

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

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Editorial

Under modern conditions, it should not be surprising that mundane-world politics rears its ugly head in fandom. For this issue, we have a reasonably solid policy. Political opinions of reviewers are off-limits here, not to be discussed. Political opinions seen within books, because there is politics within books, are fair game, but comparisons with real-world politics are in general not suitable. The review discusses the book, not the author, so discussions of the author's politics 'You should dislike this book because the author is not a monarchist' are not suitable for publication here. The last rule must be somewhat flexible; note the recent review of a book by Rebecca Roanhorse, in which the book and aspects of the author's life were inseparable.

And remember, opinions of characters may not be opinions of the author. The hero of the book may be the last High Priest of Huitzilopochtli, thrust by magic into the 21st century and desperately trying to stage an authentic god-feeding ceremony before the sun goes out, but that does not mean that the author is plotting to cut out your heart.



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Fiction

A Desolation Called Peace by Arkady Martine

Review by Samuel Lubell

A Desolation Called Peace is the sequel to *A Memory Called Empire* which won last year's Hugo Award and the Baltimore Science Fiction Society's Compton Crook Award for best first novel. Arkady Martine, AKA Dr. AnnaLinden Weller, is a city planner with a Ph.D. in Byzantine history, which naturally inclines her to complex plots and well-realized backgrounds.

If *A Memory Called Empire* was a novel of setting, that of the richly described culture of the Teixcalaan Empire, *A Desolation Called Peace* is much more a novel of character or, more accurately characters. Three Seagrass, who had served as Ambassador Mahit Dzmare's aide/liaison in the first book, is now a major viewpoint character along with Mahit; Eight Antidote, the 11-year-old heir to the Empire; and new character Nine Hibiscus, yaotlek (commander of fleet commanders) in charge of the fleet fighting the aliens. Unlike other books with multiple viewpoint characters, Martine does not separate different viewpoints into separate chapters but jumps from character to character within each chapter.

The book opens with Nine Hibiscus sending a scout ship to find out more about the mysterious aliens who attack and then vanish without any demands or even communications. No one even knows what they look like. When the scout returns with an alien corpse and a recording of the aliens' communications, which is painful to human ears, Nine Hibiscus sends a message to the Information Ministry asking for a linguist who can speak to aliens.

The Third Undersecretary to the Minister of Information, Three Seagrass, receives that message. Already feeling trapped and bored in her administrative position, she uses her discretionary authority over assigning personnel to assign herself to this job as Envoy-at-Large. She plans to use this position to reunite with Mahit Dzmare, since the barbarian is the closest thing to an alien she knows.

Meanwhile, Mahit Dzmare, the heroine of *A Memory Called Empire*, has returned to Lsel Station, whose efforts to remain independent of the Empire mirror her own personal struggle against assimilating into its culture. Still ambassador, despite her quasi-disgrace, Mahit finds herself learning how to adapt to having both old and young versions of Yskandr as voices in her mind due to the secret and very unauthorized implantation of a second imago, a device that carries another's memories and personality. She is also trying to learn whether Councilor Amnardbat deliberately sabotaged her imago. When Amnardbat demands she update her imago for a future successor, Mahit is suspicious that Amnardbat wants to find out why the sabotage failed and worried about what will happen when the government learns she has replaced her imago. So when Three Seagrass arrives and invites her to join the communications effort, she jumps at the chance.

Back in the empire, 11-year old Eight Antidote, a 90% clone of the previous emperor and the heir to the current one, is learning what a future emperor needs to know. He frequently visits the Department of War to learn how battles are fought. The emperor is only half joking when she calls Eight Antidote her little spy. In the course of the book he really does discover secrets and has to decide whether he can take action now, not just prepare for his future reign.

Like the first book, *A Desolation Called Peace* has a lot going on in the background which makes for a

slow start. But once the Three Seagrass and Mahit join the fleet and begin to work on translating the alien language (which they begin to do unrealistically quickly) the pace speeds up. And the hints of an attraction between Three Seagrass and Mahit become a full-bloom sexual relationship that still does not resolve their interpersonal problems.

A Desolation Called Peace lacks the mystery that drove the first book. Instead, there is an overall theme of communications, between humans and aliens, empire and barbarians, and Three Seagrass and Mahit.

I found this book to be very good, but not quite as good as *A Memory Called Empire*. I felt the alien plotline was resolved too quickly and too easily considering the lack of common ground between human and alien. Also what the author intended to be a major surprise about the aliens' nature is too easily predicted. And I find it very difficult to believe an 11-year old, even the clone of a previous empire and the heir to the current one, could do what *Eight Antidote* does at the end (and not get into trouble for it). However, these are minor quibbles in an otherwise excellent book.

This novel also feels like the second book of a trilogy even though I have not heard if Arkady Martine plans to write a third one immediately. *A Desolation Called Peace* resolved the alien plotline but did not settle the relationship between Three Seagrass and Mahit. And there are still questions about Mahit and the government of Lsel Station.

Readers who loved *A Memory Called Empire*, and there must be many considering the awards it won, will love *A Desolation Called Peace*. I highly recommend it to all readers on the understanding that they must read *A Memory Called Empire* first.

A Hymn Before Battle by John Ringo

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Every once in awhile you stumble across a new author. If you're lucky that author can lead you to new authors. Once upon a time, that's what happened to me. One of my co-workers would NOT. SHUT. UP. about this David Weber guy and his Honor Harrington series. It finally got to the point where my only option left was to either read the book or fight the co-worker and I needed my job. I bought *On Basilisk Station*. After reading the entire Honor Harrington catalog as it existed at the time, I switched over to the Prince Roger series. That was when I became aware of an author named John Ringo. Soon after, I rushed over to Barnes and Noble and picked up *There Will be Dragons* and *A Hymn Before Battle*. Both began a series. The subject of today's review is *A Hymn Before Battle*

I've already warned you that I'm a fanboy. It should come as no surprise that I have read *A Hymn Before Battle* many times, most recently ending last night. This is a work of fiction I have enjoyed way too much. *A Hymn Before Battle* is precisely the kind of story I've always loved. Speaking as a man with a history degree, whose passion has always been war and politics (and yes, I am aware that they are one and the same) I love the way Ringo wrote this book.

A Hymn Before Battle is the classic mix of war and politics. I don't want to spoil the whole series, but once you've read what comes next it becomes pretty obvious how Ringo is building the future of his universe. The political maneuvering leads to the fighting, which...well... read the book. The two mesh together so effectively that at times it can be hard to tell which is which. Oddly enough, that's how the

real world works as well.

A Hymn Before Battle (and the Legacy of the Aldenata series which follows it) is the Science Fiction equivalent of epic fantasy. The stakes are huge. The overlords are corrupt. The technology is effectively magical in the “any technology that is advanced enough will seem magical” sense. The enemy is coming and they are relentless. The crisis is existential. Only our heroes can stop it. And Mike O'Neal is a bad man and he's coming for his enemies.

O'Neal is a man on a mission. I mean that both in the literal sense (He's a member of the military who gets sent on a mission) and the metaphoric sense. He won't stop. He continues on when, by all rights, he could just lay there and die. He wouldn't do it. He is faced with a commanding officer who is a complete piece of trash. He could in good conscience let nature take its course. He won't. About the only thing he tries to weasel out of is promotion from enlisted man to officer. Even that he accepts, although he doesn't really like the idea.

Some authors just excel at certain things. David Weber writes the best naval battle, whether it's a wet navy or a space navy. David Brin constructed a future society that was so twisted yet realistic that it still gives me the creeps. Tom Kratman can mix his story with moral and political lessons and keep it amazingly entertaining. Harry Turtledove can create a cast of ellebenty bajillion and tie it together while switching back and forth between varying points of view better than anyone else alive. George Lucas can tell a story and use it to sell things like no one else. John Ringo is the king of asskickery.

Seriously, if you ever want to learn how to write a straight up ass-whooping ask Ringo. I mean, you may have to lose half the troops in your novel in order to rout the unroutable enemy, but who cares. When “boom” comes to “bang” comes to “Ooooooh... that sounds like it hurt... a lot” look to this dude as your exemplar. I'd like to buy Ringo a drink and try to figure out how his mind works when he's writing this stuff. Seriously. It's not just the battle tactics themselves. It's that he can come up with solutions to problems that no one would seriously consider until the history of the battle was almost argued out two hundred years later but he drops them into his story contemporary with the battle. It's not standard but it makes sense, and it works. It's really stinking cool too.

Ok, so the characters are pretty awesome as well. Not just Mike. His unit, his wife, the general he serves under all work. They live and breathe. I want to sit down and have coffee with some of them. Others I'd like to slap. At least one group has me twisted around to the point where I don't know if I want to shake all of their hands or put them all in the stockade. Actually, both might work. And it's not just the good guys.

Ringo writes an alien race that makes sense. It takes a bit before we get a look at things from their point of view, but he makes their motivations plain. This is not the look into the society of the Posleen that Yellow Eyes, which he co-authored with Tom Kratman does. It does, however, give a good if somewhat brief, look into the mind of the enemy.

All in all, A Hymn Before Battle is a masterwork. It sets up a magnificent universe, but it works as a standalone. Granted, that may have something to do with the fact that it is the first book. It grips the mind and imagination. If you get lost in this one you may very well not want to find your way back out. It will have you cheering. It will tempt you to cry. It shows humanity at its best, its worst and its most opportunistic. A Hymn Before Battle is a book that is not to be missed. If, however, you don't read it, don't blame me.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Antimatter Explosions

A Pillar of Fire by Night by Tom Kratman
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

In the acknowledgments, Kratman says this is the next to the last book in the series. I'm hoping that he is not designating "Terra Nova: The Wars of Liberation" as the last book; I've read it, in the pre-published form (it will be released in August), and while it's wonderful, it's not the last chapter that I want to read in the Carrerverse. At any rate, he promises we won't have to wait long.

I'm going to write this with those readers in mind who are familiar with the background. If you are reading this review, and this is the first book in the series for you, then please STOP! Go get "A Desert Called Peace," and read that first, and then follow the series along. If you are trapped on a cross-continental bus ride, and "A Pillar of Fire by Night" is all that was available at the news-stand, then you are STILL going to get some enjoyment from the action, and you MIGHT be able to guess some of the back-story of the main characters, but I really do NOT advise this route.

Over the course of the first books, the kind and restrained gentleman known as Patricio Carrera has done all that is within his power to make sure that he does not have an enemy in the world. Or in space. Or on Earth. Admittedly, in the majority of cases, that much-to-be-desired outcome has involved abrupt environmental disruptions for those with hostile intent. In some cases, direct action, in the form of high-speed projectiles, led to the end of hostilities, although at least one individual was persuaded to cease belligerent status by repeated applications of blunt force trauma. At the other end of the spectrum, under very, very special circumstances indeed, tiny bits of matter were induced to rapidly encounter other tiny bits of matter, and so on, until some small fragments were freed from the limits of matter and enjoyed a brief journey as pure energy. In that case, not only the direct enemies of Carrera experienced a rapid cessation of their implacable hatred, but their friends, neighbors, and all of their family members did so as well.

However, in some cases, the conflict was resolved through mutual realization of self-interest, and those who had been under orders to render Patricio hors de combat recognized the honor and mercy he showed to them, when he could have easily utilized Plan A (see above paragraph). It has always been a characteristic of Patricio Carrera that he valued an honorable enemy and strove to convert them to honored friends. While I expect that the title is likely derived from an event/series of events toward the end of the story, I believe I could make the case that Carrera's conduct in warfare was itself, figuratively speaking, 'a pillar of fire by night.' His way of doing war was recognizable by the results, but also by the methods; and, just as a light draws the moth, so Carrera's reputation as a fair and just opponent drew those enemies who realized that resistance beyond the point of possible victory was only going to leave them unable to enjoy another evening under the stars, and that they would receive honorable treatment. For these, instead of always fleeing the pillar of light in fear, at the end, they could approach it in the confident assurance that they would be welcomed and cared for.

Despite having proven his character and his ability on repeated occasions, at the beginning of this book, we find Carrera and his forces in what seems to be an untenable position. All of the forces of the Tauran Union have more-or-less agreed to combine their forces and have an overwhelming advantage in equipment and manpower. Moreover, the person placed in command of the combat units, Bertrand Janier, has had all of his arrogance trodden out of him by repeatedly coming out on the losing side with Carrera, so he is not likely to engage in foolish wastage of the troops under his command.

Besides the massive air and land forces of the Tauran units, Carrera has blundered into drawing the last

major power on Terra Nova, the Zhong, who have presented an overwhelming sea force, and have landed troops on one of the Balboan islands.

In the face of the overwhelming forces, Carrera show every sign of disintegrating, just as he did when his first wife was killed in the terror attack that initiated the conflict.

There are (at least) two more significant aspects to this installment, but I stop here, so as not to venture into spoiler territory.

But here's a closing thought, for all of us: would a rebellion have taken place, if Patricio's wife and children had gone to a different location on The Day when the airships crashed into the towers? It's a sure bet that the powers on United Earth would have continued their policies toward Terra Nova, as well as toward their own people. In addition, it was those policies that encouraged the governments on Terra Nova to imitate them. In effect, the politics on Old Earth and Terra Nova represented ONE point of view; the only difference was that the effects of programs initiated by the power elite had more time on Old Earth to manifest. Terra Nova was moving toward the same end.

If this is the case, then there is NO mechanism for change in either Old Earth or Terra Nova. The power elite controls everything, and resistance = death. In order for a revolution to take place, someone HAS to get pushed out of the system. That's what happened to Patricio Carrera.

Consider, then: what happens if Carrera endures the minor limits, and lives a full life, dandling great-grand-children on his knee? Does the entire system disintegrate, for a lack of barbarians at the gates?

It's something to think about.

The Best of Walter Jon Williams Reviewed by Samuel Lubell Originally in SFRevu.com

Some writers become superstars from their first book. Others quietly produce book after book of excellent, sometimes even superior, work without gaining the same attention. The latter is true of Walter Jon Williams. He is probably best known for the cyberpunk novels he did early in his career (such as *Hardwired*), his science fantasy hybrid *Metropolitan*, and for his *Dread Empire's Fall* space opera about the decline of an interstellar empire. But as the Introduction by Daniel Abraham makes clear, Williams' novels have a wide range, to the detriment of his branding. He has written everything from 19th century sea stories to comedies of manners to *Wildcards* superheroes to high fantasy to near-future to disaster novels. He has also written for television and games. What his works have in common is their strong literary craft and interesting characters.

The Best of Walter Jon Williams has 600 pages and some 200,000 words of his novellas (11 novellas and one short story). All of them are well worth your time and show that a master of the craft of writing does not need bloated 800 page novels to create a convincing background, fascinating characters, and a compelling plot.

“Daddy’s World” shows what it might be like to grow up in a completely Virtual Reality setting and how a parent’s love can turn into obsession. It won the Nebula award.

“The Golden Age” is a fun romp with larger than life superheroes and villains set in a tall tale 1849 California gold rush setting as a gold miner turned pirate, the Commodore, fights The Condor, a flying superhero. This is one of my favorites.

