The N3F
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono

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

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Prose Bono

Literary Criticism

FINIS ... 41

Editorial

Why Literary Criticism?

We have added a new section to The N3F Review of Books, Including Prose Bono. For the nonce, that section is entitled "Literary Criticism". In this section, we present articles that occupy the traditional role of some literary critics, namely they use their reviews to expound upon positions that could be called 'political', positions that refer not only to the book under consideration but also to its relationships with other volumes, other authors, and issues beyond the magnificent stfnal world. Of their nature, works of literary criticism will prove controversial, with some readers strongly disapproving of the position of some reviewers. We would like to present more literary-critical articles, hopefully taking different political positions. Some readers will compare with the situation several decades ago, in which — we are told — fannish publishing in one European country was dominates by a single fan-ed, who strove mightily to impose his political opinions on the local fannish scene. Unfortunately, the fan-ed in question was by report a Communist. To avoid distressing most readers, the section Literary Criticism will appear as the final articles in each issue.

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Fiction

Angel of the Overpass (Ghost Roads)
by Seanan McGuire
Review by Sam Lubell

Angel of the Overpass by Seanan McGuire is the third book in the Ghost Roads series about Rose Marshall, the Phantom Prom Date, who became a hitchhiking ghost after Bobby Cross hit her with her car in 1952 in a small town in Michigan. Rose can gain a physical body for a short time by convincing someone to lend her their coat and can only take what is given to her freely without payment. Despite what some legends say, she does not kill those who give her rides; instead, she helps guide the dying to their afterlife.

But Angel of the Overpass is also a sequel to That Ain't Witchcraft, book eight of the InCryptid series, which even has a guest appearance by Rose. In that book, Antimony Price made a major change to the ghost roads mythos. Angel of the Overpass deals with repercussions of this for Rose and Bobby Cross. Former movie star Bobby Cross, who made a deal to stay young and handsome by using ghosts to fuel his unique muscle car, continues to chase Rose both because she got away from him when she first became a ghost and because her long existence gives her exceptional power that would power his car for a long time. In this book, he gives her an ultimatum, surrender her protection and stop running or he will target her friends. He even points out that this would save the existence of other ghosts. But now Bobby has lost his protector and, at the urging of the Queen of the Routewitches and with permission from the Lady of the Dead, Rose has the opportunity to turn the tables on Bobby and end him once and for all. Can she do this and remain true to herself and her role as a hitchhiking ghost?

An interesting subplot is her relationship with Gary, her former prom date, who has turned himself into a ghost car in order to reunite with Rose. But Rose is unsure how she feels about him and resents how he made this decision without consulting her. What seemed like a happy ending for the pair in book two, now seems a little less happy and not so much an ending. Another subplot is Rose's own identity as events push her beyond the limits of a hitchhiking ghost.

As always McGuire remains compellingly readable. She is a pure storyteller who excels at creating series that start off as fun adventures but gradually reveal a darker, complex mythos behind the facade. She writes interesting, likable, competent characters and puts them in interesting situations.
Some readers may find the start of the book to have a bit too much explaining of the backstory, especially for those who have read all the preceding books, even with McGuire making it interesting, not a dry history lesson. This may help new readers, although I still would recommend people read the first two Ghost Roads books and That Ain't Witchcraft (at a minimum) before tackling Angel of the Overpass. The close of the book provides a fitting ending for the whole Ghost Roads series. If they do continue, I would expect they would have to be rather different, possibly with a new central character (in the same way that the InCryptid books use different main characters) or with Rose in a different role.

I recommend Angel of the Overpass and the Ghost Roads series so far to readers who want modern-day fantasy with a more complex backstory and world building than just the idea of a fantastical element added to the world we know.

Another Girl, Another Planet by Lou Antonelli
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

This review will be short…Another Girl, Another Planet

Ahem…

Buy Lou Antonelli's Another Girl, Another Planet.

Thanks.

No, that's it. Go out, buy this book.

You don't like or read alternate history? Neither do I. Too bad, you'll like it anyway. Really.

…. Sigh. Okay. Fine. Be that way.

The story

David Schuster is just another political operator. He's helped his political party under President John Anderson, who just won the 1984 Presidential election, despite being primaried by former governor Ronald Reagan. As a reward, they're sending him to a political appointment … on Mars. But he'll have company with counterparts on the Soviet side, like the minor functionary Vladimir Putin…

Welcome to an alternate reality where Admiral Robert Heinlein turned the arms race of the Cold War into a never-ending space race. Where Heinlein's buddy Asimov went into practical applications of his theories, leading to a particularly messy Cuban revolt of androids.

Yes, we're going to do an alternate history with a mystery as well as Blade Runner as a subplot.

For the record, this book is laugh out loud funny. There is, at minimum, a chuckle a page. Up to and including Mormons …..INNNN SSSPPPPAAACCCEEE. Also, Jenny's phone number. Heh… you have to read it to get that joke.

I'm not sure if he wanted to deliberately make a reference to Andy Weir when our hero discusses Martian potatoes, but that helps. And Lou does have a philosophical conversation with androids about theology without being preachy about it. Yay.

The writing is brilliant. Like with some Nero Wolfe novels, Antonelli gives you relevant parts of the plot before you even know what questions are being asked, and what mysteries are coming at you.

The characters

David Schuster is the best drawn character in the book, but he's a first person narrator, so that's to be expected. Everyone else in the novel is well drawn, with enough personality to be likeable.

The world

As this is alternate history, Lou Antonelli has more than enough historical references to make any history nerd happy — which politicians rose to power, or fell sooner rather than later, and what happened to some of the others. And this shows a solid grasp of US local political history so deep, that I've got a master's degree, and I read history for fun, and I'm certain I missed some references.

Obviously, the big question Lou dives into is clear: What would have happened if Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein never went into creative fields, but stayed creative in the "real world," like MIT professor Asimov?

All of the historical changes and references are easy and casual. Nothing is forced in this book. Especially when they refer to music and SF authors who had different lives. You can easily see this being the future we could have had. We might even have flying cars in his version of 2021.
The politics

I'll call this right of center, but not too heavily. Obviously, the politics of this world will be different from our own. No one is a fan of the Soviets, but they're not much of an issue during the book. There's enough about progress and advancing science, with a good hefty dose of warning lights. Because sometimes, there are no slippery slopes –they're just sheer cliffs.

Content warning

There will be sex scattered throughout the book, but it's all fade-to-black, offscreen sex. David Schuster is a bit of a ladies' man, but he doesn't get a lot of opportunity.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys basic science fiction, or mysteries. Want something like Blade Runner, only brighter, with more mystery and a sense of humor? Antonelli has it.
Why read it?

Lou Antonelli's Another Girl, Another Planet is both a self contained SF mystery, as well as the best sequel bait ever. It's a murder mystery, a missing persons, alternate history, and ends on a fun and innovative hook for round two…

There will be a round two, right Lou?

Barbarians of the Beyond
by Matt Hughes (& Jack Vance's Ghost)
Reviewed by Robert Runté
http://SFeditor.ca

Jack Vance (1916-2013) was one of the greatest and most prolific science fiction and fantasy writers of his age, a master of world-building, memorable characters, plot, and language.

Mathew Hughes, the Canadian SF&F writer—who is similarly a master of world-building, memorable characters, plotting and language—is frequently compared to Vance, with reviewers pointing out the obvious Vancian influences on Hughes' own version of The Dying Earth or the similarities in their galactic civilizations and central characters…while still allowing that Hughes' vision is completely origi-

nal and often even more intriguing.

It should therefore come as no surprise, then, that Jack Vance's son, John, invited Hughes to continue some of Vance's most popular series, a challenge Hughes has joyfully taken up. Barbarians of the Beyond is therefore the sixth and latest book in Jack Vance's The Demon Princes series. It is also a thoughtful, page-turning novel quite capable of standing on its own for those not familiar with the original series.

As a fan of both Hughes and Vance, I found it an eerie read. It is not just that the novel is set in Vance's universe, or that the action takes up where Vance's series left off, it's that Hughes is writing as Vance, channeling him as only a true disciple could. And yet…it was unmistakably a Matthew Hughes novel too. As collaborations go, I cannot imagine a more cohesive blending of two masters, Hughes building onto—but also staying true to—Vance's original vision.

The title, Barbarians of the Beyond, accurately conveys—with perhaps a touch of self-deprecating humour—that the novel is pure space opera. It's escapist fare, filled with spaceships, pirates, drug lords, spies, and so on, but the culture, the setting, and characters are fully realized, making this a great read. Best of all, both Vance and Hughes are known for their inventive neologisms, which instantly convey the function and significance of far future technology but still manage to remind the reader that this isn't 1960s America.

The series' 'Demon Princes' refers to five master criminals who operate in the Beyond, the far reaches of space where the policing of more civilized planets cannot reach. There are no actual demons in the hell-spawn sense, merely criminal cartels in the tradition of Pablo Escobar or El Chapo. The 'barbarians' of the title refers to the attitudes of the civilized sectors towards the scattered settlements of farmers and villagers that make up the Beyond, assuming that such primitive conditions produce unsophisticated peoples.

Of course, Morwen Sabine, our heroine, is anything but primitive. Hughes has created a smart, driven woman who is both a product of her upbringing and yet foreshadows the future of the Beyond (as part of Vance's Gaean Reach series, set in the same universe but a gentler future.)

One notable difference between Hughes and Vance is that Vance generally only darkly implied offstage violence, whereas in this instance, Hughes has one scene where Morwen is directly involved. The scene is needed to move character and story forward, and it is not particularly graphic, but I was a bit surprised after other scenes had stuck to Vance/Hughes' style of an arched eyebrow paired with a seemingly innocuous, but therefore terrifying, comment. By the standard of Star Wars, and certainly of, say, the John Wicks movies, the violence remains pretty mild.

I highly recommend Barbarians of the Beyond both for itself, and as an introduction to The Demon Princes, if you're not already familiar with that series, and to Matt Hughes, Canada's answer to Jack Vance.

Barbarians of the Beyond is published by Spatterlight, 2021.

An earlier version of this review appeared in The Ottawa Review of Books, Sept 2021.

Bookburners by Max Gladstone, Margaret Dunlap, Mur Lafferty, and Brian Francis Slattery
Review by Samuel Lubell

What if books were written like television series? Instead of having one or two authors write a novel, get a group of authors, put together a series bible with the long-range plot and character arcs, and have the authors write a series of adventures involving these characters. That's what realm.fm (originally serialbox.com) does with a multiple series in the sf, fantasy, horror and thriller genres.

Bookburners (available in hardcover, paperback, and ebook) is a collection of the first season of the same-named serial. These fifteen episodes follow the adventures of a Vatican black-ops magic hunting team, Team Three of the Societas Librorum Occultorum. Their job is to hunt down and neutralize books of black magic, containing demons who can take control of human bodies.

The main character and reader surrogate is Sal Brooks, a NYC cop in her early thirties. She does not believe in God or magic. When her younger brother Perry visits with a magical book and talks of being under surveillance by a group he calls the Bookburners, strange things starts to happen. Her partner claims she's made the whole thing up and the building videotapes do not back up her story. Naturally, she investigates and discovers the Bookburners, who identify themselves as special consultants to the police department with the backing of the police chief.

It turns out that Perry is possessed by a demon called The Hand. To break the possession, someone has to close the book in which the demon lives. After the inevitable confrontation, Sal joins the team, telling them that they need a cop.

