

The N3J
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
November 2021

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LITERARY CRITICISM

Editorial

A few issues back, I noted that our writers were not turning out as many reviews, so that it was not clear that we would be able to maintain regular monthly publication. Our membership responded, distinguished but previously silent members sending us reviews of novels and articles on writing. Around the world, fans are grateful to our new writers for their fanish activity.

Our lead reviewers are:

Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com> <http://SciFi4Me.tv>

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

Patrick Ijima-Washburn <http://patokon.com>

Becky Jones: <http://ornerydragon.com>

Rob Kroese <https://upstreamreviews.com/>

Jagi Lamplighter <http://SuperserviceSF.com>

Samuel Lubell also reviews for <http://sfrevu.com>

Will Mayo's writings also appear in the N3F zine Tightbeam

Jim McCoy <http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

George Phillies <http://books-by-george.com>

Jeffrey Redmond's writings also appear in the N3F zines Origins and Ionisphere

Cedar Sanderson <http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Thomas E. Simmons <http://homasesimmons.com>



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Fiction

A Hymn Before Battle by John Ringo

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

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

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

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

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

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

Some authors just excel at certain things. David Weber writes the best naval battle, whether it's a wet navy or a space navy. David Brin constructed a future society that was so twisted yet realistic that it still gives me the creeps. Tom Kratman can mix his story with moral and political lessons and keep it amazingly entertaining. Harry Turtledove can create a cast of ellebenty bajillion and tie it together

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

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

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

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

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Antimatter Explosions

After the Sky by Milo James Fowler
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.com>

In After the Sky (Spirits of the Earth #1), the world ended twenty years ago.

Now, the bunkers are opening, and the survivors are looking forward to rebuilding.

Unfortunately, dealing with a nuclear wasteland is the least of their problems.

The story

Twenty years ago, the United World Government nuked the planet in order to save it from a biological attack launched by rebels. The population was divided up based on their skills and sent into bunkers to wait for the All-Clear.

Now, the signal has been given. The survivors are coming out of their bunkers to restart civilization. However, not everything is going according to plan. Not all of the bunkers survived. Some of them

went crazy. Another came under the control of a madman who systematically murdered everyone. Others ran into trouble on the surface. They were also changed.

That is the set up for this post-apocalyptic tale by Milo James Fowler.

While it is unclear how and why it happens, the dust and ash that cover the earth changes everyone who comes in contact with it. Milton, the first character we meet discovers he has super-speed when the ground itself seems to rise up and attack him. Others have other gifts, claws, night vision, super-strength, even telekinesis.

As if that mystery and figuring out how to rebuild civilization from scratch were not bad enough, there is a seemingly endless number of cannibalistic marauders roaming the wastes that have to be dealt with. Like the Reavers of Firefly, these daemons are deformed, heavily armed, and eager to eat everyone they come across. Yet, as often happens in such stories, the real threat is the humans left behind, in this case, the Eden Guard. A group of unaltered engineers, Eden is determined to wipe out or enslave every mutation they can find.

As these different factions, the altered survivors, the Eden Guard, and the daemons, come into conflict, their fate and possibly that of the world may come down to the battle raging within Milton.

The characters

Milton is very much an everyman type of character. He is from a bunker where everyone was intended to be a simple laborer. Until he discovers his super-speed, he has no special skills to speak of. Nor is he possessed of an unusual degree of courage. In fact, we quickly learn that it is easy to manipulate him if it's in the interest of his self-preservation. As I said, he's an everyman, which is exactly why he is so important. He, like others in the book can sense and even hear spirits, the spirits that apparently are responsible for his powers, and also for strange phenomena like the earth attacking some people.

As the story progresses, we learn there are two spirits, one that is trying to help the survivors and another that is trying to finish off humanity. These two wage a battle for Milton's soul, trying to convince him to join one side or the other. Because of his unique ability, which side he lands on will have profound implications for the world.

There are others of course. Luther and Samson are both from a breeder bunker, specifically chosen to help repopulate the earth thanks to their superior genetics. In order to regulate the food supply, the male and female breeders were kept separate during the 20 years underground. Luther and Samson and the rest of the men in their bunker are eager to get started of course. The Daiyna and the rest of the women breeders aren't looking forward to fulfilling their purpose quite as much. It turns out that men and women are different, and women just might resent existing for the sole purpose of breeding. The men are understandably fine with the arrangement. In defense of Daiyna and the women, the first men they come in contact with are the daemons who shot and ate some of them without bothering to say hello first.

For that reason, when the two groups to come together, they decide to wait to establish themselves more securely before getting to their...purpose. Luther, being a deeply religious man and the leader of the men does a good job of keeping the men's spirits up, though Samson definitely has a one-track mind when it comes to his purpose.

Daiyna has been traumatized by all that she's seen since All-Clear. In addition to some of her friends being eaten in front of her she's seen a friend have her skin eaten away by apparently living sand, and

the leader of her bunker and several women trapping themselves underground where they would soon suffocate; so it's understandable that she is more than a little untrusting. Still, she is happy to work with Luther and the others.

Then there is Willard, the leader of the Eden Guard. Willard is a hypocritical self-serving psychopath, though he may also be the reason there is currently anyone alive in the wasteland.

The world

The story is clearly set in the not terribly distant future. The USA is long gone, absorbed by the United World Government. Yet, there are still plenty of combustion engines in use, though the preference is clearly for solar powered vehicles. As one might expect after a nuclear apocalypse, there is nothing left alive on the surface, no one comes into contact with so much as a roach. Everyone is struggling to survive on left over rations from the bunkers and provisions stored for after the All-Clear is given.

It's certainly a convincing world in that despite the work of the many experts who planned the retreat to the bunkers and the subsequent restart (Reset?) of civilization, not everything goes smoothly. After all, it wouldn't be a nuclear wasteland without mutated cannibals running around the place. Or with a few of the best and brightest, like Willard losing their minds. The only thing that separates this world from how similar events might play out in ours is the spirits and the gifts they grant.

The politics

A key message of this book is definitely don't trust the centralized planners. It was centralized planners who decided to nuke the surface, Willard is a centralized planner who institutes his own dystopia, and Jackson, the leader of Milton's bunker took power to himself in order to murder everyone else over the years. The only group that is ever shown to be running well without murder and enslavement is the voluntary one that is made of the survivors of the two breeding groups, the only people with a diversity of skills and interests and the only ones not sterilized.

Content warning

There is one mild sex scene, plenty of suggestive language from Samson, medical experimentation that would make Mengele proud and, did I mention the mutant cannibals?

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes a good post-apocalypse story should enjoy this. Those who enjoy games like The Last of Us or series like the Walking Dead will appreciate the plight of the main characters struggling to find hope in the wasteland, only to find their fellow humans might be worse than anything they've faced.

Why read it?

Fowler manages to bring multiple genres together. We get a mix of post-apocalypse, superhero, and dystopian fiction with a side of mystery all rolled into one without it feeling wedged in. The end result is a good time that has me interested to read the next book in the series.

Bob's Saucer Repair, by Jerry Boyd

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Yes, I said "most delightful book;" I did NOT say "mostly delightful book." There is a difference. This one is most delightful; I found nothing to object to. The book has had some changes in the cover art, and the most recent cover reminds me of "The Hitchhikers Guide" series, and that's good. It's funny; there is an adventure story, but don't come looking to have exploding spaceships take you all the way. Instead, relish the dialogue:

“You have a point. Your hair covers it, though.”

The protagonist is a mechanic. Bob, the mechanic. He arrives home at the end of a work day, anticipating chili and beer, and discovers a broken spaceship (not an exploding spaceship!) in his garage. He does NOT freak out; he invites the pilot, Nikki, to hang out while he mends a coolant pipe. Amusing cultural differences emerge, and the effect is made delightful by the fact that both Bob and Nikki are quick with a quip and an insult.

She is a pilot/guide to interstellar graduate students, who sought to cut costs by procuring a junker spaceship. Bad choice. Fortunately, Bob, then his medic buddy John, pull their chestnuts out of the fire. In doing so, they present an opportunity for continued commerce (and Bob and Nikki interact chemically, or something; anyway, they both want to smooch).

Translator devices; direct-brain-interface learning machines; some other different super-advanced tech, but, this ISN'T a story about gadgets. Do you like...SPACE PIRATES?

It's a thorough romp, the first in the series, and it's my understanding that installment 11 has recently gone live. Amazing....

Peace be on your household.

The Cosmic Courtship by Julian Hawthorne

Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com>

A lost work by Julian Hawthorne – son of the legendary Nathaniel Hawthorne – is brought back to life by Cirsova Publishing.

It's been called the American Out of the Silent Planet and it's easy to see why.

The story

In the distant future of 2001 (the story was written in 1917) Miriam Mayne and Jack Paladin both live in the upper crust of New York society. She is a promising young scientist and he an artist of immense talent and neither seems to have a particular interest in the opposite sex, until they meet that is.

That changes rather suddenly when their mutual love for and skill with horses brings them together. Jack is instantly taken with her when he sees the young woman at social event before a horse race. He's unsure if the attraction is mutual until he has the opportunity to save her life on the horse track.

The pair fall in love immediately, but the affair is seemingly cut short when Miriam disappears suddenly after their first meetings. When Jack tracks her to the lab of Mary Faust, the mystery is only deepened. While Miriam's body is there, her consciousness is (along with a suitable body) on Saturn with no clear way of return.

Jack follows, promising to bring her back. When he arrives, he finds that the task will not be easy as Miriam has also caught the eye of Torpeon, a despot with designs of ruling not only the moon of Tor but the whole solar system and beyond. Fortunately, Jack has been followed by his trusty servant Jim, a deformed but streetwise and loyal youth he had rescued from the gutter.

The characters

If you are a modern reader with certain preconceived notions of how people wrote a hundred years ago and how they portrayed people, especially women, then prepare to have your mind blown. Not only are many of the main characters women, they are not mere love interests. Mary is clearly ahead of her time with her inventions. Miriam is not only a worthy pupil, she is a skilled horse rider, and has enough intelligence and will to defy Torpeon and even develop a backup plan that would require her to sacrifice her life.

Lamara, the benevolent ruler of the Saturnians, also seems to have a status slightly below that of a goddess. It's clear that she has immense power at her disposal but would rather avoid using it lest she cause more harm than good.

The excellence of the women also does not come at the expense of the men. Jack Paladin might be the most obvious protagonist name in literary history and the character does not disappoint. While he obviously struggles with understanding the pacifism of the Saturnians, he demonstrates his fidelity to Miriam as well as his bravery many times over.

The star of the show though is Jim. Much like Samwise Gamgee, he is fiercely loyal, thinking the world of his master, while also considering him too dangerously naïve in certain areas. In fact, it is Jim, acting with complete selflessness that really moves the story along at many points, saving Jack and taking the fight straight to Torpeon.

The world

Especially given the time period in which *The Cosmic Courtship* was written one should forgive certain liberties Hawthorne takes when it comes to filling in the massive holes in scientific knowledge. Instead, focus on the way he describes a society that is in many ways truly alien from our own. While they are pacifistic, their advances also make war completely unnecessary, even with Torpeon. Yet, they are still clearly tempted by fear, anger, desire, and vengeance.

Saturn is also contrasted well with Torpeon's world of Tor which is a violent place ruled with Torpeon's iron fist and turned into a giant lab for the despot's experiments.

The politics

There are few overt politics in the book. What little there is would at first seem to be center left with the strong focus on nonviolence and lack of punishment for criminals. Yet, pay a bit more attention and you realize these things are only possible because of the immense virtue of the citizens of Saturn which

is such that a criminal brought to judgment is so shamed that he or she would willingly sacrifice themselves to make amends. It's also clear that these virtues are only so well developed because their immense devotion to God. That places a bit right of center as whole.