- “Surfacing” is about a scientist who has learned how to communicate with whales, brings some to an alien planet to help communicate with the Deep Dwellers. He starts developing romantic feelings for Philana, another scientist, only to discover she timeshares her body with an alien intelligence. This is perhaps the most human story here.
- “Dinosaurs” has a human diplomat, in a far future where humanity has become overspecialized and semi-savage at the same time, try to make peace with an alien race, the Saur, after automated terraforming kills billions.
- In “Video Star,” Ric, a victim of hospital overcharging, films his hospital drug heist. This was my least favorite story in the book.
- “The Bad Twin” is a complex time travel caper as a member of the Time Corps goes after a master time thief only to wind up accidentally duplicating himself. I like the use of paradoxes and thinking through what a Time Corps would be able to do.
- “The Green Leopard Plague” has a researcher whose investigation into the life of an academic who developed the Cornucopia Theory reveals the origins of the genetic manipulation technology that allows people to transform themselves into apes or flying mermaids. In the story’s present day, the researcher’s former lover tries to convince her that he is not really dead. This may be his best known story; it won a Nebula award.
- “Diamonds from Tequila” is set in the universe of his Dagmar novels (although Dagmar only appears in a phone call). Sean, who was the main character of Williams’ novel *The Fourth Wall*, is in Mexico filming a movie when the actress who pretends to be his girlfriend is killed. Sean, the first person narrator, has to find out what is really going on and somehow save his movie. This is a nice mystery about a character who wants the idolization of moviegoers and is not above a little crime to get there.
- “Margaux” shows the life of Gredel, the girlfriend of a small-time gangster who meets a degenerate noblewoman who looks exactly like her. This story was broken into sections and woven throughout the first *Dread Empire’s Fall* novel, *The Praxis*. It may be a bit predictable (there are only two plots requiring lookalike characters) but Gredel is such an intriguing person that it does not matter. I think the story version is more powerful than the novel version.
- “Prayers on the Wind” is a nice culture clash story as a future peaceful Buddhist-dominated world encounters warlike aliens.
- “Wall, Stone, Craft” is an alternate history story about Mary Shelley and her interactions with a Lord Byron who was the one to capture Napoleon, leading her to create a very different version of Frankenstein. It may be a bit slow at first but the pace does pick up.

The notes on each story are excellent and really give a sense of what Walter Jon Williams was trying to do in each story while showing the course of his career.

Fans of Walter Jon Williams will want the deluxe illustrated hardcover *The Best of Walter Jon Williams* at \$45. People who enjoy novella-length fiction or who want to read some high-quality science fiction with great characterization and literary craftsmanship will find the \$5.99 ebook a bargain. Williams may not be the hot new thing, but he is a highly reliable writer who does not keep doing the same thing over and over again. Highly recommended.

Blood Moon Eclipse by Lloyd Behm II

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I reviewed the first book in the series, "Shadow Lands," five months ago. I noted at that time that I had a good moment and a bad moment with the book. The bad moment came when, after 12 pages, I was enjoying myself so much that I couldn't imagine that Behm could maintain the quality of storytelling throughout the book. I was wrong. The good moment came when I thought I was arriving at the end of the book, only to discover that there was another 20% to go.

I really didn't have the same experience this time. Reason: once I started reading, I never stopped long enough to evaluate progress. In fact, the ONLY time I can remember taking a break was to groan about the AWFUL pun-ishment name one of the characters has.

Most of the main good-guy characters are back for this installment, and Father Jesse Salazar remains the primary POV character. There are some new additions to his allied, notably, a crew of tougher-than-nails dwarves. He also gets a replacement, a Sikh, who can capture monsters with his bare hands, even when that's a bad idea, and who appears to love nothing more than launching into a swarm of nasty un-earthly creatures with two bladed weapons. I can't talk much about the bad guys, because spoilers, but you won't be disappointed.

You won't be disappointed in the banter, particularly if you are a fan of Monty Python, the Princess Bride, and a few other cultural icons, including Scooby Doo. And if there are references to certain popular items that came along after I dropped out, there is also a running gag about Elvis of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. You'll also find Hitchhiker's Guide references as well.

In addition to the usual intrusions into human society by undisciplined were-beasts, a new thing is happening. In some yet-undetermined fashion, people-gobblers in fur suits appear to be able to break out of the most powerful ensorcelled restraints. That definitely falls into the category of Not Good. The usual and customary methods for turning recalcitrant Bad Weres into Good Weres are no longer reliable, and it's up to Jesse and the teams of QMG to find out why and how.

This entails their departure from their home turf of Austin, a weird place, it seems, and to go to even stranger and stranger places. Fortunately, they have friends in low places. Actually, they don't get to the REALLY low places at first, because they are SECRET low places, but when the need arises, back-up plans go into effect.

I keep encountering plot points that I Just Can't Share Because Spoilers, and it's aggravating. Can we leave it at this? Lots of unearthly critters with a plan, plenty of ingenuity in coming up with methods to counter them, and the occasional intervention by superior beings who are on the side of the good guys.

And it ends too soon.

I guess we will just have to wait for the next volume.

Blood Red Tide by Chuck Dixon

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Chuck Dixon's Cannibal Gold was book #1 of his Bad Times series. It was a little like Michael Crichton's Timeline, only with military operators as the leads.

In Blood Red Tide, Chuck Dixon continues his epic time traveling military saga. In fact, book #2 picks up the very next day after book #1. And it is a very logical step. Because after all, what does one do with a time machine? Murder Hitler? Better yet, murder Woodrow Wilson?

Nah.

How many of us would go out there and look for buried treasure?

The story

Obviously, some spoilers for Cannibal Gold., because this book covers blowback. Lots of blowback.

After the events of book #1, the survivors of the expedition 100,000 years in the past must now survive in the present. Blood Red Tide takes its time (no pun intended) filling in the backstory of Cannibal Gold, discussing the mysterious benefactor of the time tunnel project and how brother and sister Morris and Caroline Tauber were approached to build the Tauber tunnel.

Except their backer is a dangerous man, one of the richest on the planet, and our heroes have something he wants. This leads to our heroes being hunted through time and space, on multiple levels, in current day, in research, and ... it's complicated.

But being on the run requires money. And how best to make easy money than to find buried treasure—treasure that no one else has ever found? It's easy when you can go back in time and see the treasure being buried.

However, no plan survives first contact with the enemy.

And it builds up to a great twist ending that I didn't see coming... but probably should have.

Overall, even though this is only book #2, the Bad Times series feels like on long novel broken up into parts. And each part is a heck of a ride.

The characters

The characters are all fleshed out with vivid, distinct personalities. Some have full back stories and family who are mentioned or make an appearance. But this is an action novel, not a character study bogged down with complete biographies. (That's a compliment, trust me, I bog down with people with complete biographies all the time. It can be a pain.)

At the end of the day, I can say for certain that no one is exactly as you expect them to be. They will almost certainly surprise you, especially at the end.

The world

This is one of those books where you appreciate where someone fills in details, and addresses ideas no one else will. In the previous book, it was preserving the ecology of time travel. In this book, it reflects on the consequences of time travel. And there are so many consequences, it's not even funny.

In *Blood Red Tide* a lot of it focuses on logistics. I know I made some comparisons to both Crichton and John Ringo in the previous review, but both comparisons match up better the further we go along...

Okay, we would need three more chapters of nerd speak and a dozen graphs before it matches up perfectly with the late Mister Crichton.

Chuck Dixon also manages to capture a sense of the brave old world they're dealing with in "The Then." This time, it's ancient Greece, and the result is a lot of "CS Forester, BC." The naval tactics felt very much like Horatio Hornblower, or Patrick O'Brian. It's so nice when someone gets history correct... for a change.

I love a lot of the little touches. Like referring to the events of book 1 as "Operation Never Happened." Also lines like: "Just remember, we're not watching the history channel. We're ON the history channel."

The politics

I don't see much in the way of politics here, unless you want to twist yourself into a pretzel that "we need money to survive being on the run" is an endorsement of capitalism. But that requires a brain hardwired to see everything as politics.

Content warning

There is sex, but it's very far off screen. Very far offscreen. Literally, if you blink, you might miss that it happened.

Implied and threatened rape, as well as mentioning the uses of cabin boys.

If you can't handle that slavery existed before Christ, you probably can't handle this book.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys a good action adventure romp. Or for anyone who wants more to their time travel stories than Doctor Who will provide. This has enough science fiction for the SF fan, and more than enough action for the casual reader.

Why read it?

Because it's fun and because the story carries it, even if you think (for some reason) that the action may not.

Cannibal Gold by Chuck Dixon

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

So, does anyone remember Michael Crichton's book *Timeline*? It was turned into a film with Gerard Butler, before 300? *Timeline* was about a Bill Gates knockoff whose company has created a time machine... only he's lost people in the Middle Ages, and recruits a team to go back, find his lost people, and bring them back. This being a Michael Crichton book, the first thing that happens is that the security personnel are killed, leaving only the time period specialists to survive.

Give a similar premise to Chuck Dixon, legendary comic book author and co-creator of the Batman villain Bane, and Dixon turns it into a multi-book series where the SpecOps badasses are the primary leads, and a quarter of the book feels like the team from *Predator* has to fend off the hordes of Mordor.

And that's only book 1, *Cannibal Gold*.

Also, Dixon doesn't use anywhere near the number of graphs as the venerable Crichton.

The story

Former army Ranger Dwayne Roenbach has left his last job as security for a billionaire with a temper. But he's soon recruited by scientist Morris Tauber. He's lost his sister and two of his colleagues. And he would like Dwayne to go and bring them back. The catch? Tauber's sister is lost in the Nevada Desert, 100,000 years in the past.

Dwayne is skeptical, but for \$10 million, he can be flexible.

It's 100,000 years in the past, meaning that no humans live in the region. It should only be populated by oversized fauna. And that assumption was their first mistake.

The characters

The characters here are all well drawn, and fairly effortlessly at that. Every main character gets a chapter to themselves, and each one is sketched out in only a few paragraphs. Focusing a chapter on each person is a standard formula, akin to introducing the gunfighters in *The Magnificent Seven*. But Dixon manages to take the formula and apply it in a unique way that doesn't make it feel like a formula. The five Ranger shooters and the two Tauber siblings are all smart, likable characters, and a joy to read.

Funny enough, I just counted the main characters, and there are seven of them, so Dixon has hit the magic number.

There are even two-bit players in the story who are almost comedy relief, but who have a surprising amount of character.

The world

Dixon has a wonderfully visual writing style. Everything he needs to put on the page are on the page. Extraneous details are fodder for other books. Everything you need to know about the time travel device is spelled out ... mostly by the presence of two Iranian nuclear physicists with a penchant for cur-

rent Vegas performers. When the book goes back in time, we get a very clear picture of the time period. Let's just say that "nasty, brutish and short" is not the name of a law firm.

The politics

As you might have guessed, there aren't a lot of politics in this one. No one is having debates about modern politics 100,000 years in the past. If you read everything with a political bent, one can certainly read politics into it. Like? If you have a problem, and no one else can help, and if you can find them, maybe you can hire a squad of badassess to fix it.

Heh. Yeah. If you're the type of person to watch an 80s action movie and cry "Toxic masculinity," then yes, this book would be considered very political. Sane people will just be able to read and enjoy.

And yes, for the record, it is NOT politically correct. At all.

But if this were to have a political element to it, I could sum it up in one Gif.

Guns. Lots of Guns.

Content warning

There is mild language in here—so infrequently used, it might make a film PG-13. There is mention and implications of rape, but nothing on screen. There is plenty of blood, but nothing you haven't seen in The Lord of the Rings films. There are bodies being blown apart, but nothing in this book is so graphic as to put anyone off.

Why read it?

This book is written in such a nice smooth straightforward style that it's downright refreshing. There are no Ciceronian sentences that run half a page. Nothing is overly technical, but neither does Dixon talk down to the audience. Everything here is just so well thought out and well-reasoned, but nothing is over-technical. I especially enjoyed what they go through to leave no impact on altering the timeline ... and have just as good reasoning on when that can go out the window.

This book is "only" 206 pages, but I guarantee you will not feel cheated. At all. It's awesome.

Who is it for?

If you're a fan of any media referenced in this review, you're probably going to enjoy it. It has Larry Correia level gun porn. It has Zulu-level odds. Frankly, it's just plain fun.

CASPer Alamo
by Eric S. Brown and Jason Brannon
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Recently, I became aware of just how far behind I was on this series, so I've been obtaining a LOT of these books via KU. And that contributes, perhaps, to a small bit of confusion I have as to where these two stories fall in the timeline. That may not make any difference, in terms of the story arc. This IS, after all, Book 9 of the Revelations Cycle, which makes it relatively recent. The subject matter, however, makes me associate this with the Alpha Contracts. But I think it's more recent.

A WORD ABOUT SPOILERS: First of all, the book is given the TITLE "CASPer Alamo." Secondly, the blurb states that the stories re-create the Battles of the Alamo and Isandlwana. Therefore, I'm not sure that 'spoilers' really exist for this book. Maybe for a particular character? I'm not gonna beat this to death. I just don't want anyone pretesting that I gave too much away.

With respect to those particular battles: I recently watched John Wayne's 1960 budget buster "The Alamo," comparing it to my memories of earlier views. I started school in San Antonio in 1959, so the Alamo was a part of my childhood. As a result of that recent viewing, I found myself comparing the behavior of the characters in the first story and was pleased to discover that there is no significant carry-over. However, a different movie led me astray for the second story, as I had the Battle of Rorke's Drift in mind from a somewhat recent viewing of 1964's "Zulu" with Michael Caine. Well, that's NOT the right battle; The Battle of Isandlwana, which immediately preceded Rorke's Drift, was very different, and had a very different outcome. O, brave new world, in which we live, where I can switch between my book and unleash my google-fu, without leaving the comfort of my chair!

The first story, "CASPer Alamo," is the story of mercenary unit Bowie's Marauders, under the command of cigar-chomping Colonel Travis, aided by Major Bowie, and yes, Bowie DOES have a big honken knife he keeps close by and sharpens when he needs to think. His company has a contract to defend the colonists of Durin II, a religious commune who intended to support themselves by mining. However, something has been eating the miners, and for safety, everyone has withdrawn to the fortress-compound known as the Sanctuary.

The local security force, under the leadership of Commander Neill, is not equipped to deal with the threat, and are significantly undermanned as well. Although Neill was delighted to have the Marauders hired, the high-handed manner in which Col. Travis treats him brings them into conflict.

Legendary fighter/trader David Crockett is on the scene, and not likely to be leaving, either, his ship having broken a critical part.

Everybody is on their last chance. Bowie's Marauders are about to be seized by creditors. The colonists have no hope of survival, much less prosperity. Crockett either gets the part he needs, or his traveling days are over.

And so they all hunker down to wait on the attack, hoping they have enough to keep the monsters at bay.

The second story, "Devils," is also a 'mining-enterprise-gone-bad' story. That's a reasonably inevitable

outcome, as the story is based on the first battle in the war between the Zulu and the British, and the reason behind the British (and the other European nations) colonization of Africa was primarily driven by the mineral wealth found there.

The main merc group is the Hellhounds, led by Colonel Hendershot, who appear to be a rough-and-ready group; the primary POV character is Lt. Rai, a highly competent CASPer pilot. Robert's Guard, on the other hand, is a spit-and-polish unit with shiny CASPers and strict discipline. They are led by Colonel Robert, who appears to have a stick inserted in places sticks shouldn't come near, and infantry commander Drake, a nasty, highly efficient killer.