In the early episodes, the team confronts magic and demonic possession, helped by a magical orb that alerts them to new magical problems. At first the episodes seem independent, but gradually an arc emerges and the reader discovers connections across the episodes. There's corruption in the Vatican, one of the teams enjoys the violence too much, and there may be a traitor on Sal's team.

Each member of the team has their own secrets and their own reasons for becoming involved in this hidden world. Liam, their tech guru, lost two years to his own demon possession. Grace has superstrength and speed, but a lifespan tied to the burning of a candle. And Asanti, an archivist, is too willing to turn to magic as a solution.

This series can be considered the Vatican's supernatural version of the *X-Files*. The writers' styles blend seamlessly (or at least are edited well). Characterization is several notches above any television series and print does not have to worry about the cost of special effects or actors leaving the show.

Fans of *X-Files*-type adventures or a grown-up version of *Buffy* will find themselves right at home here. Readers who wonder what would happen if first-rate fantasy writers suddenly found themselves running a TV series with an unlimited budget will find *Bookburners* fits the bill. It's also suitable for fans of urban fantasy. While Realm.fm has five seasons available online, this collection of the first season has a very satisfactory ending, not a cliffhanger.

City of Miracles
by Robert Jackson Bennett
Review by Samuel Lubell

City of Miracles is the third and final book in the *Divine Cities* series, following ***City of Stairs*** and ***City of Blades***. This book follows Sigrud je Harkvaldsson, the giant Dreyling, a mountain savage who in the first book served as Shara Komayd's bodyguard and partner in investigations. Now, almost 20 years later, Sigrud hears news of Shara's death and rushes to Ahanashtan to find those responsible. While he finds traces of a bomb, he discovers a Divine barrier in the streets of the city that turned Shara's hotel into a fortress, suggesting that Shara has once again involved herself in the Divine. But Sigrud knows there is only one God left in the world because Shara has killed the other two.

Surprisingly, Sigrud finds the actual killer fairly easily, although overcoming the killer's divine protections was more difficult. Still, while searching, he learns that Shara was working a larger operation collecting mysterious children that seem to have special powers. But this work is opposed by Nokov, a child of the Gods who has powers over darkness. Nokov is able to gain strength by absorbing the powers of the other children, which he plans to use to become a full God himself and then defeat the remaining original one. He has a list of these Godlings, including Shara's adopted daughter, Tatyana. Sigrud is aided by a girl with powers over time, the extremely rich fiance of Shara's former boyfriend, and his own hand which has power over the Divine as a result of past torture with the Finger of Kolkan.

Ultimately, Sigrud becomes not just Tatyana's protector, but also her teacher in the use of weapons. This book provides a strong characterization of Sigrud who embodies persistence. He finds himself drawing on skills he has not used in over a decade, constantly surviving incredible damage and injuries culminating in an incredible action sequence on an aero-tram, essentially a cable car that can travel for a three-day ride. The book would make a fantastic action movie. His age comes up frequently as well, although he does note that he isn't aging as much as he was before he went into hiding. For instance, he wonders if he is "an old dog insisting he can still perform old tricks". However, at other spots, Sigrud is surprised at how well his old tricks work in the modern sophisticated world.

It is worth noting that unlike so many fantasies where technology is essentially frozen, in ***City of Miracles*** the world has made advances since ***City of Stairs***. There are trains, cars, guns, and bombs, in addition to the aero-tram. Yet the book feels closer to traditional fantasies with its invented world than to urban fantasies in which magic functions in our own world. The book also has some interesting speculation on the nature of the divine.

Although this is the third book in the series, Bennett provides enough information that a new reader can follow along, especially since each book in the trilogy focuses on a different main character and nearly 20 years have passed since the first book. However, the books in the series are interesting enough that the reader really should start with ***City of Stairs***.

Overall, I think ***City of Miracles*** is the best book in the trilogy. It has stronger characterization and a better sense of consequences to the characters' actions. Sigrud is not as clever as Shara is in the first book, but succeeds through determination and stubbornness. Readers who enjoy Max Gladstone's *The Craft Sequence* will also enjoy this trilogy's take on the relationships between humans and the divine.

Dreamscapes by Ethan Goffman
Review by Will Mayo

This is a book of dreams. Indeed, it is a book I wish I had written. It covers a wide variety of the mind from anxieties about the author finding his way home in a strange city to various fidelities to anti-Semitism to contact with alien civilizations to the very untold secrets of the universe. I suggest that you open this book of tales and read it for all it's worth. It will leave you wondering.

Escaping Infinity
by Richard Paolinelli
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

If you want world-bending, rule-breaking science fiction that explores great new ideas and explores philosophical insights about humanity, the way classical SF used to be, then you better get your hands on the complete works of John C. Wright.

But make danged certain to get Richard Paolinelli in the same shopping trip, because he will do the exact same thing… usually, using fewer twenty-dollar words.

Escaping Infinity was my introduction to the man who I would easily put in the top 5 science fiction authors of today.

And for the record, no, this is NOT the author who wrote Eragon, that's Christopher Paolini.

The story

Peter Childress and his buddy Charlie Womack are engineers driving to Phoenix. But Charlie's "shortcut" has them lost in the middle of the desert, Arizona. When their car breaks down in the middle of the night, they figure they're well and truly screwed. Lucky for them, Peter and Charlie trip over the Infinity Hotel. Charlie can't help but enjoy all of the hotel's casino and other delights.

Peter, on the other hand, wonders where the front door disappeared to, and why the floors on the inside of the building seem to go on forever.

If you read the above and thought this was a scifi version of The Twilight Zone taking place in the Hotel California… yeah, pretty much. Sort of. After a fashion.

Though if you're worried that the description above will spoil the plot, it only covers up to chapter 2. Our hero, Childress, has already started to piece together that the hotel is bigger on the inside by that point.

Yes, the Hotel Infinity is bigger on the inside. And if you think that's bad, you should see the Star Trek references. Heh.

The book is written in a style that's very novel-like. Less Victor Hugo, and more modern novel, but Richard is very much an artist with no pretensions. It's smart and well-thought-out, a mystery that plays

perfectly fair, and gives the reader all of the pieces and parts to figure out what the bloody blue heck is going on. However, you really won't figure it out.

I will say that going from the prologue to chapter 1 in a little disorienting, as it goes from space opera, David Weber style, to a road trip in the Southwest. The last 10% of the book could have been an additional novel by itself, with what it pulled off. But the ending we got gave a complete, satisfying conclusion to the story, the characters, and the world that's been established.

The characters

One of the nice things here is that everyone has a back story. And I do mean everybody. If they have a name, they have a backstory. There's at least one chapter of history for almost every named character. We know their full biography. It's so effortlessly done, it's a joy to see how he does it.

Oh, and while we're trying to escape the ultimate booby trap hotel, free all the inhabitants, save the world, and figure out what's going on here, Richard found time for a romance subplot that's surprisingly well done and ties in to everything.

The world

I'm going to have to make a pass on this one. One of the key elements to this is the mystery, and I can't explore the world building without spoilers.

Suffice it to say that Richard uses very little and that it effectively describes a lot.

The politics

The politics are, in a way, socially conservative. It favors small towns over big cities, ("small" being a few thousand instead of millions) and focuses a lot on family units and personal responsibilities. That's as much as I can get into without spoilers.

Content warning

There will be a fade-to-black, offscreen sex scene. That's it. I don't even think there were any four-letter words.

Who is it for?

Do you like Rod Serling? David Weber? John C. Wright? Classical Science fiction that explored new ideas without worrying what other people might think? Then read Escaping Infinity.

Why read it?

At the end of the day, this book starts out like David Weber, continued as written by Rod Serling, and ends with the epic scope of John C. Wright.

Richard Paolinelli obviously also thinks in terms of epic scope. I won't say that Paolinelli is in Wright's league just yet. Give him another book or two and expect Wright to have serious competition in the "awe-inspiring scale" category.

Foundryside by John Bennett
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

"Foundryside" is an amazingly smooth read. I've noticed an uncomfortable tendency to dump bizarre place and people names at the beginning of some fantasy books; it seems the author must IMMEDIATELY establish that this isn't taking place in mundane land, and they don't quite trust the "FANTASY" tags on the cover to get the point across. If they also toss in an info dump about how magic works, it makes it worse; and, if they haven't gotten all of the tendencies to purple prose yet hammered out of their system, it can be just as close to unreadable as you can get.

None of that here. Bennett does an excellent job of showing, not telling. It's only after he has established that protagonist Sancia feels the walls and gets a complete understanding of their environment from that, and that use of that power makes the scar on her head burn, that he tells us why that's the case. It works well.

Sancia is an approximately teen-age guttersnipe thief girl, who is proficient in the use of her ability to 'hear' and understand physical structures, small enough to fit in tiny places/openings, and strong enough to handle the necessary acrobatics to climb roofs, etc. She is NO Mary Sue, though. Her ability to hear the floors, walls, etc., talking to her also means that she can't tolerate much touching her skin; it produces a sensory overload. She can't even eat meat, or drink water, because she identifies so strongly with what it is and where it's been. Plain rice, some beans from time to time, and weak cane wine is all she can tolerate. She even hates to have to put on new clothing, because she has to adapt to what the new cloth has experienced.

She has a plan, though: she has heard that there are criminal-element docs, who can free her of the gift/curse via an expensive surgery. So, she partners with former upper-class fixer Sark. He identifies worthy objects; she steals them; they split the take.

And the take on this last job is an unbelievable amount, enough to get repaired, and to escape the wicked city of Tevanne.

Actually, the city isn't THAT wicked. It's just horribly constructed around the use of magic. From the scraps of a prior civilization, a few magical concepts have been recovered or rediscovered. By means of scribing cryptic symbols on an object, it can be made to perform simple acts, or to have certain characteristics. Until fairly recently, though, it was too cumbersome for most uses; if you tried to scrive all the desired characteristics on the head of an axe, you'd run out of room. However, a discovery in some ancient ruins showed how all the needed traits could be linked into a single scribing, which would be small enough to fit. That condensation of instructions can be compounded further, and via a series of links and instructions, entire construction industries can be built.

If you have ever done any programming, this will sound VERY familiar to you.

It's not the magic itself that is horrible; it's the uses it's been put to. All of the power is concentrated into a very few merchant houses, and they seem to spend as much time protecting their privilege and limiting access to their processes as they spend making shoes, or building boats, or whatever. Industrial espionage is a significant part of their business practice, and while they HAVE managed to come together and ban certain extremely dangerous magical uses, there is no thought of establishing anything that looks like an authority over their individual practices.

And that leaves no one with the authority, and perhaps not the inclination, to look out for the welfare of those who don't fit into the institutional structure of the merchant houses. As a result, you have lovely, clean, well-lighted dwellings for the merchants and agents of each house, all enclosed in impenetrable walls with gates and guards to keep other merchants of other houses out. And as for the refuse, nobody cares. They can live or die as they see fit, as long as they don't intrude on the business and well-being of the merchants. If that happens, doom comes, in the form of well-armed and armored troops with magical weapons and some pretty lethal non-magical weapons as well. They kill or capture the offenders, and those who die may be the most favored. Convicted offenders (and they are ALWAYS convicted) are punished by having magical wire loops placed around various appendages; the loops then contract, slowly, until the appendage is amputated. Sometimes, this results in death, and at other times, in crippling. The merchants don't really care, except for the value of the punishment as a source of entertainment.