Content warning

There is little content that could be found objectionable here. There is some use of magic and attempts at seduction undertaken by the villains of the story, but it only ever skirts the edge of PG-13 once. There also a couple violent deaths near the end but not described in a graphic way.

Who is it for?

I'd recommend this to anyone with a taste for an older style of storytelling. It is slower paced and relies on the character relationships and concepts to carry the story. If you are a Chris Nolan fan, or you greatly enjoyed C.S. Lewis' sci-fi trilogy, then this is for you. I'd also recommend this to a teenage boy or girl who has a more advanced reading ability and expose them to the way men and women should act when courting.

Why read it?

To return to a simpler time, to a different way of telling stories, unencumbered by the many silly rules we impose on ourselves.

Death of Sleep by Anne McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye
Review by Leybl Botwinik
<http://www.kulichki.com/antimiry/cybercozen>

I'm sorry to say, that I found this book very disappointing. I trudged through the first 200 pages, only because of McCaffrey. Only then does the story start to, somehow, pick up. Even so, the plot is nothing special.

The original, key premise or storyline – somewhat related to the title – is that a woman goes into suspended animation in an escape pod after her ship is attacked by pirates. She thought she would wake up – be rescued by the space police – a few days/weeks/months later, when in fact she wakes up many years later.

Normally, this could be a good starting point for a background plot, comparing her 'present' with her new reality. However, one would have to be pretty imaginative to pull off an interesting 'delta' (the gap between the old 'present' and the new 'future'), since it already takes place in a future anyway – so we have no real reference point for comparisons: For the reader of 1990 (or even of 2021), the fact that she goes to sleep in a faster-than-light spaceship, for example, and wakes up years later, when technology can make ships fly even faster – is not really all that exciting. ... and then it happens again: She goes into suspended animation once more – presumably for a few days/weeks/months – when she in fact wakes up many years later (again). This seems, somewhat reminiscent of 'flogging a dead horse'...

The only reason I lasted the first 200 pages, though, were the few redeeming factors:

- The story has a certain flow to it, and is clear and well written.
- The descriptions of the technologies in both 'futures' was well thought-out and seemed realistic.

Still, not a book I would recommend. It lacked passion/emotion, intrigue, even vital questions/answers, nor was there any real sense of adventure, suspense, or mystery... A more appropriate title might have been "Putting You to Sleep".

Deep Pink by Sarah A. Hoyt

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Sarah Hoyt has written a delightful book! Whether it will be a book for a tiny little niche of readers, or something with wide appeal, remains to be seen. However, I loved it!

The plot. There is a crisis occurring among the death metal bands in Cleveland Ohio, and that's a sentence that I never thought I would generate in my lifetime. Bands are changing their names from (these are just examples I fabricated) Filthy Slime Killers to Precious Pink Kitties; the members wearing pink frilly clothes and Hello Kitty headbands and singing music about bubbles and puppies and kitties in falsetto voices. This does not sit well with their fans.

Attempting to get to the bottom of things, death metal band manager Ron Rando calls private investigator Seamus Lebanon Magis, known as Leb, and asks him to investigate. Magis visits the apartment of one Albert Schneider, a semi-prominent band member, and finds that his residence looks like "multiple Disney princesses have exploded." All of the décor is pink, glitter and stuffed animals are everywhere, and Schneider is wearing a pink jumpsuit. However, Schneider says he is still a servant of the Dark, but that he's under new management. At this point, both Schneider and Leb hear an ethereal voice saying "Tut-tut, don't talk!" and Schneider is terrified. Leb starts to ask if he really believes Satan is in control, but Schneider interrupts, says to call the Boss "Peggy", and refuses to say more. Next morning, Schneider's body is found, butchered.

Pretty creepy, right? I can't say that it gets worse, but it does get...more involved.

In short order, we have the reappearance of Emma, Leb's long lost love, a little girl (Lilly) who has vanished, and a big Chevrolet (The Brown Disgrace) that exists pretty much on its own terms.

Nothing links the bizarre behavior of the band members and Lilly's disappearance, until Leb follows a lead out to Mary of the Pines Seminary. There he meets a former member of the band Punk Sausage, a seminary student who lost his faith, and experimented with being in a band. However, when bizarre things started to happen, he had the theological training to recognize that this was more than drug-induced mental illness. He briefs Leb on what he thinks is going on. In an amusingly intricate monologue about the distinctions between the natural, preternatural, supernatural, he loses Leb LONG before he runs out of things to say.

In addition to the theological hypothesizing, though, the seminarian DOES provide Leb with evidence that something bizarre IS happening and warns him to stay away (and small spoiler, provides support later).

It's rare to find an author who can exposit the supernatural aspects of a commonly held belief system, without sounding either evangelical or contemptuous. Hoyt is one of the few I've seen who can do that and remain WITHIN the framework of mainstream science fiction and fantasy. Her portrayal of the Dark One is a FABULOUS bit, with the Father of Lies sporting pigtailed with pink ribbons, wearing a pinafore, and attending a tea-party. Evidently, there are SOME rules that must NOT be broken, else

consequences, you know? As always, her plot is consistent, and her characters are recognizable as people you might encounter, or live with, or be.

Some goriness in a morgue; a few non-PG words; nothing else to offend any adults, but if you have a precocious child who reads everything, stand by to explain.

Demons Are Forever by Declan Finn Review by Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.com>

After the events of Honor at Stake, (Love at First Bite #1, reviewed here), you'd think Marco Catalano and Amanda Colt would be going out and hunting evil vampires together as they planned their wedding. That might be the case if either of them were particularly well-adjusted.

The story

After the events of the first book and the victory of Marco and company over the vampire Mikhail the Bear, Marco flees to San Francisco in an effort to not hurt Amanda should she discover just how dark his dark side really is. He also has the plausible excuse of responding to Merle Kraft's request to help train a group of vampire hunters in San Francisco. Not that the fanged critters are a huge problem there yet--Kraft would just like to keep it that way.

Marco takes his time integrating himself with the team Kraft has already assembled, and when he does, let's just say Marco's people skills have not improved much from the previous book. Surprisingly, he does forge something like a real connection with Yana, a casually pagan walking stereotype of San Francisco – in a fun way. There is even a hint of romantic tension that leaves the reader wondering if Amanda might turn Yana into lunch later on.

All of that takes a backseat when the forces behind Mikhail retaliate against Marco, the Vatican Ninjas, and the rest, beginning with a feigned terror attack in New York. Realizing that the attack was aimed at Marco; Bram, Hendershot, and the rest of the Ninjas arrive in San Francisco just in time to save him from the person responsible for the attack, the mysterious Mr. Day. As one would expect, he is much more of a threat than Mikhail. Mr. Day, in fact, has a long history of causing trouble in the world and has crossed paths with Amanda before. His powers are beyond those of any vampire they have met, requiring all of their forces and all of Marco's considerable strategic talents to overcome.

The characters

Declan Finn has a talent for coming up with devout characters that don't conform to a stereotypical model of piety. Marco is certainly devout, never missing Mass, going to regular confession and doing his best to follow the ten commandments. Yet, he is also a self-described violent sociopath. It just so happens that he's able to turn his dark side to the right targets, in this case, vampires. In fact, it's probably a good thing that there are vampires because Marco might otherwise direct his violent tendencies elsewhere. Which would make him the Punisher at best or the Joker at worst.

Merle Kraft is also further developed. It turns out he has a wife as well as a collection of ill-defined powers which leave the reader wondering exactly who he is. Finn also shows off his skill here in that one would expect the vague nature of Merle's powers to come off as sloppy. Instead, the author crafts it such a way that the character comes off as enigmatic.

Mr. Day is the kind of bad guy who knows he's the bad guy and clearly likes being the bad guy. There are no attempts at sympathy, he treated as he is, a powerful being of immense evil. And get used to him, he pops up in other books, including those with Tommy Nolan.

The world

Marco and Amanda's world begins to expand in this book. In the first, Marco was exposed to the fact that vampires exist. Not only that, the Vatican has a fully equipped strike force to deal with them.

We learn here that is only the tip of the iceberg as we meet exploding vampire thralls, werewolves, a demon, and a bona fide guardian angel.

The more Finn builds out his universe the stranger and more interesting it becomes.

The politics

With Marco as the POV character, the politics of this series are best summed as, "smite evil before it smites you". Marco isn't passive. If he has an opportunity to strike, he takes it, smacking down the villains without bothering to second guess himself.

In a way, it isn't politics at all, it's a reclaiming of martial virtue.

Content warning

Demons and horrible deaths abound. Like most of Finn's books, the gruesome nature means this one isn't for the littles.

Who is it for?

If you liked *The Lost Boys*, or *Blade*, then this is definitely for you. The vampires and other supernatural creatures all have the classic weaknesses but live squarely in the modern world. That is to say, no one is running around posing dramatically in a cape, nor is anyone sparkling in the sun.

Why read it?

If you like the idea of *Blade* with an intellect like Batman wreaking havoc on the supernatural underworld with the help of a Catholic vampire and literal Vatican Ninjas, why wouldn't you read this book?

Divided We Fall: One Possible Future
edited by Tiffany Reynolds and Patty McIntosh-Mize.
Review by Becky Jones

I've always liked anthologies because I can get a taste of multiple authors at one time. Anthologies also introduce me to authors I haven't yet read and finding new authors is always fun. This week's book review subject is *Divided We Fall: One Possible Future* edited by Tiffany Reynolds and Patty McIntosh-Mize. The authors include Sarah A. Hoyt, Brad Torgerson, Mack Henkel, Jon Del Arroz, and more. There are twelve stories in all. All twelve are good to great, but I'm only going to go into detail about a few of them here.

Here's the blurb for the book:

Political upheavals can be a very dangerous time, especially when ideologies are as far apart as they are now. *Divided we Fall* presents one possible future, one where powerful forces act behind the scenes to effect the change they've wished to create for decades, and have largely been held back. What happens when a nation is sharply divided, anarchistic forces allowed to run wild, and the police are held at bay or even defunded? Add in a presidential assassination, and you have all the potential for a world changing situation. In this world, *Divided we Fall*.

A collection of talented veteran bestselling authors and several new ones join together to paint a picture of the post 2020 election that none of us hope to see come about. But the more we watch events unfold, the more anything seems possible.

The first story in the collection sets the scene for the reader and provides the context within which the other stories take place. In "Fourth Estate" Mack Henkel gives us the story of the run-up to the November 2020 election, the immediate aftermath of the inauguration of Joe Biden and the consequences for President Trump from the point of view of a reporter who was there but is writing several years from now. He tells the story of growing up in a strong union and Democratic household. We follow his growing career and doubts until the November 2020 election and aftermath. Along the way we also get a short history lesson about highly contested elections and the role of the Electoral College in American politics. The story is written in the style of a Bob Woodward "tell-all" political book with the insider's view of events contrasted with the public view. I came away from this story thinking, "it's plausible, really plausible, and I really don't like it." A good story makes you come blinking back into your own world wondering what just happened and that's what I did with this one.

Brad Torgerson takes on the political attacks against churches in "Secret Combinations". Torgerson explores one man's reactions to federal actions shutting down churches, specifically, Latter Day Saints or Mormons, and declaring a faith outlawed. Obviously, a huge move in contradiction to the First Amendment. The protagonist, Ephraim Roberts, a veteran and former federal law enforcement officer is faced with the dilemma of helping LDS members who are trying to make it clear that they don't want a violent end to the situation or working as an informant for his former employers who are convinced that the LDS group wants to start a shooting war. The frustration Ephraim feels at what he views as the overly optimistic outlook of the LDS members, and the deliberately obtuse view of the feds comes through loud and clear. The decision facing Ephraim is a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation.

