book, a few major ones, including the fate of Evandar, a guardian spirit, and his changelings, are dealt with rather quickly at the very end, after being almost completely ignored for the last couple of volumes. More to the point, the threat of the Horsekin is not resolved although a major victory against them is won.

Obviously, the last book of a 15-book sequence is no place for a new reader to start. The series is written in groups of four (mostly as there is one three book group) so the reader can reasonably stop at the end of any sequence. Personally, I think the original four are the best in the series (making sure to get the author's preferred editions of Dagerspell and Darkspell as she edited these later in her career). However, patient readers, who do not have to see battle scenes or spectacular acts of magic will find much to enjoy in the whole series.

The 2020 book *The Sword of Fire* feels less connected to the series than the others and can be regarded as the start of a sequel series that stands independently from the plots and characters of the original Deverry books.

Tam Lin by Pamela Dean Review by Sam Lubell

Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* is marketed as fantasy (from Tor), originally as part of Tor's Fairy Tale series although it is, of course, based on the famous ballad, not a fairy tale as such. Yet as a story of three roommates at college in the 1970s, this could easily have been marketed as mainstream. The fantasy elements are low key and not until almost the very end are the characters confronted with something fantastical that cannot easily be dismissed or excused.

It is difficult to describe the wonders of the book. Pamela Dean's fantasies frequently use quotes from great writers as spells, here it is literature and the characters' love for it that is the magic illuminating the book. The writing and story are rich in real characters and everyday wonders. It is one of my all-time favorite books.

Reading and books fills the story and the lives of the characters, starting right from the opening which describes how people in the college use the required Greek textbook to keep their bookcases up, "The generally harried air of most Classics majors was attributed by their friends and roommates entirely to their reliance on an inferior wedging system for their bookcases." By page three, Dean has mentioned Hermann Hesse, Heinlein's juveniles, and *The Wind in the Willows* (thrown out the window by a character's mother.) When one freshman brings six boxes of books to college, her new roommate automatically examines the books literally in the same sentence that she says "Hi". (The third roommate begins

to feel stupid because she doesn't read.)

The central character is Janet, an English major, who explains her choice of majors to her roommates as:

"If the thing you liked best to do in the world was read, and someone offered to pay you room and board and give you a liberal-arts degree if you would just read for four years, wouldn't you do it?" "But what will you do after that?" "Go to graduate school and read some more."

By the end of the book any reader who did not major in English - - and many who did -- will be tempted to call their college and ask if it is too late to re-enroll. The characters quote famous poets and playwrights, especially Shakespeare, at the drop of the hat and read poetry out loud for the feel of the sounds. Janet becomes annoyed when the entrance to the college tunnel system has a misquote,

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here", other characters are furious when a performance of Hamlet cuts Hamlet's melancholy, "Are they mad? Do they want to gut the play? Don't they know that Hamlet must be his own clown?", and even the Fourth Erickson ghost, which may or may not really exist, throws, of all things, books out the windows. In this atmosphere, it seems almost natural that Janet would literally start to relive literature. (As an English major, Janet should know better than to become involved with a guy named Thomas.)

Janet has difficulty getting along with the roommate who doesn't read, their other roommate constantly argues with her boyfriend, but they all stick together, and their affection is infectious. The reader cannot help but to grow to like all the characters. There is no obvious villain until the very end.

The plot revolves around the life and loves of the three roommates at college, their courses, and other amusements. In addition to their search for the ghost or whomever is throwing the books out their window (but where do these *old* books come from?), the three begin to date three strange Classics majors with weird moods and mannerisms. By the end of the book these -- and some strange goings on in the Classics department -- are all explained. There clearly is some nostalgia for the author's own college days, and a sense of not getting everything out of the college years.

Key to the book is Janet's relationship to Thomas, who first insults her in the library and then becomes her roommate's boyfriend. Thomas is an eternal undergraduate who keeps switching his major (he announces his retirement from the Classics department by staging a play in which the costumes make fun of the head of the department. Until the end when the fairy tale (actually a Scottish ballad) takes over, this is clearly a book where the plot emerges from the characters rather than manipulating them.

If the last thirty pages of the 460-page novel had been changed only slightly, the rest could have been published as mainstream without changing a word, and probably have garnered more critical attention. This novel is a treat for anyone who likes to read, anyone who struggled to build friendships and relationships, and anyone remembers what was like to choose between homework for a class that really interested you or the company of your friends. This is a book to give to those who say they don't like fantasy or to those who love it. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Torchship by Karl Gallagher

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Imagine, if you will, if the TV show Firefly was written by David Weber, before Honor Harrington became Game of Starships with 500 characters whose names you can't recall.

The story:

Torchship is told as a series of anecdotes that serve to build the world. Over the course of each story, the five missions all build on each other. The opening deals with a bunch of tourists ... which turns into a cat and mouse chase among asteroids, a shootout, and some additional SCIENCE!

Events that take place during the first story lead to the next mission with Terraformers ... called "Kitty Chow." Yes, really. Trust me, you won't see this coming.

"Kitty Chow" leads to several bits of business in the next arc of stories, with Pilgrims, the Treasure of the Sierra Madre IN SPACE ... and then Hitchhikers. How do you have hitchhikers in space? Heh heh heh.

The characters:

The characters here are difficult to describe, for the simple reason that much of who they are is expressed during the story and as part of events. Imagine starting with a collection of characters who seem to be a handful of cliches, and every last one of them has a surprise inside. To steal from one TV show, on this ship, no one is who they appear to be.

Overall, it's just awesome. It's fun. Read it. Enjoy. Click here to buy Torchship, by Karl Gallagher, now.

The world:

There are several interludes that take place in between the missions of the torchship in question, and they both add to the narrative and provide some exposition. This is important, since there is little in the way of exposition in the stories. There is just enough data here to get you through the story, but nothing else. "The Fusion worlds" are paranoid about technology, because the AIs revolted. Why did the AI revolt? No idea. We don't need to know. We just need to know that they dislike humans. Don't worry, they'll explain.

But dang, this was fun. Granted, we don't have the scene-chewing, over the top characters from Firefly, but we also don't have their angsty BS. The crew of the Fives Full are ... generally well-adjusted individuals. The story doesn't leave you wanting, but it does leave you with a desire to know more about the world, and what happens next to our heroes.