In the midst of this lawless depravity, Captain Gregor Dandolo cuts a solitary figure. A war veteran who has seen horrible things, he resolves to bring order to the city, and he starts by cleaning up the waterfront. He hires guards to watch over the area, and they eliminate the theft and trafficking taking place, until thuggery departs.

Which makes the waterfront a safe place to store things. And one particular thing, from this safe location, is what Sancia must steal in order to earn her monster, life-changing paycheck.

And, she steals it!

The object she steals is contained inside a simple wooden box; she has to preserve it for three days, before she can meet up with Sark, and make the transfer. However, her escape plan got a little too enthusiastic, and instead of just causing a distraction, she burns the whole waterfront. She fears that the enraged Captain Dandolo will be hot on her trail, and she needs to have some way to stay safe yet retain possession of whatever is in the box. So, she opens the box, and finds a gold key.

And discovers the key can talk to her and hear her thoughts. It's a unique key, that can open any lock, and detect scribed objects from a distance. In the hands of a merchant house, they could have immediate access to the secrets of all the other houses; nothing would be safe.

And, THEN, it gets weird.

This is a very well-written book, with lots of flashy, bang bang boom boom bits of violent conflict tossed in to keep the characters motivated. The villains are boo-hiss dastardly. The heroes are sufficiently flawed to make them lovable. The logic behind the magic only requires the SLIGHTEST bit of suspension of belief, because it's clear that it takes a good bit of organization and skill to make the devices work as intended. If a world is posed in which any dope can do any magic, it just doesn't play, because there's no realistic conflict possible. Here, magic is a resource, and access to it can be controlled similarly to access to energy, food, and so on.

Iron Chamber of Memory by John C Wright
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

Do you think the cover is eye catching enough?

F. Paul Wilson's novel The Keep impressed me growing up because it was a novel that had started out as Dracula and ended with Lord of the Rings.

John C Wright has managed and even greater trick with his latest novel, Iron Chamber of Memory.

In this case, what started out as a romantic comedy, Nora Roberts style, and then, Jeffery Deaver-like, ended in an epic battle on the scale of Mary Stewart and her books of King Arthur and Merlin.

Let's call it a fantasy romance, of sorts. Where's the soundtrack for Excalibur! I need O Fortuna to accompany the knights charging out of the mists!

Trust me, when I say it was epic, I mean EPIC.

The story

The small island of Sark in the English Channel is the last feudal government in Europe. By law, no motor vehicles run on the road, and no lights burn at night. Only the lord of the island may keep hounds.

Enter our hero, Hal Landfall, penniless graduate student… which is a redundancy. He's looking for his friend Manfred Hathaway, who now owns the house and the island. What he finds is Manfred's fiancée Laurel. There is one room in the house, where those who enter remember their true self. When Hal and Laurel step in, they remember, with fear and wonder, a terrible truth they must forget again when they step outside.

I wish I could go more into this story without given things away.

This book has haunted Wright (Haunted? Good enough) for over a decade.

The island it takes place on is real, even though it sounds like a fantasy construction, for it is a fantastic place.

I read it on a Kindle, so I can't give you page numbers. But the first 25% is a romantic farce. Like Bringing Up Baby, only it's funny. Then the next 25% is an epic romance. The third quarter …. transitions nicely into the last 25%, in which the fecal matter hits the air impeller, and we are in for one hell of a ride.

So we have some of your epic fantasy, we have some RomCom, and we have a face-off with the forces of Hell.

And in all of those elements of epicness and mythology clashing, good against evil, we have a bit like this.

"I am the son of The Grail Knight. My father showed me the cup when I was a boy, still with heaven's innocence in me, so that the shining rays were visible to me: and in the Blood of the Grail he anointed me."

"And after…"

"We moved to New York, and he opened a used bookstore."

The unexpectedness of that line was … well, I was glad I didn't wake the neighbors.

Or:

"Are you suffering from cutlery dysfunction?"

It's times like those where I'm wondering if I'm in Mary Stewart or in a Peter David novel. Either way, it works.

This is what, in my family, is called a "Novel novel." There is more in common with Victor Hugo than James Patterson. It's a book where I spent a lot of time admiring the crafting of story, and the crafting of words and phrasing. I'm usually not the sort of person to note that sort of thing.

So, you want your humor? Check. Want your fantasy, triple checked. Want romance? Double checked in two different meanings of the world. Also, if you want a plot twist that makes Jeffery Deaver look like amateur hour? Quadruple checked (yes, really, four, I counted. Maybe 6).

The characters

Everything and everyone are drawn in inventive ways. There are no data dumps, The best way I can describe it is how well Babylon 5 did characterization, because no one here is anything like what they appear to be. This makes it hard to go into a deep dive of the characters, because that would involve spoilers all over the place.
The world

It's John C Wright. This man makes five fully fleshed out worlds before breakfast. Then he throws out four of them because they're merely better than what's on the NY Times bestseller list.

I only hope I'm exaggerating.

Wright is obviously in a level all of his own, wherein he brings together so many myths and legends, there were moments I paused and went "How did I not see this?" His dissertation director at Oxford is a Dr. Vodonoy. You will be amused by a Mister Drake in this novel. He doesn't actually have any lines of dialogue, but trust me, when Wright reveals the joke, you'll enjoy it.

The politics

If battling the forces of Hell, chivalry and virtue are political, then those are the politics of the book.

Content warning

Look at the cover. I mean it…

Now that you've done that, let's talk.

This is at least PG-13. There are sexual situations, but at that age, I just skimmed over them. Granted, if your kid is smart enough to read this book, your kid is probably mature enough to handle how mild the sexual bits are.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who misses a sense of the fantastic in their fantasy, and who wants to make Arthuriana great again. If you enjoyed Mary Stewart and Stephen R Lawhead, or even Murphy and Cochran's The Forever King, you should be reading this.

Why read it?

Read this because this is epic fantasy that battles all the forces of Hell, and still contains a sense of wonder.

Knowingly Familiar by Alma T.C. Boykin
Review by Becky Jones
http://ornerydragon.com/

This week's book review is Alma T.C. Boykin's Knowingly Familiar. It is Book 16 in the Familiar Tales series. And, until this week, was the latest in that series of stories about the magical community in Riverton. I like to think that the Riverton of the familiars is the Riverton my grandparents lived in, and I visited frequently as a small child. The weather and some of the town features are similar… hmmm….but, back to the book.

Return to the world of Familiars and goth shadow mages. André and Lelia Lestrang and their familiars, Rodney, the kit fox, and Tay, the ring-tailed lemur, are now dealing with teenagers, a daughter who lovesloves unicorns (especially pink and purple unicorns), and wants a house-dragon for a pet. The cherry on the cake of all that chaos is an ancient evil that arrives in Riverton via an archaeological exhibit at the university. Lelia and André are the lucky shadow mages who get to do the heavy lifting for this one. Oh, fun.

As is usual with her Familiar stories, Alma Boykin provides a good mix of mundane life and its ups and downs, magical encounters, and funny moments.

Here's the blurb for Knowingly Familiar:

Something moves. A Mesopotamian curse sends ripples through the magical community of Riverton. Mages André and Lelia Lestrang find themselves fighting ghosts from their past. The battle draws them closer to Master Saldovado and the clans, closer perhaps than Lelia's heart dares to go. How long before Patrick Lee and Riverton's other magic users demand answers about the clans? The Familiars are keeping the secret. For now.

But breaking ancient spells comes easily for shadow mages. Juggling parenthood, budgets, car repairs, school schedules, and a six-year-old daughter's desire for a pet unicorn? (Or a house dragon, preferably pastel pink.) That's difficult!

We catch up with André and Lelia about 15 or so years after the event in Judiciously Familiar. The university archaeology department has received a shipment for an upcoming display, but something is off. One spell is broken and the evil within destroyed. But now Lelia and Dolores have to explain to the dean why she cannot and should not allow the exhibit to proceed without a thorough magical cleansing of all the artifacts destined to go on display. As an academic administrator though, the dean cannot conceive of anything as silly as an ancient curse affecting the highly sought-after exhibit.

The evil that moves into and through Riverton affects the entire magical community. We get to see more of the personal dynamics within the magical community as some of the mages express their curiosity and growing distrust of Lelia and André's relationship with Master Saldovado's clan. It turns out that Master Saldovado's clan aren't the only ones suspicious of outsiders. The Riverton magical community tends to look askance at magic users it does not know. And now there's another magical guest in their midst.

I enjoyed the glimpses of the mundane chores and family issues that Lelia and André have to deal with as well as the more dramatic magical encounters. Boykin's description of the ins and outs of university politics is spot on as well. I've had deans like Dr. Tierney and I really wish I'd had Dolores and Isabeau to help deal with them.

The story's action ebbs and flows and keeps the reader fully engaged. In fact, I read this installment in the series in one sitting. We get to see Lelia as a full adult now (whether she likes it or not) and her growth into her role as a shadow mage. She still hates that she and André have to deal with monsters from abyssal planes and the humans who opened the gates for those monsters, but she has finally recognized that understanding evil does not mean that she herself is evil. Her daughter's unbridled love of all things cutesy and pastel-colored will be Lelia's undoing well before any abyssal monster catches her. That, and the fact that Deborah clearly has Master Saldovado wrapped around her little finger.

If you haven't read any of the Familiars books before, I recommend you start from the beginning and work your way through. You won't regret it. There's another reason to do that as quickly as you can… Learnedly Familiar was just released this week and you'll want to get started on that one as soon as you can. You can read more of Boykin's work on her blog, Cat Rotator's Quarterly.

The Man Who Sold The Moon/Orphans of the Sky
by Robert Heinlein
Review by Christopher Nuttall

http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com

It's neither your business, nor the business of this blasted paternalistic government, to tell a man not to risk his life doing what he really wants to do.

The trouble with any detailed examination of Heinlein's shorter works, which are often compiled in larger volumes, is that there is a great deal of duplication. Life-line, Heinlein's first story, is reprinted in at least three separate volumes – and it is far from the only one to have been duplicated. Indeed, as the compilation volumes are put together by theme, it would be surprising indeed if there weren't more duplications. I have therefore put my comments on some of the stories within The Man Who Sold The Moon/Orphans of the Sky under other titles.

Heinlein, an engineer, was fascinated by the impact of new technology and ideas on society. Both The Man Who Sold The Moon and Orphans of the Sky have social impact as a common theme, although – on the surface – they don't seem to go together. Baen Books put them together when republishing the two books as one and I think they work together fairly well. They are not the best of Heinlein's works, but they are among his most significant.

The Man Who Sold The Moon is a collection of short stories and novellas focused on the common theme. Let There Be Light features a partnership between a male and female scientist who stumble across a method of generating free electric power. Unfortunately, vested interests are keen on keeping the method a secret, as it will imperil their grip on power. The duo therefore release the information into the public domain, giving it to everyone. It's a very simple story, in places, but its notable for its underlying assertion that there are some people who will fight to stop progress and for the female scientist, radical in its day. (That said, they do wind up getting married at the end of the story.)

The Roads Must Roll is an odd little story. Near-future America is dominated by the 'roads,' effectively giant railroads moving everything from cargo to passengers from place to place. The roads are so important that shutting them down will prove disastrous. Unfortunately, a handful of road engineers – convinced that their importance to society gives them the right to dictate to others – go on strike, shutting down a couple of roads. They have to be defeated before the whole system collapses.

