

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

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# Editorial

With this nicely thick issue, we bring the year 2021 to a close. Many thanks to all of our fine contributors!



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Our lead reviewers are:

Tom Feller

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

Becky Jones: <http://ornerydragon.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>

Sam Lubell

Will Mayo

Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFReviews.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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# Novels

## A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes and The Eternal Passion For Books

By Nicholas Basbanes

Review by Will Mayo

A genuine delight, this book traces the history of book collecting worldwide, from the Great Library Of Alexandria, to the private libraries of the Robber Barons of the 19th century, to the "gentle madness" of one eccentric who foraged in dumpsters and robbed libraries throughout my country to make his collection complete. It is a sure book to light any bookworm's fancy in the way that no electronic device can ever satisfy. I recommend it to all you readers out there. You will have a good time with this one.

## The Body Farm by Patricia Cornwell

Review by Will Mayo

Late in my 30s and into my 40s I became taken with reading novels out of the mystery/suspense genre. These filled me not only with suspense at finding out who the wrongdoer was in these novels, but also a whole wraparound feeling of horror, awe and apprehension at it all. Of all these fictional worlds, none so thrilled me as this one by the queen of the mystery novels, Patricia Cornwell, called The Body Farm. In this novel, Cornwell has her detective venture to the so-called body farm in which donated human bodies are laid out on the ground in various states of decay in order to find the trail that would lead her to her criminal prey. It's been years since I've read this slim paperback, packed with gory-eyed wonders. I've since gone on to read a nonfiction account of the real-life body farm (complete with pictures of the dead bodies) on which she based her story, but nothing ever got to me like Patricia Cornwell's story of her detective on the trail of a notorious murderer. If you are at all a fan of the crime genre, I urge you to read her Body Farm. It is a treat.

## The Broken Eye by Brent Weeks

Review by Jim McCoy

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

When I first sat down to write this review, I was trying to decide whether Brent Weeks was a totally freaking awesome author or just a big, evil meaniehead who got his kicks from torturing his sweet, innocent readers. Then I realized that the two are not mutually exclusive. It's obviously both. I shall, for the nonce, embrace the power of "and." Then again, we must enjoy it. How else would this guy have sold elebenty bajillion books?

So, yes, I'm behind but I finally got around to reading The Broken Eye and it was freaking epic. Weeks has a way of bringing the mighty low and promoting the weak to power. It's hard to follow sometimes but it's on full display here. The all-powerful Prism, with his powers taken from him, is now a galley slave. The son of a drug addicted prostitute is elevated to one of the highest posts in all the Seven Satrapies. I mean seriously, keep a scorecard. Or better yet don't because Weeks has provided one for us

in the back of the book. It's like one hundred pages long. But it's cool because a story this huge epic needs a big cast.

One of the great things about *The Broken Eye* is how the characters remain themselves throughout everything. Gavin Guile, fallen Prism, now plots to get home instead of to rule the Seven Satrapies. Karris White Oak, scion of a destroyed noble family, marries him and consorts with a member of the Spectrum, the ruling body of the Seven Satrapies. Kip, the kid who grew up poor, now stands to inherit a fortune and the political power that goes with it. Teia, a slave, trains to be part of the Blackguard, a unit of elite bodyguards and the only group allowed to carry arms in the capital. The list goes on.

Weeks knows how to write a hero. Kip is self-doubting but doesn't give up. He nearly dies because of his sheer stubbornness and dedication. Teia does what she must, even though she hates the necessity of some of it. Cruixer, leader of a squad of Blackguard inductees, makes decisions and lives with them. He knows how to balance the good of his people with the missions they have to accomplish. Karris White Oak risks her life to save her husband and leaves everything that ever mattered to her behind to follow a new path, a duty she never sought but is forced to undertake.

Weeks also knows how to write a villain. The Color Prince seeks to enslave all around him by telling them they'll be free after he takes over. Andross Guile is the embodiment of self-interest, pushing forward with his goals at the expense of anyone who gets in his way. Seriously, to Andross there are three types of people; those he can use to further his goals, those in the way of his goals and those that don't matter. He's a villain's villain. I love to hate that guy.

*The Broken Eye* is like every other Brent Weeks' book in one respect: The reader cannot allow himself to become comfortable with the way the story is going. Every time you think things are going to work out a certain way a plot twist hits. Upon reflection they make sense, but you can never see them coming. Reading is one of my favorite forms of physical relaxation. I kick back, put my feet up and crack open a tome. I don't relax mentally when I read Weeks's work. I'm constantly trying to figure out what comes next. It never seems to work but it definitely keeps me interested.

The action sequences in *The Broken Eye* are amazeballs. Luxin (light turned tangible through magic) is an amazing weapon, and the martial arts present here are crazy, too. Primitive guns, blades and magic. You just can't go wrong. Well, maybe you could, but Weeks didn't. Some of these sequences made me want to go out and hit something just to fit in.

Ok, so the actions of the Spectrum do kind of piss me off, but that's kind of the point. They're so busy denying the fact that they are at war that they won't fight an enemy that is invading their country and killing their people. They're pretty typical politicians in other words. Say soothing things to the population and do nothing to accomplish anything. I have to believe that Weeks is doing this intentionally. They do manage to appoint Andross Guile as promachos (basically a wartime dictator and leader of armies) but then he basically does nothing as well. In actuality, they do manage to throw a big party for their biggest holiday, so I guess that's SOMETHING, even if it's the WRONG thing. But what do I know? I'm just the reader.