On the one hand, I would say that this is hard SF — our heroes plot courses with slide rules, we have terraforming (right now, it's mostly done by Israel), AIs, genetic engineering and using elements for fuel. I think the only thing that isn't merely an extension of current technology is translating through space via various and sundry portals. But this man has planets listed with their gravity well intensity. Who does that? Answer: an MIT grad with an engineering degree.

Yes, Karl is a rocket scientist.

However, to say that this is hard SF would be terribly mislabeling it. Much of hard SF is so techy, you'd be hard pressed to find character or culture among the people and places. Here? Here, there is something for everybody. There are multiple systems of government, from an auctionocracy (yes, they auction off seats, it's half the tax income for the year) to representative government, et al. The cultures are clear, and unique, and varied all over the place. It's a wonderful array of stuff here, and it's obvious that Karl has put in plenty of time contemplating ... everything.

The politics:

Not only is this libertarian to conservative, it is so in multiple ways. How many different types of small government can you have in a world? I think Karl's still adding to the pile. `

But overall, our heroes are basically small businessmen trying to make out a living. All the way, they're solving problems that big government just can't, or won't, solve. In some cases, it's because big government is the sole cause of the problems –sometimes deliberately. But this is a group of ordinary people doing the best they can with what they have and coming up with extraordinary heroism as a result.

Content warning:

There's some sex. It's not graphic; it's mentioned off-screen.

Who is it for?

Torchship is recommended for readers who enjoy David Weber or Timothy Zahn. This really feels like if Firefly had been done really well, and if Honor Harrington were made into three books instead of 40. Why read it?

One problem I have with this particular novel: why are they broken up into short stories instead of chapters? It reads continuously. Also, the opening few pages (less than five) are disorienting. They do feed into the story, and any confusion from the opening is resolved by the end, so no worries there. It may make it a little difficult for some people to get into the novel initially. Don't worry about it, just push through the first five page (okay, more like page 5, 6, and 7) and you're good.

Is it Superversive? Hell yes. That's the easy part. Is it Pulpy? Well, that's according. You see, there's a romance going on here, a spy story, a thought problem story, with multiple types of adversaries — the ever-present man versus nature of hard vacuum, man versus man, man versus self, and man versus society.

Overall, it's just awesome. It's fun. Read it. Enjoy.

Treasure Planet by Hal Colebatch and Jessica Q. Fox

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Pastiche: noun; an artistic work in a style that imitates that of another work, artist, or period.

If you are a lover of the Kzin stories, as I am, then whether you have been following them for thirty years, since they first appeared, or have joined up recently with the release of Man-Kzin XV, released

in February of this year, you have likely thrilled along with me to find echoes of some of the famous movies of the past among the literature. “Treasure of the Sierra Madre,” “Casablanca,” and most recently, “The Third Man” have all appeared, and there are likely others that I have missed. Missing things is inevitable, even for a voracious reader like myself, largely because I am NOT as much of a film buff as I am a reader. In fact, when I recently read “The Third Kzin,” I had to find and watch “The Third Man” simultaneously as I read the book, swapping from text to video, section by section. I found both experiences to be enhanced.

That is the case with this title as well. Actually, while I am certain that I have seen some version of the filmed “Treasure Island,” I didn't even attempt to do a re-watch; movies tend to bore me sick. At the moment, I'm trying a re-watch of “The Alamo,” which hit the big screen when I was in the first grade at Sunset Hills Elementary in San Antonio, Texas; one of my sister's friends was a direct descendant of Col. Travis. And, even with that connection, it's taking me a week or more to get through it. So, rather than try the movie, I grabbed the original Robert Louis Stevenson book off Gutenberg, and multi-tasked my reading.

Lovely, lovely, lovely time!

All of the pirate characters in this re-telling are played by rogue Kzin, including the heroically villainous (or villainously heroic) Long John Silver. However, Kzin are represented among the good guys as well, most notably as the companion of the Jim-analogue (Peter Cartwright), the kzinrett Marthar.

Her story provides a great deal of the suspense. As a modern kzinrett, she has received an implant that prevents her from developing into a mindless breeder. However, once beyond the reach of modern medicine, she is injured, and the implant is destroyed. That gives her a definite deadline to get the story resolved, because she will most assuredly revert to a chrowl-seeking pleasure device unless she receives proper care.

I'll not go further into the story. If you have ANY recollection of “Treasure Island,” you'll be familiar with the plot; if not, then “pirates and treasure and kidnapping and danger” is all I'm going to say.

Although you can find his name on the covers/in the pages of the Man-Kzin Wars books in multiple forms (Colbach, Colbatch, etc), I am assured that the proper spelling is Hal Colebatch, and he is most definitely an experienced player in the universe, as is Jessica Q Fox. Read, and enjoy!

Unconquerable Sun by Kate Elliott Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu March 2021

While Kate Elliott (a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen) may be best known for her fantasy novels, her early work was mostly science fiction. She wrote a science fiction series (The Highroad Trilogy) under her real name and her 1990s Jaran novels are excellent examples of anthropological science fiction romance. Still, it has been twenty-six years and about eighteen fantasy novels since Elliott wrote her last science fiction book--a long wait for her science fiction fans.

Elliott calls this book "Gender-swapped Alexander the Great on an interstellar scale". The book does not hit the reader over the head with historical parallels, but this does excuse the author's use of Queens, Princes, and Princesses, and Core Houses in the future. (How the Republic of Chaonia has royalty is not explained.) The book's main character is Princess Sun, the daughter and heir of Queen-Marshal Ei-

rene and one of her consorts, Prince Joao of the Gatoi. Nearly all of the Gatoi fight for the Phene Empire, as enemies of Chaonia, so most people are deeply suspicious of Prince Joao; Sun recognizes that it would not take much for them to feel the same way about her and that she would be replaced as heir should her mother ever have a full-blood Chaonia child.

Sun is an interesting character. She is a military genius but earnestly wants her mother's approval. She is proud almost to the point of arrogance, both of her own abilities and her position as heir. Sun also has a temper she does not always keep under control; one of her guards' jobs is to keep reminding her to control herself.

Her mother the queen is very conscious of appearances and does not want her daughter to eclipse her either militarily or in the eyes of her subjects, even though the queen is regarded as a hero for accomplishing wonders in defeating the enemy and building Chaonia into a major power. Early in the book the queen sends her daughter on an inspection tour to keep her away from her upcoming wedding, so she does not create a scene and there are many scenes of the two arguing or having others (especially those from Lee House) try to increase the ill-feelings between the two.