Stories by William Dietrich, "Dangerous Words", and Leigh Smith, "Delenda Est", give the reader a father and son facing the same problem. In "Dangerous Words" the son, Bruce McAlister, is a Marine sergeant watching fellow Marines get hauled away for saying the wrong thing to the wrong people. He's trying to figure out when and where they will be deployed...within the US. He's also writing a now-illegal blog about the political situation. If anybody finds out about the blog, not only will Bruce be dishonorably discharged, but he will also wind up in jail. Bruce discovers his estranged father's secret and reaches out in the hopes that the retired Marine lieutenant colonel will be able to give him some fatherly and Marine-worthy advice regarding his options. Bruce gets far more than he expected.

The other side of Bruce McAlister's story is "Delenda Est"; the story of Bruce's estranged father, Lt. Col. (ret) Ash McAlister, who is facing his own dilemma. He's been recalled out of retirement. Like father, like son, Ash is torn between calling out current abuses and upholding his oath. He also has a young family to protect. Finding himself trapped between conflicting courses of action, Ash is equally surprised to reconnect with his son from his first marriage. That reconnection gives him a renewed

sense of purpose and another ally in his fight against the unconstitutional actions of the federal government.

Both stories combine the sense of personal loss and renewal in the father-son relationship with the loss and renewal of purpose and country. Both stories ended on a note, even if small, of optimism and made me remember that there are people out there who will do the right thing in the face of huge obstacles.

Sarah A. Hoyt gives us the story of the origins of the USAians in “Teach the Children.” Driven from their homes, a group of unlikely neighbors begin the process of insuring that the children in their care know and understand the founding documents and values of the U.S. The new-found (or perhaps renewed) determination and strength the characters find is why I found hope in the conclusion. As with the father and son Marines, this story is a reminder that there are lots of people out there who will continue to do the right thing in the face of overwhelming odds.

One story that stood out for me, because it didn't seem to fit in with the others in the sense of people fighting to preserve values and freedoms, was “The Ballad of Becky and Karen” by Jon Del Arroz. Granted, it was a story about those on the “other side” of the equation. Becky and Karen are two high school/college-age young women who decide to show support for the oppressed minorities in Oakland. As a former college professor, I do understand the dangers of indoctrination within our educational system. But I still thought that Becky's refusal or inability to understand the reality of her situation was a stretch. I've known and worked with some clueless college students, but never any who were that bad. This piece was an odd note among the other stories in the collection.

In the end these stories are tales of hope, faith, courage, and determination in the face of what may seem like crushing opposition. Like I said above, these are not happily-ever-after stories, rather they are stories of Americans, humans, who will fight for their freedoms and liberties. While I was uncomfortable with the plausibility of the situations described in some of the stories, I was also reminded of the resilience and strength of the majority of Americans. This is a great collection of stories for these uncertain times.

Ender in Exile by Orson Scott Card Review by Samuel Lubell <http://sfrevu.com>

There was a time when Orson Scott Card was my favorite science fiction writer. Ender's Game is one of the modern classics of science fiction having won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, as did its sequel, Speaker for the Dead. His early Alvin Maker books were very strong as well, especially Red Prophet. But none of his more recent books have reached these heights.

Even in the Ender series, Card's four novels about Bean, a spinoff of the Ender books about the smallest soldier in Ender's army, although decent novels, were not up to the high bar set by the first three Ender books. But if I had to pinpoint the book that showed Card was not writing as well as he had been, I'd pick Ender in Exile, a 2008 fix-up of a book, that filled a few holes in the Ender series. It is still an acceptable novel, just somewhat disappointing.

In Ender's Game, the brilliant Andrew Wiggin (nicknamed Ender) as a young boy is sent to the orbital Battle School to learn how to fight the enemy aliens, the Buggers, by playing a series of games. What he does not know is that the games were real and that by winning them, he has saved Earth. Meanwhile, his brother and sister have gained enormous political power by writing online columns under a pseudo-

nym (making Card the first to come up with the blog, and to foresee its power). The sequel, *Speaker for the Dead* takes place thousands of years later (thanks to the way faster-than-light travel voyages take hundreds of years of real-universe time while those on the ship experience just a couple of years). Ender is now seen as the xenocide, the killer of an entire alien race, thanks to a book Ender himself wrote (at the end of *Ender's Game*) in his new identity as the *Speaker for the Dead*. *Ender in Exile* is a bridge novel, fitting between *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead* (or more exactly, before and during the last chapter of *Ender's Game* that had served as a bridge before this novel was written). It also overlaps the *Bean* novels.

While the purpose of *Ender in Exile* was to fill in that blank, what readers got was a very long setup to Ender's first visit to a colony planet, a rehash of the final chapter of *Ender's Game* with little new material added, and the settling of some unfinished business from the last *Bean* book. *Ender in Exile* begins with Ender's parents manipulating his siblings Valentine and Peter to convince the world through their blogs to keep Ender off Earth. (A major discrepancy from *Ender's Game* is that Ender doesn't know about his sibling's online blogs even though Valentine had explained it to him in the original book.) Ender and his sister join a colony ship so Ender, now a hero, can govern it. But once on the ship he worries that the admiral may see himself as a better ruler than the 13-year-old Ender, so has to hide all of his thoughts and feelings while trying to turn the colonists into potential allies. Meanwhile, an overly controlling mother tries to arrange a relationship between Ender and her daughter. This dull scheme, and the voyage itself, occupy most of the book.

As in the last chapter of *Ender's Game*, Ender finds the cocoon with the hibernating Hive Queen and writes his first book using the *Speaker for the Dead* identity, but Card does not show Ender's reactions to meeting the Queen, learning how to communicate with it, or even his feelings as he wrote about the race he destroyed. Nor is there any more detail on his reconciliation with his brother, now the aging Hegemon of Earth, and the writing of the second book under the *Speaker for the Dead* identity, which barely gets two pages. Instead, the final chunk of the book is devoted to resolving a plot thread from *Shadow of the Giant* as one of the children of *Bean* and *Petra*, two members of Ender's army, has been kidnapped and brought up to think himself the son of *Bean's* arch-enemy. To discredit *Bean* and the government of Earth, he uses Ender's *Hive Queen* book to label Ender a mass murderer and the government of Earth the pro-xenocide party. In the end, the struggle between Ender and the son of his friends resolves some of Ender's issues about the two boys he killed in *Ender's Game*, partially out of self defense.

What made the first two Ender books so strong were the emotions. The characters' actions had emotional consequences. This was especially true in *Speaker for the Dead* where the climax was Ender's account of the meaning of another's character's life. Unfortunately, it is this emotional quality that is lacking for most of *Ender in Exile*. For most of the book, Ender has to keep everything hidden from the sensors controlled by the ship's captain. And even late in the book, we see little of Ender's relationship with anyone, even Valentine. This is especially needed since so many of the important plot points in the story were already told in the final chapter of *Ender's Game*. Moreover, having the change in Ender's reputation from savior of humanity to killer of an alien race be the quick result of a single person's misguided scheme, rather than the slow influence of the *Speaker for the Dead's* *Hive Queen* book makes the change seem rather petty and unrealistic.

This is not to say that *Ender in Exile* is a bad book. But it does not have the strong drive or characters of the other Ender books. In *Ender's Game* he saves the world from the alien buggers, in *Speaker for the Dead* he brings about an understanding of the biology of an alien species, and in *Xenocide/Children of the Mind* he prevents a second xenocide. But in *Ender in Exile* his main accomplishment is avoiding

being trapped into a marriage at age 15. So, a book that would have been good, but not great in the hands of just about any other author, or about any other character, becomes disappointing when it is Orson Scott Card writing about Ender, his most famous character. Fans of Orson Scott Card who liked the Bean books will like this one too. Readers who gave up on the Bean books but still had hopes for a "real" Ender book will find this one only a small step up. And readers who pick this up without having read the previous books will wonder what all the fuss is about. This is not a good starting point for the series. Instead, new readers should read the four original Ender books, starting with Ender's Game.

The Frozen Rabbi by Steve Stern

Review by Leybl Botwinik

<http://www.kulichki.com/antimiry/cybercozen>

380 pages Since we're already on the subject of suspended animation, this book (though not really SF) also uses that premise – only it takes place between some time at the end of the 19th and into the 20th century and 'today'. A kind of a Rip Van Winkle situation. We'll get to the plot and the so-called 'redeeming' factors of the book in a moment, but first a note (of warning).

The book is written in a way that makes it almost two books, and two stories. One is an entertaining and sometimes even shockingly blunt (or piercingly sharp) romp through Eastern European Jewish life and then (mostly) North American Jewish immigrant life – and in parallel the present day. However, whereas the first is 'colourful' (to say the least), the latter is disappointing, and – I'm afraid to say – SHOCKING AND DISGUSTING SMUT. Stern really overdid it, and I'll get to that soon. Notwithstanding the hype on the front and back covers of what a 'great' book this is, if you do want to read it – not recommended, regardless of any so-called 'redeeming' factors – you ought to look at it as having three faces: The 'GOOD', the 'BAD', and the 'UGLY'...

The 'GOOD':

Looking at this as if it were two separate books, the first 'book' tells us the quaint and lively story of how a Rabbi in a small Polish Shtetl (Jewish village) gets frozen in a block of ice, is cut out of the frozen river where he fell asleep, and is stored away by his disciples until – maybe – one day he would thaw out and be revived. The block of ice containing the Rabbi is saved from a pogrom that burns down the Shtetl, and is transported to the New World – America.

This part of the story – by the way, it's not 'two parts', but rather a running series of 'historical flash-backs' in parallel with what's happening in the '2nd' part of the book (the part in the late 20th century, that could be 'today'). It is very vivid and colourful, and a very explicit walk through the trials, tribulations, and turmoil of the Jewish immigrants in NY in the early 20th century. Stern does a very good job of depicting much of the historical veracity of that early period, while at the same time keeping a good pace and interesting storyline of the characters in play, chock full of satirical knocks on the people and society as it was then. His characters are interesting and well-developed, and the situations keep your attention and you want to continue reading. There is a part where the main character goes to the new-born Israel – where I can't agree with Stern's criticisms of the fledgling state – but I won't get into the arguments for and against, now...

The 'BAD':

Our 'theoretical' book 2, is how the novel actually starts: 'Today', a young Jewish boy in the US, in

suburban Memphis – an adolescent coming into his own – discovers the block containing the Frozen Rabbi, stored in the family deep freeze in the basement of his house. The boy’s family is a typical 3rd & 4th generation assimilated Jewish family that knows little of anything about Judaism. Nevertheless, the parents have kept the family tradition of guarding the block of ice and keep the Frozen Rabbi as some sort of inheritance, unbeknownst to the young man or his sister. During a freak electrical storm and power outage, the Rabbi thaws out and causes turmoil in the boy’s life – and in his family’s. The Rabbi – spewing ‘philosophy’ – takes the boy under his wing, teaches him some Yiddish (there is actually a lot of Yiddish in the book) and somewhat about Judaism. The boy’s interest is sparked, and he begins learning more about his heritage under the tutelage of the Rabbi. – This reminds me of the assimilated Jewish boy in the movie “The Chosen” who wants to know more about his Jewish roots, and eventually becomes very religious.

At this point, the reader can just imagine the fun that Stern could have had with the story: introducing a pious 19th century Rabbi to 20th century ‘Jewish’ life in America. But here is Stern’s downfall – in my eyes. Instead of doing contrasts between ‘then’ and ‘now’ between the devoutness and spirituality of the Rabbi and the often frivolousness and shallowness found in much of modern society – even in a satirical way – he totally corrupts the Rabbi, making him into a money-hungry guru, leading a sad flock of followers who would like to be enlightened by his ‘philosophy’ and ‘spirituality’ – and he thus creates a cult following with the boy’s father’s help. This saddened me very much. It reminded me of a disgusting scene of the wife of an Orthodox Rabbi down on her knees, eating pork during a TV show “What’s My Perversion”, in Woody Allen’s satirical movie “EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT SEX – BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK” – and there was absolutely no connection between that, and ‘SEX’ per se... Stern – like Allen – just thought it was OK to pull things out of context and demean a symbol of piety. I know that there are so-called observant Jews who break the Jewish laws, and have been satirized in the past – but this seemed too ‘ambitious’ (pre-meditated) by Stern, as if he wanted to purposely condemn an entire way of life, based on the moral and ethical weaknesses of one perverted individual.