On the other side of the equation are some of our aforementioned heroes who want to do what they need to. The problem is that they don't have the political power to raise the necessary army themselves and, while some of them are crazy powerful, they don't have the ability to win the war without one. The other side has lots of powerful people too. This war is going to be a battle royale, if the Spectrum ever gets off of their asses and decides to fight it.

Honestly, I wanted to see more of the war than I did. Bad news arrives occasionally, but we don't get to see the fight up close and personal the way I wanted to. It makes sense given the plot of the book, but it's a bit frustrating. A lot of what I enjoy about fantasy fiction is the fighting and the wars. We don't get that here. It's still an awesome book though, and there is a sequel already out.

It's only fair to mention that *The Broken Eye* is third in a series. The first two were *The Black Prism* and *The Blinding Knife*. I recommend them all (and I'm reading the fourth book, *The Blood Mirror*, currently) but I would not recommend *The Broken Eye* as a standalone. There is too much going on here that is carried on from earlier books. Seriously, if you're going to read TBE start at the beginning with *The Black Prism*. You'll thank me later.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Lightforged Arrows

## Cartwright's Cavaliers by Mark Wandrey

### Review by Jim McCoy

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

Written once upon a time:

Me: Oh look, Cartwright's Cavaliers is going to be free all weekend. That's pretty cool.

Devil on My Shoulder: Oh, those evil, mean, hateful people. Didn't you just pay five dollars for that book like two weeks ago?

Me: Well, yeah, but...

Devil: But NOTHING!!!! We must have our revenge! Let it burn!!!

Angel on my Shoulder: You did pay for it, but let's face it. It was worth the five bucks. Actually, it was probably worth more than that. It was a really good book.

Me: That's true. I really enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, being a dude who has had some financial problems, watching Jim rise from the ashes and resurrect his father's business was kind of inspirational.

Devil: F that! We paid when we didn't have to.

Angel: Never mind you, devil. Aren't you a fan of violence for its own sake?

Devil: What has that got to do with anything?

Angel: You can't tell me you didn't enjoy the fight scenes. You can't tell me you didn't chuckle when all that stuff blew up.

Devil: Ok, yeah, that didn't suck. I still don't see why it's okay that we spent all that money.

Angel: And you can't tell me that the Adayn chick doesn't smell a little fishy to you.

Devil: Ok, she stinks. I'd think more brimstone and less fish though. She does have a sneaky feeling to her.



Angel: And listen, that space battle was hot, right. I mean, mass chaos death, screaming, no one knew what was going on.

Devil: Oh, okay, so I enjoy jacked up situations and that WAS a jacked up situation.

Angel: Oh, and Jim's mom was definitely one of yours, the way she screwed him and his whole company over and almost killed it. You know you loved that.

Devil: Yeah, it did make my day. I mean, how do you not love pure, self-centered evil like that? It was the greatest thing EV-AR! But there were soldiers in the book.

Angel: It's military science fiction, you knob. Of course there were soldiers in the book.

Devil: And they like worked together and stuff.

Angel: Mm-hmm. That's that soldiers do.

Devil: And some of the guys who helped Jim did it because they were still loyal to his dad and HIS DAD WAS DEAD!

Angel: Yeah, mortals are funny like that. They don't stop caring about each other just because one of them dies. Especially if it's someone they've fought and bled with.

Devil: I'm a devil jackass. I don't like it when people care about each other.

Angel: Oh, that's too bad. I mean, these guys work their tails off for each other. I was almost in tears when that cap...

Devil: I knew it. You're a wuss!

Angel: I know you liked that little Splunk thing.

Devil: You know, I have to have some respect for anything that looks that demonic. I mean, have you seen the stuffed animal version? She's a dead ringer for an imp! If only she had a bad attitude instead of acting like an animal companion in a Disney movie.

Angel: You know that Disney movies make hundreds of millions of dollars and are still watched decades later, right? And that they're so successful that people travel for thousands of miles and pay gobs of money to meet those same animal companions in "person?" And that they do it simply because they love them?

Devil: Huh?

Angel: And you can't tell me you that you don't want your very own pet Tortantula.

Devil: Heh. You know those things are cool. And they totally kick major ass. But what has that go to do with anything?

Angel: Never mind. Listen: You read this along with the rest of us right?

Devil: (snarky) Obviously, you dolt.

Angel: And now this is the second Four Horseman Universe book we've read, right? And we've reviewed both of them now too, right?

Devil: Yeah.

Angel: And we got the first one free even though that one was never offered for free to the public right?

Devil: Ok, yes. Come to the point, will you?

Angel: Do you doubt for a single moment that the rest of the books are going to feature huge amounts of chaos and carnage?

Devil: Nope. Not at all. We're going to see lots of explosions. I can't wait. It's like it says in my favorite song. Let the bodies hit the floor, let the bodies hit...

Angel: I get it, guy. And we got this one sooner, right?

Devil: Yeah. Unlike those slack-tards who didn't buy this thing up front.

Angel: So you're admitting that it was worth the five bucks to get it early?

Devil: No. It's FIVE STINKING DOLLARS!!