Sun has a group of Companions who include young people from the other Core Houses (who function as a hereditary nobility) who function as her friends, support staff, and her link to the Houses. These Companions include The Handsome Alika, the equivalent of a rock star (he plays the ukulele). When Perseus Lee (from the House that controls the secret police and corrections system) dies, Lee House sends his twin sister Persephone as a replacement. But Perse, another viewpoint character (whose first-person chapters all have "Wily Persephone" in the title) has been hiding as a cadet in the Central Defense Cadet (military) Academy (under a fake name) and is not pleased to be brought back into her House's service, let alone to be its heir and Companion to Sun. Meanwhile Sun and the other Companions are not sure where Perse's loyalties lie. And she discovers his best friend in the cadets was spying on her. It is unusual to have the first-person narration from someone who is not the main character while the bulk of the book is in the third-person, but it works here.

The other main character in *Unconquerable Sun* is Lieutenant Apatma At Sabao, a soldier of the Phene Empire in their war against Chaonia. She thinks she is an ordinary lancer pilot, but senior officers know her name, delay a ship to transport her, and at one point make sure she escapes from a ship that is about to be destroyed. This cause Apatma to wonder what is going on and what is so special about her. Showing these glimpses from the enemy's point of view is a brilliant way of expanding the universe for the reader.

The book is full of politics, issues of trust, and military action. The plot of this 563-page novel is far too complex to summarize here. Lee House is up to something. Prince Joao is up to something else. The Phene Empire has its own plans. Sun can only hope that her mother is up to something too because otherwise she is being manipulated by forces trying to separate her from Sun. Certainly, Sun's own pride and temper are not helping things. And can Wily Persephone and Princess Sun really trust each other and do the Companions have their own agenda.

This book is not a romance. But it is worth noting that as with ancient Greece homosexuality is accepted without comment and both the queen and Sun have female lovers.

Unconquerable Sun is the first book in a trilogy so there is a lot of setting things up and the first few chapters are a bit too obvious with the info-dumping. The trilogy is all one story, so this volume ends with much of the plot unresolved. The sequel *Furious Heaven* is scheduled for release September 2021. Princess Sun, in this book's last sentence, says, "I have no idea what's going to happen next, but I would

bet anything that it is going to be wild." I think that is a safe bet.

I recommend this book for fans of action/adventure stories and space opera. This is clearly the start of an epic trilogy. Although this is science fiction with planets and spaceships, it still has a fantasy feel with princesses and her heroic band of Companions. Elliott makes no attempt to explain any of the science. I would not call this Young Adult, but the main character is a young woman trying to forge her own identity and do what she thinks is necessary despite her parents' plans for her. The book is a lot of fun.

The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin

by L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

This book is permanently free on Amazon.

The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin by author L. Jagi Lamplighter Wright has been described as Fringe meets Narnia in Hogwarts. The Narnia is easy to see. And it is set at a magical school. But the rest?

Imagine the end of the Harry Potter series. You know, where the school is under full assault, things are blowing up, students are fighting, and great beasts are tramping around?

Imagine that's only the prologue. There's a dragon, and possession, and hordes of the possessed out to slaughter the school. There's even an evil math tutor (Moriarty, anyone?). I was expecting a few lines from Maleficent (the character, not that terrible movie). But it was not to be this time out.

The story:

Like all good stories, this has elements of a mystery. (Don't look at me like that. Even Die Hard has a mystery: like "Detonators? What about them?") And The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin wastes no time in setting this up. Chapter one sets up an existential threat to reality and ends with an attempted murder. The rest of the story takes place over the next five days of the first week of magic school.

And the grand finale is so epic, you're going to wonder why you haven't heard of Rachel Griffin before.

Jagi does so much with so many different things in this, you'd think she has an encyclopedic memory of all of fantasy and threw them into a blender. And while it looks like a standard "boarding school" story, she jams in so many subplots and stories and character arcs, you'd think it would be cluttered. But she makes it look so easy, you don't realize how much you've read until they try to recap it in the next book.

The characters:

Our heroine is Rachel Griffin, 13 years old, a student at Roanoke Academy for magic, in New York. She's English royalty in a new world, with classmates from all over the world. This alone puts it head

and shoulders above ****the next nearest competitor**** (which first treated America as a nonexistent land in the world of magic before turning it into a neo-puritan hellscape in a spinoff film series).

Chief among Rachel's new acquaintances is Siegfried Smith, who comes with a background of a Dickens character, and all the psychology that should come with it. (Oliver Twist is less fiction and more fantasy, orphans in the system aren't that cute.) Siggy is an acquired taste. Then there's the magical princess of magical Australia, who's another oddball.

And then we're off to the races.

The world:

The easiest way to review this is to compare it to Harry Potter. It's not fair ... to Harry Potter. Don't get me wrong, while I enjoyed the books 20 years ago, the world of Harry Potter was so narrow and confined, you never really got the sense of the larger world. What did it look like? What would it look like?

The nice thing about this is that we get the perspective of someone who lives in the world of magic, excluding the Stranger in a Strange Land effect.

That's right, unlike Rowling, who relied on the tried and true "Alice in Wonderland" variety of dropping an outsider into a new world, make them the primary narrator, and explaining it to the narrator and the reader, Jagi has managed to make a complete world, encompassing every question one might have about how things work. Jagi didn't get to taxes yet, but I almost expect it while reading.

And instead of three primary characters, excluding almost all others (let's face it, Neville Longbottom was a punching bag until he became a sword swinging badass out of nowhere), there are friends and acquaintances all over the place. There are mean girls, certainly, but nothing fits into the nice, neat little boxes that Rowling jammed her characters into. There is no one house of "obvious villainy" here.

Sure, there are plenty of ominous characters. There's a Victor von Dread, who I expect to talk in all caps about Latveria. There's a Salome Iscariot, who worried the heck out of me from the moment she was introduced. The characters are vividly drawn, and deeper than you'd expect.

The politics:

This ends up as Christian Fiction. How so? Let's start with Aslan being a character. The serial numbers are rubbed off, but you can still see the impression.

Also, everyone in this school open carries a sidearm. It comes in handy.

Content warning:

None. It's really YA. Though as someone once sneered about Narnia, "This is too good for children."

What makes this worth reading?

The short version is that this book is awesome. Lamplighter combines a lot of disparate fantasy elements into something unique and captivating.

You need to buy it and read it today.