Their opponents seem to be pitiful. True, they have overcome previous expeditions, but they aren't taken seriously by the CASPer-equipped units, since they don't appear to have progressed beyond stone-tipped spears and arrows. There ARE some reports that they possess unusual strength, but the prospect of facing pre-industrial warriors with the modern weapons and defenses of the CASPer units seems laughable.

So much so, that at least one of the troops is suffering a crisis of conscience about the ethics of this mission. Unlike prior contracts, in which she could at least see her role as defeating an armed, hostile ruler, oppressing his people, she clearly sees that this mission is nothing more than a blunt grab for resources, and that the lives of the natives aren't a factor, since they are so primitive. To her credit, she rejects that appraisal. But she goes along with the mission, anyway, with the intention of quitting when this one is over. She has a special reason for this course of action, and I'm not going to tell you what it is.

There are several nice sources of conflict in the story: the friction between the leadership of the teams, the personal animosity felt for Drake by Hellhounds Lt. Rai, and the tension between Rai and Kylie, when Kylie reveals her doubts. All of that pretty much is forgotten, as soon as they encounter the natives of the planet, the devils of the title. I shall close the door on further consideration; saying only that emergency evacuation from a contested landing zone presents one of the most suspenseful scenes you'll read.

The Dark Archive by Genevieve Cogman

Review by Samuel Lubell

Originally in SFRevu.com

The Dark Archive is the seventh book in *The Invisible Library* series. In this fantasy series Librarians of the Invisible Library pursue their assigned missions in the multiverse, collecting and preserving rare books, frequently by stealing them. They also work to protect the worlds and preserve the balance between the chaotic Fae and the hyper-rational Dragons.

The book opens with a brief summary of main character Irene Winter's current situation in the form of a letter from Senior Librarian Coppelia. Irene's friendship with Detective Peregrine Vale, in a Victorian-era world's London where he essentially is Sherlock Holmes, has led to multiple kidnappings and assassination attempts. Irene has requested permission to take a teenage Fae as her new apprentice, but no Fae has ever managed to enter the Library (and she would pose a security risk if she succeeds). The plot immediately begins with Irene and Vale fighting for their lives against mind-controlled Navy men in underwater tunnels. After defeating them through Irene's Language-based magic, Irene finds a portal to a futuristic world and discovers that Lord Guantes, a Fae enemy she had killed in a previous book, has somehow returned to life only to die again in front of Irene, leaving a warning as his final words.

Meanwhile, Irene's former apprentice (and current lover) the Dragon Prince Kai, and Irene's current apprentice Catherine are conducting a secret meeting to purchase a rare book for the Library when their waitress says she just poisoned them. They still purchase the book and escape with Irene's help (via zeppelin naturally) in time for them to find a cure. Gradually, as they survive fires, threats, werewolf kidnappings, assassins, and more (at times the book seems almost like *The Perils of Irene*) they learn that the real mastermind behind Lord and Lady Guantes is none other than Irene's arch-enemy Alberich, a former librarian who uses the Language for evil.

By this point Irene, a survivor of six previous novels, has been kidnapped, escaped death, and saved the various worlds so many times that she is more than a little jaded. Cogman deals with this in three main ways. First, she has introduced a naive apprentice, Catherine, the niece of Fae spymaster Lord Silver, who just wants to be a regular librarian who reads and recommends books. Catherine is constantly surprised that, instead of a serene life of reading and study, the Invisible Library calls on its Librarians to spend far more time acting as spies, detectives, thieves, and action heroines. Second, the author teams up past villains—the Guantes and Alberich—to present Irene with a greater challenge than a single opponent. And third, Cogman takes full humorous advantage of having a more experienced heroine with lines like “It was a sad commentary on Irene's life that, on waking up in chains, her first thought was *Oh no, not again.*” Even her Librarian superior has to remind her that “having half a dozen werewolves try to snatch you out of your cab is *not normal.*”

Although the seventh volume of a continuing series, Cogman puts enough background details into *The Dark Archive* that new readers can understand what is happening. But such readers will have missed a lot of fun in the previous volumes. I recommend readers start with the first book, *The Invisible Library*. All the books in this series are quick readers with lots of excitement and action paired with a deft, light tone. The books are enjoyable romps, not deep but with enough characterization to make readers care about the people and enough background to keep things interesting. Readers who enjoy a capable and snarky heroine who succeeds as much through her wits as her magic will enjoy *The Dark Archive* and the whole series.

Dark Moon Arisen
by Chris Kennedy and Mark Wandrey
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

As I was sorting through the appropriate windows to write the review (Amazon, Goodreads, word processor) I found an opportunity to be grateful that the chosen title for this installment was “Dark Moon Arisen,” and not “Bad Moon on The Rise.” I spent decades associating that with a plumbing facility on the eastern side of a northbound hallway and didn't need the earworm.

Perhaps others will find meaning in other aspects of this story, of which there are several. However, probably because I have so DRASTICALLY read these books out of series, my attention was riveted on the actions of the stupendous genius with all of the lively curiosity of a three-year-old, while possessing not one-fifth of the self-restraint, Taiki Sato.

I am currently Papa to two, no, wait, that's THREE three-year-olds, so I know whereof I speak. If anyone needed to be placed in stasis when not under the direct supervision of a competent adult with

spanking privileges, it's Sato. Yes, surely, it's the case that he will produce some marvelous technological break-throughs for you; however, that ONLY serves as a reason not to administer a lethal solution to him post-haste. It is not, repeat NOT, an excuse for allowing him unsupervised access to a playroom. Do you want to have banana squished into the bottom cavities of all the Legos? Do you want to have the entire ship converted into plasma? Because this is how you get banana-stuffed Lego plasma ships. And not in a nice way.

Somewhat along those same lines, but not as lethal, and far more amusing, are the SalSha. Is there ANYONE who doesn't love the SalSha? Give me the names! Bring them here, right now! True, you cannot have a universe composed of nothing but SalSha, but a universe without them would be a sadder place. Admittedly, the space analogue of the motor pool sergeant would have a vastly different experience. They do have a propensity for bending and scraping the craft they are given to pilot, but MOST of the time, that will buff out just fine. Most of the time. And they are always sorry, afterward. However, their own experiences with the voracious grasp on their homeworld have instilled in them a respect for danger, and an understanding of what it means to be a part of the team, that transforms them from clowns in a demolition derby to precisely the sort of people you want with you in tight spots.

I just read that an editorial decision was made at DC comics that none of the main characters were to be permitted to have happy lives at home, so no marriages, etc. This was to preserve an 'edgy' feel to the characters. Well, poot on that! I think it's a GOOD thing that folks get to have some romantic satisfaction, even if it DOES bring complications. What of it? There are going to be complications in the life of the calmest person, living in the calmest town imaginable. Winged Hussar leader Alexis Cromwell has enough responsibility; I applaud her personal alliance, especially since she isn't violating the rules by taking advantage of someone in her chain of command.

Lots of lovely scenes of exploding spaceships, lots of other aspects of the best of space opera, and plenty of combat scenes which combine super-duper techno whizz-bangs, with the good old fashioned knuckle sandwich to the nose. If you are looking for characters to inspire you, you will find them here.

A final word: I find the names of the four recently acquired battlecruisers to be a bit off-putting. I have no problem with 'Arion,' a mythical horse with unmatched speed, nor with 'Shadowfax,' the horse Gandalf took from King Whatsis in the 'Lord of the Rings.' But 'Phaeton' wasn't a horse; he was a guy who couldn't manage the horses that drew the sun chariot through the sky, which necessitated a lightning bolt from Zeus. And Nuckelavee? Horrid, horrid sea monster horse that ate people and destroyed crops, and NO ONE (well, one little old lady-thing) could control it.

Deathangel by Kevin Ikenberry

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I am not as happy writing this review as I might have been. That is through no fault of the book; it's just that ONCE AGAIN, I have allowed sloppy record-keeping on my part to lead me into the error of reading books out of sequence. It is hopefully the LAST of those errors I will make, as I have (nearly) caught up with the prolific, and probably profligate, writers of the 4HU. Their depravity is common knowledge among the fans, many of whom flock to surround them at public appearances, causing riots in city after city. But I digress.

The wicked, wicked forces arrayed against the stalwart humans have two goals: first, the general eradication of human power by wiping out organizations and colonies, and second, the apprehension of one

James Francis, father of Jessica, the first Human Peace Keeper, and the owner/operator of InterGalactic Haulers. It appears he has something they need, or at least want. Those forces, primarily composed of members of the Mercenary Guild, but all adherents of General Peepo, are highly competitive with each other, to the point of being unwilling to cooperate unless fear is the driving force.

And the most fearsome adherent is one Kr'et'Socae, a somewhat horse-like alien, formerly one of the Peace Keeper's top Enforcers, now gone renegade.

Tara Mason, not QUITE a Peace Keeper, but certainly a friend, is attempting to bring a small strike-team force together in a mission to counter Peepo's efforts. Her primary hindrance in those efforts come from one Jackson Raines, the third Human, and first male Human Peace Keeper. He appears to be a cast-iron SOB, and why he has not had his head pinched off, I do not know. Perhaps his secret file has the annotation "Necessary Jerk – Do Not Pinch Head off." Cretins like this would never have made it through a peacetime Army Basic Training course, much less achieved elite status; they are certain to be fragged at first opportunity. Since there is no evidence of that, I can only assume he has demonstrated significance to SOMEONE. However, I can still hope he'll get sucked into a jet engine.

To aggravate things even more for Tara, the helpful program "Lucille" has been severely limited in capability by order of the Peace Keepers. This is necessary in order to prevent it from gaining sentience, as a companion version of the software had done. The inhibitions mean that feedback and reaction times will be slowed considerably, as previous decision functions of the software have been terminated.

The tempo of operations, and the significance of decisions, is heightened in the story, much in the same way that the two-minute drill in a Superbowl game has stepped-up intensity. With so much at stake, there is very little time to recover from errors. Furthermore, all of the participants in these dramas seem to understand that there is no more reason to hold back something for next week, because there isn't going to be a next week. It's not the FINAL battle, but there are no prizes for second place.

I wouldn't really call the ending a cliff-hanger, but surely there is a precipice around here somewhere. The stakes are high, and not just for the planet of Victoria Bravo, and not just for the pitiful Humans. Within a short time, things will come to a climax. And then, perhaps, we will see how all of the threads tie together.

Gun Runner by Larry Correia and John D. Brown Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.com/?p=268>

Take the setting from Avatar, the toys from Evangelion, and the plot of "The Train Job" from Firefly, and you have GUN RUNNER.

Mecha tends to be more popular in visual media, and thus doesn't get as much play time in literature. So when a good one comes along in print it's worth exploring. Such is the case with GUN RUNNER by Larry Correia and John Brown.

Set in a not-too-distant future when interplanetary travel becomes common enough for the skies to resemble the Old West, humanity is back to its old tricks. There are power brokers and turf wars and unlikely heroes rising from the ranks of scrappy workers, fighting for their small corner of the galaxy.

The Characters

One such hero is a young man named Jackson Rook, known in propaganda as “Sergeant Jack,” who rose to prominence during a civil war on his homeworld of Gloss. In this future, cybernetic enhancements are the norm, but not everyone takes to them equally. Jackson’s rare ability to sync seamlessly with giant machines makes him an excellent mech pilot, and at the same time makes him vulnerable to hacking.

Having been hacked before—and forced to execute several of his comrades—he’s not keen to fully meld with machines ever again...so you know things are going to get to that point, because hey, Chekov’s gun. Now he just operates machines manually, and he’s still good at it, good enough to make a living in the skies.

Opposite Jackson is potential love interest Jane, a skilled hacker with a secret past of her own. She was able to stop Hacked-Jack without killing him, something that has endeared her to him, and he spends a fair amount of time pining for her as the story goes on. When she’s not working on jobs for their captain, she’s building mechanized mini-monsters that help with various missions, including a microbot called Fifi.

The Plot

The eponymous crew of gun runners take jobs from brokers for different governments—some of which are even legitimate. When Jackson’s crew gets hired to steal a state-of-the-art mech and take it to the planet Lush, they end up getting too close for comfort with the local warlord...and Jack starts to see things on the ground that remind him too much of the civil war on Gloss.

And thus, things get interesting.

The plot is fairly straightforward, and a number of the beats are even a little predictable, but still satisfying. The world is believable even if the tech level is advanced beyond our own. In the digital age of the 21st century, it’s easy to see how tech entities would use that kind of power if they had it; at its core, GUN RUNNER is showing how mankind would keep doing everything in the future the way they’ve done it in the past, with populations grappling for control of valuable resources, dividing into sides, and carving out their own security along the way.

The world

The settings range from a zero-G spaceship to an orbital station called Swindle, to the violent surface of the planet Lush where everything vies to be an apex predator, and everything wants to kill you. There’s not a whole lot of handwavium when it comes to technology, beyond the “hyperdrive” that takes them from planet to planet. It’s grittier than a Star Trek escapade without being so dour as the setting of *The Expanse*. The characters carry the story well and have their own intriguing backstories, which beg further exploration in sequels down the road. Of the many Correia-related stories that would adapt well to the screen, this has to be among the most colorful of them and would do well visually what with the giant machine and giant monsters duking it out on the surface of Lush. Correia’s gaming background comes through strong in the worldbuilding.

And Brown’s own influence is there too, showing the same imagination that made his *Dark God* series a success. When two epic authors team up to write a story there’s a tendency to overstuff the word count, but GUN RUNNER doesn’t lag or stare at its own navel as it moves through the plot. This is the

kind of adventurous sci-fi that keeps the pages turning.

Content warning

Put this one on the milder side of an R-rating as far as violence goes. There was little (if any) profanity, save for a few in-world terms that are harmless slang to the reader. Other than a couple of pool parties and some crew members eyeing the local womenfolk, there was no sexual content.

What makes this worth reading?

We as readers got into science fiction because we wanted to have fun, and GUN RUNNER delivers that in spades. It gives you the science side and the human nature side—the basic given facts about space travel, the behavior of smuggler crews and smalltime warlords, underground rebellions, and terrifying wildlife, as well as the near-future integration of computer tech and the human body. And then it just has fun. You want to see big mechs? Small mechs? Fancy mechs? Construction mechs? What about mechs patched together from junkyard scraps, duking it out with a wide array of monsters in a savage alien jungle? Because it's all there, and it's not afraid to feed your imagination along the way.

As a bonus, the audiobook version is an excellent production, narrated by the talented Oliver Wyman. Go check it out.

Have Space Suit Will Travel by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

In hindsight, it is clear that I had a far more favourable impression of *Have Space Suit, Will Travel* when I was a child than after my reread. *Have Space Suit* is one of the more innovative and wide-ranging of Heinlein's juveniles, but it has its limits. The child reader may enjoy the story without noticing the unfortunate implications, for better or worse; the adult reader does not have that luxury. Indeed, *Have Space Suit* is perhaps the single one of Heinlein's juveniles that has not aged well, at least for me.

Which is a shame, because it is a ripping good yarn.

The plot focuses around an all-American teenager Kip Russell, who enters a competition to win a flight to the moon. Kip, having gone to considerable lengths to win his prize, is unamused to discover that he's been beaten to the punch by someone who had the same idea (for an advertising jingle) first. However, for better or worse, Kip does win the runner-up prize; an old – and genuine – spacesuit. Being a bit of a tinkerer, in a way frankly alien to most children and teenagers these days, Kip promptly starts repairing the suit. A few months later, he is the proud possessor of a working space suit, which he names 'Oscar.' This makes him a figure of fun about the town, mainly by the local town bully.