Angel: Ok, so what did you not like about the book?

Devil: I find it unrealistic that the mercs in the book would follow an obvious slug like Jim. I mean, he's a slug. These are guys who work their tails off to stay in shape to be better soldiers and all that guy does is eat pizza and drink Coke!

Angel: Uh, the book does show why they respect him. He earns it. And also, c'mon guy. Have you looked in the mirror lately? What else?

Devil: Uhhh... uhhh... Well, there's some mushy stuff.

Angel: C'mon guy. We already covered that. Is that really the best you've got? CAN YOU NOT COME STRONGER THAN THAT?

Devil: What's your point?

Angel: My point is that this book was five bones well spent.

Devil: Yeah, I guess it was.

Angel: Even if everyone else can get it for free for the next few days.

Devil: Now wait a minute...

Angel: Nope. I'm right. You're wrong.





Meanwhile, there are other feelings just below the surface within the group; some reciprocated, some not. It's romance stuff, and it's what you would expect in a mixed group of apprentices. However, this appears to be a highly moral culture, at least in some respects, so the only late-night visits are for plots, fears, and support, and not for smooching.

And another thing that is becoming more evident is just how WEIRD the master arcanist is. His primary presentation is that of a grump, but sometimes, it's clear that he has great concern and affection for his students. But mostly, he works overtime to distance himself from them. But, if he doesn't like apprentices, why did he take SIX?

I have to stop now, because to go further would be getting into MAJOR spoiler land. Without getting into specifics, though, I'll tell you that Stovall has a very clear insight into how much devastation can come, when you try to keep a lie hidden, even from people you should be close to.

Yes, there are more books in the series, and they should make excellent reading as well.

### The East Witch by Cedar Sanderson

#### Review by Becky Jones

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

A bush guide in Alaska finds a wood elf in a bear trap and her day just gets stranger from there. Finding herself Underhill, in the realm of magic and faeries, Anna must draw on all her skills, strength, memories, and sheer determination to get back to her dog and her home. It turns out that helping Ivan, the wood elf, get back home, has trapped her in Underhill. Her efforts to get home and back to her dog (who's been left alone in Alaska) bring her in contact with individuals and beings she had thought were confined to children's stories, and the stories that were meant as dire warnings no less. Ivan pledges himself to Anna and vows to do what he can to help her return home. Together they set out to tackle Underhill's obstacles.

In this stand-alone book, Cedar Sanderson takes her readers back to Underhill and the world of her Pixie Noir series. Her characters are well thought-out and come to life with bright colors and human flaws (even the non-humans have human weaknesses and strengths). This is not your basic "fight the evil in the land so that all may live happily ever after" story. There are nice and not-so-nice and in-between characters (in other words, real), and there are fae politics, and complications arising from those politics. There's even a bit of romantic interest.

Anna must mind her manners while remembering the pitfalls described in the fairy tales she read as a child. How does one safely leave Baba Yaga's chicken-legged house? Anna's resourcefulness and skill as a hunting guide in the Alaskan wilderness are also keys to her survival in the world of Underhill. That resourcefulness and determination win her allies and friends in unexpected places.

Ivan is determined to repay Anna for rescuing him and to prove to his family and clan that he is an adult and capable of handling that responsibility. He gave her his oath and he will prove that it was not an empty or frivolous promise. His adventures, as he searches for Anna, test his resolve and courage. What can one young wood elf do against the tide of fae politics?

Since politics is my bailiwick, I enjoyed seeing the story play out over a layer of politics and plotting occurring in Underhill that also affect Anna and Ivan's abilities to help each other. Anna and Ivan must

use all their wits and everything at their disposal to safely negotiate the rules of Underhill and the all-too-familiar political machinations of those, human and fae, who control competing poles of power.

Sanderson has woven Siberian fairy tales together with what might be called “traditional” fairy tales into a story that makes you want to keep reading. A good book is one that makes you sad that it ended...and *The East Witch* does just that. I’ve read this one a few times already and I know I’ll be going back again. I can also strongly recommend that if you haven’t done so already, pick up the *Pixie Noir* series.

You can also read more of Sanderson’s writing over at Cedar Writes where you can find more stories, snippets, and serials, alongside recipes and recommendations of what to read while you’re eating some of those recipes.

## Endless Summer by Misha Burnett Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com/>

Misha Burnett proves himself a true talent that deserves a lot more attention with this collection of short stories.

The story

I had never heard of Misha Burnett until Cirsova sent me *Endless Summer* to review. I wish I had been aware of him long before. In this book, he offers up a number of sci-fi stories that fuel the imagination and do so across a number of sub-genres. The book contains detective stories, alien visitors, surveillance everywhere, the end of the world, time travel, and more.

It’s hard to pick a favorite. Most of them are not particularly hopeful, but there are some exceptions. Such as *Milk, Bread, & Eggs* in which aliens come not to invade but to pick up some groceries. And by groceries, I mean stopping at an actual supermarket, not harvesting people like *War of the Worlds*. And the opening story, *The Bullet from Tomorrow* in which the heroes avert a nuclear apocalypse by stopping a plane crash. There is also *These Were the Things that Bounded Me*, a story of a paraplegic and a blind girl work together to survive in a world decimated by a virus similar to *The Stand*.