Unknown Worlds: Tales From Beyond
edited by Stanley Schmidt and Martin Greenberg
Review by Sam Lubell
Originally in The WSFA Journal

By all rights fantasy should be the largest and most diverse type of fiction. Any fiction, any story that is not true --even those set in the real world with realistic characters -- can be called a fantasy. Even if we limit fantasy to stories that contain elements of the fantastic or the non-explainable, there is still an immense amount of territory that could go under the fantasy label. Yet most of genre fantasy, until very recently, were set in a quasi-medieval world and involved collecting the objects needed to destroy an evil dark lord. Only recently has urban fantasy, set in the present day, eclipsed medieval settings. The influence of Tolkien, bastardized into quests to collect plot coupons, dominated for too long.

But fantasy did not have to evolve that way. The anthology, *Unknown Worlds: Tales From Beyond* edited by Stanley Schmidt and Martin Greenberg contains fantasy stories of a decidedly different bent. Dating from 1939 to 1943, the magazine *Unknown Worlds* was edited by John Campbell as a sister magazine to the hard SF magazine *Astounding* (now *Analog*). He tried to find stories that applied the rules of logic and consistency to fantasy. Just as science fiction would frequently bring in one new idea or invention and then explore the consequences of it, stories in *Unknown* frequently would introduce one fantastic element and then play it for all it was worth.

For example, in H.L. Gold's "The Trouble With Water" a water gnome curses a concession station operator so that "since you hate water and those who live in it, water and those who live in it will keep away from you." The problems this causes with shaving, bathing, and running his business are detailed and then solved. In De Camp's "The Gnarly Man" an immortal Neanderthal man--who had to invent soup when his teeth wore out--is found working in a carnival and finds that modern life is more savage than any prehistoric tribe.

Henry Kuttner's hero of the "The Misguided Halo" has to cope with an angel who awarded him a halo by mistake and since all of his sins rebound to good, cannot be removed. Ironically, another story takes the direct opposite approach, Cleve Cartmill's "Hell Hath Fury" tells the story of a boy who is half-demon and so even when he tries to do good, it turns to evil. This one has a real twist as the boy tries to set things right, leading to a final confrontation with Hell and the definition of true evil. In another of Kuttner's stories, a union organizer is transformed into a gnome and has to work out a scheme to become human again, which naturally includes unionizing the other gnomes.

Other highlights include Manly Wellman's story about Edgar A. Poe's strange encounter with a Vampire, Lester Del Rey's story about what happens to the Greek God Pan after his last worshipper dies; C.L. Moore's stunning story about Lilith in the Garden of Eden and the true story of the Fall; De Camp's story about a man who jumps into parallel universes (predating the *Sliders* television program by 55 years) and shows that political savvy crosses all dimensions. There is more than one pact with the devil story (quite different) and religion pops up in stories on the afterlife. In fact, the closest thing to what today would be considered typical genre fantasy is two stories of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser by Leiber which seemed rather disappointing compared to some of the other stories. More stories verged on what today would be horror such as Robert Bloch's story of a man who wears the cloak of a real vampire on Halloween; Sturgeon's story about a swamp monster; Van Vogt's story of a witch with the identity of a dead woman; and Sturgeon's story of "The Hag Seleen" thwarted by a preschooler.

The vast majority of the tales in this big (517 page) anthology are set in the world as we know it (or

would have known it had we lived in the 1940's) with the fantasy element standing out even more from the contrast with the more familiar setting. They show some of the tremendous variety of fantasy that goes beyond dungeons and castles, trolls and kings, orcs and knights.

4HU: Alpha Contracts
by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

First, a confession. (And yes, I DO seem to be doing a lot of those lately.) When I looked at the cover art, I thought, "What the heck is going on here? What in the WORLD can the artist have been thinking! That's the worst rendering of a fat Jim Cartwright possible!"

Sigh. I was half-way through Chapter 1 before I realized that, duh, ALPHA CONTRACTS!!!! This is the ORIGINAL Cartwright (also named Jim, though), and NOT the obese-shading-to-merely-rotund Cartwright of Cartwright's Cavaliers and the other mumble mumble books in the 4HU. And the original Cartwright wasn't operating with the same burdens (see what I did there?) that the most-recent Cartwright had to struggle under, hence wasn't a Tub-O-Lard.

The artist is right; I was wrong. On with the review!

The primary focus is on the companies which became the Four Horsemen. However, the writers include small snippets from another company, the Avenging Angels, to remind us that 96 of the contracts ended in the extermination of the humans. It's a very well-done bit, and the method of the telling, which is correspondence with home, makes sure we know that it wasn't Companies who died; it was individual people, with hopes, dreams, and families.

Note: because the book deals with the main history of each of the companies separately, there is some repetition of scenes in which more than one company is involved. Feature, not a bug.

First, Cartwright's Cavaliers. Jim Cartwright is owner/operator of Cartwright's International, an independent contractor supplying security and transport in parts of the world where booms can ruin a perfectly good trip to the market. He has a number of significant employees, including Nina, a young woman of short stature who is highly proficient at making bad Enemies into good Enemies, with the .50 BMG being her ammo of choice.

We discover that Cartwright combines a love of action with a first-class business mind, and that he has started and sold numerous highly profitable companies, all of them selecting resources that no one else thought existed. He MAY have some sort of built-in early warning system, because he gets uneasy just before the aliens land, and Earth's economy is wrecked. Prior experience serves him well; alone of all the potential mercs, he understands the value of research. Seeking such, and bearing gifts/bribes, he seeks counsel from the only military officer who has a clue about fighting aliens, Col. Kuru Shirazi of the soon-to-be-extinct Iranian Guard.

And I'm not following the story further, because spoilers. Just remember--Jim Cartwright may have some pre-cog, or his genius may be extrapolating from available data, and he is a firm believer in preparedness.

Next, Asbaran Solutions, seeking to carry on the tradition of the knights who lead the Sassanid army in the closing days of the Persian Empire. They are mostly drawn from the remaining units of the Iranian

military, which has taken a SOUND beating as a result of the suicide bombing of the visiting aliens at the UN vote to adopt a global government. In response, the MinSha had turned most of Iran into slag, then raided much of what was left over for booty. In almost every case, Resistance WAS Futile, but there were a very few notable successes, hence Jim Cartwright's visit. Reading the signs, Col Kuru Shirazi led remnants away from the lethal entanglements of what was left of Iran, and also away from the jackals fighting over the corpse, and established New Persia, under civilian leadership.