Interestingly, Heinlein goes out of his way to make it clear that the strike is unreasonable, both in the sense the strikers are already well-paid and in just how much damage it will inflict on the country. However, he also points to the ideology behind the strikes, an invented political movement – 'Functionalism' – that is used to justify anything. As he puts it:

"Concerning Function: A Treatise on the Natural Order in Society, the bible of the functionalist movement, was first published in 1930. It claimed to be a scientifically accurate theory of social relations. The author, Paul Decker, disclaimed the "outworn and futile" ideas of democracy and human equality, and substituted a system in which human beings were evaluated "functionally"—that is to say, by the role each filled in the economic sequence. The underlying thesis was that it was right and proper for a man to exercise over his fellows whatever power was inherent in his function, and that any other form of social organization was silly, visionary, and contrary to the "natural order."

Heinlein uses Functionalism to point out the fundamental flaw in every revolutionary movement from Communism to Radical Islam, without mentioning any particular ideology by name:

"Functionalism was particularly popular among little people everywhere who could persuade themselves that their particular jobs were the indispensable ones, and that, therefore, under the "natural order" they would be top dog. With so many different functions actually indispensable such self-persuasion was easy."

It's an interesting point – and one with much relevance to modern-day life. The people who join revolutionary groups are almost always convinced that they will come out on top – and they're almost always wrong.

The Man Who Sold The Moon is the story of the man who laid the groundwork for the first missions to the moon, doing everything in his power to realise the lunar dream. DD Harriman, a man obsessed with reaching the moon, raises money and organises the first flights to the moon, intending to eventually go there himself. Unfortunately, the house of cards he's built is dependent on his presence … and he can't go, not if he wants the moon to be colonised. The man who settles the moon is forever denied the

chance to visit himself. It is, in many ways, a bittersweet tale.

It touches on many interesting points. Harriman flatly refuses to pay off a woman who sues his company on spurious grounds, pointing out that buying her off will simply lead to more lawsuits and a constant outflow of money. He talks about the importance of investing in the future, although his detractors are not entirely wrong to point out that, if they fail to recoup their investment, they're screwed; he talks about the importance of going well by one's employees, insisting that the company has to take care of them. Harriman wins a great deal of personal loyalty and it serves him well. Sneakily, Heinlein also points out that corporate small print often provides an excuse for not doing something.

Requiem, the sequel (although it was actually written first) is the story of Harriman actually making the flight to the moon, right at the end of his life. It is one of Heinlein's few truly emotional stories, all the more so as Heinlein doesn't try to force emotion. Harriman is both a giant of a man and an aging man, threatened with losing control of his life to his heirs (who try to declare him senile) and desperate to make one final bid to reach the moon. His death, just after they land, is genuinely tragic, but it is also a triumph. Harriman got to leave the world on his own terms.

(Life-Line and Blowups Happen will be discussed in the Expanded Universe review.)

Orphans of the Sky features what may well be the first-generation starship in science-fiction, on a voyage to a nearby star. Unfortunately, something went badly wrong and there was a mutiny, resulting in the near-complete destruction of the ship's records. By the time the story takes place, the ship is divided into two sections: a tribe of pureblood humans, ruled by the 'Captain' and gangs of mutants, one of which is led by a two-headed man. Neither side realises that there is a world outside the ship's walls. To them, the ship is all there is – and ever will be.

The hero of the book, Hugh Hoyland, is born into the human tribe. Being more intelligent than most of his peers, he is recruited into the scientists – an inner group who keep things running – and then, after a raid into mutant territory goes badly wrong, he finds himself a prisoner (and a slave) instead. This actually works out in his favour, as he befriends the two-headed mutant and, more importantly, discovers the truth behind the ship. They're approaching their new homeworld.

This does not go down well with his former masters, and he is sentenced to death for heresy, only to be rescued, in the nick of time, by the mutants. Forging an alliance between the mutants and rebellious (and ambitious) scientists, he helps mount a coup to unite the two tribes and guide the ship to its final destination. But the new government falls apart and a handful of people are forced to flee the ship, landing on the new world even as the ship itself is condemned to remain drifting through space forever. (Later, Lazarus Long would claim to visit their planet.)

Orphans of the Sky showcases just how a restrictive society can restrict a person's mind, from being unable to comprehend that there might be a world outside their walls to being practically conditioned to slavery. (Hugh accepts his servitude without demur, an unusual trait in a Heinlein hero.) The social tensions that eventually rip the ship and crew apart cannot be suppressed indefinitely, particularly when they are faced with something that is – by their lights – blasphemy. (An Outside Context Problem, as Iain Banks put it.) Matters are not helped by ambitious people on both sides using the crisis as an excuse to gain power, then turning on the others. They are more interested in their own power than saving their people.

The book also shows the flaws in tribal societies. There is literally no room for freethinkers, let alone open debate … to the point that several factions are plotting revolution just to get control of the levers

of power. But the tribe has no choice. The dictates of survival are paramount. And yet, when the 'good guys' gain power, they hold purges themselves. Hugh and his allies are not always good people. Indeed, Hugh is pretty much a domestic abuser in his later days.

Heinlein cheats, in some ways, to get his heroes to the planet. He gives a catalogue of their lucky breaks during the final section of the book … but then, without those strokes of luck, the story would end badly. And yet, with only a handful of living humans, there is a good chance the colony will end badly in any case. Genetic inbreeding will get them, even if they're lucky enough to avoid mutant births (caused by a radiation leak during the mutiny.)

Overall, the collection of The Man Who Sold The Moon and Orphans of the Sky is well worth a read. Heinlein might not have reached towering heights – yet – but the stories open one's mind, make you think … and lead directly to other, younger works.

Murder in the Vatican,
The Church Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes
by Ann Margaret Lewis
Review by Declan Finn

http://www.declanfinn.com

When I was thirteen, I started reading through the collected stories of Sherlock Holmes. I made it about halfway through. I had been stopped dead by "The Adventure of the Gloria Scott"—one of two times that Holmes was the narrator. I wasn't the only one who had a problem with that story. Another author of the day, G.K. Chesterton, said that the Gloria Scott showed why Watson was relevant: because Holmes was an awful storyteller.

Since then, I have been critical of anything about Sherlock Holmes written after the death of Arthur Conan Doyle. Some stories went wildly off track. Others were riddled with so many anachronisms it was painful. Of the vast quantity of Holmes-related material published, my family of readers owns only a fraction.

When Robert Downey Jr. starred in Sherlock Holmes, I crossed my fingers and hoped it didn't suck … instead, I got a checklist of what they did right.

When Doctor Who scribe and show runner Steven Moffat created a show called Sherlock, I also crossed my fingers. It was surprisingly awesome.

Then I heard about Murder in the Vatican. The Church Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes in a newsletter. It had an interesting premise: author takes Watson's offhand references of Holmes working on cases for the Pope, or involving religious figures, and turns them into entire stories.

I experienced the same feeling of dread. How off would the narration be? Would someone try converting Holmes? How lost would a detective from Victorian, Anglican England be in Catholic Rome? How many different ways were there to screw this up?

The story

I stopped worrying when I read the first sentence. And, oh my God, this book is awesome! I loved this

book….

Lewis caught the voice of Dr. John Watson as though she had taken it, trapped it in a bottle, and used it to refill her pen as she wrote. I liked the voice. I liked Watson, the doctor, trying to diagnose an ailing Leo XIII (85 at the time of the events of the first story). I like the brief sketch of the political situation between the Vatican and Italy. I even enjoy Watson's discomfort at the Pope slipping into "The Royal We" when he speaks of himself as The Pope. Even the artwork was as though it had been lifted from issues of The Strand magazine.

Someone had fun here, and it shows.

Thankfully, there is no overt attempt to convert Holmes, evangelize or proselytize him. There is only enough theology in the entire novel that explains to the casual reader exactly what the heck the Pope is doing. The closest the book comes to exposing Holmes to theology is a page-long sequence that ends with Leo saying, "Perhaps you should spend some of your inactive time pondering that conundrum [of Jesus] instead of indulging in whatever narcotic it is with which you choose to entertain yourself." That is the best zinger I've ever seen a character use on Holmes regarding his drug use. Even the most secular person I know can appreciate a page of theology for one of the better one-liners I've ever seen.

Also, the little things were entertaining for a nerd like me. For example, the casual mention of John Cardinal Newman, referred to as "a recent convert." The political situation at the time is given just enough of a sketch to explain what's going on, but nothing obtrusive; history nerds like me can be satisfied, but you don't have to have a degree in it to comprehend what's going on.

There are truly parts where the novel seems to merge all the best qualities of Sherlock Holmes with those of G.K. Chesterton's Fr. Brown short stories…

At this point, I must make a small confession. I write these reviews as I read the book. There is plenty of backtracking, to fill the blanks, and rewrite it as the book goes. I wrote the above line when I finished the first tale.

I then read "The Vatican Cameos," and discover a Deacon, named Brown …

I swear I didn't see that coming.

The first story in this collection is "The Death of Cardinal Tosca."

In this memorable year '95 a curious and incongruous succession of cases had engaged his attention, ranging from his famous investigation of the sudden death of Cardinal Tosca — an inquiry which was carried out by him at the express desire of His Holiness the Pope…

—Dr. John H. Watson, "The Adventure of Black Peter"

Imagine Sherlock Holmes on vacation … if you see that vacation turning out like an episode of Murder, She Wrote, with a body hitting the floor at some point, you pretty much have the setup. It has a poison pen letter, with real poison, some Masons, references to two different cases in the space of two paragraphs, and a Papal commando raid with a real pontiff. This story is so delightfully odd and over-the-top, but still preserves as much reality as any other Holmes tale. I enjoyed every moment of it. And I can't argue with any story where the pope gets most of the amusing one-liners.

Heck, even the murderer gets in a good line. When confronted, our first killer sneers. "Let me guess. You're going to explain, to the amazement of your friends, how I did the deed?" Holmes replies, "I've already told them that. It would be old news. They already know you blundered badly."

I think the story concludes on a nice, solid note. As Holmes tells Watson, "[Leo XIII] is genuinely pious. He is also imperious, but in a most endearing way."

Watson merely replies, "Yes, well. I'm used to that."

The second tale, "The Vatican Cameos," is a bit of a flashback episode to when Holmes first met the Pope. Leo XIII has sent a collection of cameos to Queen Victoria. The cameos are secured tightly in the box they're delivered in, but upon their arrival in London, the box is empty. The Queen has a simple solution: send Sherlock Holmes. Watson is busy with a medical emergency, so he wasn't around.

When Watson asks Sherlock about the incident, Holmes says, quite clearly "Watson, I am incapable of spinning a tale in the way you do. The narrative would read like a scientific treatise."

Madam Lewis certainly read "The Adventure of the Gloria Scott."

So, there is only one person left who can narrate this tale … the Pope himself. This was the story that truly showed that the author did her research, assembling little details of Leo XIII's interests and hobbies and putting them together into a rich, vibrant character. He is shown here as witty, humorous, and bright.

The byplay between Leo XIII and Holmes in this story was marvelously entertaining. The Pope is shown to be about as smart as Watson … maybe a little smarter. When Holmes first meets the Pontiff, and rattles off conclusions in his usual rapid-fire manner, the Pope takes a minute, and deduces how Holmes came to most of them. Not all, but most. This is a wonderful inversion of what is so typical of early Sherlock Holmes films—in the Basil Rathbone movies, whenever Holmes walked onto the screen, the IQ of everyone in the room dropped about ten points. Making Leo this smart only serves to make Holmes as impressive as he should be—yes, everyone else may be smart, but Holmes is smarter.