Perhaps the saddest of them all involves a bunch of apparently sentient theme park characters keeping their park going when everyone else is dead, called *The Happiest Place on Earth*. There is something about the need to keep on going, to fulfill some kind of purpose in the face of utter desolation that really reaches in and tugs at the heart strings.

The most unsettling goes to *The Island of Forbidden Dances*, a story of a vacation at the *Morningside Resort*. Think of it as *Big Brother* but on an entire island and the cameras are literally everywhere. And one of the founders of it are always on the lookout for new recruits to keep the ratings high. It isn’t so much what happens in the story that is so unsettling, it’s the fact that we’re about one or two years away from it actually happening.

There are a total twelve stories in the collection and each one is engaging and will likely even spark a thought or two.

The characters

Like the stories, the characters are many, varied, and extremely well developed in a shockingly small amount of space. One that really sticks in my mind is Len, a man stuck in his auto-driving care In the Driving Lane. As the story progresses, you can feel his desperation, trying to figure out what is going with his car and why he can't get off the road.

Then there is Mr. Emil Becker, an apparently soft and mild-mannered auditor sent to check out operations in a mutant wasteland. When the operation decides to strand him and doom him to the Serpent's Walk, Becker is revealed to be something else entirely.

Not all of the main characters in Burnett's worlds are good guys either. In Heartbeat City Homicide, we meet Alex, a dirty cop who manages to feel some remorse about working with the criminal elements of the vast underworld.

It would be easy to go on and on because in every story, the author manages to deliver characters that are never flat or one dimensional despite allowing himself just a few pages to develop them.

## The world

Obviously, there is no one true line on the world building in a collection of short stories. However, each story feels like a snippet of a complete world even though most are only around twenty pages. Burnett manages this through a combination of brilliant setting descriptions, dialogue, and character reactions that show the tone of the world, sketches how the society works and how the characters' place within it. The fact he does this so consistently demonstrates the author's immense talent more than anything else. If you go read through his comments on the stories in the back, Burnett suggests that several of them could easily exist in the same universe.

## The politics

As is often the case with books reviewed here, there are no explicit politics. Yet, each tale tells the story of how individuals react to their circumstances, and it is often the individual and his own action and responsibility that drives the story, placing it somewhere in the libertarian camp.

## Content warning

There are a couple of gay characters in the first story but nothing special is made of it. There is also one not-quite sex scene and a number of naughty words that are unlikely to ruffle the feathers of anyone reading the book.

## Who is it for?

If you are fan of speculative shows like The Twilight Zone, The Outer Limits and the like, you are going to love this.

## Why read it?

You should read this because Misha is a gifted writer who knows how to tell a tight story without sacrificing character or plot development.

## Fade by Daniel Humphreys

### Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Did you ever wish there was more of Jim Butcher's The Dresden Files? You know, another good, solid, likeable hero who has the superpowers of magic, snark, and taking a beating like he's Jim Rockford?

No, not Iron Druid, I said a likeable and witty protagonist who is a hero. I'll talk about that series if Upstream Reviews ever gets around to reviewing trash.

Fade is the book that made me realize that if Jim Butcher dropped dead tomorrow, there is someone who could easily do for The Dresden Files what Brandon Sanderson did for The Wheel of Time.

Meet Daniel Humphreys, and his hero, Paxton Locke.

#### The story

Paxton Locke has had a tough life. That's what happens when one's mother sacrifices one's father in a demonic ritual and tried to add Paxton to the mix. Paxton's mother went to jail, and Paxton was left with hair and skin like an albino, and magical abilities. Now, Paxton makes his living as an investigator of the paranormal, and ridding homes of ghosts.

When a ghost warns Paxton of impending doom, he has to go straight to where all of his worst fears live: home.

The flap copy on the book describes it as "Harry Dresden's sorcery goes on a Supernatural-style road trip. Cool car sold separately." Frankly, the line isn't branding. It's fairly accurate .... and despite having his own family drama, Paxton Locke is nowhere near as angsty as the Winchester brothers, whose own angsty BS killed any interest I had in Supernatural, no matter how good the plots or the actors were.

Let's skip to the short version: This is NOT a Dresden knockoff, but he is most certainly a successor. He wanders like the Winchesters, has a motorcycle like half of 80s action heroes, and an RV like ... no one. No one has an RV. At least no one who comes to mind (Did anyone else even watch Midnight, Texas?).

But seriously, I've read Dresden knockoffs. THIS is the descendent of Harry Dresden.

#### The characters

Paxton Locke carries the book. Sure, there are a lot of similarities between Dresden and Locke. Locke is a snarky first-person narrator who uses a lot of quips and media references, as well as guns. Hell, he even gets beaten up like Dresden, though Locke is much better at fixing himself. But that's about where the similarities end...

Also, the first client in the novel is a woman named Shirley Jackson, and her house is haunted.

Did I mention that the author is also a smartass?

Oh, yes, and the evil mother? Adjunct professor of cuneiform studies at the University of Chicago.

Also, she was an evil vegan, which I know is redundant, but still. If you thought that Harry Dresden had family issues? Mommy dearest is freaking evil. And she has fan mail.

The ending was a wonderful setup for book two, setting up a villain and introducing new elements to be explored in the next book. Including one thing that I always noted that Harry Dresden seemed to lack — more than just a local interest in magic. (Seriously, Jim, if you're reading this, does everything go to Chicago? Nowhere else in America? We've had magic destroy entire buildings in odd and bizarre ways, and no Feds have ever put two and two together before Battle Ground?)