Going out for a walk in his suit, Kip accidentally flags down a flying saucer. The craft in question is being flown by Peewee Reisfeld, an eleven-year-old genius/brat, and the Mother Thing, an alien of uncertain origins. Unfortunately for all three of them, Peewee and the Mother Thing are on the run ... and Kip has accidentally given their enemies a chance to catch up with them. Kip gets snatched by the kidnapers, who turn out to be quislings working for a very hostile alien race. Kip promptly dubs them 'wormfaces.' The aliens have a base on the moon, which is where they kidnapped Peewee. They apparently want to use her to get to her father, a genius scientist.

Kip would be more thrilled to be on the moon if he wasn't a prisoner and the three start to plan a series of escapes. Each escape nearly works, but inevitably ends up with them in worse trouble (and the quislings turned into alien food) until Kip, though a daring adventure, manages to signal the Mother Thing's people. The good news is that the Mother Thing's people have no trouble whatsoever in handling the wormfaces, the bad news is that they want to put humanity on trial for being a grievously savage race ... sorry, for being potentially dangerous. Kip and Peewee find themselves having to defend the human race in court, eventually convincing the aliens that humanity is a young race and will grow up in time.

The kids get sent back to Earth where, for once, they manage to convince the grown-ups that they had a real adventure. Kip wins a scholarship to MIT and the promise of further adventures to come ... and he also scores one over the town bully.

I cannot help but wonder if *Have Space Suit* is Heinlein's tribute to Doc Smith. The pulpy aspects of the story are played up for all its worth, from a hero who is both extremely competent and oddly unsure of himself to alien super-technology and powerful mentalities as far above us as we are above ants. The solar system may be more modern – there are no intelligent races on Mars or Venus – but otherwise the story is vast, rather than focused. And yet, the story also includes a great deal of engineering detail. Heinlein's space suit is extremely realistic, as are Kip's calculations as he tries to work out where he is this time. Indeed, I'd say that Heinlein overdid it.

Kip himself is more average – or at least he thinks he is – than the standard hero of Heinlein's juveniles. He does not have a brilliant mind, an eye for opportunity or a perfect memory. He is all too aware that he isn't bright enough to go to college, let alone outer space. And yet, he is pretty much the unstoppable man. Kip never gives up, even when faced with alien overlords and super-powerful alien races. Given poor schooling – by this point, Heinlein was thoroughly sick of American schools – Kip learns on his own. His response to a challenge is to try to think of a way to overcome it. Unlike the collaborators, who give up when faced with the wormfaces, Kip keeps trying.

In some ways, Kip is an archetypical teenager from a bygone age. He is a tinkerer, constantly working to repair and improve his spacesuit; neither he nor his family has any real doubts about the wisdom of allowing a teenager to work with some very dangerous compounds, even explosives. In this sad age, it is very difficult to repair a personal computer – although the time of the tinkerer may be coming back – and anyone who experiments with a 1960s chemical set would be at risk of being arrested for domestic terrorism. *Have Space Suit* is often harder to follow because much of Kip's life is alien to me. Heinlein would grow better, in the future, at presenting an alien time in a way I could understand.

Kip is contrasted with Ace – a typical small-town jackass/bully, whose role in the story is thankfully limited – and Peewee. The latter may be one of Heinlein's better female characters, at least partly because she is still a child. And yet, Kip finds her very annoying at first, unsurprisingly. (He notes, fairly early on, that little girls who were geniuses should have the grace not to show it.) Peewee grows on both Kip and the reader as the story progresses, with Kip eventually coming to regard her as a little sister. This would probably not have worked so well if Peewee happened to be older.

Ace does little for the plot, besides providing a reason for Kip to contemplate homicide, but Heinlein does use him to illustrate a point that is often overlooked. After Ace is banned from the drugstore for heckling, Kip protests that Ace is harmless. His boss has other ideas:

"I wonder how harmless such people are? To what extent civilization is retarded by the laughing jackasses, the empty-minded belittlers?"

Heinlein does not draw this point out as much as I might wish, but it is fundamentally true. How many people go through life being harassed for being nerds? Or penalised for daring to try to climb out of the ethnic ghetto? Or simply for not fitting in? How many great minds have been lost to us because their owners simply gave up? Heinlein deserves credit for trying to teach us that lesson, again and again. And yet, we never seem to remember it.

Have Space Suit, like most of the juveniles, manages to sneak a great deal of social commentary into its text. Kip's father has very clear views on the value of 'modern' schooling – valueless. I'd like to say that the assignment that prompts Kip's father to tell Kip to learn on his own is fictional, but I've seen stupider essay questions in more modern schoolrooms. How is a 'family council' organised indeed? Kip's school isn't as bad as modern schools, or even the schools Heinlein would portray later, but it is a complete failure at its role. Ace proves that as much as Kip himself.

It also has an early round of 'fake news,' when Kip is invited to go on television. His answers are cut off and replaced with a set of canned answers, which are promptly mocked by the gullible townspeople ... who believe that Kip actually said them. It's an interesting lesson on just how easy it was, even then, to misrepresent someone ... and how hard it can be to recover one's reputation.

But perhaps the most important lesson is that while might doesn't make right, it does tend to determine what actually happens. I never liked the Mother-Thing, not least because Peewee sang her praises in a manner that reminded me of the Demon Headmaster, and her people are cold judgmental monsters. (Peewee calls them bullies and she's right.) They have no moral right to pass judgement on either the wormfaces or humanity, a point the wormfaces themselves make, but the simple fact is that they have the power. Might, as Heinlein would write later, has settled more questions than anything else in recorded history. The idea that white settlers were wrong to push the Native Americans to the brink of genocide is a relatively new one. Indeed, the West is perhaps the only civilisation that questions itself on that score.

And yet, as Kip notes, there are some threats that simply have to be removed:

“That was my chance to be noble. We humans were [the wormfaces'] victims; we were in a position to speak up, point out that from their standpoint they hadn't done anything wrong, and ask mercy-if they would promise to behave in the future. Well, I didn't. I've heard all the usual Sweetness and Light that kids get pushed at them-how they should always forgive, how there's some good in the worst of us, etc. But when I see a black widow, I step on it; I don't plead with it to be a good little spider and please stop poisoning people. A black widow spider can't help it-but that's the point.”

It's striking, looking back at the book as an adult, just how much values dissonance there actually is. Kip experimenting with explosives is, in many ways, the least of it; the drugstore owner and doctor who casually hands out pills that wouldn't be available today (at least not without a prescription) is strikingly out of place. Kip's father – who seems to have a somewhat variable background – is noted as having been a university professor who married his best student, not something that would go unremarked today. And while Kip's mother doesn't appear much in the text, there is no suggestion that she continued her studies after getting married. (A more charitable view of the facts is that they met at university, then married later.) Indeed, Peewee's father hints that Kip and Peewee will start a relationship when they're older. It isn't something I can imagine any decent father doing, although – to be fair – the text does imply that he's somewhat neglectful. What sort of man sends his daughter to the moon on her own?

And yet, despite those issues, *Have Space Suit* is still a fun little story, a testament to the depths of Heinlein's imagination, a glimpse into a vanished world, an ode to the idealised American teenager ...

... And a fitting homage to the pulp fiction of Heinlein's era.

Heroes Fall by Morgon Newquist

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

People keep trying to give us “realistic superheroes.”

Usually, they fail.

I think the trend may have started with *Watchmen*, which frankly told me more of what was in the soul of Alan Moore than said anything about the superhero genre. A better example (I'm told) is Kurt Busiek's *Astro City*, which addresses themes such as a man who becomes a superhero to find redemption, or even the legalities of X-Ray vision and super senses.

Here's the successor.

For those of you who long for the days when comic books were actually entertaining, and the most angst you were subjected to was the occasional Spider Man nervous breakdown, welcome to *Heroes Fall*, *Serenity City*, book 1, by Morgon Newquist.

We open with *The Rampage*, a mission involving Superman, Batman and Iron Fist, I guess.... goes horribly, horribly wrong. One is murdered, the other goes mad, and only one is left standing.

Sounds like fun ... except this isn't a comic book crossover. This is Morgon's new world of heroes and villains. The heroes are Achilles, Pendragon and Banshee. And an epic battle of massive destruction throughout the city.

So, yeah, this one was fun. It starts strong, introducing plenty of side characters (even throwaway characters) effortlessly. It was a Hell of a way to open.

Despite the amount of time the blurb spent on the setup, 90% of the story focuses on Victoria Westerdale. She doesn't want to be a superhero, just a simple, straightforward hero who saves people and goes back to the daily nine to five. It's mostly a mystery set in a new and improved *Astro City*. And I can't say a whole heck of a lot without spoiling it, so I won't.

But the young “primes” of *Serenity City* are disappearing, and only Victoria can stop it.

The characters

The characters do a lot here. They both drive the plot and build the world. It's done so well you barely notice it's happening until you're halfway through the book and you realize just how much has happened, and how much about the reader knows about the world. It's an especially neat trick because Morgon Newquist doesn't rely on “down the rabbit hole” narration. Unlike *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Harry Potter*, our main character isn't a complete outsider that needs everything explained to her. This

is a brave new world we're in, but one that our heroine was born into.

Even the villains of the piece are well drawn out. And yes, there are two. They're both fairly well developed, though one has barely any screen time. If you're wondering how that happens, it's largely because of the quality of the "evil plan." One villain is a narrative underdog, and the other is a cunning master manipulator. One comes off as David Tennant's Kilgrave, and the other is trying to do "good" for noble reasons, but has all the skills and talents of Richard III, or the MCU's Zemo in Civil War. It ends with a full on a train wreck for our heroes, with a moral quandary that had only one solution.

And the fighting. It's so well done. Of course, Morgon gets her martial arts right. If she didn't, I think everyone who knows her would worry, considering her black belt. And she does a good job of playing superhero chess — how does Y superhero use X powers against Z and Z's powers. Even the execution of powers is well thought out.

Also, Morgon has a degree in Latin, so expect a ton of quotes and references from ... everyone. Peter Pan, The Aenid, The Illiad, The Odyssey, Greek myth, Roman myth, a few other myths. I do so enjoy it when the authors I read actively read other people and steal from them. It warms my heart. You get little lines like "He is Lancelot, not Arthur. But even Lancelot is better than Mordred."

The world

I like the breakdown of the superhero class structure. No, we're not going into class warfare here, merely a practical approach to superheroes. DC and Marvel comics are truly unrealistic — that only one superhero (Booster Gold, IIRC) — seems to be offered or has desires for fame and notoriety. In the world of Serenity City, everyone wants to climb the hero totem pole. It's a competitive culture for the next brand endorsement, coming with a good paycheck. And there are some of those heroes who are Iron Man narcissistic and some who are simply saving people and hero-ing and taking cash because they'll take all the help they can get. Of course, this environment means that no one really teams up, but considering how many times the JSA and the JLA have broken up, is anyone surprised when heroes can't get along?

It's also fun when you consider this acknowledges that Batman basically has a superpower. Long story. But the description of the bat cave here will have you playing Danny Elfman's Batman film score in your head.

At the end of the day, fans of the superhero genre should recognize the occasional tip of the hat to everything from The Dark Knight to Astro City to Green Hornet. That would be a spoiler if you could get the permutations right. We have an Alfred with superpowers. A character named Ash who I suspect could be played by Bruce Campbell. A healer hero named Panacea (yes, really). A hero lawyer with the ability to cloud men's minds. And oh dear me, we're going to have a realistic portrayal of what it would be like as a superhero, only none of this grim and gritty Alan Moore BS? Be still my heart.

The politics

This is a superhero world that believes in subsidiarity— that conflicts should be dealt with on the smallest, most local level. Corporatism is looked down on and rightly belittled. Trusting the government is a bad idea.

Content warnings

Rate this one PG-13. There are intimations of rape and inappropriate (ie: mentor/ mentee) seduction. Teenagers might be able to understand it, as it's not spelled out.

There is also superhero violence.

Why read it?

If you're a fan of superheroes and you want more, then here it is, the start of a great new superhero world.

If you want better superheroes than what we've seen coming out of the Big Two lately, then you definitely want to read this.

Who is it for?

Anyone who is a fan of well written superhero fiction, before things became political.

Honor at Stake by Declan Finn

Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com/?p=226>

What happens when you drop all the modern nonsense about vampires, bring them back to the creatures that don't like holy water any more than they like sunlight and throw them into the modern world? You get the world of Declan Finn's Honor at Stake.

The story

An intense young man named Marco Catalano with a reputation for violence has finally found a worthy challenge in his fencing class. Amanda Colt is just as happy to be challenged, it isn't everyday she finds someone with reflexes that can match her own. Which makes sense given that she's a vampire.

The two begin to fall in love as they discuss theology, culture, and vampires, as one does after going out for lunch a couple times.

While the romance grows, strange bodies are turning up in New York City, bodies drained of blood. Simultaneously, there are attacks being committed by people who seem to be going out of their way to look like stereotypical vampires.

Soon, Marco and Amanda are drawn into a confrontation with an army of the undead alongside an unlikely magician and a special division of the Swiss Guard.

It's a fun, action packed page turner that will keep you in the recliner until it's done.

The characters

Marco is one of my favorite characters that I've discovered in recent years. He is a devout Catholic who is also wired to be a ruthless killer, a dichotomy that torments him as he struggles to channel his

impulses. He also is a certifiable genius, working his way through med school while also training himself to be a fighter that can easily best your run of the mill vampire. In short, he's a more ruthless Batman.

Amanda Colt is far more than just a love interest. She's a vampire that has refused to give in to the urges that go along with that. Determined to not become a killer, she usually stays away from people, living a quiet life feeding herself in part with the Precious Blood at Mass, an idea I'm surprised I hadn't seen before. Being a vampire, she doesn't like to get close to people but with Marco, she can't seem to help herself.

The two make an excellent team. Imagine if Batman and Wonder Woman ever had a serious relationship and it might look something like this.

They're joined by plenty of supporting characters as well. Merle Kraft is particularly interesting. The owner of a magic shop who sometimes works with the FBI, Merle is a character of uncertain abilities. The mystery surrounding just who and what he is, is supported by his roguish nature. While Marco is intense and no nonsense, with all the charm of an angry cobra, Merle is like a Han Solo, ready with a joke and able to talk his way in or out of plenty of situations.

And who could forget the addition of literal Vatican Ninjas into the mix? I don't care who you are, if you have literal ninjas from the Vatican toting machine guns that shoot wood bullets to kill vampires with, you are in for a good time.

The world

Finn gives us a world with vampires that I've never seen before. Rather than following the modern tropes of ignoring the religious aspects of vampires such as the fact that holy water and crucifixes are deadly to them, he restores these to their rightful place in vampire lore. He thankfully doesn't stop in the middle ground staked out by *Fright Night* and *Salem's Lot* – the idea that the religious repellants to the undead are dependent on the faith of the user. No, the religion works because it's true and the average vampire is existentially repelled by it. The faith of the user is irrelevant.

Yet, this is no mere return to the world of Bram Stoker. These vampires exist squarely in the modern world, which allows Finn to play with the way they would operate in the real world, as well as new ways to kill them. Marco and his bellicose imagination dives full in, using rosaries, squirt guns, and water balloons aplenty to dispatch the undead.