This separation from the country now mostly consisting of radioactive glass solved a number of problems for those left alive, but for Shirazi, a principal benefit was that it would support the efforts of the merc group he established.

From his own experience, significantly clarified by his contact with Cartwright, Shirazi was convinced of the futility of force-on-force conflict with aliens. The few wins (which no one else had accomplished) had been achieved through tactics lumped under the term 'asymmetric warfare.' And that's the specialty Asbaran Solutions picked for their company.

Long enmity with ... (practically the rest of the world, but a few countries in particular) was a difficult obstacle to overcome, but Shirazi found he was able to unify others by their hatred of the MinSha, and by extrapolation, the entire Galactic Union. This was a solution devoutly to be desired by his comrades. Thus, from the beginning, his company was a Solution: to the problem of association with a dying, lethal country, and to the problem of the lost honor, stolen by the MinSha. It also made for a nice front for prospective clients: whatever your problem, we are the Solution.

The Winged Hussars. Lawrence Komalski was an information technology genius, and a person with great expectations. Specifically, he expected to inherit control of the family shipping business, while his less-competent cousin was sent out to pasture with some money to play with. Unexpectedly, at the reading of his grandfather's will, he discovered he had been outmaneuvered, and his cousin got the company. The beating his cousin also got at Lawrence's hands resulted in him being locked up in Warsaw's Rakowiecka Prison. (Note: this prison is REAL, and HIGHLY worth the time it will take you to google it. In fact, here's a link I followed.) His cousin runs the company into the ground, and springs Lawrence from the slammer to fix things. This Lawrence does. One of his earliest changes allowed his merchant ship officers to receive military training, which turned out to be a critical choice.

No number of beatings could introduce good sense to his cousin, who spent all of the resources on the company buying what he thought was a space-faring cargo ship; it turned out to be a worn-out warship. He then compounded that error by signing a merc contract, to serve as an armed escort for an assault group. If the contract is fulfilled, it will redeem Komalski Shipping; failure will bankrupt it. And the contract stipulates that Lawrence has to be a part of the crew. The job goes badly.

Look, you KNOW it HAS to work out in the end, right? Because Winged Hussars are part of the Four Horsemen? You MUST read this to find out how Lawrence pulls THAT off.

The Golden Horde. If ever I read in prior books in the series that the Golden Horde merc company emerged from a drug-smuggling background, I neglected to store that fact in memory. What I retained is that the leader, Madame Enkh, was ruthless, and that she had prescient dreams, and that the Horde traced their legacy to Mongol origins. And that family ties are very, very important.

Drug trafficking IS a high profit-margin business, but it's also a high-risk business as well. The cops can be bought off, in many cases, but the competition never stops. And the discovery that one of their

competitors has access to alien hardware makes current business practices untenable for the Gray Wolves, the precursors to the Horde. Even worse, the casualties they suffer are family members, and it takes a LONG time to turn a zygote into a team member.

It's tough enough to get arms, but the disintegrating corpse of the former Soviet Union provides opportunities for scavengers, willing to take some risks. Where do you get subordinates who will be bonded like family, though? There must be SOME way...

Prose Bono

It's Life, According to Plan
by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Nothing goes according to plan. I think we've all had a book we were reading, where things went too smoothly, and you either went 'meh.' Or you started side-eyeing the plot wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. I mean – I also do this in real life. When things are going great, I start wondering what's going to break. Usually the most expensive thing, but sometimes just the most inconvenient. And for variety, sometimes it's me. I break. And then it gets interesting.

As a pantsner, it doesn't feel completely disingenuous to write about a character's plans. Even though I'm fairly sure that like my own, they are going to take a wrong turn, more than likely before much if any of it is executed. And unlike in my life, the characters don't break themselves. Often. Well, not usually. Mostly, there's drama and conflict. In my life? It's stress and lack of sleep, and honestly that's not exciting to write about. No more than a description of the character's poor choices in food and hydration leading to them being miserable and achy would be.

When I'm writing, I usually have a plan for the story in my mind. So I write out the character's plan, naively thinking that I'll be able to slip in some twists and turns... and then, what comes out is not what I planned. Usually, it's better. Sometimes, it's not. That's when editing has to happen, and I don't like editing.

Writing is full of surprises, which is part of why I enjoy it so much. Like reading, at least when I'm reading a good book, I can't quite see what's around the corner. Until I read it, or write it. Not always the case – there are any number of books where I could see the denouement coming a mile away.

Funny how I would love to have that in real life, but in a book it makes for boring, flat, lifeless and probably going to wander off in search of a better story.

Wright's Writing Corner: The Logic of Character Revisited
L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SuperversiveSF.com>

Mephisto Prospero

"Don't you recognize me?"

I love this subject. So, I thought I would discuss it again.

The logic of character is the thing that makes it so that characters come alive, the thing that makes it so that quality A and quality B overlap to make Character C who not only seems vivid and 3-Dimensional, but also begins to act on his own.

What do I mean by “act on his own”? Surely, characters do not write themselves without writers!

Well, no, they do not appear on the page without a writer to type, but they do dictate their own actions as the writer writes, so that the process of writing is almost like taking dictation. The character has so much integrity—qua character—that his reactions or next actions are obvious without the author having to decide what they will be.

Not all characters come alive. Two dimensional characters never come alive. The writer has to put them on the page through painstaking care, imitating what happens when characters are alive and hoping that the lack of depth will not be obvious to the reader.

This type of organic character generation is visible more to the writer than the reader. I think readers pick up on it when a character really comes together, but I have seen it faked...where the character never really came alive for the writer, but at least some readers read into him whatever is missing.

It is much more obvious in roleplaying where, once a character comes alive, it tends to differ dramatically from the person portraying it...to the point that the character generator (moderator or player) can be as surprised as anyone else at what they say. Some characters even make the jump from one moderator to another and stay alive and vibrant.

(Actors probably could tell us even more about this process, but there are none here at the moment.)

What is interesting is that, while I have spoken in the past about how contrasting characteristics help characters spring into 3-D, it is body gestures that really seem to bring them alive to me. The characters I really get a grip on, I tend to have a particular way to stand, or hold my head, or some other thing that goes along with the character. Often, I do not even notice it unless I think about it.