### The world

This follows the school of the “Hidden World” branch of Urban Fantasy.

I like his magic system. When it comes to most Urban Fantasy books, I've never really noticed or felt a cost for the magic in each system. With Harry Dresden, a wizard is literally a different species from humans. Here, magic has a concrete cost that has echoes and impacts on our hero, and other people can see just how much it costs him.

I even like this concept of ghosts, where they are less the soul of the departed and more like the echo of the pain and suffering they went through as they died... usually in terrible, horrible ways. I even like the grimoire, which has a personality of its own.

And then the Men in Black show up. Like Larry Correia's MHI series, the Feds know there's magic afoot. But they get developed more in book two.

### The politics

Paxton rids people of ghosts and fights the literal forces of darkness, there isn't a lot of politics there.

If you want to stretch politics to fit the book, like Ghostbusters, Paxton Locke is an independent contractor who doesn't play well with others, including the feds. He has multiple guns and charges what he sees fit for his services. And his mother is the worst sort of left-wing ideologue. Draw your own conclusions.

### Content warning

Parents sacrificing children and spouses, ghosts, zombies, demons, guns and violence.

### Who is it for?

This is for any fan of Urban Fantasy, be it Jim Butcher or Larry Correia.

### Why read it?

When I read Harry Dresden, if I didn't have a three in one volume, I never would have finished the series. Fade is book one of the series, and it's better than Storm Front or Fool Moon by Butcher. Unlike those two by Butcher, when I finished Fade, I was ready and rearing to go on book two. Granted, Butcher's magnum opus is better, if only in metric tonnage, but give Daniel equal time in terms of decades, and we'll see how they go toe to toe.

If you don't believe me about how awesome this is, read Fade and prove me wrong.

Going Ballistic by Dorothy Grant  
Review by Becky Jones  
<http://ornerydragon.com>

Michelle Lauden always wanted to be a pilot and go to space, but that didn't happen. Piloting sub-orbital planes, known as ballistics, got her closer to space than most people. Then on a routine flight leg she, her plane, and her passengers became pawns in the life-threatening political games playing out between two planet-spanning governments.

What kind of pilot does it take to bring a plane in for a safe landing after it's been shot at by one government and almost hijacked by another? Michelle is about to find out as she uses everything she's ever learned or experienced to get her bird safely on the ground. Then she still has to avoid becoming a casualty of a cold war that's rapidly going hot.

Here's the blurb:

When her plane tries to come apart at apogee during a hijack, ballistic airline pilot Michelle Lauden handles the worst day she could imagine. When she gets down safely without losing any passengers or crew, though, she finds her troubles have just begun!

The ground below is as unsafe as the air above. The country she's landed in has just declared independence from the Federation. The Feds intended her passengers to be the first casualties in the impending war – and they're not happy she's survived to contradict their official narrative in the news.

The local government wants to find her to give her a medal. The Feds are hunting her to give her an unmarked grave. As they both close in, Michelle's running out of options and time. The only people able to protect her, and hide her tracks, are an accident investigation team on loan from the Federation's enemies... the same enemies who sent her hijackers in the first place. And they have their own plans for her, and the country she's in!

Being a pawn in political games is obviously never fun and Michelle has to quickly figure out who, if anybody, is on her side, and where she might be safe. She concocts a plan to hide herself among pilots who fly cargo around the continent. She will have to give up her career and her dreams of heading off-planet, but at least she'll be free and alive – if she has the time to carry out her plans.

The characters in *Going Ballistic* are fully realized and authentic. We feel Michelle's worry and stress as she goes into the crash investigation board meeting, and her relief when she's offered a modicum of hope by perfect strangers who seem to understand exactly what's at stake for her. It's already clear that she is going to be used as either a scapegoat or turned into a victim – likely a tragically dead victim – for her part in safely landing a badly damaged plane and saving the lives of her passengers and crew.

Some readers might feel that a government shooting down a plane in order to create a crisis is taking the willing suspension of disbelief a bit too far. To those readers I say that idea is a bit too close to home for me. There are numerous examples in history of governments deliberately causing mayhem, destruction, and loss of life among their own citizens in order to provide an excuse to implement some new policy or emergency orders, or even change in governmental structure. Grant has taken those examples and used one that has occurred in real life and given us a story of how the outcome might be different if enough players work to change the government-approved version of the story.



An experienced pilot, Grant brings a wealth of knowledge and detail to Michelle's experiences in the cockpit of different types of aircraft. There's enough information for the average non-pilot to figure out what's going on, but the writing never drifts too far into insider jargon. Instead, you get just enough detailed information to realize how damn complicated it can be to fly an airplane, and that despite that, it might be fun to learn how to fly. And I'm prone to airsickness so that's saying something!

Dorothy Grant has given readers an action-packed political thriller, added in some military-science fiction (mil-sf), some great flying, and topped it all off with a touch of romance. The characters are fully realized, and the political games unfold as you move through the story. The political geek in me thoroughly enjoyed it all. Going Ballistic is a fast read with well-paced action, a good amount of humor, and realistic characters and settings. Go get it and read it!