What of Amanda Colt, the devout Catholic vampire? Finn has created a take on vampires that leaves them with the faculties of reason and of free will. In essence, a vampire is by no means doomed to turn into a Dracula. A vampire can choose good or evil and his appearance and power will reflect those choices. A vampire becomes more powerful the more evil or the more good he is. Unfortunately, most of them either choose evil or try to remain in the middle. The latter are the vast majority and aren't that much more powerful than a strong man.

Finn's world is also one that has plenty of people who know about the supernatural. The Vatican's special unit of the Swiss Guard is highly trained and equipped to track and kill vampires, indicating that the Catholic Church has been fighting the undead for quite a while.

The best part is that Finn does it all without a lot of info dumps. He simply gives the reader the information that is needed in the moment and moves on to let the story do the rest.

The politics?

I describe Finn's work as "punch you in the face Catholicism". As such, there is little concern for the feelings of anyone on the side of the vampires and Marco, in particular, is shown as having little patience for the modern world. Religion of course is held up as a positive good and demons and angels are treated as being very real.

Why read it?

Honor at Stake is a great introduction to the writing of Declan Finn. It is fun, thought provoking at many points and manages to convey a lot of theology without ever seeming preachy. The action moves at a brisk pace and the characters move in and out of the story at just the right places. Would I let a 10 year old read it? Probably not, but someone a little older will enjoy it, as will any adult that just wants to have a good time reading about evil getting vanquished.

Honor the Threat by Kevin Ikenberry

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I have little doubt as to the reason the Most Wicked Villain developed into the contemptible specimen that he is. It's because his parents hated him.

Raleigh Reilly? It's close to a death sentence. True, they could have named him "Stink Between My Toes Reilly," but I suppose that would have been too obvious.

Little kids can't spell; they just hear sounds. So, instead of perceiving the somewhat possibly distinguished name 'Raleigh,' they hear the clown-shaped word 'Rollie.' You have to have a handlebar mustache and lead the major leagues in saves in order to sport the name 'Rollie' and get away with it. Add the surname 'Reilly' to that, and starting in pre-school, he hears the chant:

Raleigh Reilly
Never Smiley
Rarely Ruly
Raleigh Reilly!

...and becomes a psychopath. It was inevitable.

Admittedly, he COULD have just remained at home and become a serial killer, but there was very little money in that. He liked whiskey. So, it's the mercenary life for him. Lots of endorsed murder with big honken bang-sticks, recruits to abuse, and an unending supply of whiskey.

I don't THINK this is a spoiler, because it is revealed very early in the story, but skip the next paragraph if you are highly spoiler averse. Like I said, I don't THINK it's a spoiler.

I wonder: if influential members of the United Nations had realized at the beginning that ALL that it took for genocide to become an approved practice, was for a contract to be issued calling for that: would they have agreed to sign up? I would hope not. But truly, that is the deal. It's only a slight shift from the (repudiated) defense of "I was only following orders" to "I was fulfilling a legal contract." But, whereas on Earth, humans have applied a higher standard to behavior, no such standard exists for

the Galactic Union.

What in the heck are the MinSha doing on the planet? There is no one there to kill. Science? MinSha doing SCIENCE? Surely you jest! (No, I'm NOT jesting and... never mind.) However, even among the placid and hallowed halls of **SCIENCE**, there are strange things happening. (Parenthetical note: In any academic or industrial science environment, with the +possible+ exception of a well-run, financial-ly secure community college, strange things will be happening. Budgets. Office space. Advancement. Parking! It will always be something. At least, that's my experience.)

And there is something very strange going on in the bushes. (No, not that! MinSha don't do that.) Certain figures have appeared that really shouldn't be there. I'll not go further, because this really COULD be the Spoiler We Haven't Been Looking For, but I will go so far as to remind you of the story of the goose and shiny eggs.

At the center of it all is the first Human Peacemaker, the lovely, deadly, conflicted fixer of insanely difficult problems, without being a Mary Sue: Jessica Francis. Always professional, always determined to use all resources to solve whatever problem she faces, Francis has had almost no opportunity to form human friendships. Her one human friend, Tara Mason, has been cast adrift by circumstances I have yet to discover (maybe I'm missing something?). Jessica really has no hope of that relationship being restored; for one thing, surely Tara is somewhere else. It's a semi-large galaxy/universe/space, after all.

GREAT characters; lots of action, with exploding spaceships; MUCH, MUCH intrigue; problems which have no solution, but MUST be solved. I keep thinking that each book is the best so far, and I thought that with this one as well. HOWEVER!!!!!!! In the course of reading THIS, I had to go back and do some re-reading of prior books in both Revelations Cycle and Omega War, and they were still excellent reading. So, I am forced to conclude that it is just the fact that each book engages me, much as a kiss from my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, engages me. Therefore, each book I am reading is the best, just as each kiss I am a part of is the best.

If that makes no sense to you, then find your significant other, and make at least PART of that a reality.

You'll thank me for it.

Irontown Blues by John Varley
Review by Samuel Lubell
Originally in SFRevu.com

Irontown Blues is the third novel in the second version of the author's *Eight Worlds* series. John Varley wrote the original version of his *Eight World* series in the 1970s and early 80s, including stories like "The Barbie Murders" and "Picnic on Nearside" and the novel *The Ophiuchi Hotline*. But when he returned to this setting, in his 1992 novel *Steel Beach*, he said he would not be limited by past continuity, essentially creating a new version of the setting that he has since used for 1998's *The Golden Globe* and this 2018 novel. In both versions of his *Eight Worlds*, alien invaders have kicked humanity off of Earth. Humanity now lives in a variety of habitats on the moon and on a few other worlds and moons in the solar system, including replicas of different historical periods on Earth.

The main character and the (human) viewpoint narrator, Chris Bach, is a private detective on the moon who models his office and look off of the hard-boiled detectives of the 1930s. He has been traumatized

by an event in his past that the author slowly reveals and his only friend is his bloodhound Sherlock, a cybernetically enhanced canine (CEC). Sherlock, with the help of a human translator, narrates several chapters in the book. The translator explains that CEC dogs do not think in words but in thoughts that a certified translator can express in words. Easily the best canine narrator since Oberon from Kevin Hearne's *Iron Druid*, Sherlock's view of the events in Bach's life is frequently humorous. Sherlock accepts Chris Bach as his alpha but disapproves of his drinking and believes all humans, including alpha Chris, can be very stupid in addition to being nose-blind. For his part, Bach believes Sherlock "is one of the laziest dogs in Luna", yet Sherlock finds his way from Bach's office to home faster than Bach does.

Irontown Blues begins, as a proper noir detective story should, with a client entering a detective's life. "The dame blew into my office like a warm breeze off the Pacific." Mary Smith asks Bach to find the date who infected her with para-leprosy. An informant sends Bach to Irontown where people are spreading a bacterium engineered to be near incurable. Irontown, the early, no-frills habitats built by the first few generations to be evicted from Earth by the Invaders, now houses criminals, sociopaths, paranoids, hoarders, and others who have opted out of lunar civilization including Heinleinians, pro-gun and pro-science libertarians who dream of sending a spaceship beyond the solar system.

Irontown Blues is a fun mystery with an interesting portrayal of a protagonist damaged by his past. Even his mother admits "you're not quite right in the head Christopher, and you know it." Gradually, Varley reveals what Bach did during "The Big Glitch" (as shown in *Steel Beach*), and why he is afraid of Irontown. The author explains enough in this novel that a reader who has not read his previous books can follow the story; however, this does spoil a major twist in *Steel Beach*.

The book also has a successful depiction of a superintelligent canine that thinks different from humans in ways that are logical extrapolations from real canine behavior. The investigation demonstrates Sherlock actually is a better detective than Bach, not just by tracking a suspect by scent but also by reasoning when one suspect is replaced by another.

It is worth noting that Ace originally released this book as a trade paperback, not a hardcover like the previous two volumes in the series (and the *Red Thunder* series). As of 2021, Varley has not published a subsequent novel (although he frequently has four or more years between novels.)

Fans of Varley probably have already read *Irontown Blues*. Readers new to Varley should start with *Steel Beach* unless they are primarily interested in Sherlock who does not appear in the other books. And be sure to read his Gaea Trilogy from the 1980s, the books that made him a SF star.

The Last Marine: Books One and Two

by T.S. Ransdell

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

T.S. Ransdell's *The Last Marine: Books One and Two* are the story of Sean Harris, the last surviving member of the US Marine Corps. He is interviewed by one Sean Levine, a young man who believes that he has a good future ahead of him... If he can trash Harris and his beloved Corps badly enough. The story is told mainly through flashbacks to the time of the (obviously fictional) Sino-US War.

The story

Harris was a loyal Marine who gave good service to God, Country and Corps under a Republican presi-

dent. When the original president's term is up and a Democrat gets elected, things go to hell. A nearly won war is all but abandoned. Sean and his friends are abandoned by the country they served and eventually declared to be guilty of treason. It just gets worse from there when the United States goes from a free country to a wokester's paradise of political correctness and disappearing rights.

The characters

The two main characters are Harris and Levine. We also get to meet a bunch of Harris Marine buddies. They're the kind of hard charging, fun loving, drinking, swearing Marines that you'd expect.

The world

The United States of the piece is a Communist Dystopia similar to the Soviet Union. The Elites run the Democrat Party and get all of the best food, housing, travel permits, etc. Think Josef Stalin with his five dachas while working class families had to live in concrete apartments.

The politics

Harris makes a good case for liberty and the way things used to be. Levine listens to it all, but is skeptical because he's been told that the old way of doing things was racist, misogynistic, etc. The politics shown are actually a quite realistic view of how things will go if the left wins.

Content warning

Violence, gore, swearing, sex and probably something else I'm forgetting. I loved these books but I wouldn't buy them for a twelve year old. I might honestly a bit hesitant about letting my fifteen year old read them.

Why read it?

It's awesome and realistic. It feels like you're there with the characters. It feels prescient. The biggest reason to read it is because it's quality entertainment.

Who is this for?

Anyone who likes war stories and/or dystopic fiction would love The Last Marine.

Making Peace by Adam Lane Smith Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Making Peace is the first novel of Adam Lane Smith. It's a character driven novel that's both scifi and fantasy. And it's just fun.

The Story

Our story centers around romance author Belkan Candor. He's got plenty of debts, and he figures this one gig as an embedded journalist with the peacekeepers will settle his debts. What Candor ends up

with is being in the middle of a war.

Our hero, Mister Candor (really, Mister Smith? Really?) is essentially sent to serve in a less friendly Ankh-Morpork, only played less for laughs. (Or just shown from street level, which is fairly messy to start with). Only a war between the noble houses is brewing and the peacekeepers are the only ones who can nip it in the bud before there's riots and blood in the streets....

If you're also a fan of Terry Pratchett, you might think of this as Thud!, as told from the perspective of the city accountant who is sent to audit the Watch, only to be drafted into the front lines of the riot squad.

And yes, I'm comparing Smith to Sir Terry. If you have a problem with that, then buy the book, read it, and tell me where I'm wrong.

But, yeah, this was awesome, from start to finish. I wish I had been writing this well for my first published novel.

What's impressive is that this story it starts with a flipping memo, and somehow isn't boring. Which is an achievement all by itself. Then again, the memo has a fun bit of meta-humor. ("I noted that bit in the waiver you had me sign: death by, among other things, giant lizards? This book had better make enough to settle all my debts.")

The Characters

Overall, the characters carried this one for the most part. And there's a nice solid formula for character exposition — because our narrator is an embedded, so of course he can interview each character for in-depth pieces. That formula isn't even that formulaic, because there's an issue while trying to interview the team barbarian, but what else can you expect from barbarians? We still get the character exposition in a genuine and organic manner — while being held at knife point.

And yes, I will admit, there are elements that are formulaic and simple, but it's a helpful tool for the readers as they track the six characters we open with, before Smith goes into the depth of each character. And yes, each character has depth. Hell, even the character development and evolution were subtle and so gently sloping that you don't really notice it happening until it's already happened — and yes, it was happening the entire time.

You could say that this is a very simple fantasy story, but that's only if you're not paying attention.

I spent a lot of Making Peace appreciating this from a technical perspective. "Gee, cute, I can track most character attributes through the names" — which were Shield, Ugly, Candor and Vapor (the water nano-mage who's part cyborg and part Raven from Teen Titans). It was basically an RPG party— barbarian, healer, mage, rogue, bard — which will make the PulpRev crowd happy (I'd note more, but I the closest I've ever come to D&D is Order of the Stick). But this was both highly entertaining as well as technically sweet.

The world

This world is one part fantasy, one part science fiction, and mostly just straight up fun. Smith does a nice does of genre-blending. Mages come from nanite enhancements. We have magic and Valkyries, but three of our characters are from off planet. We have an odd sort of coming-of-age story, a thriller, at

least one romance and total war. He's got political intrigue that easily outdoes George R.R. Martin, a story and setting that would make Terry Pratchett happy, and just enough philosophical depth that would entertain John C Wright or Tim Powers (certainly deeper than Neil Gaiman, who is about as deep as a dinner plate in comparison to Smith).

The politics

The politics in this book are all local. Unless you think that meting out justice at sword point is political.

Content warning

Sword violence. There will be blood and body parts. But if you can handle flying heads of orcs out of Lord of the Rings, you can handle this book.

Why read it?

This is the best epic fantasy novel I've read in years. It's even better than Correia's Son of the Black Sword. He's not John C. Wright, but he'll get there.

Who is it for?

Almost everyone. I'm serious. I think you can read Making Peace then give it to your children. If it were a film, it would be a soft PG-13. Did you like Terry Pratchett? Lord of the Rings? Larry Correia? You'll probably like this one.

Penance by Paula Richey & Thomas Plutarch Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

What can I say about Penance that I haven't already said about Silver Empire's Heroes Unleashed universe?

Quite a bit, actually. Much to my surprise.

The story

The "Prime" (The HUU's version of someone with powers) in this case is Penance Copper. At 17, she's been on the streets for most of her life. She's been raised by a street thug named Acid her entire life. Then the day comes that Acid asks her to take out a local hero named Justice.

That's the last straw.

Unfortunately, this last mission from Acid leads Penance in the middle of an interstellar invasion by Kail— a supply sergeant from another planet. His men need food, and they need water. And the nearest planet to raid? Earth. And they have a place full of food and water. It's called a football stadium, and there's a game on, so there are plenty of hostages.

And Penance is the only one who can get inside.

Hilarity ensues.

This story was just so well told, I breezed through more than half of it in a single night. Good plotting, action, and character. It's all well put together.

The characters

Penance is interesting. Because she's the Artful Dodger with superpowers, working for Fagan-as-supervillain. She's a character that has to think about using her superpowers—like used her electromagnetic powers and abilities to copy anything with an RFID chip (electronic keys, alarm system codes), or her plasma abilities to cook microwave popcorn in her hand. Also, the ability to shock someone back to life, something I want more electricity-based heroes to do (I think Endgame may have been one of the few times someone tried it). Paula even highlights how Penance can have these powers without cooking herself.

She's also stronger than the average bear (a literal bear). And she's Southern...By the time we get a quarter of the way through the book, Penance sounds and looks like Rogue, with additional powers that feel like "What if Jubilee was useful."

And yet, Penance isn't so overpowered that she overcomes anything that gets in her way. At least four times in the book she gets her ass kicked fairly thoroughly—once by simple science.