And it is not just me. There is a character that I particularly like. I like him in the book he comes from. I like him when John stuck him in a roleplaying game. I like him when I portray him in games. I like him when other people portray him. Recently, I noticed that I had picked him out a couple of times the moment he came onstage, even when he was being portrayed by a less skillful moderator and was using a code name. It was his body language and tone of voice that I recognized...and the character was vibrant enough that these qualities made the jump from the original book to those acting the part.

That strikes me as a bit odd. How can it be?

How can such a thing be? How does this character have such integrity across mediums that I can recognize him at a glance, even when the person portraying him is not a particularly good actor?

Years ago, John and I were in an accident. While John was recovering at the hospital, my girlfriend got him a brightly colored, stuffed parrot from the hospital store. We picked it because it was colored a bit like a phoenix. John named it Ixion, after a phoenix we liked.

Ixion took on a life of his own. He talked with a kind of Bronx-like bird accent (a bit like Iago the parrot from Disney, though Iago came many years later) and often talked about “Flying!” his favorite ac-

tivity (usually accompanied by someone throwing him across the room.) We jokingly called him our son and used to take him everywhere, even making him wear a seat belt in the car. (To this day, we tell the kids that Ixion is their elder brother. Orville bit a bit of his nose off when he was little, but other than that, he's still "flying!")

The funny thing about Ixion was that not only did he maintain his personality between John and me, but nearly everyone who visited also got in on the act. Guests and friends would do the funny bird voice and make comments as Ixion. Even my mom got in on the act. The uniformity of character between speakers always amused me.

What is most amazing to me is that this phenomenon exists at all. We did not have to live in a universe where, if you correctly "caught" a character, it came to life and seemed to make its own decisions. In fact, the very idea is rather bizarre.

Personally, it makes me wonder about us human beings and how our personalities are put together.

I know people who are mentally ill who adopt strange ideas or behaviors, and I cannot help but wonder if they have been taken in by the logic of character. A person playing a character in a game can get really caught up in a good 3-D character. Is this what has happened to some of these folks, only they are not quite with it and think this alternate character is them? It certainly seems that way. If they understood the phenomena—that it was something writers, roleplayers, and actors can put on and take off—would they be less taken in?

If so, what does it say about the personality we think of as "us"? Is that a character, too? If so, what would happen to us if we stopped assuming it?

Inquiring minds want to know.

The real issue, though, is that: logic of character is fun. It is delightful to watch a character come to life, in your hands or in another's, and bring clarity and charm to the page where he presides. It makes the process of writing as much fun for the author as the process of reading is for the reader. It makes it worth the effort to keep rewriting until you find the approach that does make your characters spring to life.

Okay, that was not really about how to write, so much as a commentary on the process of writing. Sorry about that. Still... a fun topic.

One semi-related comment before I close. Two people have now claimed that Mephisto in the Prospero Daughter's series was based on them. This amuses me because I wrote Mephisto exactly the way John portrayed him in the roleplaying game where I first encountered him. I did not change him one whit. (I did alter some of the Prosperos a bit, fitting them better into my story. The original Theo was not an old man, for instance. But not Mephisto.) I did not have to. He was so 3-Dimensional that he sprang to life without any effort on my part, so much so, apparently, that some people out there think he is them.

Not sure what to make of that.

Star Trek, Respectable Characters
and What Makes a Story Worth Reading

By Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

(Author's note: I didn't make this meme. I'd credit the appropriate party if I had any clue who they were.)

Once upon a time I was hanging out with a pretty cool female who suggested that I read Twilight by Stephanie Meyer. I mean, the premise sounded okay. There was this girl, and she had a thing for this vampire and maybe a werewolf. I like vampires and werewolves. Who doesn't? I mean, I've loved Anne Rice's The Vampire Chronicles since I found out they existed. Granted, that wasn't until I bought Interview With the Vampire on VHS, but that's because none of my friends told me about it. Werewolves rock too, whether we're talking about Michael J. Fox in Teen Wolf or the super evil archetypal werewolves in the Dungeons and Dragons. Hell, even the Worgen in World of Warcraft would be pretty cool if they weren't Alliance scum.

So, I bet her that if she read Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, I would read Twilight. She read, I believe, the first five Potter books. My copy of Twilight went against the wall at high velocity about one hundred forty pages in. The last I heard about it was that my niece was enjoying it. She was about thirteen at the time. And that's about right for that character. Stephanie Meyer got lucky that her books hit when they did. The Harry Potter Generation had just reached the age where they would be reading Young Adult books instead of children's fiction. There was a huge niche and she exploited it. That led to literally millions of sales. Here's the thing though: Bella is not the type of character that most people would find entertaining.

The reason that Bella fails as a character outside of a narrow niche is because she's not the type of person that most people respect. Seriously. Bella is not a hardworking person doing her best to overcome a problem. She's a whiny little brat who acts like a victim and bases her self-worth on what some boy thinks of her. There's just nothing here that would interest most readers, even if Meyer did manage to find a large following among a specific group.

What makes a story worth reading is the relationship between the characters and the audience. Readers like to think of themselves as being admirable people. They identify with things that they see in a character that they believe about themselves. Notice that I'm not talking about race or gender because, except in the case of an extremely bigoted person, they're irrelevant. Seriously. The only thing that keeps a white person from identifying with a black person, or a black person from identifying with a white one, is hatred. We're all people and, while culture may make a difference in how things are obtained and expressed, at the end of the day we all want basically the same things. Let's talk about a few Trek characters and why they work:

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine is a series that I enjoyed. I always admired Benjamin Sisko, the commander of Deep Space Nine and captain of the Defiant. Sisko is a man who, in many ways, finds himself in situations that he would rather not have to deal with. He never asked to be the Emissary of a religion he doesn't even believe in. His wife was killed in combat and he never wanted that. He loses his station to the enemy at one point. Benjamin Sisko is a man who, at any given moment, could have given it all up, gotten a prescription for Fuckitol and just walked out of Starfleet. He didn't. He did his job. He got through whatever life threw at him. I'm not saying it was easy. The fact of the matter is that it wasn't.

He did what he needed to do. Anyone who knows the series knows the episode, "In the Pale Moonlight". (Granted, some don't like it but it's one of my favorites.) The actions Sisko takes in that episode, including the sabotage of a Romulan ship and all of its crew and passengers by proxy, are not exactly admirable. The fact of the matter is that they work. The Romulans join the war effort. It's not polite. It's not easy. He just does it. I've been there. Sometimes in life you have to do things that make you uncomfortable so that you can do what needs to be done. I respect that. I gained a lot of respect for Sisko because he did it, even if what he did wasn't really morally right. It was also probably illegal, but war is war and law only has limited relevance in a wartime environment.