The ‘UGLY’:

If the ‘Bad’ wasn’t enough, Stern hit a further low by making the Frozen Rabbi not just a decadent and shallow human being, but in the end: an embarrassing, sexually depraved person – what you would call ‘a dirty old man’...

In Conclusion:

Although the parts of the book covering the ‘history’ of the Rabbi while still frozen (and those around him who preserved the frozen block at all costs), were mostly entertaining and even historically interesting – the parts in modern day America were both disappointing, and worse – quite often disgusting...

Galen’s Way by Richard Paolinelli
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.com>

In the distant future, humanity is still full of terrible people and courage is still found in the most unlikely places.

The story

Galen is a rogue, a mercenary, and a smuggler, the most dangerous man in humanity’s little corner of

the Andromeda Galaxy. And he has just been recruited to rescue Princess Rhiannon from a fortress that no sane man would dare even approach, much less infiltrate. Galen, however, did not get to be the most dangerous man alive by playing it safe.

When he makes it to the surface of the fortress world, he finds it manned only by the outlaw Dunstan Vedastus. The two have a history and Galen is more than happy to kill Vedastus as part of the rescue. What he finds though is not one princess, but four, each in pods hooked up to an outlawed mental torture device. Things get interesting though when Galen realizes that he's been set up by Harmool, the chief advisor to King Iodocus, Rhiannon's father. Had Galen not arrived early, he likely would have been blown up along with Vedastus, the princesses, and the entire planet. As he tries to figure out what to do, Galen uncovers a plot that threatens the entire Alliance.

The characters

Galen Dwyn is a virtual archetype of the virtuous outlaw. Found living on his own in a slum, the young Galen was trained by the elite bodyguard of the Alliance's chancellor, the Bata'van. Already a gifted leader, the Bata'van made him incredibly hard to kill. So hard that after Galen deserted, the legendary force eventually gave up trying to bring him in.

Galen may be a mercenary, but he has a highly developed sense of right and wrong, one that never lets him walk away from a fight that needs fighting. He is incredibly resourceful and single-minded. Yet, he is not a loner, no matter how much he might fancy himself one. For one, Cass, his snarky ship's AI keeps him company on his travels between the stars, all while clipping his wings with her sharp tongue. Sort of the Alfred to Galen's Bruce Wayne.

Then there is Lir Fiachra, Galen's mentor when he was still one of the Bata'van. After Galen has deserted, Lir retired and started a new life as a history professor, passing along the ancient stories of humanity as it left the Milky Way behind for Andromeda, being forced out by an unexplained enemy that killed every star in the galaxy. Lir is a romantic, and he saw in Galen even at a young age the qualities of a knight, qualities he carefully encouraged. Because of their relationship, Galen still goes to his old friend for advice when he can't find a way out of a situation, advice that he very much needs when he realizes the depths of Harmool's plot.

Naturally, Rhiannon becomes the love interest for the lonely Galen. Yet, she is no mere damsel, nor is she a typical woke Xena. Her strength lies in her character, in her ability to adapt to her situation when Galen removes her from the sleep pod and fills her in on what is going on. The two develop a back-and-forth relationship that blossoms into romance despite Galen's attempts to suppress his feelings for the princess.

Going too much into the villains would give away the plot but let me assure you, Harmool is the least of Galen's problems.

The world

Paolinelli did a fantastic job building the world for Galen's Way. In many ways, the specific location in the Andromeda Galaxy and how far in the future it is don't matter to the primary story. However, references to the ancient war that led to the death of the Milky Way and the fact that it has been so long since the last star there went out that many people don't even believe it existed add depth to the world.

It's also interesting that humanity, no doubt in part due to the struggles of intergalactic travel and the

subsequent perils of getting the race re-established in a strange world, has gone back to monarchy as their government for the most part. While the Alliance appears to be somewhat of a republic, the individual worlds operate like kingdoms. There is also a lot of thought given to the technology available and how it would work. Especially a certain piece of ancient alien technology that comes into play at the end.

The politics

The politics of the story itself are largely monarchical as described above. That also means the story is full of its share of court intrigue, especially when we learn the real plot behind Rhiannon's kidnapping. While Galen himself is mostly apolitical, his disposition is very traditional. He won't hurt innocents, doesn't appear to randomly hook up with women, even trying his best to not look at the princesses when exposed in their pods, and when he falls in love with Rhiannon, he doesn't think twice about sacrificing himself so she can live free. That places this book squarely into the conservative and traditional end of the spectrum.

Content warning

Paolinelli doesn't get very graphic at any point, though there is definitely plenty of violence, one torture scene and some off page sex. At most, it's a soft PG-13.

Who is it for?

There are some obvious comparisons to Dune to be made here. There is the hierarchical nature of the planetary governments and the intense political intrigue and depravity that will remind anyone of Herbert's work. However, Galen Dwyn is perhaps best compared to a character like Batman – the not-quite-lone badass who uses a combination of skill and intelligence to ruthlessly overcome what should be overwhelming odds. If you like Dune, Batman, Solomon Kane, and Han Solo you'll very much enjoy Galen's Way.

Why read it?

Why read Galen's Way? Because it is a story about a total badass that hasn't lost his humanity. It's one man willing to take on an empire for the woman he loves and winning. All wrapped up in political intrigue and hints of far more dangerous enemies to come.

The Ghost of McCallister Mansion (and Other Stories)

by Emily Red

Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com>

Emily Red serves up three short and very different horror stories, ranging from hints of Victorian ghost stories to shades of Lovecraft.

The story

The Ghost of McCallister Mansion

KellyAnne and Gertrude want nothing more than to move their catering and café business from a bland

storefront to a beautiful historic home and McCallister Mansion looks like the perfect fit. That is, until they encounter Drake, the ghost who haunts the mansion on their first visit. Rather than backing away from the deal, the pair press on, determined to help Drake move on. In the process, they discover the current owner of the home might know more than she is letting on.

Clutter

Tom is looking forward to introducing his girlfriend Callie to his family. She isn't quite so enthusiastic and has decided she'll be breaking up with him when the trip is over. It isn't long before she begins to wish she'd dumped him a day earlier. Something is obviously off as soon as they enter the family home, a home packed with furniture and cables of various kinds, leaving only narrow pathways through the enormous main room. It isn't long before the reader gets the feeling that this is the kind of story where Callie winds up getting eaten by her boyfriend's psychotic family. That isn't exactly what happens but there is something definitely not right going on.

Greensong

Something is killing the whales and if Corianna and the other scientists can't figure out why and put a stop to it, it will spell disaster for the tribe in charge of managing the whales. They've just been showing up on the beach dead or dying for no apparent reason. Finally, they take their sub out to follow a pod and catch one just as it begins to die, right after a dive to catch some rising shrimp.

The characters

The characters are varied in terms of their background. There are bakers, scientists, and college kids. One thing that unites them is that they are all ordinary people. They have no truly unique skills, no abilities, and other than the scientists, no special knowledge that sets them apart from the rest of humanity. And they surely have no knowledge of the supernatural. In short, they are everyday people forced into extraordinary circumstances. For the most part, they respond as we hope we would, with courage in the face of uncertainty and even at the risk of madness.

The world

The Ghost of McCallister Mansion and Clutter could take place in nearly any small American town, albeit on different sides of the tracks. Greensong seems to take place in an alternate or future reality than our own based on a couple references to governmental bodies. However, change those to something more familiar and it could easily be taking place off the coast of Alaska. What is really interesting is the hints of the wider world in the stories, hints that make me hope Emily comes back to them at some point. Tom's family in Clutter is clearly up to something, something that involves sapping the energy from human beings. And of course, Greensong's villain is something that opens up an entire world of terrifying legends.

The politics

Given the nature of the stories, there isn't much in the way of politics to point to. However, the characters that persevere and overcome the obstacles set before them are those who act on their own initiative.

Content warning

Other than some of the insanity that ensues during the deep dive in Greensong it's pretty clean, especially for horror stories.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes good old-fashioned tales of the macabre will enjoy this. I already made allusion to the hints of Lovecraft in the story. However, given the different nature of each story, the best comparison might be *The Twilight Zone* or the collection *Ancestral Shadows* by Russell Kirk.

Why read it?

If you like sitting on the porch or in front of the fire to read for a little while, then this is perfect for you. It will take you away just enough and leave you with enough hints of mysteries that exist just off page to make sure the stories stick with you for a while.

Imperator, by Jason Anspach and Nick Cole
Review by Ginger Man
<https://upstreamreviews.com>

The unstoppable team of Anspach and Cole deliver a truly rare thing with *Imperator*, a prequel that is actually good.

The story

Confession time, this is actually the first book of the *Galaxy's Edge* world that I had ever read. As such, it did take me a little time to get into the book. I had no idea what a Goth Sullus or Legion were when I started reading and certainly the authors relied at least a bit on prior knowledge of and investment in the main character and the universe as a whole. However, once I realized I was reading a prequel, the pieces fell into place, and I was hooked.

The story is primarily told through a series of flashbacks from the point of view of one Casper Sullivan, jumping back and forth between his early encounters with the Savages, the once rich and powerful who left earth before the invention of faster than light travel, and the Dark Wanderer, his wanderings on a forgotten planet that holds the secret to the Wanderer's strange power, and training sessions with a person known only as 'the Master.' The combined effect shows how a man is transformed from a heroic officer into a galactic dictator with a lust for power.

As the story unfolds, the reader is initially given hope that maybe Casper isn't walking down that path on purpose, that maybe he will turn away, that maybe he doesn't become the ruthless Goth Sullus after all. That hope fades, especially over the course of the flashbacks to the Dark Wanderer and his attraction to the power, and the training sessions with the Master. Before the sessions are done, the transformation is complete.

The characters

Being a prequel focused on how one man came to be the kind of predator he once fought against, there are not many characters, meaning that Casper/Goth has to carry the book almost entirely by himself. Fortunately, Cole and Anspach are able take even readers new to this world and bring them into the mind of the most deadly person in the galaxy. Even better they do it without making you think Sullus is justified in becoming what he is. He's sympathetic in that you can see why he makes the choices he does but not in the modern sense of regarding him as someone who is just misunderstood and needed a couple more hugs growing up. As soon as he saw the otherworldly power of the prophetess, his lust for power and control awoke, a lust that in the end would claim even his best friend.

It was that exposure to power and his unnaturally long life (thanks to experiments conducted on him by the Savages) that gave Casper the opportunity to become Goth Sullus. Perhaps that is the real tragedy of his character. Without either one of those he would never have lived to master the Crux, a power much like the Force, and take over the galaxy. He would most likely have died a good man fighting against the forces of chaos. It prompts the question ‘with unlimited life and power, what would you do?’

There are of course a handful of side characters, most notably TK-111 a psychopathic war droid from an earlier time who is basically Alfred if he were a trigger-happy genocidal maniac.

And I would be remiss if I left out Urmo, the strange little creature that appears not long after Casper crashes on the extra-galactic planet he’d spent many hundreds of years searching for. At first, he seems to be barely intelligent, able only to utter the word “Urmo” over and over. As the trek towards the temple Casper is searching for continues, the reader will begin to realize that Urmo just might be something else entirely. If you find yourself thinking about how Yoda first appeared to Luke, you’ll be on the right track.