## Gunpowder For Single-Ball Poems by Alan Britt Review by Will Mayo

This is modern experimental poetry, clear as a bone to the reader. An iguana darts its tongue on a steamy Southern night. The severed head of a captain guides the reader through the ballroom of a submerged cruise ship as all manner of fish and shimmering gowns pass by in a waking dream. An array of Bach and Beethoven music thrills the reader and holds the old empires intact like soldiers lifting the throne of a sickly Queen Elizabeth to the dance before an old mythology for the fortunes of the imperial minded crumbles away as the fraud it really is, so that mischief will at last fall apart. And, oh, a Bolivian guitar beckons you with festering love for the jungle. Reader, I think you will like this one. This is clear-driven fantasy for a humanitarian purchase on life. It has all the right elements.

## Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy, NYPD by Declan Finn Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Prefatory materiel! I MUST point out something about perceptions of reality before going into the specifics of the plot and characters. Due to some technical problems, at this moment I can't see how the book is classified for marketing purposes on Amazon, but I suspect it's listed as fantasy.

This may sound a bit weird to you, but: there is nothing in this book that would place it beyond the realm of everyday reality for the orthodox Christian believer. That's a pretty bold statement, and feel free to dispute it if you like. It's true, though, that classic, traditional Christianity teaches that angels, resurrection from the dead, demons, and a variety of miracles, are absolutely valid. Those beliefs are discussed at length in theologically oriented books, which are readily available. Similar themes are found in some popular movies and television shows.

Where Finn stands apart is that his protagonist, Tommy Nolan, is a good guy, an average blue-collar guy, working as a police detective in New York, who suddenly finds that his work combating conventional crime is "enhanced," shall we say, by the tools and desire to combat authentic demons from Hell.

And: YES! That can be said to be COMPLETELY CONSISTENT with my belief systems. I'm not the same 'flavor' of Christian that Finn is, BUT, as I said earlier, the things he puts forward have traditionally been orthodox teachings of the mainstream Christian churches. If that seems too outrageous for

sane people to believe, I recommend you look closer at the history of the Church, PARTICULARLY the foundation documents, including the Biblical accounts.

And now, to the book: As stated, Tommy Nolan is a good guy who finds himself gifted with super-powers so he can fight evil in physical form. That's the premise, and I have to say that I found it delightful, perhaps largely because of my Christian perspective.

A very few days ago, I was given the opportunity to watch "Constantine," a movie which shares some of the same themes of power, demons, Heaven and Hell. However, the additional themes of betrayal, isolation, and unforgivable sin combined to alienate me, and I stopped less than half-way through.

What I liked about "Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy NYPD" is his constant virtue, in the form of his dedication to his wife and son, and his compassion even for the criminals he has to arrest. Long before he found himself in the role of A SAINT (!), Tommy was investing himself in his community and the people he encountered. This is NOT the story of a worthless, ineffectual dweeb who discovers a magical weapon in the desert and is transformed into a great American hero. This is a story of a regular guy, who commits himself to BEING a great American hero to his family, friends, prisoners, and anyone else he encounters, just with the tools of his hands and feet, mind, and heart. While the reason he was selected for sainthood and super powers isn't disclosed in this installment, I believe it was simply a recognition of who he was becoming on his own.

A couple of closing remarks.

1. I don't read horror. There were elements of this story, in describing the crimes of the Bad Guy, that were horrifying. They may not be tolerable for those who are squeamish, and I would not recommend this to my 15-year-old Kenneth. However, those grotesque elements were essential clues to the nature of the killer. So, I hung in there, but I'd kind of like some brain bleach.
2. Although Tommy Nolan is a practicing Catholic, I didn't see this as a distinctively Catholic novel. True, Tommy DOES use some strictly Catholic elements to battle evil, but it's not so obscure that it can't be understood by this non-Catholic. If you have to look up the definition of a word, do it.
3. A couple of real-life murderers are mentioned as patterns/examples for the method the Bad Guy uses to murder his victims. I suggest you do NOT research their names; the crimes were horrific, and the failure of regulatory/supervisory agencies to intervene is likely to cause you to lose faith in certain systems which should be guarding public health. Again: I'd like some brain bleach.

Under normal circumstances, a phrase I have heard before but don't believe I comprehend, I would have already finished the Saint Tommy series. Keep checking in on me and let's see how it goes.

Peace be on your household.

**Heroes Fall by Morgan Newquist**  
**Review by Ginger Man**  
<https://upstreamreviews.com>

Victoria is a down on her luck superhero hiding out on the wrong side of the tracks.

Until a van crashes through front of the grocery store she works at, dragging the past in its wake.

## The story

Victoria is just trying to do her best to lay low while still protecting the citizens of the rundown part of Serenity City. The plan gets totally upended though after an extremely eventful couple of nights. After she rescues a quiet girl who can turn invisible from getting assaulted by a group of gangbangers, Vicky notices a strange girl with a disturbingly wide grin following her. A girl she also notices the same night a van flies through the front of her grocery store. The van was being driven by Twitch, an old friend and chased by Pendragon, easily the most famous hero in the city. When Pendragon accidentally kills the young Twitch, it launches a chain of events that drags Vicky back into the world of mainstream superheroes.