Also, having Leo XIII using Thomas Aquinas to talk with Holmes of reason and science … it works for me.

And the scene with Holmes, the Pope, and the gunman was fun, too.

> "You know that I am preoccupied with this case of the two Coptic Patriarchs, which should come to a head to-day."
>
> Sherlock Holmes, "The Retired Colourman"

"The Second Coptic Patriarch": The third and final tale is from yet another throwaway line of Arthur Conan Doyle's.

In this case, a former criminal comes to Holmes to solicit his services; the priest who converted him away from his life of crime is in jail for murder. A bookstore owner has been murdered with a book ("The Rule of Oliver Cromwell–weighty subject, no doubt," Holmes quips), and the priest will only say that the victim was dead when he arrived. It's almost Sherlock Holmes meets Alfred Hitchcock … I didn't know someone could do I Confess like this. It's a fun little read, and possibly the most traditional of the Holmes stories — it's a good tale. From the perspective of the overall book, it's a perfect cap to

the character arc.

Now, after reading Murder in the Vatican, I think I'm going to go back and finish the Sherlock Holmes series — and keep Murder in the Vatican handy, so I can read them all in chronological order.

The characters

The only characters to track here are Holmes, Watson, the Pope … and two guest stars in the third case. I feel like Holmes and Watson are better written here than they are in the original Conan-Doyle, and Leo XIII is now one of my favorite popes.

The world

It's beautifully drawn Victorian England.

The politics

It's late 1800s Catholicism, with a heavy bent on Aquinas, meets Sherlock Holmes.

Content warning

None. It's Sherlock Holmes.

Who is it for?

Did you like Sherlock Holmes? You're going to love this. You may like it better than the original stories. If you liked Alfred Hitchcock's I, Confess, you'll also like it.

Why read it?

Ann Lewis said that the book was "meant to be fun and lift your heart for a short time. I had a blast writing it, and I hope you have a blast reading it."

Mission accomplished.

Other Rhodes by Sarah A. Hoyt.
Review by Becky Jones
http://ornerydragon.com/

Other Rhodes is a far-future, deep space noir detective story and another fun genre mash-up from Sarah A. Hoyt. Our heroine, Lily, finds a cyborg in her airlock when she expected her husband. Now she has no option except to team up with the completely illegal creation to locate her missing husband. Additionally, with no other allies, she has to trust that her husband's long-time friend is also her friend and will give her the help she needs. The book combines elements of classic noir detective stories (Rex Stout, Nero Wolfe) within a space-faring and high-tech universe.

Here's the blurb: Lily Gilden has a half-crazed cyborg in her airlock who thinks he's Nick Rhodes, a fictional 20th Century detective. If she doesn't report him for destruction, she's guilty of a capital crime.

But with her husband missing, she'll use every clue the cyborg holds, and his detective abilities, to solve the crime her husband was investigating when he disappeared.

With the help of a journalist who is more than he seems, Lily will risk everything to plunge into the interstellar underworld and bring the love of her life home!

All this action is set in a finely woven, richly described, complex universe, but the story is character-driven, not tech driven. Ten thousand years in the future and people are still people and still motivated by all the same human foibles: lust for power, jealousy, fear, and love. This is not to say you don't get the tech advances you expect to find in a story set so far in the future. There's plenty of that for those of you who like to read about all the cool new devices we'll have in the future.

There are a number of fun references to current political and cultural issues along with the practical and ethical issues of creating cyborgs. The first time I saw this done with a eye to a believable human reaction to cyborgs was in the 1987 movie Robocop. In that movie we saw little hints of the human police officer in the gestures and comments of the cyborg officer, and we saw the emotional wounds those gestures had on the family left behind when the officer was "killed." Hoyt addresses these issues as we watch Lily try to come to terms with the idea that this illegal cyborg might just be her husband. Hoyt shows readers what the creation of a cyborg might mean to actually living family members.

The book seamlessly weaves all of these things together and keeps the focus on Lily as she takes on the job of private detective, something she's never done before, and grows into her new role and new responsibilities. She also learns how far she'll go for the man she loves.

Other Rhodes is a quick read, mostly because you won't want to put it down, with an ending that just screams for more cases for our intrepid detectives. It's available on Amazon including Kindle Unlimited. I am looking forward to the next book in this series!

Outlander by Diana Gabaldon
Review by Will Mayo

A rich eighteenth century romance set among the beauty of the Scottish Highlands with a drama to match, this is among the finest books I've read. It is in part a time travel story, another a faded romance and yet another a detailed and richly researched historical novel. All inspired by the author's sight of a mysterious portrait hanging in an ancient house long age. I would highly recommend it to anyone wishing to sample the flavor of the period.

Sons of Heaven by Chuck Dixon
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

Sons of Heaven is the fifth of Chuck Dixon's time traveling action novels. We've reviewed the first three.

Review of Book 1: SpecOps gunmen go back in time to save scientists traveling through time.
Review of Book 2: Go back in time to see buried treasure be buried.

Review of Book 3: Go up against the legions of Rome to save a carpenter's son.

Chuck Dixon's Bad Times #4, Helldorado was fun. Most of what I would comment on in a review was absent. It was essentially one long run-and-gun sequence. It achieved some goals that will carry over into this review.

Two major elements came out of Helldorado: our heroes went back in time to recover lost member Rick Renzi, who had been left behind in book 1. Second, in the present, one of our resident scientists behind the time machine had been kidnapped by a billionaire rival of series antagonist "Sir Nigel" — this newcomer knows about the time machine and wants our heroes to run a recovery operation through time.

In book #5, Sons of Heaven, Chuck Dixon gets a chance to write his own version of a Richard Sharpe novel.

The story

In Sons of Heaven, our merry band of Rangers have grown slightly, and are about to be thrust into the middle of the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1865; a rebellion that ended with 30 million dead.

The billionaire's target? The biography of Genghis Khan.

Sons of Heaven is different from the other novels because it has less of a multi-level plot structure. Less time is spent on storylines in different years, and more time is spent in 1865—that's mostly because 1865 China is such a clusterf*** it makes a Richard Sharpe battlefield look neat in comparison. Let's just say that current events in China, with Uighurs being cut up for spare parts, or for breeding stock, seems like a natural evolution of the history of barbarity.

But this story throws in everything: siege warfare tactics? Check. History of munitions? Check. Historical cameos? Check. Full scale battles with overwhelming enemy forces? Check.

All told, Sons of Heaven is a fun book. I'm just trying to figure out how the final book is going to wrap up everything, given how this ends.

The characters

The big character moments here all revolve around the horrors of war. Despite every character being a military veteran, Chinese warfare of 1865 is a whole different level of Hell from what they know. It's more on par with, again, Napoleonic warfare, with all the savagery that can be conjured up from the horrors of warfare history. This time, the world very much impacts our characters, whether they like it or not.

The world

Dixon does love his research and you can see it, even in the discussion of weaponry. Since the latest time period is modern, they have to be extra careful in what they bring back. Which leads to an interesting historical conversation about bolt-action weapons, level-action, and that Chinese knockoffs go back as far as China does.
Speaking of research, Dixon even has his team prepared for "they'd all had shots for malaria, yellow

fever, rabies, typhoid, cholera, three kinds of meningitis, an alphabet soup of hepatitis, encephalitis, and tetanus boosters." These and other things glossed over by time travel fiction; take that Doctor Who and Michael Crichton.

The politics

Depends: if you think that highlighting the barbaric past of warfare is somehow racist, or if you think that history must only show barbaric white people, then this book is not for you. Then again, it's 1865 warfare, which makes Fallujah look like kindergarten.

Like all the other Bad Times novels — it's "right wing" in the sense that it is "Based," since this is thoroughly based in reality.

Content warning

This one shows that war is Hell, and it does not shy away from it. Not for kids. Casual slaughter happens. It's generally messy.

Who is it for?

Anyone who has ever read a Bernard Cornwell novel should enjoy this. Anyone who likes time travel stories who knows history. If you read the military scifi of David Weber or John Ringo, you should easily have a blast with it.

Why read it?

Read this because it's the continuation of a great series, with all the action you could ever want.

Spinning Silver by Naomi Novik
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

There are MUCH better reviews of this book out there! I do not believe that there are any BETTER books in this category. Just as good? Sure. But, not better.

Is that not a GORGEOUS cover image?

First: what an absolutely GORGEOUS cover!

I skipped to the end and read the last chapters so I could see how it was going to come out.

There, I said it.

I really just needed to know if the beauty and skill of the first quarter of the book was going to be sustained. I was hoping that would be the case, that the promise of a good story would be delivered on. And it WAS!! I'm not going to spoil it for you, but in this case, what begins well, ends well.

I also grabbed up my resource lists, and I ripped through them to see what Respected Others, and Disrespected Others, had to say about the book. I needed confirmation, you see. And, what I found was that

the people who have a good head on their shoulders consistently raved about how lovely this was; the idiots foamed at the mouth. And both of those are ringing endorsements.

So, here we go:

Miryem's father is a moneylender, and he's not very good at it. You could call it soft-hearted, if you wanted to, I suppose. However, I spent a LOT of time in sales and marketing, and I'd have to say the guy just isn't a very good closer. You HAVE to be able to ask for your money.

Particularly when you are a Jew, and most professions are closed off to you; and there is a need for cash, and the Gentiles are prohibited by church law from loaning money at interest.

But, whether soft-hearted, soft-headed, or just not cut out for the job, he can't get it done. So, Miryem, seeing her mother sick from too much cold and no food, gets the job done. And it turns out that she's good at it.

Wanda's farmer is a drunkard. He borrowed money from the moneylender to get medicine for his sick wife, drank and gambled most of it up, and what he had left wasn't enough to help. So, she died, along with the newborn babe, and was buried under the white tree. This did NOT improve things for Wanda and her two little brothers; they were just BARELY scraping by, until Miryem shows up to demand repayment of the loan. When she sees they really have no means to repay, she instructs Wanda's father that she'll accept a half-day of labor from Wanda in exchange for a half-penny reduction of the amount he owes. Although it is not readily apparent, this deal DELIGHTS Wanda, who will escape beatings from her drunken father, as well as get fed at least one good meal per day, as well as what she can forage from the stale bread for the chickens. As time goes by, Wanda makes a way to earn money for herself, and for her brother as well.

Irinuska's father is a nobleman. Having married once for love, and then lost her in childbirth, he is resolved not to love again, so Irinushka has a permanent last place, after the stepmother with the huge dowry, and the two tiny step-brothers. She can benefit him in no way, until he is presented with a chance to marry her off to the insane tsar.

I read enough to know that this is an EXCELLENT story, and well-told. I read enough to know that the author has the skill to make a situation look like one thing, only to discover that it's something else entirely. I read enough to know that this book will NOT be a DNF (Did Not Finish), but a NFY (Not Finished Yet).

Alas, I DO have this deadline. And, in the faint hope that this last review will be of a benefit, I submit it to you, as is.

As for The Question: Was "Spinning Silver" a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Fantasy Novel?

My opinion: Oh, heck yeah. In fact, the fairy-tale aspect (the story is, I believe, derived from the Rumplestiltskin story) makes this the most charming of the lot. I don't know if that's what YOU are looking for in a fantasy; in fact, I don't know if that makes it a better contender for the award.