With Kail, our alien, it's interesting that his story could be easily summed up as "the quartermaster needed some lousy supplies," but boy, does that spiral. Seeing things through his eyes tells the reader more about his planet, his culture, and him, more easily than a chapter-long data-dump on societies. And the culture clash is as effective as Crocodile Dundee, if sometimes less funny.

Not to mention that limiting the POV to these two main characters highlights just how much one knows about the other, that even the other isn't aware of about themselves....

Yes, I think that sentence made sense. Honest.

And I like that Kail, as supply sergeant, makes his own clothing. And bookshelves.

And the nicest thing? Kail even thinks like an alien.

The world

Separating out the world-building from the characters and the story required a crowbar in this instance. There are no data dumps here. There are no exposition paragraphs. There isn't even a chapter where Kail regales Penance with the exact nature of their cultural and societal differences.

And it's unnecessary. Paula Richey spent the entire book world-building. It's shown in almost every interaction between the two, and their actions.

If David Weber could do this in his novels, they'd be at least 20% shorter.

The impressive thing is that Penance created and explained an entire alien civilization without stopping to spell out how it worked. And it works like Ming the Merciless learned to make an entire generation

put themselves in debt and be in chains forever. Paula does a great job of making an unrepentant SOB you just want to see have a stake rammed through his heart.

And, at the same time, Penance spells out a lot of life on the streets for Heroes Unleashed. Every time I expect them to go bigger, they manage to do a lot with very little. Paula manages to take one element and write a good chunk of the book around it.

There are also at least two threads that tie Penance back to the original Heroes Fall book.

Not to mention that I enjoyed having the alien invasion spun by the Men in Black as “he’s a new supervillain. Nothing to see here.” Seriously, if John Ringo did the politics of superpowers, this would be the series he lifted it from.

Not to mention that Paula has a grasp of technology no one points out. For example “your invisibility suit is nice, but what happens if it’s really dusty?”

The politics

There is only one way there is a political angle to this novel. Penance is reading a Bible throughout, because she’s trying to learn about this Jesus person. I think that along will turn off certain readers.

Imagine if “Christian Fiction” only started having conversations about Jesus at natural points in the story.... like if an alien asked questions.

Why read it?

Penance was just plain fun. I can usually tell what writing tricks are executed when “This is the data dump. This is act one finale. This is how the slip in backstory.” Not here. It’s all smooth and effortless and makes writing look easy. Why couldn’t I have written like this when I started.

And yes, this is labeled “YA.” How? Why? Aside from the age of the characters, I can’t really tell you. It’s not like anything in the rest of the HUU has had egregious violence, or sex, or foul language. (And nothing has been as bad as the icicle in Die Hard 2, not even John Wick’s pencil.) And, as one reviewer said of Narnia, “This is too good for children.”

Anyway, this book is fun, it’s awesome, and you should buy it.

Possum Creek Massacre by Cedar Sanderson

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The author also did the cover art, and it's magnificent, particularly when the story shows you the relevance of the details.

Two sections in this review: the author's craft, and the characters.

I saw a snippet of this posted online a few months ago, and I really can't improve on my treatment of her craft, so here is what I said then (minor edits):

ALL of her work is first class. but sometimes, as you sift through the gold dust in her work, you encounter a diamond the size of your fist. Check this out:

"The idea had been to keep warm in the winter and cooler in the summer, but it didn't work so well in the summer. It was cooler to sleep on the porch, even if the mosquitoes were a torment. She'd been sleeping there since May, and had planned to continue until September, but she didn't have that long."

You don't HAVE to know the details of 'the idea' to understand what's going on, particularly if you live in an area of the country when one (or more) seasons are not particularly friendly to man.

The first two sentences, and the first two thirds of the last sentence, give you a BEAUTIFUL set-up.

It's a nice, homey description, and although the unidentified protagonist of the chapter seems to have perhaps a little bit of the hoarder in her, she is quite sympathetic. And then...

"...but she didn't have that long."

The knife slips in so skillfully, it doesn't even hurt, at first. And the following paragraphs play off that beautifully, slowly. Each has an intro that tells you, up front, that the Bad Thing is coming, and then resumes, depicting the surroundings as if they were slowly unraveling. And there is a bit of dread mixed in.

Nope, I really can't improve on that.

Now, a (brief) word on her characters:

Amaya "Call me Amy" Lombard is a police detective who has the ability to perceive magical forces. She was introduced in *Witchward Book 1*, "Snow in Her Eyes," in which wonderful, delightful, UN-EXPLAINED items are introduced (such as her prosthetic hand). As far as she knows, she is the ONLY police detective who has any sort of ability to see magic. (She has a partner, but he is only mentioned in this installment.)

Captain Sean McCune, her boss. He surfed until he needed to make money, then became a cop. It leaves him with a bit of a laid-back attitude, but he is a good boss.

Sheriff Constant "Connie" Lilburne. I'm sort of seeing Andy Griffith here, friendly, country, tough-minded when needful. He knows he is up against something he just can't handle, and he isn't afraid to ask for help.

Deputy Mark White. Good-looking guy with a bit of a limp. He picks Amy up at the airport and provides her with a bit of a briefing that raises more questions than it answers. Hint 1: good looking guy. Hint 2: with a bit of a limp.

Merlin/Marilyn: If she had cats, she MIGHT be a crazy cat lady, but she has flowers, instead. I had a grandmother a lot like this, except Merlin does more of God's work in the form of magic, while my grandmother limited herself to taking food to sick people and letting entire families move into her small brick house on the dirt road.

I better stop there. If I go further, I'm gonna hit spoiler territory for real, and I DON'T want to spoil this one for you.

Redcaps Rising: A Walter Bailey Misadventure by P.A. Piatt

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Somebody call Piers Anthony, because I found an author who actually knows how to do humorous fantasy and it's not the way he did it. Seriously, I read two of the Xanth novels. One on purpose and the other because I was book starved, and in a position where I couldn't get more. One of my friends gave it to me for free. I almost asked for my money back. I mean, it sucks because I really loved his Bio of A Space Tyrant series but Oh my God, did the Xanth novels suck. Every joke was a bad pun. At least they eventually ended, and I was able to get somewhere to buy a new Battletech novel. Now that I'm done nerd raging about something that has nothing to do with what I'm writing about...

I recently received a copy of P.A. Piatt's Redcaps Rising: A Walter Bailey Misadventure. He warned me that it would be funny, and he wasn't wrong. I love a good comedy, but very rarely have I seen it done well in a novel length work. P.A. Piatt managed to knock it out of the park though. I'll be honest. I found P.A. asking how to get more reviews in a Facebook group and told him to send me a copy. He sent me one, then told me it was humor. I got a little nervous and flashed back to dandy-lions and hypnogourds. I mean, dude's initials were even P.A. I was about to get Anthonied. The Xanth bomb was dropping. Oh God. Oh God, Oh... Wow. I'm actually enjoying this. How did that happen?

Seriously, the humor is well done and not always tasteful. That's okay, tasteless humor is my favorite kind. I'll say this much: Don't ever get hit with a curse in a Walter Bailey Misadventure. The cost of breaking it is just too damn high. Oh, and I'm not a fan of anything that involves a mullet. Really. Even if I end up with a curse sticking to my achy, breaky ass. I just couldn't do it. I'd have to live the rest of my life like that.

Redcaps Rising also turns into a written version of one of my favorite movie genres: The roadtrip flick. I have to admit that I've never seen a movie with quite as motley a crew as Redcaps Rising but it works. Our main character, Walter Bailey ends up in situations he never anticipated with friends and enemies he never would have believed possible and ends up traveling cross-country on the run. There are food fights and shenanigans. There are serious, worrisome moments. There is hijinks and hilarity. It's really well done.

And then Boosh farted.

BAM!

Anyway...

It occurs to me that Redcaps Rising included one of a very few prologues that I have ever enjoyed. It was entertaining. It set the stage for the story, and it included characters that were in the rest of the story. Ordinarily prologues are against my religion, but I'll make an exception here. It's actually relevant.

Redcaps Rising started off like a mystery novel, but that only lasted a couple of chapters. I like that though. Not only does it show a bit of range as writer on the part of Piatt, but it was a good lead-in to the rest of the book. Walter needs a reason to start on his journey of laughs and the first couple of chapters do a good job of getting things headed in the right direction.

The cast of characters Redcaps Rising is slightly non-standard, but I mean that in a good way. The gar-

den gnome is nutty. The elves that live in the shed are... well... not Tolkien-esque to put it mildly. The main character doesn't really seem to be the Chosen One. Seriously, Walter is just a guy doing what he can in a situation that he never really wanted. I don't want to spoil too much but the supporting cast isn't exactly archetypal either. He does an excellent job here.

I really like the way that Piatt brings fantasy races into the modern world. He is hardly the first author to write urban fantasy, but he gives an interesting take on the way the classic races would act in a modern world. His non-human races are not just cardboard cut outs either. They're real people who just don't happen to exist. They do things for the own motivations. From orcs to elves to gnomes to all kinds of crazy stuff. I kind of wish he had included a dwarf but that's just me. I have a thing for dwarves in fantasy stories.

This novel cooks. Something is always happening. There is no downtime and even a stop for dinner can turn into a riot. You never know what's coming next, but it gets here quickly. I loved that aspect of this book. Redcaps Rising is far from being the longest book I've ever read, but it has more action than a lot of longer books. It doesn't take long to read, and I never got bored. This one had me hooked all the way through.

My only real beef with Redcaps Rising is that I needed to see our chief villains more. My favorite part of any fantasy is hating the villain. The Redcap sisters are portrayed as evil and power hungry. Their minions are out for blood. It would be fun to spend more time with them though. I'd like to get to know them more. There is the potential for these three to be every bit as classic as the Wicked Witch of the West from The Wizard of Oz, but he just hasn't taken them there yet. Then again, the series is The Misadventures (plural) of Walter Bailey, so maybe we'll get to know and hate them a bit more in future novels. Here's hoping anyway.

You know what? Yeah, I'm going to take it there. I was going to nominate Declan Finn for the Dragon Award for Best Fantasy. I think I'll still nominate him, but I'm going to move him down to Best Horror. He writes vampires after all. That makes it horror, right? I'm going to nominate Redcaps Rising for the Dragon Award for Best Fantasy Novel. I would urge all of you to buy and read the book and if you agree with me to nominate Piatt as well. How cool would it be to see someone you nominated on the final ballot? Help your boy out! Let's get this thing done. This work is that good. Take a bow, P.A.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Cursed Elves

Space Cadet by Robert Heinlein

Review by Chris Nuttall

<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

It is not enough that you be skillful, clever, brave— The trustees of this awful power must each possess a meticulous sense of honour, self-discipline beyond all ambition, conceit, or avarice, respect for the liberties and dignity of all creatures, and an unyielding will to do justice and give mercy. He must be a true and gentle knight.

—Space Cadet

It's interesting to realise that Robert Heinlein was himself a naval man who attended the US Naval College, as it is genuinely striking just how much of his experiences were incorporated into Space Cadet. Indeed, rereading this book after reading biographies of Heinlein is something of an eye-opener.

Heinlein may have gotten a lot wrong about the way politics and technology would develop, but he does manage to get across both the life of a student at a naval academy and the early years of an officer of a naval force. And it's in space!

The plot is relatively simple. Matt Dodson, an American teenager, applies to join the Space Patrol (a combination of the USN and the Coast Guard). Going through a series of tests, some with hidden tricks to catch cheaters, he is eventually permitted to join as a cadet and go to the academy (actually, a spaceship which has been converted into a school). There, he meets three friends (one of whom, Oscar Jensen, was born on Venus, which is a later plot point) and a semi-rival, Girard Burke. For better or worse, perhaps for the worse, Matt finds himself rooming with Burke.

The cadets are pushed hard, until Burke either resigns or is asked to leave (the text doesn't make it clear.) Matt and his three friends, however, are allowed to proceed onwards to the next level, actual service on an interstellar ship. After a short adventure where they stumble across the remains of another ship, lost in the asteroid belt, they are called to Venus by reports of a native (i.e. alien) uprising. Matt and co take a smaller ship to the foggy planet, but accidentally crash-land and are captured by the natives. There, they discover that Burke, their former comrade, was engaged in a little gunboat diplomacy that got his entire crew killed and himself captured.

Burke offers them a great deal of money if they keep his secret, summon the marines to put down the 'uprising' and parcel out the captured land. Instead, Matt and his friends make friends with the natives, patch up an old ship and head back into space. Burke is placed under arrest and the three patrolmen, now feeling like patrolmen, resume their duties.

Believe it or not, I think *Space Cadet* is perhaps my favourite of the Heinlein juveniles. It works well as a story for teenage boys while also including a great many bonuses for the more adult readers. It is clean and simple yet has a number of underlying themes that stick in the mind. Heinlein-as-teacher is very clear in this work, where it isn't clear in others.

And what makes it work, I think, is that Matt starts out as a recognisable character. He may come from a future world – an early section has him using a mobile phone to call home – but he's still human. He's as close to us as he would have been to the kids in Heinlein's first audience. When he starts, he's on the cusp of manhood; he's eager and determined, but also naive and profoundly unsure of his abilities. The story is not so much space adventure as Matt and his friends growing into men.

Matt is contrasted with Burke, who is a cynical bounder of the worst sort. Burke is not a bully, in the sense he picks on Matt or the other cadets; Burke privately questions the purposes of the tests, assuming that everything is a test with a hidden purpose ... in short, as a cadet, Burke undermines the other cadets. His view of the universe has no room for honour or even for basic common decency. (He sees a spaceship crash, when the cadets are being tested, and assumes that it's part of the test.) Later, as the CO of an exploration ship, Burke schemes to deprive the natives of their mineral rights by kidnapping their queen, forcing her to sign a contract and then – presumably – using the contract as a figleaf of justification for a military operation. This was not, of course, uncommon in the days of the Wild West. Here, it has a happier outcome for the natives.

This is, in many ways, the start of a theme that runs through most of Heinlein's books. Colonisation, in the classic sense, is wrong; exploiters, people who will steal from the natives, are evil. Normally, Heinlein tries to make us like someone before he uses them to make a point; this time, Heinlein goes to some trouble to make us dislike Burke to ensure that we do not side with him. It's a curious moment

when one remembers that the colonisation model that Heinlein condemns is not the European one, but the American one. Heinlein wants us to realise, I think, that the victims of such exploitation are human (or at least intelligent) too. It's notable that Oscar, who grew up on Venus, actually treats the natives with respect ... something that helps the cadets escape certain death.

Indeed, *Space Cadet* also includes an antiracist message that seems to have gone largely unnoticed. Heinlein was less subtle at this point, it should be noted; the characters make a point of saying that a senior officer's skin colour (black) doesn't matter to them, although they're comparing him to the aliens. And yet, it is clear that the Patrol is a multiracial as well as multinational organisation. (That said, it is also men-only. Women are barely mentioned within the text.)

Heinlein touches on many other issues of importance to young men. The importance of honour, for example, is contrasted with shameless money-grubbing. Matt is told that you can't buy men of honour, just as Matt himself refuses Burke's massive bribe. The patrol is held together by honour. It can't function any other way. There are also moments drawn directly from Heinlein's own experience as a naval cadet, including a sad moment when Matt goes home ... only to discover that he no longer fits into his hometown. The gulf between him and his family (and former friends) is simply too large.