The list of admirable characters in Deep Space Nine is a long one:

Worf, who lives an honorable life and refuses to abandon his heritage.

Kira, who lives a life of religious devotion and fights for what she believes no matter the cost.

Worf, who lives up to a different code as best he can and manages to employ many and entertain countless others.

Bashir, the medic who is not afraid to wield a phaser when he needs to.

Jake, who grew up surrounded by expectations and did his own thing anyway. That took guts.

Nog, who did the same thing, albeit with different expectations and outcome.

Keiko, the military spouse struggling to help her husband with his career and still progress in hers, all while taking care of the kids.

Pretty much the only one of the main cast that I didn't like was Rom because he was just a goofy dumbass. I'm sure there was some redeeming characteristic there, but I'm not sure what it was. He was used by everybody, fell for everyone and ended up as Grand Nagus. I don't get that dude at all.

Then there is Captain Janeway from Star Trek: Voyager. She ends up on the other side of the galaxy, seventy-plus years from home. Then she buckles up her chin strap and gets it done. She ends up in charge of two trashed ships and has to combine their crews to make one that will work. She conducts diplomacy with alien races that no one has ever heard of. She maintains her interest in scientific exploration. She builds relationships with and between the members of her crew. She never gives up and she gets them all home. Catherine Janeway FTW! (Oh, and who didn't want to be successful author/hologram writer and all-around scamp Tom Paris?)

I was a nerd growing up. I took a lot of shit from a lot of people because I was intelligent and let it show. I heard a lot from parents and other family members about not worrying about it. They all told me about how I shouldn't worry about it. I always heard about how people were jealous. You know who my earliest idol was? Do you know who I wanted to be? Spock. Why? He was smart as hell and in complete control of his emotions. He would've never felt the pain. And my God was that guy smart. I've watched a lot of shows and movies. I've read a ton of books. I have never, ever wanted to be someone so badly in my life.

I could go on but I won't. There are so many more characters: Uhura, McCoy, Sulu. Data, Picard, Riker, Troi, both Crushers (at least if you were a couple years younger than Wesley the first time through.) DS9 I've covered pretty well. Chakotay, Kim, Torres. Archer, Trip. I haven't seen Discovery. My Wi-Fi sucks and I don't want to pay for the streaming service. I'm sure there are some good ones there too.

Those are all characters that fans can identify with. They're all characters with admirable characteristics that make them fun to watch. They're not just people you can identify with, they're people you want to identify with. That's what makes them fun. That's what makes people spend their money.

Interviews

An Interview with Roy Griffis by Tamara Wilhite

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

Roy "Griff" Griffis wrote the "By the Hands of Men" series. He also wrote "The Lonesome George Chronicles"; that was originally published by Liberty Island Press, the publishing house associated with Liberty Island Magazine. And I had the opportunity to interview him.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to write the alternate history post-apocalyptic thriller, "The Lonesome George Chronicles"?

Roy Griffis: Wow, that's a long story. Shortest version is: During the post 9/11 years of the Bush Presidency, I became aware of, shall we say, a certain slant to reporting by major media voices about American progress in Iraq. I want to put together a non-fiction account of what America was really accomplishing in that newly freed region. I contacted the military authorities, who were pretty excited about the project, until someone asked the awkward question "Say, what are your press credentials?"

When I had to answer honestly "None, I'm just this guy who wants to tell an accurate story of what's happening over there," they stopped taking my emails. Which is understandable...they'd been dogged by the press so much; they just couldn't take the chance I was some proto-Wokenista out to pile on with the character assassination and eliding of the truth

Alas, that left me with all this research (notebooks full) that I couldn't use. One day, my fiction-writing brain was musing, as I did, about the state of the world then, and a voice in my head said, "Sure must be lonesome to be George."

In the strange way these things happen, something about that phrase captured my attention, and I could begin to see an entire scene where someone might say it. And that fictive world I envisioned just so happened to be a place where I could share my thoughts about the folks who say they want to kill us and destroy our nation, and the folks inside this nation who don't believe the folks who maintain their most treasured goal is to grind America under their sandals.

I'd never written a novel before. But once I started telling the story of why someone might be called "Lonesome George," the words (and characters and conflicts and causes) just kept showing up.

Tamara Wilhite: And how would you describe the series?

Roy Griffis: The series imagines what might have happened to the America, and the world, if Al Qaeda had gotten their act together and staged a series of coordinated attacks on US in August 2008. The novels follow everyone from a former insurance adjuster turned reluctant guerrilla fighter to an aide to a Congresswoman, along with a famous actor, a newspaper columnist, and the last elected President of the United States, as they variously deal with the social, civil, and political fracturing of our nation. And, since as goes America, so goes much of the globe, things get really sketchy in other countries, too. (Coincidentally, it was originally published by the fine folks at Liberty Island Media.)

Tamara Wilhite: What is the "By the Hands of Men" about?

Roy Griffis: In World War One, a young nurse meets a wounded English Lieutenant a mile from the front lines, and to their surprise, they discover love in the harshest of soils before fate and human duplicity rips them apart. The memory of their brief time together stays with them even as they cross a world wracked by revolution and betrayal. At its heart, though, it's about how the hand of men can make a heaven or a hell of life here on earth. The story covers two decades and multiple continents in a saga of duty, honour, love, and redemption.

Tamara Wilhite: What kind of research did you have to do for the series?

Roy Griffis: Lots, considering I was talking about things I've never done and places I've never been (I'm not going to spend a majority of my novel-writing career setting books in Maine, for instance). I started with basic books about the Great War, and often one passing reference might send me off in another direction entirely. I might read an entire book and come away with one "telling detail" that I'd use to lend a sense of verisimilitude to the setting. I read non-fiction, memoirs, and even reprinted pamphlets, such as one from 1919 when a bunch of starry-eyed Englishmen travelled to Russia to cheer on the new Worker's Paradise. And that kind of research continued through the entire series.

Tamara Wilhite: I believe the series it is up to six books. Will there be a seventh? Otherwise, what are you working on now?

Roy Griffis: When I started the series, I knew the beginning and the end, and I thought it might be a single book. I was mistaken.