The world

Anspach and Cole have clearly put a lot of thought into the backstory of Galaxy’s Edge. After Earth has been rendered little more than wasteland with no real hope of ever getting better, the glitterati left, taking off in giant, generational ships that would eventually reach near the speed of light. However, they are not the ones who settled the galaxy. That privilege went to the motivated, the entrepreneurs, the risk takers.

Shortly after the beautiful people abandoned Earth, hyperdrive was invented and the designs distributed for free. Anyone with the motivation and the available parts could build a ship and head out to the stars. By the time, contact was reestablished with the generational ships, a loose Republic was already forming. The reunion was not a happy one though. The generational ships have descended into madness, turning their inhabitants into creatures straight out of Bioshock.

That backstory haunts the pages of *Imperator* as his experiences with the Savages are part of Casper’s motivation to take the Wanderer’s power for his own. Yet, that is not all the world building that is done. Through Casper’s eyes, we learn that the Republic is plagued with the corruption that is endemic to all major bureaucracies. Naturally, the immortal Casper thinks he’s the only one that can fix it.

There are hints of a larger and older galaxy as well. Throughout the worlds discovered by Earth’s far-flung children are strange pyramids built by a civilization known only as the Ancients. And there is the vast graveyard of strange ships Casper discovers at the temple. Ships from places he couldn’t begin to identify, other travelers seeking the same power as he.

The politics

The consistent thread in *Imperator* is that all systems of politics fail in the end. The Republic is falling to corruption, the hedonistic oligarchy of the generation ships became insane hell pits, the libertarian playground of the early galactic civilization found it necessary to band together to communicate, trade, and eventually fight off the Savages. The politics can best be summed by the notion that politics and economics won’t save you and the quest for power will make you a monster.

Content warning

Definitely some disturbing deaths and concepts are brought up throughout the story. It's a solid PG-13 rating.

Who is it for?

Galaxy's Edge is basically for fans of Star Wars who don't like what Disney has done to it. Especially if you enjoyed Star Wars and the EU before The New Jedi Order, this is for you.

Why read it?

Imperator is the back story to the deadliest man in the galaxy and it has certainly hooked me. I'm looking forward to getting into the rest of the Galaxy's Edge universe.

Minds of Men by Kacey Ezell

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Psst.... Hey, you. The one reading the blog. I see you there. You think I'm talking to someone else. Listen, I need you to work with here, okay? I'm about to share with a review about a book named Minds of Men by Kacey Ezell. But uhh... well...

Jim looks over both shoulders

It's umm... Alternate history. And I've got a history degree. And if one of my old professors were to find out that I read a book that they'd consider to be historical fiction, I'd be in deep doo-doo. If they found out I enjoyed it, I'd be in even deeper doo-doo. And if they found out I featured it on my blog and encouraged others to read it, I'd get to find out if it was possible to impeach me and take my degree away. So, I mean, yeah, Minds of Men kicks ass, but if you talk to any history professors from Oakland University (where I got my BA) especially, or Wayne State University (where I did some graduate work but never finished) then you didn't hear how good this book was from me. K? I mean, you can still say you read and enjoyed it if you don't mind the inevitable backlash. Just don't tell them it's my fault. I've got kids.

On the other hand, Minds of Men is a really excellent book. Kacey did a great job of creating a world where things are close enough to be recognizable but just far enough away to be considered fiction. She sucked me into this thing quickly. I really did enjoy the premise of this story. It gets going and doesn't stop. Ezell knew what she was doing when she wrote this. This is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, her first published novel, but it doesn't read like it was written by a rookie. It's entertaining as hell and holds together well.

The premise of the book is that some very few rare women are able to communicate telepathically. By using this ability, they can effectively create a network among people. The Women's Army Corps recruits twenty of these women to send on bomber missions during World War Two in Europe. They end up flying in B-17s. This results in faster communication and saves lives and improves accuracy. The

real joy of the book is in the characters as always, but the telepathic networking is what holds the story together and it is fascinating.

I have to say this: In order for the premise of the book to work, you have to give Ezell about ten pages or so. It's not a lot and it makes more sense once you see what they're doing in action. I was a bit skeptical at first. I mean, radio was in common use by every side in World War Two. I didn't see how telepathic communication would be any faster or work any better.

I kept reading though and I'm glad I did. The difference between radio and psychic networking is the difference between dial up internet and a gigabit connection. It just takes a bit of patience to let the characters explain it to you. Oh, and without going into massive amounts of spoilers, let's just say that networking isn't the only thing these ladies are capable of. Seriously, read the book if you want to learn what all they can do. There is an awful lot there and almost all of it makes sense.

Minds of Men is well named. It turns out that they psychic women can bond better with men, even though (or maybe because for all I know) men don't have psychic ability. Our heroine, Evelyn "Evie" Adamsen, bonds psychically with her crew (and yes, she becomes as much a part of the crew as any of the men because she earns it) and goes through hell on Earth with them.

Seriously. I've often thought (as someone with zero combat experience) that in all of the wars in history and all of the places that humans have fought and all of the specialties of the people who have fought, the worst job literally ever would be to end up hanging in the sky over Europe in a plane flying straight and level about to drop bombs with nowhere to hide and no way to dodge. Knowing that someone is trying to kill me would be bad enough. Making it easy for them so that I can get my job done is probably a bit more than I could get through. Evie does it though, and so does her crew.

There is more to Minds of Men than simply bomber missions though. I don't want to spoil the book, so I'll just say that possibly the most harrowing part of the work doesn't happen in the sky. Ezell, having been a pilot herself, shows us what I would expect most pilot's nightmares to look like. This aircrew goes through some bad stuff. They come out of it okay-ish though, and a lot of that has to do with Evie herself. Her gifts save them all.

Speaking of Evie, she's a damn well written character. I watched part of a video earlier today about the problems with women in fiction. The vlogger (whose name I don't remember and am too lazy to go look up) spoke about a dichotomy between the wilting violet type and the utter badass type. Weak feminine characteristics versus masculine women. Evie is neither. She doesn't straight up bitchslap dudes, and she doesn't just fold up and die and wait for the men to come and rescue her. Evie uses her abilities and keeps her guys alive, but she is not the physical threat that some women are, despite differences in muscle mass and size that most women would face in the real world. I really enjoyed her.

Oh, and the cover says it's book one of The Psyche of War. That means we've got more coming from Ms. Ezell. I'm stoked. This is some seriously good stuff and I'm in for the next one. Whenever it gets here. Of course, I'd never be that fan and actually bother an author about when the next one's coming. I wouldn't dare tell someone to shut up and take my money or anything. That's just not me.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Stars

Odd Thomas by Dean Koontz
Review by Will Mayo

At times, I think of Dean Koontz's novel *Odd Thomas* in which a short order fry cook seeks to stop all manner of deaths while accompanied by his handy sidekick, the ghost of Elvis Presley (yes, that Elvis). There is one scene in Koontz's novel in which the protagonist finds himself trapped in a room of infinite darkness, all while trying to find his way back to the light. Just that infinite darkness of which we're all made. Yeah, that's horror for you. Check this one out. I think you'll like it.

Paladin's Sword by Fiona Grey
Review by Becky Jones

I'm reviewing Fiona Grey's debut book, *Paladin's Sword*, the first in the Professor Porter series. We are introduced to Dr. June Porter, newly minted PhD in folklore and military history, on her way to her first full-time position at Paladin University in New Hampshire. In addition to her new PhD, June is also in possession of magic which, unlike the PhD, she would like to put behind her. But the universe is a fickle thing, and it has other plans for her.

Here's the blurb:

Dr. June Porter is headed for New Hampshire as a professor, brand-new PhD in hand. The last thing she wants in her new life is more magic, so of course that's exactly what she finds. Magic, and a mysterious Irishman with emerald eyes. But there's little time for dalliance when historical artifacts begin taking a life of their own and threaten the campus. Can June reclaim her magic, protect her students – and keep her job?

We meet June as she is struggling with the multiple complexities of moving across country, the mountains of paperwork needed to begin a new job, and a cute new neighbor. On top of that she's got a, shall we say, less than supportive dean, with a vicious administrative assistant.

June is an introvert who nevertheless loves talking about her research whenever possible and struggles to keep her magic hidden. One person who is as interested as she is in her research is her new neighbor Peter Ridire, IT specialist and diplomat, and it turns out he's sitting in on one of her classes. He seems to want to help her which is useful as June needs all the allies she can get. The dean has dumped responsibility for an upcoming conference in her lap and expects her to fail, thus providing him with an excuse to fire her.

Her pesky magic not only refuses to go away but turns out to be quite useful when the artifacts for part of the conference take on a life of their own...and a very threatening life at that. Reclaiming and reconciling herself with her magic is one thing June must do.

Grey's description of the labyrinth facing new faculty hires is spot on. To do x you need an ID. Where do I get an ID? Over there. You need proof of employment to get the ID that says you're faculty. Where do I get that? Where is my office located relative to any classrooms? How does this even qualify as an office? And, once you figure all that out, there's the first day of classes. No matter how well-prepared one feels, it is never enough. Grey does an excellent job capturing the feeling of walking into a classroom, in a new university, for the first time, gazing over a sea of faces and praying you don't screw up too badly. On top of that, there's always that one student...

The action in *Paladin's Sword* is fast paced, but not overwhelmingly so and there are plenty of twists. The characters are well thought out and fully realized. The intermingling of university politics, the confusion of the new hire, and the chaos of an on-campus conference are true to form and provide a multi-faceted background for the main action. This book is the first of a planned series and I am looking forward to the next installment. In the meantime, I've been reading some short vignettes on Grey's blog, and she's also just released *Glitter* a short story with Peter and June.

Grey gives a great insider's view of life in academia (okay, so I've never had to deal with malevolent armor, but the rest is accurate) and the machinations and interactions of students, faculty, and staff topped off with magic. If you want to read more of Fiona Grey's work, I recommend heading over to her blog where you can find more adventures with June and Peter.

Part-Time Monster Hunter by Nicholas Woode-Smith Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Well, it's October.

Time for some zombie-killing fun.

Part-Time Monster Hunter by Nicholas Woode-Smith is the next wave of Urban Fantasy: in this case, a city that is not American, or even strictly Western / European, only set in the South African city of Capetown (sorry, it's "Hope City"). In this case, *Part-Time Monster Hunter* by Nicholas Woode-Smith has elements of *Buffy* and *Monster Hunter International*, with extensive world building elements that are on par with Kim Harrison's "The Hollows" series.

The story

Since the necromancer sacrificed her parents, Kat Drummond's life has been busy.

While trying to survive in a post-Cataclysm world, when the rifts to another dimension brought magic and monsters to Earth, Kat has taken odd jobs. When she was attacked by a zombie during a baby-sitting gig, she is saved through the guidance of Treth, the ghost of a monster hunter from the other side of the rifts.

Now 19, with Treth's aid, Kat is balancing part time college as well as a part-time job as a monster hunter for hire. But when a new necromancer moves into town raising his legion of zombie minions, Kat is forced to up her game, or join the undead.

There's a lot to be commended in *Part-Time Monster Hunter*, from the open of "You should never get used to the smell of rotting corpses. It's bad for your health" to the catastrophic failures of her online-bought swords. But a lot of what carries this is character and worldbuilding.

The characters

Like most Urban Fantasy, *Part-Time Monster Hunter* is told from a first person POV, so the book's sole focus in the character department is on Kat Drummond and Treth, the ghost in her head. Everyone else along the way has limited page time, but they are well-sketched, from her friend the Goth (try not to confuse her with a vampire) to her sorcerer friend with the millionaire family background. Though

her Goth friend can be summed up by her thoughts on unicorns, referring to them as “Wannabe horse bastards.”

With Kat, it’s interesting watching as she and Treth feel their way through monster hunting and college. And while “teenage monster killer” sounds like Buffy... the similarities end there. Kat has to work through college, paying for all of her equipment, has to find time to sleep and study (“I haven’t seen you for so long!” “We had lunch yesterday.” “No, you fell asleep in your fries”), and operates openly in a world where she can find paying jobs on her MonsterSlayer app.