The recent biography of Heinlein suggests that *Space Cadet* was originally conceived as a sequel, of sorts, to *Solution Unsatisfactory*, which was written before nuclear bombs were recognised as a threat. Instead, the Patrol of that story deployed radioactive dust against its enemies; later, it launched a de facto coup against the world governments on the grounds that it was the only way to keep a greater threat from devastating the planet. (Panshin has some interesting commentary on that story which is well worth a read.) Matt – originally – would have ended up bombing his hometown. There are moments of acknowledgement to the original plot, if indeed that was the original plot, in the story, but overall, the second version works far better. It certainly lacks the grimness that would have weakened the original version.

In some ways, *Space Cadet* can be seen as a precursor to *Starship Troopers*. They both cover the transition of a callow youth to a mature officer, but *Space Cadet* is relatively simplistic while *Starship Troopers* is as much or more a philosophical work as it is an adventure novel. *Space Cadet* barely touches on politics, for better or worse. Keeping one's officer corps out of politics would, of course, be highly desirable.

Overall, I stand by my original judgement. *Space Cadet* may be outdated – the tech is a mixture of surprisingly accurate and laughably wrong, while the solar system is a far more exciting and inhabited place than reality – but the underlying themes of the story are still relevant today ...

... And besides, it's a fun little read.

To Sleep in a Sea of Stars by Christopher Paolini

Review by Sam Lubell

Originally in SFRevu.com

It is always admirable when authors take chances and try to do something new instead of writing the same book over and over again. Christopher Paolini published *Eragon*, a Young Adult (YA) fantasy novel when he was only 19. It became a bestseller that was turned into a movie. He then wrote the other three novels in that series and it seemed like he would have a comfortable career writing *Eragon* se-

quels and similar YA fantasy novels. Instead, he spent nine years working on a massive (825 page) science fiction space adventure novel aimed at adults.

Sleep in a Sea of Stars is about Kira, who when the book starts is a xenobiologist on a team surveying an Earth-sized moon before the colonists arrive. She and her new fiancé Alan fear that the end of the mission will mean separating for over a year. But right before the team is scheduled to leave, the expedition boss sends her out to investigate a dead drone. She discovers signs of intelligent alien life and a mysterious dust that covers her entire body. When she wakes up four weeks later she learns that her discovery put the whole system in quarantine. Despite receiving a clean bill of health, Kira was infected with an artificial alien nanotech symbiont that functions as life support and a weapons system. She initially is unable to control it as it forms spikes that kills most of her teammates. Doctor Carr of Fleet Intelligence investigates the xeno, which calls itself the Soft Blade, even after Kira demands they stop their torture. But aliens who want the xeno attack her ship and, as Kira later learns, in the battle Dr. Carr, the aliens, and portions of the xeno combine to form the Maw, a new nightmarish intelligence that makes war on both the aliens and humans.

Kira barely escapes with her life on a shuttle and is rescued by the *Wallfish*, a salvage ship not part of the League, and its Captain Falconi. She learns that aliens, now nicknamed the Jellies, have been attacking human ships and colonies. The *Wallfish* is transporting refugees, at an exorbitant markup, including two Entropists, a society of secretive mystic scholars. Kira realizes that, thanks to her xeno suit, she is probably the only one who can communicate with the Jellies. She convinces the captain to take her to Malpert Station where she can get onto a Jelly ship and try to find out what the aliens want. In the course of the journey she befriends some of the crew, including Falconi.

When they encounter a damaged alien ship, Kira joins a salvage team from the *Wallfish* to explore it. Kira saves a member of the crew and gains access to a Jelly computer, learning about their society and organization. The Jellies believe that humans started the war to exterminate them, and they are searching for an ancient weapon called the Staff of Blue. Realizing that humanity is doomed unless she finds the Staff of Blue first, Kira convinces a military ship to join the *Wallfish* in a journey to where the Soft Blade thinks is the location of the Staff of Blue.

To Sleep in a Sea of Stars is an exciting space opera adventure. The first half has many mystery elements as Kira has to figure out what is going on with her xeno suit, the aliens, and the nightmares attacking both sides (the Maw is not explained until much later). The second half is a long series of battles that probably could have benefited from losing a hundred or so pages (the book is over 800 plus an appendix.) I also think the author could have developed a better name for the sought-after weapon than the fantasy-sounding “Staff of Blue.”

The afterword is far more illuminating than the usual set of thank yous. *To Sleep in a Sea of Stars* is the product of nine years’ hard work. The author spent 2013 learning the science and creating the universe and wrote the first draft by January 2016 only to realize that this version of the novel did not work even after extensive edits. Paolini admits that his plotting and problem-solving skills had “gotten rusty from disuse” and he had to reteach himself how to tell a story. He had to rewrite almost the entire book from scratch in 2018-2019. Most writers go through this stage at the beginning of their careers, producing trunk novels and learning the craft of writing. For someone who wrote a bestseller while still a teenager, this must have been very discouraging.

Now in his mid-30s, Paolini is no longer the teen wunderkind and is writing for an adult audience. Considering that this is Paolini’s first science fiction novel, he does a very good job with this material. This is a plot-driven book; there is some character development of Kira, but most other characters are there

to support the story. The action scenes are well done, but I do think the second half of the book could have used some trimming as the various battles blurred together. Also the situation with the Maw should have shown more details for the reader to understand what was happening.

The publisher has labeled *To Sleep in a Sea of Stars* “A Fractalverse novel” and the ending absolutely sets up a sequel. Paolini has stated that this is the “first of what will be many books” in the Fractalverse. Still, the novel does resolve the initial situation enough to provide a satisfactory conclusion. Readers who do not normally read science fiction but like Paolini’s *Inheritance Cycle* should give this one a try. So should readers of space opera, space adventure, and even military sf.

War Demons by Russell Newquist

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Devil went down to Georgia. He was looking for a soul to steal.

And this time, he isn’t coming with a violin. He’s prepared for war.

Welcome to *War Demons*, by Russell Newquist.

The story

Chapter one opens up with a swordfight with a demon and ends with dropping a daisy cutter on it.

That irritated the sucker a little.

Fast forward a few years to our hero, Michael Alexander, who Jack Ryaned out of the military when his helicopter crashed. He and his buddy hid in a cave ... only to discover something in the cave that was colder than the dark... and hungry.

When Michael returns to Georgia, the thing that haunted him in the sandbox follows...

Ahem, “The Devil went down to Georgia....”

But when Michael starts to see his dead friend stalking him in the shadows, well, it’s just some PTSD demons. Nothing to worry about, right?

Yeesh. When this guy is haunted by his past, he takes it literally.

The fun continues as the circle of crazy threatens to suck in the entire state. Black Ops commandos, Vatican operatives, a billionaire prepper (seriously, don’t mess with the billionaire prepper), a moment of “I wanna bring the flamethrower” that I really believe (Down to “We got it from the Bureau of Land Management”). He gathers the magnificent seven, mounts up, and “We’re gonna save the damsel from the dragon”

Aaaaannnnndddd it’s only the halfway mark. Which made me wonder how the bloody blue Hell the rest of the book was going to go.

That was pretty much the point where things got worse, complete with a villain you really just want to

run through with a stake, cut its head off and burn the body ... maybe in that order. It was such a deliciously evil sucker.

And then he had a couple of Blackhawk and Apache attack helicopters fight a dragon.

And, it being Georgia, it ends at a football stadium.

Because of course it does. It's Georgia.

The characters

Honestly, *War Demons* was solidly authored and put together. 11% into the book, he's established most of the characters we're going to see throughout the novel, including the villains.

Yes, all of them.

What? You thought just a demon was going to be enough? Nah. We're going to have golems and vampires and zombies and warlocks and Jihadis, oh my. (Or, as I thought of it as I read it, "terrorists and demons? Challenge accepted.") Newquist also does a great job of sprinkling everyone's back story throughout the novel.

It's got a nice sense of humor. Up to and including a spook who picks his aliases out of a liquor cabinet.

The world

This is very "secret world" –it's our world, only with monsters lurking in the background. Despite that *War Demons* gives you just enough world building to keep the story going, it's clear that this is the tip of an iceberg that can sink an ocean liner. It's very much like *Harry Dresden* that way — "Here's some lore, now duck!"

The politics

We have a SpecOps team fighting the forces of Hell, an Apache gunship playing tag with a dragon, preppers to the rescue, and yes, we're on a mission from God.

... You could say that the politics are somewhat socially right-leaning.

The politics of *War Demons* is somewhere between "Guns, lots of Guns," and "Deus Vult."

Or as one of our other reviews coined, you could call this "Punch you in the face Catholicism."

Content warning

There is reference to sex in here (as in "X slept with Y about Z years ago.")

Who is it for?

The back of *War Demons* describes it as "Jim Butcher's *Harry Dresden* collides with Larry Correia's

Monster Hunter International in this supernatural thriller that goes straight to Hell!”

That tag isn't bluster.

In fact, it's fairly accurate. Personally, I think War Demons leans more on MHI than Harry Dresden. So much so that I'm willing to say up front that I would not be surprised if Russell ends up authoring an MHI spinoff novel. No, I'm not exaggerating. This is a story that could have been mistaken for a Monster Hunter International novel if Larry Correia used prayer as a weapon more often. But I will admit, there is a TON of Dresden-level action.

Why read it?

Because it's every day, average people fighting the forces of darkness with enough firepower to make the A-Team envious. It's just plain fun.

The World Asunder by Kacey Ezell

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The first book in the series, "Minds of Men," was a finalist for the 2018 Dragon Awards. The headlines in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution read "First time novelist hits it out of the park!" Well, they WOULD have read that, if I had owned/operated the paper, but regardless, it was still a significant achievement. (If this one doesn't make Dragon, I'll be surprised. BADLY surprised.)

It's also confirmation of something I've been saying for some time, which is that the DCL (Dear Chopper Lady) is a great writer, and a great storyteller. And those two aren't the same!

Lina Sucherin was introduced in the first novel in a secondary storyline. Portraying an interrogator for the German Secret Police as a sympathetic character HAS to be a tough assignment, but by keeping a tight focus on her personal motivations and needs, Ezell pulled it off. Now we see her story in full, and it's not a pretty one.

She's living in the Soviet Occupation zone in Berlin, and things are bad, and getting worse. She is fortunate to have a job as a typist for the State (all jobs were for the State), and a little apartment, even if utilities aren't always available. Best of all, she has good friends who live across the hall, husband Rolland, wife Isa, and their three daughters Ginette, Aleda, and Johanna. They represent all that she values in the world.

At the start of the book (in 1948), Lina is shocked into a rediscovery of her abilities to communicate through her mind, by a sound that she originally interprets as a return of the American bombers that took so much from her. It throws her back into a time when she regularly used her psychic abilities. A gradual reveal shows us how she closed the door on her powers, after she used them to kill someone during the sacking of Berlin at the close of the War.

Her journey is triggered when she gets home to find that the StaPo, or their predecessors, have taken away Rolland, while Isa and the girls hide. She agrees to help them get to safety, by crossing the border into the American zone, where Isa has a sister. And there, she meets an American intelligence officer, but only if Lina helps him rescue Rolland for extraction to America, where his (secret) background will

be exploited.

That's the core story set-up, although there is much, much more. I leave the discovery of her adventures, torments, and conflicts as an exercise for the reader. You may anticipate losing sleep over this one. I found it to be an AWFULLY absorbing read. I was in the middle of a bout of insomnia when I started reading, with about 75 hours or so since I last slept. Usually, by that time, I am not able to concentrate well enough to read, but I had no problem staying with "The World Asunder." I do not recommend that you wait until your next bout with insomnia; get the book and read it NOW.

And we come to the entire point of this review: an examination of the degree of intimacy experienced between couples in popular fiction. I think I started paying attention to this several years ago, with one particular Mel Gibson film, Lethal Weapon 2. In that delightful romance (NOT!), Gibson and the girl meet, share attraction, share a bed, then share a murder attempt which the girl does not survive – all in one day. Ummm...nope. It takes longer than that.

Usually.

There ARE exceptions though, and Ezell has found one.

The PURPOSE of a courting period is to discover the other person. You have to spend time with them in order to distinguish between attraction, which is fast and fairly common, and a determined commitment necessary for a healthy, mature relationship. Usually, that period of getting to know the other person takes months, or longer. And it is ESSENTIAL in Western culture, which doesn't accommodate arranged marriages.

But! Ezell's "Psyche of War" series postulates something closely akin to telepathy. It's not just thought transfers, though; there is a sharing of emotional states, and beliefs; it's a dreadfully intrusive act, if not voluntary. Hence, Lina avoids doing it, even after her powers return, out of respect for the others. However, Paul Rutherford, the American intelligence officer, not only opens his mind to her, he INSISTS that they maintain a continuous link, and as a side effect, they come to know each other, thoroughly.

And, having accomplished that in a very short period of time, they fall in love, and ...not spoiling further.

And it's LEGIT!

How do I know it's legit? Because Poul Anderson addressed the Very Same Issue of knowing another via telepathic communication, in his 1957 story, "Journey's End." True, that one has a different ending, but it doesn't matter.

The essence is the same: via the type of communication Ezell describes, two people can come to know each other much faster than is possible with mundane forms of communication. For one thing, there is no hiding secrets, and no possibility of deceit. Each person, even if unwilling, brings nothing but the truth to the communication. For another, the ever-important issue of trust is quickly laid to rest. Lina is instantly able to discern what Paul's intentions are toward her, and will encounter no surprise betrayals.

True, there are other elements necessary to the formation of a mature relationship, but the most important aspect has very little to do with the body; it's almost entirely a decision, a choice. And, while for the mundane world, bad choices can be made, because the proper evidence is hidden or ignored.,

that's simply not possible with the mind-to-mind connection in this series.

SO: the romance works, and I don't want to hear anyone whining that it isn't realistic. Got that?

Prose Bono

The Long and the Short of It

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

A friend and fellow writer made an offhand comment in the writing/accountability group we both belong to, as he was talking about his writing progress. Short stories are harder than novels, he said. I wholeheartedly agreed with him. I've had repeated attempts at shorts derail themselves in an attempt to go long, very long. Writing an effective short story requires so much, in such a small arc, that it's difficult to compress.

I was listening to a podcast the other day about, among many, many other things (and it's an excellent episode, I highly recommend it, called Frittering Away Genius), the compression of video, and what makes this possible. It's the diffs.

What's the diff? Well, in this case, it's the differences between one frame and another in a movie. The less diff, the more it can be compressed. It's when, the host explained, you have a lot of jump shots and rapid action, it becomes harder and slower to compress it. Which, as I was contemplating the problem of writing short, really came back to me.

Part of how you can compress an entire world into a short story is to have as few differences from the reader expectation as possible. And when you do have, make them count. Tropes exist for a reason – we know and understand them. They are shorthand, which the reader can mentally unpack, making your story bigger than it actually is, in the mind of the reader. Rather than taking the time to explain every little thing, just slide it in, and see what happens.

The jump cut applies to shorts, too. You can't have too many places, too many people, in a short story and have it work effectively. Which, as I say this, I'm certain that someone will come up with an example. As a rule of thumb, thought, shorts are necessarily limited in scope. Which also means action – you aren't going to be able to pack multiple action scenes, even with spare description that you have pared down to the essentials, into a short story. Pick one, and run with it, unless you have the luxury of a longer structure – ten thousand or more words. Keep in mind that the film analogy plays out here, too. A feature length film is, more or less, a novella worth of material. Which is why the book is always better than the movie. You have to seriously truncate a novel to cram it into one movie.