Yes, I'll start work on Book Seven ("Taking the King's Coin") probably toward the end of July. Right now, I'm working on a new comic fantasy series called "Cthulhu, Amalgamated." The first book is called The Thing from HR. The blurb for goes like this:

What's a nice Shoggoth like him doing in a dump like this?

Narg was content working as a DS-10 in HR. Sure, he was related to one of the Elder Gods, but a little nepotism never hurt any Thing. His life was just wailing and gibbering, right up until his Uncle needed a small favor from his nephew. All Narg had to do was go down among the humans...and pretend to be one of them.

I just finished Book Two (The Auditors of Doom) in that series, and I'll be starting Book Three (The Breakroom of a Thousand Nightmares) in the next couple of days. I'll start releasing those at the end of May, about a month apart. When the last Cthulhu, Amalgamated novel is complete, then I'll start on BTHOM7.

Tamara Wilhite: May I ask if you have a day job? Alternatively, what is your professional background?

Roy Griffis: There are two truths I've learned as a writer. One is: "Don't quit your day job." I do have a corporate job, which helps keep me from being a burden on society. I do get up at 4am Monday – Friday to work on my novels for a couple of hours before starting my responsible adult employment.

The other thing I learned as a writer is "Seat of the pants to the seat of the chair." You have to sit down and write. Not talk about it, not plan, not dream about it, but flippin' write.

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

Roy Griffis: If you have a dream, go for it. Much of how our lives turn out is determined by our choices. As one SEAL leader is fond of saying “If it’s important to you, you’ll find a way. If it’s not, you’ll find an excuse.”

So find a way.

Tamara Wilhite: Thank you for speaking with me.

**An Interview by Tamara Wilhite
with Richard Paolinelli, Author of “Galen’s Way”**
Tamara Wilhite also appears at <http://LibertyIslandmag.com>

Richard Paolinelli is a science fiction writer. Richard Paolinelli’s novel “Escaping Infinity” was a Dragon Award finalist for best science fiction novel. I had the opportunity to interview him after his latest novel “Galen’s Way” came out.

Tamara Wilhite: In your bio, you mention your first science fiction credit being the Elite Comics sci-fi/fantasy series, “Seadragon”. What exactly was your role in that project?

Richard Paolinelli: I was the lead writer, tasked to transition “Seadragon” from the eight-page story that ran in the back of several Epsilon Wave comic books to his own full 24-page comic. I wound up writing the first two of the six books that were produced. Ironically enough, I recently got the green light to make a novelization of “Seadragon” from the surviving co-creator Tom Floyd and I hope to have that book out by the end of the year.

Tamara Wilhite: What led you to retire from sports writing in 2010?

Richard Paolinelli: Working until midnight every night was getting old. Plus, I felt I had done everything I’d wanted to do as a sportswriter. So, when newspapers starting cutting staff – beginning with us old-timers who commanded higher wages than the kids coming out of school – I read the writing on the wall, spent a couple of years working as an online editor for a web-only paper in Southern California, and finally made the move back to full-time fiction writing in 2013.

Tamara Wilhite: You’ve been busy with a steady stream of science fiction novels and short stories. How many stories did you contribute to the Planetary Anthology series?

Richard Paolinelli: I wound up in eight of the 11 books, with Mercury, Venus and Mars being the three I did not get into. This makes me even more impressed with Bokerah Brumley, who is in all 11, and A.M. Freeman, who was in 10 (Neptune was the only miss for her). I don’t mind finishing third behind these very talented authors at all.

Tamara Wilhite: Your latest novel is “Galen’s Way”? What is that about?

Richard Paolinelli: It’s a space opera set in John C. Wright’s Starquest universe and, by a quirk of fate, it is actually the first Starquest novel to be released. John has a trilogy coming out soon and I know two other authors are also writing in this new universe.

My story is set in the 4th age of Starquest (John is writing in the 12th, millions of years after my stories), when the human race has forgotten it originated in a different galaxy as well as the Galactic Knights that held the line against a Dark Force long enough for them to escape oblivion. It follows the exploits of the Andromeda Galaxy's most feared mercenary, Galen Dwyn, who might just be descended from one of those long-lost Knights. Galen has been hired by an emissary of the King of the planet Salacia to recover the King's kidnapped daughter. She is being held on a fortress planet, impervious to an all-out assault by the Salacian military, but possibly vulnerable to a man with Galen's cunning and skill. That he will also be able to settle an old score of his own with the kidnapper only sweetens the pot for Galen.

But, when he arrives on the planet, he discovers not one kidnapped Princess, but four. He also discovers he is right in the middle of an attempt to overthrow the Chancellor of the Interplanetary Alliance by the very man whose daughter he was hired to rescue. A rescue, that is instead a trap designed to kill the four Princesses and hang their deaths on Galen and the Chancellor.

Now, Galen must use all of his cunning to keep himself and the Princess Rhiannon alive long enough in a galaxy filled with people looking to kill them both to stop the birth of an evil Empire. And he will do so the only way he knows how – Galen's Way.

Tamara Wilhite: And how does it relate to other books or stories you've published?

Richard Paolinelli: It really doesn't, to be honest. I've never written Space Opera before and certainly nothing else that sets up what is – so far – an eight-book series when you factor in the pre-migration stories I have planned within the Starquest universe. Several will take place before humanity is transplanted from the Milky Way Galaxy to the Andromeda Galaxy. Even the Del Rio series started out as a three-book series with my decision to expand to a fourth – and likely final – book only being made recently.

But the one thing it does have in common with the others is my approach to the storytelling: That the reader will finish the book well entertained by a well-plotted out story with characters they connect with and are happy they invested the time and money they did in reading it.

Tamara Wilhite: What else are you working on?

Richard Paolinelli: In addition to the "Seadragon" novel, I have an Alt-History project based on the Biblical character Cain that I started some time ago and set aside while trying to work out how exactly I wanted to end it. Then there is the long-called-for sequel to *Escaping Infinity* that I finally figured out how to write.

Provided I have time, I have the fourth book in the Del Rio political-thriller series to finish up before the end of the year as well. Then I plan on spending 2022 and 2023 writing the other seven novels I have plotted out in the Starquest Universe.

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

Richard Paolinelli: First, thank you for interviewing me again. And if your readers would like to keep up with what I am up to they can do so at www.scifiscribe.com and get access to some exclusive giveaways and content – including some new short stories and a few others no longer in print – here: <https://www.buymeacoffee.com/rdpaolinelli>

~ **Finis** ~