Violence: Deaths, references to rape, but nothing graphic

The Stars Entwined by Jon Del Arroz
Review by Jim McCoy
http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com

(Authors note: I'm not sure why, but I can't seem to write this review without spoilers. So advance and read at your own caution. You have been warned.)

When one receives a request for a review from The Leading Hispanic Voice in Science Fiction, one reviews the book. If it kicks ass, that's just a bonus. So, when I received an email from Jon Del Arroz requesting me to do a review of The Stars Entwined I did. And the fact that it kicked ass was just a bonus. See what I did there?

I had a bit of trouble slotting this one into subgenres. I mean, The Stars Entwined is kind of Science Fiction, but it's kind of Science Fantasy (I'll get into that in a bit.) It starts out looking like it's going to be a police procedural, then it turns into a spy novel. You can never get comfortable with this thing because it changes in an instant. There are lots of twists and turns, but they all make sense in the story.

Seriously, if I should ever have the good fortune to meet Mr. Del Arroz at a con I will, after having bought him a drink and congratulated him on writing such an awesome book, stick my tongue ALL the way out at him for making me chase my tail like this. I like to slot books into sub-genres and this one doesn't freaking fit. I guess I'll get over it. I mean, it was a good book.

Despite my problems fitting works into little boxes The Stars Entwined is, at its core, a story about learning and functioning in a foreign society. Our protagonist, Lieutenant Sean Barrows, first encounters a species of beings called the Aryshans in his space station. Barrows is a security officer and runs into a stunningly beautiful Aryshan named Tamar.

Before long, Barrows finds himself undergoing radical surgery to make him look like an Aryshan and sent off on a spying mission. There he makes friends and discovers things about both Aryshan capabilities (his true mission) and culture (not really his mission but potentially more useful). There is a lot to be said for both. His friends are important people in their own right as well. His lover is the well... not really captain... but... first among equals in command of the ship. There is a lot of depth to the other culture because there has to be. The majority of the story takes place within it.

The reason I labeled The Stars Entwined Science Fantasy is because, although it has strong elements of SF like starships and space travel, the aliens in it are different. The Aryshans have a strong empathic sense among members of their own clan, similar in some ways to the Betazoid empathic sense from the Star Trek universe, only more limited. The sense is more pronounced among “entwined” couples. When Sean entwines with Tamar, unless I'm hallucinating, he actually gets a more advanced connection that even most purely Aryshan couples get. It surprises Tamar too. It definitely sounds like they're able to communicate better than their entwined friends. It's more of a telepathic link than an empathic one. It leads me to believe that Aryshans and humanity might just have a shared ancestry somehow.

Don't get me wrong. The Stars Entwined isn't a book that focuses on anthropology. It actually includes my favorite scientific process, which I like to refer to as “blowuptuation.” There is a ton of action. This thing is actually action packed. Ok, so maybe one really scary moment was way too telegraphed, but it still made me say, “Oh shit.” so I'm gonna call it good. Generally speaking any oh shit moment is a good moment. Especially when it doesn't go the way I expected it to.

I've always wondered about spy novels where the protagonist doesn't identify at least a bit with the people they were spying on. It never sat right with me that a spy could just run along with no compunctions. I mean, sure they might not have any when they got there. They're spying on the enemy. But once they get to know they people they're spying on...

Yeah, it should get weird. I'm happy to say that in The Stars Entwined it does. Sean starts to feel weird about selling people out. The reaction of his new wife when he confesses to her is epic. The crazy part is that he doesn't realize that she can't allow him to come to harm. He just feels like he has to do it. It's not rational, but not everything a human being does is rational. He does it because he loves her.

SNIFF

It's just so beautiful!!!

Ok, so maybe I'm being a bit of a smartass but it's true. It makes sense. I like it when the actions of characters make sense in context, based on human emotion. Sean did the only thing he could here. He did what the vast majority of people would have done. It's almost like it's a universal human emotion and Mr. Del Arroz was acknowledging that his character might have something in common with all people. Even the ones who didn't look like him. Hmm...

Oddly enough, one of the things I also like about The Stars Entwined is that it really does have an actual villain. One of the Aryshans really is straight up crazy and out to cause problems regardless of the cost. He believes in his own cause, such as it is, but so does every bad guy. A story has to have someone to cheer for, but it really helps to have someone to root against as well. And I hate that guy. I'm just not going to try to spell his name from memory.

Other than my sub-genre confusion, there is nothing I can find to complain about here. The plot cooks. The characters feel real. I feel like I could have a drink with Sean. I feel like I could talk nerd stuff with his friend Tol. I want to walk through Tol's workshop. I want to tinker with his crap and offer impossible improvements because I have no knowledge of engineering and only a senioritis-infected knowledge of high school physics. Ok, so it has an almost, kinda, sorta cliffhangerish type ending but it's not as bad as it could be and honestly, I'm suffering from complaining-about-cliffhanger fatigue.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Entwined Couples

Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel
Review by Jeffrey Redmond
https://www.facebook.com/groups/9990182714

If you’re looking for a book that focuses on character development, then STATION ELEVEN is the book for you. STATION ELEVEN follows several characters after a plague wipes out most of the human population--and how they're connected in unexpected ways.

Or maybe plot isn’t so important, and you like meandering through a setting that is both familiar and foreign.

It may also be that you like books with elements that don’t seem important to the plot as a greater whole, OR maybe you find satisfaction with plodding through 280 pages before you start seeing the connections between the characters and plot points. If this is the case, you might just enjoy STATION

ELEVEN.

STATION ELEVEN was written in 2015, pre-COVID–and that's an important distinction. Because the story revolves around events after a worldwide pandemic that kills more than 90% of the population, immediately plunging survivors into a pre-Industrial Revolution existence.

On one hand, reading this after living through 2020 makes the reader grateful that things weren't worse. But on the other hand, the book may exacerbate any COVID PTSD everyone may be experiencing.

Kirsten was eleven years old when the Georgia Flu hit Toronto. Everyone but her brother died. She doesn't remember that first year after everything changed, as it was just too traumatic. Now, twenty years later, she travels with a roving symphony and acts in Shakespeare plays as they travel from settlement to settlement around the Great Lakes area.

Life is rough. No dentists. No antibiotics. No electricity. No birth control. She vaguely remembers flying in airplanes, but now the rusted shells of cars litter the old asphalt roadways. Instead, she has to learn knife skills in order to be able to protect herself.

Jeevan got the news that the flu had hit Toronto from a doctor friend who suggested he hole up somewhere. So after maxing out his credit card at the local grocery, he takes the supplies to his brother's apartment. And they wait out the first months of chaos, before emerging to find a new–and empty–world..

Clark was in his fifties when he found himself stuck at a quarantined airport with a hundred other stranded travelers. He spends the next twenty years collecting the memorabilia of the past world.

What connects all these people? Actor Arthur Leander was famous, but was spared living in a post-plague world by having a heart attack the night before the flu hit Toronto. The main POV (and some non-POV characters) characters have a connection to Arthur in one way or another. They recall their relationships with Arthur as author Emily St. John Mendel explores this post-plague world–what it would look like, how it affects the characters, and how they move through it.

The majority of the story follows Kirsten and her travels with the Symphony, their visit to a town taken over by a megalomaniac prophet that eventually comes to haunt them. The connections between the characters to Arthur, and then their connections to each other as a result are the main drivers of the story.

But what does "Station Eleven" have to do with it? The Arthur connection is that "Station Eleven" is a self-printed comic book written and drawn by his ex-wife, Miranda. But why name the book that? Perhaps the exploration of the novel is more subtle than many action-packed Fantasy and Sci Fi preferences allow. It's all very literary with the connections to Arthur. Maybe Station Eleven has to do with hope and the desire for a better world?

The Thread That Binds the Bones
by Nina Kiriki Hoffman
Review by Sam Lubell

The Thread that Binds the Bones won the Bram Stoker Award for Best First Novel. The sequel, *The Silent Strength of Stones*, was a Nebula and World Fantasy Award Finalist. Yet the book has languished out of print for far too long until Open Road Media added it to its extensive collection of rescued mid-list (and former top sellers). Yes, some of this absence may be due to Hoffman being a writer's writer and frequently more successful at the short story length. Still those who like quiet, domestic fantasies, novels of love and of discovering one's magical powers, will find much to enjoy here.

The book opens with Tom Renfield, a high school janitor, hearing ghost voices and doing instinctual magic to prevent two teenagers from killing themselves. Afraid of the attention this brings, he flees to Arcadia, Oregon where he gets a job driving a taxi.

Model Laura Bolte, who moves frequently to prevent her family from finder here, receives an invitation to her brother's wedding. The two intersect when Laura needs a cab ride to finish her journey home, and he refuses to let her off in the middle of nowhere, despite warnings that â€œPeople in my family don't bring home strangers; they bring home slaves." But Tom is able to listen to Laura's underneath voice, which doesn't always align with what her regular voice says, and speaks of needing him. While they debate, something causes the cab to leave the ground and fly the rest of the way to Laura's familyâ€™s home.

In turns out that Laura is part of a group of magical families who use their powers to hide from the world, occasionally enslaving humans to be domestic workers. To prevent the family from enslaving Tom, Laura names him her guest. Then, during the brother's purification ceremony, the family spirits, called the Powers and Presences, demand that Tom and Laura get married. One of the ancestral spirits moves into Tom's body to help with the rituals and to show Tom how to use his own magic.

Most of the rest of the book is devoted to Tom's growing relationship with Laura and how they alter the family's relationship with the town. Some in the family see Tom as a dangerous force and try to use their magic against him. This forces him to further develop his own powers, which are not exactly the same as those of the family. Laura also learns more about her own powers, which she has unconsciously limited out of fear she would become as cruel as the other members of her family.

While the book does contain some conflict, as Tom teaches a family bully a lesson about transforming others and there is a grand finale that clarifies the meaning of the title, most of the book is quiet, focused on relationships and growing strength. Tom rescues a few of the family's slaves, forcing a new accommodation with the town. And they discover why Laura's family is stronger in the dark side of their gifts.

A few readers may be uncomfortable with the idea of a child being used as a sex slave, but this is described as happening in the past, before Tom's rescue, and not shown.

In addition to the novel, the ebook contains two extra stories--one about Tom as a child and one about the daughter he has with Laura. These add atmosphere but are not as spellbinding as the novel.

The Thread that Binds the Bones is perfect for those who enjoy well-written character-driven stories. It

is a love story, but also a story about finding one's own strength. Little is actually explained. Readers never find out how Tom gained his powers or even how the family acquired theirs; this simply has to be accepted as the normal state for these characters. The closest comparison are the People stories of Zenna Henderson, except done as fantasy, not science fiction.

Readers who want plot-driven stories with action and a logical progression of events tying everything together should look elsewhere. Those who like stories about people with powers, who still remain people with all their virtues and flaws, will love this book. Open Road Media should be commended for giving this midlist novel another chance to attract the readership it deserves.

The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering
by L Jagi Lamplighter
Review by Declan Finn
http://www.declanfinn.com

Here we go again.

If you haven't seen the other books of Rachel Griffin … this is a very long story. The previous books are:

Book 1: The Unexpected Enlightenment of Rachel Griffin
Book 2: The Raven, the Elf, and Rachel
Book 3: Rachel and the Many-Splendored Dream Land
Book 4: Awful Truth about Forgetting

By this point, we should all realize that I'm still reading them at book five, so it's a good assumption that this book, too, was awesome, and you should read it.

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

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

That's the Rachel Griffin novels.