That chain of events brings her back into contact with her friends at the Hangman House, a sort of refuge for young super powered people and its sponsor, the reclusive Priest. As the story progresses it becomes clear that there is a plot afoot that connects back to a twenty-year-old event known as the Rampage. In the Rampage, Achilles, Serenity City's greatest hero lost his mind and attempted to kill Pendragon, only stopping when his wife, Banshee was killed in the crossfire.

In trying to uncover the truth of what happened, Victoria has to confront the worst trauma of her past and a deep secret that she has been desperate to hide from everyone.

## The characters

Victoria Westerdale has little patience for mainstream superheroes. Ever since the Rampage, most of them have only been about fame and corporate sponsors. They rarely ever help normal people dealing with normal crime, opting instead to focus on the flashier problems posed by supervillains, weapon smugglers and the like. That, however is only part of the reason Vicky lives in the East Greycoast, Serenity City's industrial area. While she gets to help those in an area of the city that is ignored by most of the supers, she also gets to keep a low profile, something the young heroine is desperate to do. That's because she has a secret, one that connects her to Thanatos, the villain behind the villains.

Victoria is supported by a number of different characters, many of them well developed enough to carry a novel in their own right. Those like Achilles and Pendragon have high aspirations to nobility but have some level of brokenness, some sin or character flaw that holds them back. Others, like Mia the invisible girl, are just trying to find a home.

The Priest is perhaps the most enigmatic character of the bunch. His given name is Adrian Cross and little is known about him except that he's reclusive, is rich, and doesn't actually do any public superhero work. What he does do is fund the Hangman House, pouring millions into the group home for super powered kids who just want to be left alone. He too, has a connection to the Rampage, one that proves essential to uncovering Thanatos' ultimate plot.

On the villain side is Keres, the crazy waif girl that Victoria pursues through much of the book. As it happens, she isn't only crazy, she can actually project her insanity onto others through physical contact. One almost gets the impression while reading that Keres might have gone the hero route if circumstances had been different.

Then there is Thanatos. Named for the god of death, he prefers to stay in the shadows. This is despite his power, which is great enough to take on the strongest and most determined of heroes. His goals are not the typical villain goals, striving merely for money or power. What he wants is to destroy the very

notion of superheroes. To discredit the entire idea. He nearly succeeded with the Rampage and now, he is finally moving the pieces in place to strike the final blow.

### The world

Serenity City is a city like any big city. There are the nice parts of town, and the places where you are more likely to get mugged walking down the street. It also happens to have a population of superheroes and villains living in and around it.

That does also come with some extremely advanced technology, thanks in part to heroes whose gifts allow them to develop it such as Banshee, and also due to normal people needing to come up with some way to counter the supers.

Where Newquist truly shines is with her ability to make it feel like the world is bigger, with a past that began with the Event that led to the creation of the supers and the various heroes and villains that come in and out of the story.

### The politics

While politics play no significant role, the very nature of superheroes and their individual action leans toward the libertarian and conservative end of the political spectrum.

### Content warning

There is a scene where crazy waif girl kisses Vicky to transfer her insanity. There are also two scenes of sexual assault and discussion of another. Otherwise, there is general superhero violence.

### Who is it for?

Obviously, anyone who likes superheroes will like this book, especially since it launches Silver Empire's superhero universe. Particularly if you have read Rising Stars, Valiant Comics, or seen the Umbrella Academy, this book is very likely right up your alley.

### Why read it?

In her debut novel, Morgan Newquist does a fantastic job of building up a diverse cast of characters, developing all of them into something more than a cookie cutter formula. It's fun and thought provoking, full of moments that force you to ask what you do in similar circumstances.

## Holy Blood, Holy Grail by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln Review by Will Mayo

One book that my father did forbid me to read in the mid-1970s was the book, "Holy Blood, Holy Grail," that claimed Christ didn't die on the cross but, instead, founded a royal dynasty that lasted through the millennia to today. I was interested to read this account but abided by my father's word. It did come about that in the years after his death in the new century I got a hold of the book on my own. But I've yet to read it. It's since been overtaken by other books, some much more controversial than the

one that raised my father's ire, to the point where I'm now much more interested in reading a good story than any controversial subject. For one brief moment there, however, my father and I butted heads like two old bulls and that forever changed us. When it came time for him to pass away he was a much more mellow man than I'd known in my boyhood and so was I. It took time for us to get there, though. Time and a hell of a lot of horse sense.

## Home for the Howlidays, edited by M.L.D. Curelas Reviewed by Robert Runté

<http://www.EssentialEdits.ca>

The marketing category, "Holiday Collection", conjures up heart-warming stories about families getting together for Christmas dinner, Hallmark romcoms featuring mistletoe, and perhaps some stories about puppies. Well, okay, this holiday collection actually has all of that. But you might not have been expecting coyotes, werewolves, hellhounds, or a variety of non-Christian winter solstice celebrations. On the other hand, A Christmas Carol is undeniably a ghost story, A Wonderful Life is about suicide and angels, and Gremlins is apparently as much a Christmas movie as Die Hard, so who is to say Christmas specials shouldn't include the occasional werewolf?

Take, for example, the opening story, "A Furtastic Gathering" by Angèle Gougeon. It's a charming depiction of every family's Christmas dinner: kids under foot, cousins crowding round, and meeting the daughter's boyfriend for the first time. That the family happens to be werewolves, and the new boyfriend a vampire, merely emphasises the universality of the experience.