Buffy never had these troubles... and she should have.

And no, there is no “chosen one” trope. The ghost, Treth, doesn’t even pick Kat, he just finds himself attached to her for reasons beyond both of their understanding.

Honestly? This is one of those books that so improves on a concept, it makes me look back on other IP with disdain, looking at all of the lost opportunities. Once I was done with Part-Time Monster Hunter, I thought “Buffy should have had a character arc that looked like this.” Joss Whedon only had his main character grow up at gunpoint or for purposes of angst. Kat Drummond grew up over the course of one novel, and it may not have been an entire college semester, where her motives for doing what she does evolve from hunting for an adrenaline rush, to hunting for profit, for revenge, and finally, to protect.

By the end, Kat has a character moment that should end every superhero origin movie, that’s one-part personal revelation and acceptance of what she’s become. Because it’s not all fun and games and cracking the quip.

The world

Despite this being urban fantasy set in a different world from ours, a lot of this is based in reality. The geopolitics are light, but interesting, and not outlandish. And it’s nice to have a different setting than some bland nondescript city. While this is the third or fourth urban fantasy I’ve read lately that relied on rifts (this time, opening in Siberia), it does a lot of unique things along the way. I do enjoy the Magi-corp concept, and the books stopped short of it becoming the OCP of RoboCop, though there are hints that the books will go into that aspect later on.

Also, since Kat is in college, the book delves into some of the stupidity of academia, especially when it comes to being politically correct about monsters, especially campaigning for “monster rights.” It’s especially entertaining when her real-world experience clashes with the assigned readings.

I do also enjoy the weapons involved, such as anti-magic minerals that can be weaponized against magic users. And there is an entire chapter set around the thought behind Kat’s weaponry.

Much of the worldbuilding is explored via Kat’s personal history. It feels a little like the Hollows of Kim Harrison, but without the angst. (Though I suspect that there will be an explanation in a later book about where Odin comes into play.)

A cute bit I enjoyed: “The end of the Cold War could have meant something if the nukes weren’t replaced with dragons. Nobody could have predicted that, and you can’t blame Harry Truman for the unification of Scandinavia under Odin.”

It’s also nice to see someone else use flash bangs against vampires.

The politics

As I said above, it's fairly based. Surprisingly so. I purchase the first four books as a set during a \$.99 sale. I didn't expect to review it here. As this is an alternate reality, the overlap between the politics in the world of the novel and ours are slim.

But for those who read politics into everything, one can definitely arrange something.

It's pro-second Amendment (Kat spends time ridiculing the anti-weapon policy on campus only minutes before all Hell breaks loose), as well as pro-small business. The book also delves into the reality of expenses, budgeting ("I had even been able to afford to upgrade to the premium cup of noodles"), weapon and armor maintenance, as well as balancing work and life. Woode-Smith even makes fun of "Nothing is as permanent as a temporary government programme," and that government here is as useless as in the real world. I even liked the baby-sitting, only with a panic room.

Even the geo-political scale is interesting, since Hope City is a land of refugees, and just outside the border is the advancing Zulu empire. Given the current conditions in South Africa, this is almost prescient.

As for the villain of the novel ... let's just say that his ideas on universal healthcare are interesting.

Content warning

Mostly bloody maggoty messes. She does spend most of her time cutting up zombies. There is some rated R language kicking around, but it's particularly heavy. I heard worse language in my Catholic grammar school playground.

Who is it for?

This could easily be for any readers of Kim Harrison's Hollows, Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International, or those who enjoyed Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Only it lacks the gun porn of Larry Correia, and the angst of Buffy and "The Hollows." Considering how much of this is monster killing for profit, even fans of The Witcher might enjoy this as well.

Why read it?

Imagine if The Witcher was set as a modern urban fantasy in an alternate universe of magic and monsters. I enjoyed it, and I want to see where the world is going to go.

Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir

Review by Samuel Lubell

<http://sfrevu.com>

Andy Weir is, of course, the author of The Martian, the hard SF novel about an astronaut marooned on Mars. The book, a first novel, became a huge phenomenon, ending up as a major movie starring Matt Damon. But many critics felt Weir's second novel Artemis, about a slacker criminal jeopardizing a moon colony, was disappointing. This third novel, Project Hail Mary, is a lot closer to The Martian in feel but raises the stakes beyond the survival of a single astronaut (although that is a factor) to dealing with a threat to all life on Earth.

The book uses the familiar device of a person who wakes up with no memory to introduce the reader to Ryland Grace, a former scientist turned junior high school teacher. Even before he remembers his name, in the book's early chapters, he does experiments with gravity to discover that he is not on Earth. Then he remembers watching a NASA announcement that the sun's output is shrinking at an increasing rate. This will lead to a new ice age and, if it cannot be reversed, the extinction of humanity. Slowly, he remembers being drafted into an effort by all the nations of Earth to find a solution to the sun's gradual death.

Much of the book alternates between sections showing Ryland's growing role in investigating the sun's decline with sections of Ryland in space, solving engineering puzzles. While on Earth, Ryland discovers that the drop in the sun's energy is due to microscopic alien microbes, the Astrophage, eating the sun's heat. The astrophage travel between stars, infecting them. Yet somehow the star called Tau Ceti, inside the cluster of infected stars, is not affected. So the Earth governments, as a Hail Mary pass, build a starship to send four humans to Tau Ceti to discover why. But when Ryland reaches Tau Ceti, he finds an alien ship already there.

The bulk of the book is Ryland's efforts to communicate with the alien, like Ryland the only survivor of a mission to save his planet, and work together to find a way to save both their worlds. This involves a large number of engineering puzzles. Fortunately, the alien, Rocky, is the ultimate engineer, able to create practically anything Ryland can dream up.

Weir comes up with a number of twists, most involving the nature of the astrophage, but also the truth about how Ryland came to be on the starship. Even after Ryland and Rocky appear to have solved the final problem, Weir includes another twist that creates a huge moral dilemma for Ryland. Throughout the book, Ryland is convinced he is over his head even as he uses his science to solve the many problems he encounters.

One flaw with the book is how easily Ryland and Rocky figure out how to communicate. While this is necessary since the thriller aspect of the book gives the characters a tight timetable, it seems highly unrealistic. Another problem is how often Ryland acknowledges that risking his life means risking the survival of humanity but then goes and takes the risk.

Project Hail Mary is an exciting thrill ride that celebrates scientific knowledge and engineering skill. It has all the strengths of *The Martian* plus a slightly more human character at its center. MGM has already announced it will turn the book into a movie starring Ryan Gosling. I highly recommend the novel to anyone who enjoyed *The Martian* as either book or movie.

Song for a New Day by Sarah Pinsker

Review by Samuel Lubell

<http://sfrevu.com>

Song for a New Day is arguably the first COVID-19 novel even though it came out Sep 10, 2019, months before the pandemic hit. But the book got so much right—from single person occupancy on elevators to the problems of doing online concerts—that anyone reading it during the pandemic would assume it was written by someone who had seen the actual Covid-19 world. I can only imagine what it must have been like for the author to see the horrors she imagined in her book come to life just a few months later. I know that cons are using the novel as exhibit A on panels on SF as prediction and the problems of writing

The book starts off with Luce, a musician, performing the last concert before everything was cancelled due to bomb threats that evacuate hotels, performance spaces, and anything public. After a bomb explodes a baseball stadium, killing over a thousand people, no one wants to risk any public gathering. Then a mysterious illness hits.

An unspecified number of years later Rosemary, a 24-year old who still lives at home, under the strict control of her parents, works remotely at a SuperWally Vendor Service Center using a Hoodie, a virtual reality device. Her life changes when a service call from StageHoloLive leads her to attend her first virtual concert. She originally applies for a position at StageHoloLive as an upload supervisor, which she was qualified to do, but is hired as an artist recruiter, a job that requires her to leave the safety of her home and go out into the world. She starts looking for illegal gatherings of listeners of live music, to recruit the performers for StageHoloLive. She meets Luce at one of these concerts and tries to recruit her. But Rosemary soon discovers the shocking truth about StageHoloLive.

Sarah Pinsker, in addition to being an award-winning author, is also a performing musician so the descriptions of the life of Luce ring true. Much of the book is a paean to the power of live music and Pinsker's passion for music shines through. At one point Luce performs under a pseudonym, in a tiny venue, thinking "I was there because I needed the energy I could only get from this connection: the elusive collision of a song, a performance, a moment; the agreement that I would try to reach them, and they'd open themselves to being reached." Only a musician could have written that.

Song for a New Day won the Nebula award and was a finalist for the Compton Crook Award. Anyone interested in music should read this book as should anyone interested in how close science fiction can come to predicting the future.

The Space Between Worlds by Micaiah Johnson Review by Samuel Lubell <http://sfrevu.com>

The Space Between Worlds won the 2021 Baltimore Science Fiction Society's Compton Crook Award for best debut SF/Fantasy/Horror novel. It also was a finalist for the Locus Award's best first novel (although it did not win) and the author, Micaiah Johnson, is a finalist for the Astounding Award for Best New Writer. So it received a fair amount of attention for a first novel.

The book puts a new spin on a familiar SF idea – travel to parallel worlds – by combining it with a stratified class structure. The Eldridge Institute, using a machine invented by its founder Adam Bosch, sends people to parallel worlds, but travelers can normally only go to a world where their counterpart is already dead. This rules out most of those living in Wiley City, with its vaccines, low childhood morality, and easy living. So the travelers who can visit the most parallel worlds are those who grew up on the wrong side of the wall, whose families never had enough food, who lacked access to medical care, and faced the constant threat of violence – in other words the poor. These traversers copy data from the other worlds and bring it back to help the rich get even richer. They also bring resources from other worlds.

Cara, the narrator and main character, has had so many brushes with death that she can visit 372 of the 380 parallel Earths. She grew up poor, in a one room shack in an Ash-town in the wastelands outside the walls of Wiley City and in many worlds died because she was in the way. So she jumped at the chance to live in rich Wiley City and have a chance at citizenship even knowing she would be despised

for her origins. She has a love-hate relationship with her handler, Dell, with whom she flirts constantly but thinks she cannot have a real relationship since Dell is from a rich Wiley City family. Her mentor tries to get her to study to become an analyst since the company is working on remote data methods that would make transversers obsolete.

Early in the book, Cara reveals to the reader that she is not the original Cara from this world, but was born on another Earth, where she was Emperor of the Wastelands Nik Nik's concubine until she met the dying original Cara on her first inter-dimensional trip. Eager to escape Nik Nik, she secretly took her alternate self's place and believes no one knows the truth, although her sister suspects since the new Cara is much nicer to her.

Gradually, she learns that her company's new product is not a way of accessing other worlds' data remotely, but a way to open up the worlds to tourism by the rich, without being limited to worlds where their other selves are dead. But Cara discovers that the limitation still exists and the Eldridge Institute plans on murdering the tourists' counterparts on other Earths so the Earth zero version could travel there. This leaves Cara with a moral dilemma especially when she learns the truth about Adam Bosch.

The real strength of the book is not the inter-dimensional traveling, but the sharp division between the haves and have nots. The author has invented a plausible reason for Cara, from the lowest of the low, to interact with both the rich elite of Wiley City and the criminal emperors of the Wasteland. Cara is a fascinating character with the strengths of a survivor who refuses to be a victim so the reader understands why she is willing to lie and deny who she is in order to stay in Wiley City and then cheers for her when she makes the decision to risk everything to do the right thing.

I recommend the book for any reader who likes a little social commentary mixed with an interesting story.

Star Marque Rising by Shami Stovall

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Shami Stovall is a (relatively) new author, and her work deserves much better treatment at my hands than it has gotten. She sent me a copy of this book, pre-pub, for my review, and it just didn't happen. It got placed in the queue, but then it got lost, and then, and then, and then. And, as a result, I missed out on a WONDERFUL read.