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

The story

When Book 5 opens, Rachel's school, Roanoke Academy, has a problem: the local wild fey are loose. The wizards were supposed to keep the local wild fey psychopath under lock and key. But now it's es-

caped, and the local fey no longer need to adhere to their bargain. If the Heer is not imprisoned again, and the fey put back in their place, Roanoke Academy will close.

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

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

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

We have Ankh-Morpork style football, a magical government that makes sense, sports team names that don't (show of hands: who wants your sports team to be named The Maenads?), Jim Butcher Scooby-Doo jokes, and students armed with a Bowie knife… which is an odd complaint given that they're all armed with wands, but seriously, who let that guy have a Bowie knife? Heck, Jagi even spells out the difference between the Seelie and the Unseelie… which I don't even think Harry Dresden explained.

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

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

The characters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The world

I have often noted in my review of Chuck Dixon's time travel action books that he will not only go into world building but will build three worlds at once: the present, the past, and either another part of the past, or part of the future.

Jagi is dealing with a multiverse, so she not only builds the world we're reading, but worlds that other people have been evacuated from. Forget 6-dimensional chess, she's literally doing multi-dimensional worldbuilding.

Line up every mythology known to man on a dartboard. Throw a dart to a random section. Odds are, that dart will hit on a mythology that Jagi has built into these novels.

The politics

This book is not politically on the right. Philosophically, definitely, but politically … the local politics are very local. But consider that everyone is armed with a deadly weapon, God is an active physical presence (and makes for an adorable mini-lion) and while there are some shades of gray, there are whole swaths of black and white.
Content warning

The Lord of the Rings films are rated for "fantasy violence." That sounds about right.Who is it for?

This is for anyone who wanted more Harry Potter … or more from Harry Potter.

Why read it?

Because it's just plain fun.

Unity by Elly Bangs
Review by Jeffrey Redmond
https://www.facebook.com/groups/9990182714

Unity is the debut novel of author Elly Bangs, and it focuses on a concept that is interesting, if not entirely unique: the idea of multiple people becoming one "greater" being. Some Science Fiction has been marketed as stories that will "resonate with LGBTQ+ readers." Good stories from marginalized authors, such as Bangs.

Danae is one of these greater beings, and is in her own way, unique. She's been living in Bloom City, deep under the ocean, waiting for the time when she needs to return to the surface and reunite with the rest of who she is. She doesn't want to involve her current boyfriend, but it's fairly obvious that he's not going to let her out of his sights, if it means that he can help her… and maybe himself… along the way.

There's a reason why so much of the population of Earth now lives beneath the surface of the ocean though. The land is inhospitable and dry, destroyed by climate change caused by the poor choices that humans have made and is ruled by mob-like superpowers that are constantly at war. It's a tenuous balance, and one that is due for a fight. In order to help them make the journey, these two tech junkies will hire an ex-merc turned soldier-for-hire, Alexei, that has issues of his own with regard to his desire to stay in the land of the living.

The story bounces back and forth between Danae and Alexei. Danae is running from the mob-boss that rules Bloom City, and Alexei has just returned from a job where he was hired by that same mob-boss to off a powerful rival. With those that help, and those that hinder, Danae's journey up out of the ocean, and then across an arid land similar to something in a Mad Max movie, is constantly fraught with avoiding the next disaster.

Writing-wise, this is pretty decent. The author does a good job of setting the scene and relaying important character along the way. The story is split into four parts. The first under the water. The second, across the dusty land. The third relays the backstory of a character that merges with Danae to become part of her "collective". The fourth and final section details arriving at her destination, and the revelations that come with finally finding her way "home".

This is a decently engaging story of a young girl that is more than just a girl trying to make it back to the combined consciousness she calls home. It all seems rather esoteric in its nature, dealing mostly with the intricacies of the ideas surrounding the central concept of combining multiple people into a single whole.

Recommended Age: 16+
Language: Strong but infrequent
Violence: Decent amount of short-term violence, but not much gore
Sex: Some aftermath and one... untraditional detailed scene

War Girls by by Tochi Onyebuchi
Review by Jeffrey Redmond
https://www.facebook.com/groups/9990182714

Citing a long history of erasure and silence surrounding the Nigerian civil war, author Tochi Onyebuchi wrote WAR GIRLS. She illustrates the way that the tensions that incited the conflict–economic, religious, tribal–exist today, and how they might play out in a post-apocalyptic future. For those who don't know any of this history, the book and the story stands admirably on its own. Interested readers can find additional information in Onyebuchi's afterword.

WAR GIRLS is rooted in the specifics of Nigeria and the conflict. Onyebuchi's talent lies in making the futuristic world of mechs, space colonies, and irradiated wastelands feel not like window dressing, but an integral part of the story. Onyebuchi's WAR GIRLS weaves together mechs, nuclear apoca-

lypse, trauma, and sisterhood in an exploration of the costs of war.

WAR GIRLS opens in the 2100s. Sisters Onyii and Ify live in an entirely female enclave of former Biafran child soldiers. They scrape together a living, hiding under the radar from the Nigerian forces that would destroy them if they found them. The soldiers consider all Biafrans to be rebels.

Ify has created what she calls her "Accent." It's a truly astonishing piece of tech that allows her to hack into any network, whether to do school work or to take control of a rampaging mech. Unbeknownst to her, however, this same device alerts the Nigerians to the camp's position, and the camp is razed. Ify is taken by the Nigerians, believing that Onyii died in the raid. Onyii is taken back into the Biafran military and redeployed as a soldier. She also believes that her sister is dead.

The narrative jumps four years in the future. Both the Nigerians and the Biafrans believe they are winning the war. In Nigeria, Ify learns that Onyii was not her savior, but her kidnapper, taking her as a young child from her family and village. In Biafra, Onyii has become known as the Demon of Biafra for her incredible abilities as a mech pilot. Along with other war girls, she is recruited into an elite forces program. Onyii's new duties, and Ify's rise in Nigerian society, bring them in conflict with each other. And eventually back together.

Along the way, we see more of the personal costs of violence to the lives of the war girls. There's the exploitative nature of colonialism, the misunderstanding of religion, and the corrosive poison of war at work in the lives of Nigerians and Biafrans alike.

WAR GIRLS has some very excellent mech fighting scenes. But it would be disingenuous to sell WAR GIRLS as a book about mechs, when at its core it's a narrative about trauma, sisterhood, and the continuing costs of war. There is a nice turn about a quarter of the way through the novel, where each side's narrative about the conflict becomes more apparent. And it becomes clear that the characters are not admitting the truth to themselves.

Short chapters and Onyebuchi's insistent prose drive the narrative forward at a good pace. Onyebuchi does an excellent job of letting us into Onyii and Ify's heads. He tells his story in the present tense, which along with his relatively spare writing makes the story feel immediate and present.

WAR GIRLS' detailed world building, and the specificity of Onyebuchi's depiction of the war, combine to create a compelling narrative.

Recommended Age: 13+
Language: None
Violence: All of the violence associated with a devastating civil war (shooting, suicide bombing, glimpses of torture)
Sex: A kiss or two

Prose Bono

A villain versus an antagonist
An antagonist is an opponent, but a villain must be stopped.

Declan Finn

Though I admit that there are more and more people who are putting aside the idea of "Oh, the villain doesn't think they're evil" and are replacing it more with the concept of "Nope. We just don't think about good and evil."

Heck, more frequently, it's "Good and evil are just soooo subjective."

Just look at anyone out there that wants to redefine pederasts as "Minor Attracted persons" or SFWA backing Marion Zimmer Bradley and her husband. The justification? "Oh, it's a lifestyle / it's just another orientation / who are YOU to judge?" or "what difference what it make?"

No, a villain doesn't necessarily see a villain in the mirror … but sometimes, a villain doesn't acknowledge that there is such a thing as a villain.

And sometimes, people just want to be the villain.

Yes, there are people who are just plain antagonists. They're wrong, or they're insane, or they're just out for themselves. My antagonists can be reasonable. They can be reasoned with. They can be talked down… which is why I don't write many of them.

Time to let the world burn as we define a villain, or an antagonist.

* * * *

An antagonist is an opponent, but a villain must be stopped.

I'm going to be a little nerdy here and use some rather clear-cut and obvious examples of a villain vs an antagonist, using enemies of Batman…

Yes, I know ... Batman? Really? Yes, really. Why? Because everyone at least knows of the majority of the Batman rogue's gallery, so it acts as a good common denominator for everyone involved.

Let's look at some of these folks…

Few people would think of the Joker as anything less than a villain. And that would be correct -- but what makes him so? A complete and utter disregard for human life, for one. He thinks he's funny when he kills large groups of people, and not only that, but he insists that everyone else finds it funny too.

Is Joker insane? Perhaps — his fashion sense would indicate that if nothing else — but does that make him "not-evil"? It reminds me of the argument that some victims of child abuse go on to become abus-

ers themselves — which is garbage. I know more victims of child abuse than is possibly good for me, and while they have an array of neuroses and psychoses, none of them have gone on to be abusers themselves.

Even Alan Moore's The Killing Joke insists that Joker is the result of, as he put it, "one very bad day." But, even during that comic, Joker is undermined by his victims. Despite creating a very bad day for police Commissioner Jim Gordon, Gordon stays completely sane, and doesn't go off on a killing spree. He doesn't even put two into Joker's head, which would have been at least justifiable under the heading of "We shoot rabid dogs, don't we?"

The legal definition of insanity is the inability to know the difference between right and wrong. With the Joker, the number of times he theorizes on what he should do next illustrates he's fully well-aware of the difference, he just finds "wrong" a more entertaining option. On the sociopath /sadist scale, he gets a ten.

He might be clinically "insane," but he is also evil. Let's call this a villain. He's not merely the opposition, not put there by circumstances — he's like this because he wants to be.

The Riddler is also of the same bent as the Joker. The Riddler's basic compulsion is to try to prove himself smarter than Batman. That's it. To that end, he plans crimes and leaves clues behind. This looks quite insane… Except when you take into account an incident where Riddler is beaten to within half an inch of his life. He's put into a coma for months, and when he comes out of it, he has both long-term memory loss and a new idea— he would outsmart Batman by being an even greater Detective!

In short, when Riddler has been on the wrong side of the law, he has chosen to be this way. And his choice makes him a bad guy. Wikipedia has actually described him as being a malignant narcissist… which we used to call evil. He's evil and he's having fun. Villain.

In short, "Proving that I'm a super genius is more important than anyone's life," means you're an evil little bastard.

You can see where I'm going with this. At the end of the day, villains are simply evil. But what's an antagonist?

Introducing Two Face for Batman: Arkham City

On the other side of the coin (yes, pun), you have former district attorney Harvey Dent, now the criminal known as Two-Face. In the comic books, Two-Face is a multiple personality, and he is literally not in control of himself; his darker impulses have created an entirely different person, and he requires a coin toss in order to judge how that would work. In Freudian terms, Two-Face is split into Id and Superego, with nothing to moderate between the two except for a coin. He's just plain old insane.

For instance: during the No Man's Land storyline, Two-Face kidnaps police commissioner Gordon and puts him "on trial" for breaking a deal. However, Gordon is saved by a vigorous defense by .... Harvey Dent.

I think this puts him on the straight crazy bent (yes, pun). There's good in him, it's just kinda lost in the white noise that's his brain. Antagonist.

And now for something a little different.