Long Live Exposition!

L. Jagi Lamplighter

<http://SupersiveSF.com>

Long Live Exposition – Use the Long Live the Queen system to evaluate where to put exposition.

Last week, I had to move a large chunk of exposition. It was stuck in the middle of a rather active scene and more than one reader had complained it was awkward and dull.

I realized that it had to be moved. But where? Ideally, I wanted it in a place where it would increase the readers interest, rather than bore them. But how to find such a place? I thought it was fascinating.

How could I tell when readers would agree with me, and when they would groan and pull out their hair?

In the end, I divided it into four pieces, putting each part into a place where it added to the scene rather than subtracting from it.

I wish I could tell you I did it gracefully.

But I can't.

I dissolved into a puddle.

When I recovered from puddlehood, I had an insight that will, God willing, help me avoid the puddle fate in the future. It was about how to evaluate a passage to decide if a given piece of exposition would increase or decrease the reader's interest. This insight revolved around the Japanese girls' video game: Long Live the Queen.

In order to explain my insight, I must first digress and describe the game.

Long live the queen 2

And here she is in her Magical Girl outfit. Her expression changes when her mood changes.

Long Live the Queen is a text-based adventure. You play an adorably cute fourteen-year-old princess named Elodie who must live to her 15th year in order to be crowned Queen.

Each week, you choose the classes you attend in order to gain skills you needs to survive. There are 39 skills to choose from, varying from Royal Department to Divination to Military Strategy Falconry to Magic. Each skill can be used to negotiate various events you must face.

You cannot learn all the skills. The key to reaching the coronation is to pick the correct skills to allow you to pass the challenges you chose to undertake.

Since learning skills is the difference between life and death, it is essential to learn as many as you can as quickly as possible. Whether or not you learn a given skill slowly or quickly depends upon your mood.

There are eight moods (Angry, Afraid, Cheerful, Depressed, etc.) The activities you do in your free time—such as going to court or sneaking out of the castle—raise or lower these moods.

If you pick the wrong activity, you can end up producing the wrong mood. This means you suddenly have a negative to learning the skill you need to pass the next challenge.

Between the activities and the classes, comes the story. During these bits of text exposition, events happen. Friends visit. Commoners bring petitions. Nobles challenge you to a duel. Your country is invaded!

These events can raise or lower your moods. Sometimes, they include skill checks that you pass or fail depending on the classes you've chosen. Occasionally, there are choices to make. Do you raise taxes? Lower them? Or keep them the same? Do you execute your magic using aunt? Or let her live?

By now, I am sure you are wondering: what in the name of the All-Mighty this has to do with writing?

Here is my insight:

Imagine you have written that wonderful description of your character's relationship with his grandmother that you find just fascinating. You really want to include it in your story, but you are not sure where to put it.

Use the Long Live the Queen rating system to decide where it should go!

Look at your scene. Pick some possible spots to put it. Then rate them in the following fashion:

If adding your exposition takes away from the prevailing mood of the scene—that is like the princess discovering she can't learn a skill she wants because her mood is wrong. Mark that spot as a -1.

If the exposition does nothing for the scene, that is like having your princess take a class in a skill that currently has no modifier. It's okay, but there's no particular gain.

And we all know how important it is to increase your skills before the next skill check—or you will eat the gift of chocolate without realizing that it is poisoned...and die!

We'll call that position a 0.

If your exposition will change the mood of your character in a way that is beneficial to your story, mark that spot: +1

If your exposition leads to your character doing something (like the princess's skills check), mark that spot: +2

If your exposition leads to your character to make a choice, mark that spot: +3

Put your cherished exposition in the spot in your manuscript that has the highest Long Live the Queen rating.

And if you can't find a place to put it where it has an effect on the character? That's the time to consider cutting it. Or rewrite it to have more of an impact.

If you remember this simple rule and apply it when adding exposition and backstory, you may make it to your coronation—in the form of publication—without ever dissolving into a puddle.

Which, really, is the best for everyone—especially your furniture.

Interviews

Interview of L. Jagi Lamplighter by Richard Paolinelli

<https://upstreamreviews.com/?p=462>

In the Superversive Spotlight: L. Jagi Lamplighter

How long have you been writing?

I started my first novel when I was 12. I wrote the first chapter and maybe one or two others. Though after that, I only wrote an occasional bad short story until after college.

After college, I went to work for my dad. I would write for two hours and work for him for six. (Only got paid for the six, but he let me spend two of the supposed eight work hours writing.)

The first year, I only worked on grammar, because I knew mine wasn't excellent. I would also write out passages by hand from my favorite authors and see how they used words, punctuation, and language in general. I still remember the semi-colon use from *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Finally, I started writing. My first attempt was about a wizard who could make living things out of a magical clay and drank a lot of tea. He was trying to make a daughter. I never finished it, but, to my surprise, it was quite funny. I didn't expect that. I wasn't funny in real life.

I went on to try several other novels and threw out over 1000 pages. One of those novels, currently called *Uncross the Stars*, I am still working on. I am on version 14. Someday, I hope to finish it. (Sadly, the main thing holding me up now is that the world has changed, and the story I had been trying to tell is not as pertinent.)

In 1992, I started what was then called *Prospero's Children*. After about 12 chapters, I made an outline. Never wrote another word. I see this happen to others, too. No one tells them how dangerous writing an outline is for organic thinkers. But a few friends liked what I had written and in 1998 later, I went back to it. I ripped up the outline (mentally. Not literally) and started again.

I finished it in 2001. I sent it to my agent, who was an old boss of mine. He got hired by Tor, which, at the time, was the number one publisher all SF and Fantasy authors wanted to be associated with. They

were adventurous and happening and still directly run by the great Tom Doherty. So, suddenly, my book was on the desk of an editor!

It took him until 2005 to decide if he wanted the book. During that time, I rewrote the book and rewrote the book and rewrote the book. It took Tor two years after that to decide that they wanted to publish it. Eventually, when it came out in 2009—as a trilogy *Prospero Lost*, *Prospero In Hell*, and *Prospero Re-gained*—I had rewritten it six or seven times.

Which writers inspire you?

Tolkien, Lewis, Tolstoy, Lloyd Alexander, Roger Zelazny, Margaret Mitchell, Alan Gardner, J. K. Rowling.

One of my first readers described my writing style as: Neil Gaiman meets C. S. Lewis or, for an American equivalent, Roger Zelazny meets Lloyd Alexander.

That is quite an accurate description of my style.

So, what have you written?

I mentioned the *Prospero's Children* series. (Tor published it as *Prospero's Daughter*, because they put it in the “Women in Fantasy” line. I was told that my book would be put in this line “even though it had no sex in it.” When the series moved to Wordfire, we changed the series title back to the original.) This is a story about Miranda from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, searching for her father, the Dread Magician Prospero, who has gone missing. The premise is that Shakespeare misled us at the end. Prospero never drowned his books and was still around, hundreds of years later, keeping order among the spirits of the air and earth, etc. and protecting the world from supernatural nasties.

Only Prospero has retired, and the children he has fathered over the centuries have scattered. Only Miranda is left to run Prospero, Inc. and protect the world.

When Prospero goes missing, Miranda must gather together her wayward siblings, some of whom she hates and some of whom she loves—and some of whom are not as wayward as she first thought—and rescue their father...

...who has been carried off, alive, to Hell.

It's a fun story, full of magic and wonder and humor. It's half urban fantasy (though with few of the clichés of modern urban fantasies, as I wrote it before UF was a genre) and half Dante. The story does turn out to be a direct sequel to *The Tempest*, but it takes a while till that becomes clear.

I have a couple of books I haven't published, a children's series about the *Lost Brothers* (Jacob and Nicky Lost, which is kind of funny because my husband wrote a series about a *Preston Lost* who became Lost on the Last Continent. I wonder if they are related.) and *Visions of Arhyalon*, of which *Uncross the Stars*, which I mentioned before, is the first book. It's what you might now call LitRPG...only the roleplaying game it was based on was designed to feel a lot more like a novel, so it isn't anything like modern LitRPG. Premise is: When a dragon attacks earth, three young writers recognize it as something that one of them made up. They discover that Earth has a magic power: Creator Vision, the ability to see into other dimensions—only you think you are making it up. Armed with the knowledge

of stories that they and others have written, they head of into a strange and wondrous greater universe—after saving the Earth, of course.) I also have a book of short stories from E-Spec press called *In the Lamplight*.

My current project is *The Books of Unexpected Enlightenment*. This series is based on a roleplaying game that a friend, Mark Whipple, ran. John and I fell in love with the premise, and I decided to write it up. It will, God willing, be a long series—possibly 24 books.

The story follows a little British sorceress, Rachel Griffin, as she attends a magic school in America called *The Roanoke Academy for the Sorcerous Arts*. Rachel has a perfect memory, and she discovers that this allows her to see through certain kinds of enchantments that hide things from human eyes. So, while she is supposed to be going to school, she stumbles onto mysteries that involve not merely students, but the whole world—and beyond.

Rachel lives on a world without God, without angels or demons or Jews, Christians, or Muslims. Only her first day, she finds a strange statue of a creature she has never seen in any bestiary...a woman with wings. It's not a fairy. It's too big for a pixie.

Soon, she begins to discover that there are many things the world once knew about that have been forgotten—and, to a girl with a perfect memory, the notion of forgetting things is particularly terrifying, so she sets out to discover what has been lost.

Meanwhile, she takes classes in magic, tries to make friends, falls for an older boy, and gets into a great deal of trouble.

There is a cast of zany characters, but the real breakout star among them is Rachel's best friend, crazy orphan Sigfried Smith and his talking familiar, Lucky the Dragon. Siggy, who is the favorite of many readers, was played by my husband, author John C. Wright, in the original game, and is really fun to write. (John helps me with the "Sigification" going through to make sure that Sigfried is sufficiently, well, Siggy-like.)

It is a delightful series to write, filled with enchantment and wonder, humor and deeper, darker moments. It takes place on the Hudson River (literally, the island is in the Hudson near Storm King Mountain) and draws from the rich lore of that area (think *Headless Horseman*.) The religious elements are quite light, as by Book Five, it is still shrouded in secret, but part of what drew John and I to the story was that amidst the adventure, romance humor, and horror, it was fascinating to meet God again, as if the first time, through the eyes of an unprejudiced character.

I also have stories in a number of anthologies, including *Planetary: Mercury*, *Planetary: Venus*, and *Planetary: Luna*. I co-edited *Venus* with the lovely and talented A. M. Freeman.

What draws you to Superversive writing?

In 2013, my husband and I were driving back from Balticon and wondering why so little modern fantasy and science fiction seemed heroic. I said that I wished there were more stories that had moments that drew you out of yourself, made you consider the wonders and majesty of God's greater universe (whether God was mentioned or no). Then, as a joke, because I had recently heard of someone else doing this and thought it was hilarious that a specific couple had done this, I said, "Let's start a literary movement."

We bandied about some names for our literary movement. John recommended Superversive, a word used by the great essayist, Tom Simon. Basically, as the word was described to me, if subversive was change by undermining from below, Superversive was change by inspiring from above. I don't know if he coined the word or found it somewhere in Tolkien or Lewis (I've heard both, so maybe he coined it from inspiration found in the works of those two worthy authors.)

A year and a quarter later, I launched the Superversive Literary Movement with the Superversive Blog. The first article was The Art of Courage by Tom Simon himself: <http://bondwine.com/2014/10/01/the-art-of-courage/>

Many people wrote for this blog. It causes a tiny stir. Jason Rennie even contacted me from Australia, asking if he could start a publishing company around this idea.

And that is how it started! (If anyone wants to know more about Superversiveness, some of my original articles have been gathered in this free booklet: Holy Godzilla of the Apocalypse <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/dif3flen4g>

What are you working on at the minute?

I have started The Sixth Book of Unexpected Enlightenment, which is to be called: Guardians of the Shadowlands. It starts about two minutes after the end of the fifth book, The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering. Rachel opens the book by nearly getting staked (by someone who mistakes her for a vampire.)

I am also working on a short story called "Who Rules the World" about Miranda Prospero's blind brother Cornelius. I have tried to write this story for three different anthologies, and it just didn't work out, but it is for the best, because this current anthology seems like a much better fit for the story.

Do you read much and if so who are your favorite authors?

I don't. And I say this with great sadness. But I have kids. I homeschool. I edit other people's books. I teach writing...and when I am not doing all that, I write.

I do love to read, though. I read once a year on vacation, and sometimes, I slip in other books. This year, I was lucky. I took off three weeks and read Jonathan Moeller's entire Cloak Mage series—15 books. Moeller has been my Indie publishing guru for years, and I had never read any of his works. The series was really fun. It was about a young woman whose brother is dying of an illness only advanced magic can cure, so she is dragooned into stealing things for a powerful elf, and hijinks ensue.

I also have read most of Christopher Nuttall's Schooled in Magic and Zero Enigma books. Chris and I write in the same genre. We just edited anthologies together, Fantastic Schools, Volumes One and Two (Volume Three is on its way) which are, to my surprise, doing quite well.

Though recently I had a real treat. I got to read House by the River by Anthony Regan—an unpublished work that I cajoled him into letting me read. It was just like my favorite books from when I was a child...where the magic is less obvious and mysterious and with a magical house. It was wonderful! I'm hoping he will send me the second book. I'm also hoping he will publish it so that the rest of you can read it!

How can readers discover more about you and your work?

I am on Amazon and at Silver Empire (they have a great new bookclub option. If you love reading, check it out!)

There is a list of my works here, but it is not entirely up to date: <http://www.ljagilamplighter.com>

Interview with Yakov Merkin by Richard Paolinelli

How long have you been writing?

I've been writing seriously for about 5 years (less seriously for at least 15)

Which writers inspire you?

There have been a bunch over the years, but two that come to mind right away are Robert Jordan and Brandon Sanderson.

So, what have you written?

I have so far written & released all 7 books in the Galaxy Ascendant series (space opera), one epic fantasy, The Dragon Hand, plus my Master's thesis, Crosscurrents: Navigating The Turbulent Politics Of The Right During The Horthy Era In Hungary, 1920-1944. I also have a few short stories out in anthologies put together by other authors.

What draws you to Superversive writing?

I enjoy writing (and reading) uplifting, heroic stories, particularly those that honor the traditions that have brought both me personally, and civilization as a whole, into a better place. Traditions that are today under attack.

What are you working on at the minute?

In addition to a short story for an as-yet-unannounced anthology, I am writing a new fantasy series, Light Unto Another World, an anime-inspired fantasy series of light novels in which an IDF soldier finds himself suddenly whisked away to a fantasy world. (And, G-d willing, I'll be launching a Kick-starter for the first 5 volumes, all of which are already written, any time now.)

Do you read much and if so who are your favorite authors.

I read less than I used to (mostly due to lack of time), but a few of my favorite authors at the moment are Jim Butcher and Timothy Zahn.

How can readers discover more about you and your work?

All of my books are available on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Yakov-Merkin/e/B0711PXQK6>

I also have a website, yakovmerkin.com, on which I'm not as active as I probably ought to be.

And for anyone still using twitter, I'm there at @yakovmerkin (same for Gab and Parler, though I'm not active on either at the moment.)

~Finis~