Let us first consider what I regard as the core of the book: the Prisoner's Dilemma.

In the classic formulation, two prisoners, A and B, are arrested for a crime committed jointly. Separately, each is offered a chance to confess. If they both remain silent, then they will both be convicted of a lesser crime, with a one-year sentence. If they both confess, they will both be convicted, with shared responsibility, of the greater crime, and each be given a two-year sentence. If A remains silent, and B confesses, then B goes free, and A takes the whole rap, getting a three-year sentence.

Since the original formulation of the dilemma, there have been many refinements and modifications to fit all sorts of situations, including investment strategy, sports, addiction, and international relations. In some cases, it's formulated as a zero-sum game (whatever one wins, another has to lose), while others are less-than-zero sum (everybody loses, but a least-loss scenario is possible). It really has some fascinating applications!

I encountered it twice in an academic setting. The first time was in a study of group dynamics, for a counseling class; the second was in some dip-stick business class that I never, ever should have been taking. However, I DID gain insight into the human condition in both cases; I particularly recall seeing a brittle, manipulative classmate attempt to use smiles and hugs to control the revulsion reaction of another colleague. Making social dynamics explicit: wow, what a feeling!

Now, in “Star Marque Rising,” Stovall posits the Prisoner’s Dilemma as a drinking game among the characters, but ALSO (brilliantly, in my opinion) constructs the story to make it obvious that the same dynamics are driving the actions of the main players.

I don’t often get really, really goofy when reading a book. I read LOTS of books, many, many more than I review. But, in reading THIS book, I got really, really goofy. What I WANTED to do was to call the author up and say “I JUST SAW WHAT YOU DID THERE! IS THAT WHAT YOU REALLY DID? PLEASE TELL ME THAT’S WHAT YOU REALLY, REALLY DID!”

No, I did not call the author. It was Stupid AM in the morning! Besides that, I don’t have her phone number. Besides that, my gift-from-God, happily-ever-after trophy wife Vanessa, the elegant, foxy, praying black grandmother of Woodstock, GA, was asleep in the bed next to me, and she would have been highly disturbed and offended to be woken up by hearing me squee on the telephone to an Unknown Woman.

So, I emailed her instead. Much better choice.

Now, returning from Cloud-Cuckoo Land, let me give you some nice summary statements about the book: It’s a space opera. It starts on a filthy, corrupt, violent and vile space station, moves to a freighter (the Star Marque), lands on a planet, and goes other places. Lots of sentient beings die, some with explicit gore, others silently, and many of them don’t really deserve it.

Clevon Demarco is the protagonist. He received significant bionic upgrades as a child but has been making his way as a loner on the aforementioned vile space station. He has no money, and no friends, and no future. Then he gets rescued by the cops. And, as part of the price of his rescue, he joins them.

The boss is (seemingly-super-woman) Endellion Voight, who apparently makes it her practice to cruise the universe, rescuing sad-sacks like Demarco, and incorporating them into her team. And, way, way off in the Far Country (I speak figuratively) live the Special People. They own everything worth owning, they run everything worth running, and if you aren’t a Special People, you are, at best, a tool of the Special People. And if you can’t figure out that this sets up a GREAT framework for a story, you haven’t read many great stories.

I’ve tried (a little) to analyze the difference between this and a YA. The things in common are the Hero’s Journey, exploding spaceships, good guys and bad guys. However, this digs deeper into motivation than you’ll see in YA, and there is an occasional foray into sexuality that librarians don’t believe YA’s know anything about. It’s not porn, though, so don’t seek this one out for THAT.

It’s a smashing good read, and the beginning of a series, and I hope that others are much nicer to Shami Stovall than I have been.

Peace be on your household.

Sword & Blood: The Vampire Musketeers

by Sarah A. Hoyt

Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

“To me, musketeers! To me, of the king! TO ME, MUSKETEERS! TO ME, OF THE KING! ”

SWORD AND BLOOD!

Why in the HECK do they call them Musketeers? There is not a musket in evidence, EVER, in any of the literature or the movies. It's all swords and swordplay and dashing to and fro.

Here's what I think: I think this is all elitist propaganda, designed to convince us that the ferocity and training of heroes is supreme. That's crap. If you want to triumph, ask the guys who are 5'6" and 130 pounds to get the job done, and the moderately sized non-heroic people will use muskets (or the modern equivalent) to win yer war for you and save civilization. Average guys, not some privileged small-brained aristocracy with feathers in their hats, flouncy capes, waving around sharp pointy things.

Anyway.

France, the jewel of the world (HA!) is overrun with vampires. Since this is before America, they have no one to turn to for rescue, and so they make a truce with the enemy.

Wow. Couldn't see THAT one coming, could ya? The French making a treaty with the enemy? Oh. My.

And of course, Athos, one of the Famous Guys With Sharp Pointy Things gets bitten, and then we are off to the races.

Secret truth, here: there is a good reason he became a Famous Guy instead of living out his life as a Fabulous Aristocrat. It seems he killed his wife by hanging her and has since then been filled with remorse. Seems he had spotted the sign of the COLLABORATORS (this is before the treaty) on her neck and strung her up.

The incompetent Fabulous Aristocrat can't allow himself to do a competent job of his impulsive act, though, and carelessly leaves her body intact, instead of whacking off her head, driving a stake through her heart, burning her body to a crisp on the barby, etc. He's a Fabulous Aristocrat, and can't be bothered with doing things correctly, so, picking the absolutely worst choice available due to a combination of fear, shame, and the grinding edges of a broken heart, he runs away from her inviolate corpse to Paris. where he allows himself to marinate in guilt, brandy, self-hatred and doubt, while becoming a Famous Guy With A Sharp Pointy Thing.

Because there are no other options. It's a planned economy.

Meanwhile, D'Artagnan, a brave and talented, though unschooled, member of the country gentry arrives in Paris in the nick of time to hook up with Famous Guys With Sharp Pointy Things. They are killing vampires, and that's what he wants to do, since the vampires have killed his parents, among others.

Lots of running around and hiding secrets from friends and enemies, and some fighting.

Turns out that having yer blud sucked out is a lot like sex, at least for some people in some circumstances.

Wow. Never saw THAT coming, either!

(Okay, I jest, I jest. I know that there are certain tropes that are essential to the story, and that one is key. If you don't include the sensual aspect, you are betraying every writer in the genre since Bram Stoker, and also eliminating a lot of the reasons the vamps aren't all killed in about 15 minutes after discovery. Everybody wants good sex, it seems, and in a country formerly ruled/heavily influenced by a celibate clergy, vampires mean you can dance around the issue in confession. A bit. Until you die or turn.)

BUT! Where do the vampires come from? What's the origin myth? It's been a LONG time since I read "Dracula," and I don't follow the genre, but I recall nothing about the origin of the monsters in Bram Stoker's work. The Sparkly Vampire literature, of which I know nothing at all, may give a back story, but the letters of Jonathan Harker don't mention it. (I could be wrong about this. It has been some years since I read the original.)

I LOVE a good back story, and TA-DA!!! "Sword and Blood" provides it, quite nicely, thank you very much. AND that's one of my two favorite things about the book. Well, three, if you include 'it gives me an opportunity to mock the French.'

My favorite thing? Read the BOLD WORDS at the top of the page.

(In my opinion, it's quite as well done as "Hello! My name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!")

His local guide is Murph, a human whose soul was stolen just before the thief plunged a knife into his heart and is now damned to spend eternity hanging upside down in a cave whilst being nibbled upon by bearded, winged clams. Like Narg, he has been inserted into the body of Dr. Weisenheimer, and like Narg, he has no clue who it is they are supposed to find and stop.

There are a host of humans, unaware of who is inhabiting the visiting Professor, and one among them is the person meddling in knowledge forbidden to humans. Which means I can't tell you much about them without giving away who it is our protagonists seek. Narg and Murph are forced to try to figure out who it is with very few clues thanks to the inept Chaos Department. This is also, in a bizarre sort of way, a buddy story, as Narg and Murph work their way through the story and become as much friends as a shoggoth and a human can.

The world

It's actually two worlds. Narg's underworld where the Elder Gods live and underlings like Narg gibber away over steaming mugs of the blood of thrice-damned men while knowing why one should never give power to cats, opens and closes the story. The human world is set nearly eight decades in the past, which makes some of Murph's hippie anachronisms clash with the humans of the time. Where those worlds collide is where this story lives and how they interact is where this story is told.

The politics

Real world politics don't exist in this story. And I prefer my fiction stories to keep present day politics out of the plot. We do encounter some of the politics at play in Narg's plane of existence, especially where his uncle – an Elder God they all call 'The Bits' – is concerned. As for Narg's time on Earth, he's too busy trying to figure out why's he here in the first place and then later trying to figure out which human is trying to use forbidden knowledge to destroy the world to get involved in Earth's politics of the time the story is set in.

Content warning

Yes, Roy was writing something meant to be fun, but there is still a lot of blood and guts involved, especially near the end. But they are mixed in with just the right light touch that it isn't much of a problem. Other than that, it's a PG-13 read for the most part.

Who is it for?

Anyone who wonders what would have happened if Harry Harrison or Douglas Adams had decided to step into H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos with their flair for sci-fi with a healthy dollop of humor mixed in.

Why read it?

If you are looking for a story about monsters – both human and non-human – that is a lot of fun to read, this is the book you want to read.

Terra Nova: The Wars of Liberation
by Tom Kratman and Company
Review by Pat Patterson
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Once upon a time, and multiple times since, I pointed out that my FAVORITE reading material is military science fiction. By and large, that is still the case. Yes, it's true that for the 2019 Dragon Awards I had to review something that claimed to be in that category, and found it to be small-minded, depraved, poorly written, and nasty.

I have enjoyed the previous installments in this series by Tom Kratman, going back to 2007. Unlike the other eight books (if I have counted correctly), this volume is a shared universe, with 11 authors, in addition to Kratman himself, providing material.

Beginning with the second in the series, all of the books have an introductory section called "What Has Gone Before," which does an EXCELLENT job of briefing the reader on the high points of prior story development. That has become rather lengthy with new material being added, but I am going to condense it, ENORMOUSLY:

In the not-too-distant future, a gateway to another universe is discovered by accident; an Earth-like world is included. Named Terra Nova, it is initially seen as a spot for exploration and colonization. Before too much time has passed, a degrading political climate on the home world causes the powers-that-will-be to decide to dump all the malcontents from Earth there, where they can be abandoned, exploit-

ed, or worked to death at the whim of the planetary administrators. Eventually, those on Terra Nova rebel.

There: EIGHT books, summarized in 82 words. Awesome, if I do say so myself!

The 12 stories in this volume are each given a bit of prefatory material, which ties them together and makes the context clear. I'll not review them, except to say that you don't want to skip them; they are interesting, and they do include background.