Catwoman is a thief. But she's also been our thief. She robs from the rich, gives to herself, and does the occasional side job for the US government and the CIA. Her later development has put her as more of an anti-hero than even an antagonist.

Though she still occasionally seems to play cat and die Fledermaus, there's still more than enough good in her to proclaim her an antagonist — when, as, and if she isn't off saving complete strangers because they happen to be within her line of sight when they're in trouble.

And then there's Ivy.

Poison Ivy, formerly Pamela Isley, is a nutjob. Completely and totally broken in the head. She has a concept of right and wrong, she just puts plants over people. Normally, her position as the ultimate eco-terrorist would be something to classify her as just plain evil. After all, she has made this decision, and she has decided that her will is greater than everyone else's moral code.

However, there's a bit of a problem with that. Why, you ask? Because Poison Ivy has had moments where she's protected human beings, despite that she generally thinks humans are inferior to plants. The No Man's Land storyline had her protecting orphaned children in central park and feeding members of the city. She has the occasional breakdown, but she's trying to be a good person. Which is more than I can say for some people I've known in real life.

And, besides, if you turn into vegetable matter and plants talk to you, you'd be a little screwed up in the head as well.

So evil? Maybe. Antagonist, definitely.

I guess I could go into Harley Quinn, or the Penguin, but I think we'd be beating a dead horse at this point. Harley is now an anti-hero after years of being a poster girl for battered woman syndrome as Joker's girlfriend. The Penguin has retired to being a white collar criminal who runs his own lounge.

Bane can't be classified, because his character radically changes depending on who's writing him. Going with the original Chuck Dixon edition of Bane, I'd put him as an antagonist. He grew up inside of a jail, so he sees the world as one big prison yard, and the Batman as the one to beat if he wants to be on top.

At the end of the day, I never subscribed to the cliche that villains never look in the mirror and see a villain. Or that "they think they're right."

Villains don't care about right or wrong. They just care about themselves.

An antagonist might be talked down, or persuaded, or brought away from the dark side; there is the possibility of redemption.

The villain likes the dark side, has chosen it, and never wants to leave. It's the difference between Hannibal Lecter (of the books) and Sauron. It's the difference between Joker and Two-Face. It's the difference between Heaven and Hell.

At the end of the day, it's why I prefer villains in my novels. When I have an antagonist, I tend to redeem them… eventually. Look at A Pius Man or Saint Tommy. There's an opportunity or two for redemption for some. And others just want to die screaming.

Literary Criticism

Why Literary Criticism?

We have added a new section to The N3F Review of Books, Including Prose Bono. For the nonce, that section is entitled "Literary Criticism". In this section, we present articles that occupy the traditional role of some literary critics, namely they use their reviews to expound upon positions that could be called 'political', positions that refer not only to the book under consideration but also to its relationships with other volumes, other authors, and issues beyond the magnificent stfnal world. Of their nature, works of literary criticism will prove controversial, with some readers strongly disapproving of the position of some reviewers. We would like to present more literary-critical articles, hopefully taking different political positions. Some readers will compare with the situation several decades ago, in which — we are told — fannish publishing in one European country was dominates by a single fan-ed, who strove mightily to impose his political opinions on the local fannish scene. Unfortunately, the fan-ed in question was by report a Communist. To avoid distressing most readers, the section Literary Criticism will appear as the final articles in each issue.

The Raven Tower by Ann Leckie
Review by Pat Patterson
http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com

I'm going to tackle a subject in this blog post that has been bothering me. I'll keep it off the two condensed book reviews that I do, but THIS is my review, and I get to say stuff. I'll also put it toward the END of this review, because I think for some, it's going to be off-putting.

I've not read this author, Ann Leckie, before. I am aware that she hit the science fiction field big time not too long ago: she was awarded the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Arthur C. Clarke awards for her first novel "Ancillary Justice." The cover of the version I saw has a picture that's probably little spaceships shooting a big spaceship, so that's good; exploding spaceships and/or pirates improve just about ant story. I read that part of the book's impact had something to do with the use of pronouns. Why pronouns should be an issue, I'm not sure, but there you have it.

I'm pretty sure I have never read a book with this POV before. It's that of a (seemingly) objective observer, who happens to be focused on one particular character, by the name of Eolo, a riding companion of Mawat, who is a person of importance.

Over the course of some flash-back reveals, we learn that the POV character is, most likely, a rock. Furthermore, the rock is sentient; and, eventually, we discover that the rock is a god. However, it's rather hard at the beginning to determine exactly what that means, other than 'sentient rock who can observe things.' The reveal progresses, and we learn that people have taught the rock language, and that their offerings provide the rock with power.

Without exception, the following applies to all gods, although it's mostly the rock who is used to introduce us to the rules.

I love it when the boundary rules of a story are spelled out, and Leckie does a great job of doing that via the rock's self-examination. The CORE rule is that all utterances must be the truth. That happens to have a significance in this universe that the same statement does not have in ours; in THIS universe, if the rock says it, then it HAS to be true, even if the universe itself has to change to make it so. If one of the gods voices an impossibility, then they have to pay the price. Therefore, the rock has to be very careful what it says; there is no such thing as a word spoken without consequence.

A permutation of the rule: the rock can report what someone else told it without being responsible for the truthfulness of the statement. In such cases, the expected form is to say “Here is a story someone told me,” or words to that effect. Also an implied result: it's better for the rock to speak generally, rather than specifically.

Power and language are, evidently, two facets of the same item for a sentient rock, and THAT is a really interesting concept to dwell on. Deny a person the ability to communicate; how much power can they be said to have?

That last is a particularly elegant rule, as it covers all of the cryptic prophecies given in stories about magic, ever.

The rules for the rock are essential for the plot development. Also essential for the plot development is the otherwise merely-very-interesting memories the rock discloses. The time it sat on the floor of the ocean; trilobites and bony fish; glaciers, which recede, leaving it on top of the hill; dinosaurs; meteorites; people, who brought it offerings, and taught it language. Fortunately for the rock, it experiences the passage of time differently than we puny people do, else I fear it would have experienced some huge amounts of boredom along the way.

It would be POSSIBLE, perhaps, to strip out all of the plot pertaining to the gods, and still have a reasonably interesting story. It wouldn't be nearly as interesting, though, as it would just deal with humans striving for power. Removing the gods, here's what it looks like: Mawat's father was the Human-in-Charge, and his term and life were at an end. We encounter him in the first scene about to enter the city, expecting to have to take over. Instead, he finds his uncle on the throne. Power struggles ensue.

Yup, that is the making of a fairly good story, but not that distinctive. It's been done, at least in Hamlet form, many times. It's the addition of the actions, and inactions, of the rock and other gods that sets this apart.

Well, that, and the unusual point of view. I'm reminded of the “little did he know” interplay in the movie “Stranger Than Fiction,” with Emma Thompson, as the author, and Will Ferrell, as her character. It's not so much a god perspective, as it is an author perspective. I do understand that some found it tiresome, but I thought it made for a nice change-up. I doubt I'd like a DIET of that, mind you, but it was rather fun.

Then again, I also enjoyed the trilobite story, and from what I've read, some people didn't, at all. I wonder about their commitment to science fiction; if you don't enjoy a good trilobite reference, how can you be claim to be a fan? Well, never mind. Not my circus, not my monkeys.

So, my opinion is: Mostly favorable, except for one troubling feature which will ONLY be dealt with in my blog post, at the VERY END, except for my sign-off, and not at all in my Goodreads and Amazon reviews.

As for The Question: Was this a worthy choice for the 2019 Dragon Award in the category of Best Fantasy Novel?

My opinion: No. There is one troubling element that just reeks to me, which I will now explain to the best of my ability, and in the most accurate, least offensive language I can use.

IT IS, HOWEVER, A RANT. IF YOU DO NOT WISH TO BE EXPOSED TO A RANT, STOP READING.

I have already commented on the strangeness I found with the Dragon Award finalists for 2019, compared to 2018. The preponderance of trad pub books, at the expense of indie and small house publishers, is a troubling development. The exultation from previously unknown-to-me sources that at last the Dragons were gone "mainstream," I found to be deeply disturbing.

Now, with some of the books coming from the trad pub area, I had no problem with including them among the finalists; even those with only a few reviews might very well had some cult followers that championed their choice. Yay, freedom!

However, it was with the reading of "The Raven Tower" that I finally identified a theme that I'd noticed earlier, ad that had distorted some of the books: the determined focus on non-binary sexuality in humans.

In previous works, it was just an aggravation. The catastrophe that is "The Light Brigade" seemed to take great satisfaction in refusing to provide the gender of the POV character. However, with all else that is wrong with that book, no point in emphasizing any particular deficit. Similarly, "A Memory Called Empire" was so severely flawed by the purple prose and the excessive, dragging length that the intrusion of same-sex intimacy between the protagonist and her companions really didn't enter into the review at all. The real offense in "The Calculated Stars" was gender-based (men are exploitative/repressive), but not sexual in nature. And, in "Black Chamber," it's the pansexuality, not the homosexuality, that is the turn-off.

But in "The Raven Tower?" The author can only wait until page four before she introduces non-binary sexuality. And, although it is briefly mentioned a few more times, IT NEVER MATTERS TO THE STORY. So, why include it?

I do not know. In this respect, I resemble the rock, in the book. I don't know what's going on inside people's heads; I can only know what I see, what they tell me. And what they are telling me is that they have a great deal to say about non-binary sexuality. More than I have ever heard, in fact, in any other context. Save one.

Starting in the eighth grade, and lasting for about a year, that seemed to be the only source of derision available to boys. According to the vile little creatures, everything was 'queer, queer, queer.' It was the sure way to isolate a target, to make them an object of contempt: tell a 'joke,' and make them the subject.

In retrospect, it's pretty clear that this was about power, and not about sexuality, per se. There were a few boys with effeminate mannerisms, and for whatever reason, they never seemed to catch the abuse that was heaped on others. This was the form that bullying took; later, as a middle school counselor, we learned to call it by the name of sexual harassment, but that wasn't a term we had heard of in 1966.

And the behavior of the wannabe thugs in a tough all-boys school seems to be echoed in the behavior of writers of books I have reviewed over the course of the last month. The hostility between those writers and publishers previously OUTSIDE the works considered for the Dragons, and those who have been Dragon contenders since the beginning, is well documented. The DragonCon group have been called just about every name by the WorldCon group except Larry, Brad, Sarah, and Kate. Instead: fascist, racist, sexist, patriarchist, cis-normative, white, Mormon, male.

And, in that context, it's very hard for me to attribute even neutral motives to what seems to be an artificial inclusion into the majority of the works I've reviewed. Instead, it sounds like this to my ears:

"We're going to speak of sexual deviance in an enlightened manner because it makes you uncomfortable, because you are all latent homosexuals, repressing your true feelings."

These are the tactics of bullies in all places, at all times.

Perhaps I am too sensitive about some things. It's just that I do not regard human sexuality as a spectator sport. I DO understand that there are some forms of literature that require, or rather, that audiences expect, to have sexual activity involved. Hooray for choices! I am accustomed to skip over certain passages in the works of some of my favorite authors; for example, in the “Ghost” series by John Ringo. But, in those cases, it's a matter of taste, and the explicit sexual scenes were part of the character arc of the protagonist.

But today, there was absolutely nothing contributed to the story by making a point that the character was a non-binary human. I can't read that as other than politicizing, or weaponizing, sexuality. And I find that despicable.

I warned you it was going to be a rant.

Peace be on your household.

~Finis~