The stories:

1. The Long, Dark Goodnight by Vivienne Raper. This tells the story of the failed first attempt to colonize Terra Nova. Earlier volumes give the bones of a story of cultural conflict exploding into violence. This story breathes life into those bones. The price paid by those who tried to keep the peace comes across almost as clearly as if it were happening in real-time.
2. The Raiders by Mike Massa. The UN holds dominion over the planet. It's not a monolith, though; there are facets! And those facets look out for their own interest, and really don't mind making others pay the price. Massa once again shows the perspective of troops who know that the price they may have to pay is ultimate; they will do their job, as long as it's worth it.
3. Sacrifice by Peter Grant. The hatred between competing factions that existed on Earth turned out to be the most easily exported commodity. True, the planet is designed to kill intelligent life. Unfortunately, people seem to have that same design. In opposition to that is a man of war, turned to peace, who must again take up the tools of war.
4. Doing Well by Doing Good by Chris Nuttall. Not every UN official was intent on literal and/or figurative rape. Those who attempted to perform ethically found themselves at odds with The System.
5. No Hypocritical Oath by Robert E. Hampson. This story combines techno-thriller, with a bit of romance, and the nastiest examples of personal bullying and vindictiveness. And then more, in the form of institutional bullying and vindictiveness.
6. Bellona's GIFT by Monalisa Foster. It's not easy to be the child of the leader; no one REALLY feels safe around you. So, how can you feel safe around them? But outsiders really don't know the rules.
7. The Panther Men by Justin Watson. A Colonel of the warriors, and a Prince of his people, Alexander has conflicting loyalties even before he sets his feet on the ground. Once there, though, his conflict grows more intense. On the one hand, he finds purity in the cleanness of straight-forward combat. On the other hand, the things he finds he much do seem to be killing his soul.
8. Desertion by Kacey Ezell. Captain Lele Campbell can fly like an angel, but her world is nothing like Heaven. She must always be on her guard; her commanding officer makes no secret of his lascivious intentions toward her, and the system provides no escape. Everywhere she turns, she finds more betrayal. Everywhere.
9. Blood, Sweat, and Tears by Christopher L. Smith. Whether a fish is caught or not, the bait is certain to be mangled. All Marko wants is to be able to do his job. However, his reputation prevents him from fading into safe obscurity.

10. Wellington by Alexander Macris. There are a very few locations on the planet where the UN isn't an ever-present force. Wellington is one of those. For an organizational bully, that would be enough reason to intervene. The presence of a thought criminal, and the temerity of locals who try to provide sanctuary, are just the icing on the cake.

11. Huanuco by Lawrence Railey. Two American ex-pats, with significant skills as independent software contractors, run afoul of the authorities in Mexico, and find themselves deported to a somewhat similar country in Terra Nova. From scant existence as agricultural workers, they are given an opportunity to help their drug-producing boss strike back at the oppressors from Earth.

12. The Redeemer by Tom Kratman. General Titus Ford is given the job of straightening up all of the messes that exist on Terra Nova, and the title of Inspector General. His actual power isn't limited at all by the scope of his job, or his titles. The peoples of Terra Nova received some benefit due to the incompetence of their masters. No longer; Ford has a better idea.

In his Afterword, Kratman suggests that he might have two more conventional works in the series, and two more of these shared-universe collections. I suppose we can get by with that; as long as he continues in other areas, that is.

Peace be on your household.

The Thing From HR, by Roy M. Griffis
Review by Richard Paolinelli
<https://scifiscribe.com/>

When I first opened up this book, I wasn't sure what to expect. It had been years since I'd read Lovecraft and I was never that big of a fan of Cthulhu to begin with.

But what I found was a great read that pays homage to Lovecraft's vision and peppers his mythos with a healthy dash of Harry Harrison's Stainless Steel Rat and Douglas Adams' Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy.

Here's why this is a book you really should be reading...

The story

Narg is a shoggoth who works in HR, Human Restraint Office, not human resources, dear ones. He's also the nephew of an Elder God who has a favor to ask – and by favor I mean a direct order: Hop on down to Earth, have his essence downloaded into one of the humans and complete an assignment that he will not be briefed on until he has arrived in his new “meatsuit” by his local native guide.

Telling an Elder God no is not an option, so off Narg goes. Only the Chaos Department isn't very helpful, even when Narg burns down a dwelling trying to contact them for more info and has to carry a naked co-ed out of the fire he started. And his native guide? He knows even less about what's going on.

What Narg does know is that there is a human nearby using forbidden knowledge to try and summon VI'mrkh, an Elder Being whose only purpose would be to devour everything on the Earth, and only he and Murph can stop its arrival.

Working their way through suspects, and an increasing number of bodies, while trying not to become suspects in murder themselves to the local constabulary, the pair finally confront the human with evil intentions and face off against the VI'mrkh in a final confrontation with all of existence hanging in the balance.

The characters

Narg is the driver of the story, after all it is told from his POV. He's content to be a simple paper-pushing Shoggoth from Damnation Services-10 in HR – sipping from his nice hot mug of blood from a thrice-damned man – but he's been assigned to go to Earth because he's the only one around who has made the study of the “Hairless Apes Who Fling Their Poo” his own.

When the Gods Fell by Richard Paolinelli Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

In space, no one can hear you scream.

Which explains why the herald of Yahweh was waiting for sixty five million years.

Buckle in, this one is going to take some explaining.

Welcome to Richard Paolinelli's When The Gods Fell.

And once more, just to be clear, Richard did not write Eragon. That was a guy named Paolini.

The story

In 2040, the latest Martian exploration team crew is wandering around the planet, minding their own business until they stumble upon a woman just standing in the middle of the Martian landscape. She's so happy that the humans seeded on Earth finally made it to Mars. Of course she managed to survive that long — she had become a being of pure energy (damn Vorlons. They get everywhere). And it's a story 65 million years in the making (yes, I stole the Jurassic Park ad campaign).

The following story is an epic tale of ... well, we're going to take ALL the mythology, and make the gods aliens with style. There were so many mythological references in this one that I'm certain that I missed some. As this is mythology, there are enough betrayals and back stabbing to make the cast of Game of Thrones look like amateurs.

We have Caste Zion, led by Lord Yahweh, where everyone in the City of Eden is part of the national guard, which was helpful when Lucifer's House Satania challenged Chronos Saturnius' Caste Olympia a hundred years beforehand, and Lord Marduk and Lord Tiamat of Houses Canaan and Dagon are plotting a followup coup....

This was hands-down awesome. This is one-part 2001: A Space Odyssey, one part Dan Simmons, and one part Babylon 5, with a hint of Mass Effect.

The short version? The concepts are brilliant. The execution is spot on. There is about 10-15% of the

book that needed a little bit of a trim, but aside from that? Wonderful.

This one is very much a novel. I don't mean to be misty about the description. But this is as much of a novel as *The Martian*. Only without as much smart ass. Okay, there's still plenty of smart ass — with the Mars station Von Braun, and rovers named Aldrin and The Glenn — but this one is a bit more serious than *The Martian*. The execution of the science bit felt a lot like the *Martian* — sensible, straightforward, and sciencey. (I especially like how Russia, in 2040, is still trying to cover their inferiority complex with bravado.)

Okay, this book is a little chocked FULL of smartass, it just requires a degree in classical studies (or a read-through of Bullfinch's *Mythology*) to really get the jokes.

As the book nears the end, it's fairly obvious how this runaway freight train is going to end. In fact, we kinda know how the book is going to end from the beginning — but the journey to how it gets there is so interesting and so readable, you don't care how it ends, you want to see how they got there. But after a certain point, runaway train is not only running off the rails, but is on fire. What comes next?

What comes next ... is a heck of an epilogue that sets up for an apocalyptic battle that I'm sure will be very interesting....

But damnit man, why did you have to end it THERE?

And the ending well, all I can say is that you should pay VERY close attention to the numbers they throw about.

The characters

This is “the weak point” of the book. Everyone's mythology is thrown in, and their characterizations are pretty spot on from what I recall of mythology. Petty pantheons and infighting? Say it ain't so... I am being sarcastic of course.

But frankly, I think Richard's translating mythological characters into a science fiction setting worked beautifully. And Richard nailed their characterizations.

The world

As I said before, when Richard uses ALL of the mythologies, he uses ALL of the mythologies. If he missed one, I can't tell you what he may have left out. We have appearances by Thor, Loki, Shiva, Kali, Nippon, a literal Mount Fuji okay, Ganesh didn't make it into the book, but there's a sequel.

And yes, Loki is still Loki.

Then again, when everyone's pantheon gets together, everyone starts to look a little like Loki. (Honestly, straight up mythology has enough murder and incest porn to make *Game of Thrones* look like kindergarten).

Now, in a book that mixes mythology and scifi — especially when one turned mythology into Scifi — you'd normally expect a ton of handwavium. Not really. I especially enjoyed describing Hades' House Orcus as underground, on the banks of a fire river Styx but that Styx had carved out tubes and caves

from pole to pole, and the way the water is described as being laced with enough methane so that the water was always on fire. It was just such a nice touch. It's less scifi and more ... fi.

The politics

This is pure power politics. How much of Game of Thrones was politically aligned and how much was just about "How can I get mine?"

Content warning

I am not going to complain about how "Yahweh is really a Vorlon." Even in the book, the Oracle telling the story said that yes, there was a Deity to whom these "gods" prayed. And I saw no mention of one of the kids becoming a carpenter. If you're that concerned, unbunch your panties and just relax. This is not Dan Brown. Paolinelli is not poking at your faith with malice aforethought.

Who is it for?

This is for anyone who wants to see how creatively one can take mythology and make it scifi. As usual, if you like John C Wright or classic SciFi, Richard Paolinelli is your guy.

Why read it?

You're going to want to read this if only because it's just plain fun, taking a lot of interesting ideas and smashing them together.

With The End In Mind by Kathryn Mannix Review by Will Mayo

What is life? And, for that matter, what is death to you? What makes it all worthwhile? Kathryn Mannix ponders these questions and more in this collection of stories from the dying in her work with the hospice in Great Britain. She tells of the lives she has lost in her own personal life, from that of a cat to that of a grandmother, and she tells of the dying others, from a gifted athlete tragically struck low, to a jazz singer, to a retired psychiatrist, to a devout Muslim, to a 98-year old economist looking back on a long life, to countless others, and she comes to some conclusions. She sees that the love granted matters as well as the love given and, forgiveness, that matters, too. But no matter the efforts of so called wise men and scientists, nothing is forever. All we have is this precious moment, passing though it may be. Everyone matters. Everyone is extraordinary. Value that today. I urge you to read this good book.

Prose Bono

Writing Horror ... Research Can Be Fun.

by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

When I was writing Hell Spawn for Silver Empire, I knew it would be something horror based by the time I was done with the first corpse.

I didn't know it was actually scary until I got Tommy Nolan home.

If you haven't read the book, at this point, our Detective has been working his butt off on the murder inquiry for over a day. He hadn't gotten sleep for about 48 hours by the time he went back home to collapse.

Then he came home and discovered that his son's best friend in school had been murdered.

Yes, that was Nolan's victim.

Then night fell, and everyone tried to go to bed.

Then it REALLY got dark.

I will not go into all of it here, but I can tell you that as part of the writing process, I did some research. Hell Spawn went as dark as it did because I had researched serial killers in high school, and demonic possession and infestation for this book. For the record, look up John Douglas for serial killers, and demonology included Father Amorth and Deliver Us from Evil (the book, not the lame Eric Bana film).

By the time I was done with the scene, I think my immediate email to my publisher was "I know you wanted UF (Urban Fantasy) but I think I'm writing a horror novel."

Thankfully, Russell liked it anyway.

But after that, the entire novel got dark. There were times I had to remind myself that the scene was written in daylight. It felt like this freaking demon was everywhere.

And all it wanted to do was kill Nolan.

Confronting the demon in its lair became interesting on a pure human level. It knew things it shouldn't. It turned furniture into deadly weapons.

Then there's the Rikers Island riot. But that's another story.

From there, I felt like the series settled down, but with the occasional dark moment where you thought, "Well, that's not good." Granted, I may have a warped point of view. I know what's in the dark. Perhaps

zombies with automatic weapons are scary to some people. Perhaps going one one-on-one with a Terminator-like bokor might be creepier than I had in my head at the time.

... Maybe I shouldn't say the story settles down, but that the sense of omnipresent dread is gone for Death Cult and Infernal affairs (books 2 and 3).

I decided we needed it back for City of Shadows.

... Okay. By the end of Infernal Affairs, the showdown with the ultimate villain involved some cool ideas that hadn't occurred to me before. So I made it the element of an entire novel.

Because I can, so there. But a little ombramancy never hurt anyone.

~Finis~