Krista Ball's "The Twelve Days of Christmas" provides the romcom. A young woman tries a dating app to meet someone for the holidays, with predictable but entertaining results. This is pretty much everyone's awful dating experience, with "werewolf" standing in for whatever body image issue you once feared disqualified you from finding that special someone.

There were several stories about alternative holidays, of which my favourites were J.Y.T. Kennedy's "Apple Night" and Sarah Hersma's "Yule Moon," both lovely examples of communities striving for peace on Earth.

My two very favorite stories of the collection both stood out for their perfect depiction of rural life. "Corn Dogs," by the writing duo of Sarah L Johnson and Robert Bose evoked such a strong sense of place that the slide from the ordinary into ancient Slavic curses became almost imperceptible. Pitting werewolves against a John Deere combine harvester in a Taber corn field may be the definitive prairie horror story. Similarly, Rebecca Brae's "The Teeth Have It" is a completely accurate description of driving alone in a blizzard and therefore a completely logical encounter with a coyote.

Not everything in the collection works quite as well as the above. A few took longer to get to the point than I thought necessary. If you have a clever horror concept, then a short, sharp jab is usually what's needed. Louis B. Rosenberg's flash piece, "The curse of Christmas Present", is an excellent example of matching length to concept, an engagingly short delivery to a delightful punchline. In contrast, there were two or three stories that could have used a bit more editing to tighten the pacing and raise the tension.

And while I really enjoyed Lizz Donnelly's "Bark! The Harold Angels Sing", others may find the partly ambiguous ending annoying. (I am prepared to argue that endings that leave at least part of the story unresolved are a particularly Canadian thing, but not everyone is into Canlit.)

Overall, I recommend the collection, the good far outweighing the few stories that were kind of 'meh'. No anthology is ever a perfect match for all readers, and "Corn Dogs" alone is worth the price of admission. If you're looking for a slightly unusual Christmas gift, you could do worse than introduce friends and family to a refreshingly different take on the season.

This review previously appeared in the Ottawa Review of Books.

## Ingathering: The Complete People Stories of Zenna Henderson Review by Samuel Lubell

This volume collects the classic stories by Zenna Henderson originally published in the 50's and 60's, and collected as *Pilgrimage: The Book of The People* and *The People: No Different Flesh* plus four stories not previously collected (and one that was included in a non-People collection).

So who are The People? They look exactly like humans but they come from another world, called the Home, and have special gifts and persuasions that allow them to levitate, sense and sort, heal, and call lightning from the air. Essentially these are fantasy powers in Science Fictional form. There is a basic goodness, what we in the cynical '90s would call naivety, about the People. There are no evil People, some of the kids can get into misadventures (but always with a good reason) one town of them has turned secretive out of fear of how Earthlings first treated them, and there is one case, one, of a selfish adult. Yet, one of their gifts, a racial memory, is the cause of an underlying sadness to these tales. They remember the destruction of their home as if it happened to them; they remember how they were first treated on Earth, hunted and feared by ordinary humans.

Most of the stories revolve around two themes, (1) the arrival of the People and how they are treated by the humans who encounter them and (2) the struggle of individual members of The People to find the others. But there are enough variations on these themes, and stories that do not quite fit these categories, so the reader does not become bored. Many of these stories, especially the early ones, revolve around teachers who are the only Outsiders who get close enough to penetrate The People's secrets.

I personally believe that the stories collected in the first part, *Pilgrimage* are the strongest, especially the first "Ararat" about the arrival of a new teacher, an Outsider, and the town's struggle to cover up so the teacher doesn't realize their strangeness. "Pottage" in which "Ararat" is inverted and the whole town lives in fear except the teacher. "Gilead" features a boy and girl of The People discovering their powers and their heritage (slightly weaker than the others but still good enough so that when I first read it in an anthology I started looking for the rest.) "Wilderness" where a teacher with strange powers but no memory of The People meets a member of The People who remembers everything except how to find them.

"Captivity" where a Huckleberry Finn type child has strange musical gifts. Other strong stories include "Deluge" about The Home and The Crossing, "Angels Unawares" about pioneers in 1890 who help survivors of the crash and about religious fanatics who try to kill them. "Troubling of the Waters" a companion story about another survivor is slightly less strong. One of the uncollected stories, "Tell Us A Story" is similar to "Troubling" also featuring survivors of the crash who don't understand how to survive on this planet and a hostile father-figure. Two other stories feature space travel "Shadow on the Moon" about children who discover an old man building a space ship to take his son to the moon and "The Indelible Kind" about a child with a rather odd learning disorder.

Only one story does not work, "Katie-Mary's Trip" an attempt to bring The People into the '60s using the style of the 60s instead of Henderson's normal, plain style. Of the other new stories, "Michal With-



out" has a wonderful engaging character in Michal and a twist on the discovery of The People theme. "That Boy" Henderson's greatest strength is combining the mundane and ordinary with the extraordinary but without the two warring with each other.

"I sighed and turned my back on the room, wandering my eyes up the steepness of Black Mesa as it towered above the school, trying to lose myself from apprehension, trying to forget why I had run away -- nearly five hundred miles -- trying to forget those things that tugged at my sanity, things that could tar me loose from reality and set me adrift... Adrift? Oh, glory! Set me free Set me free! I hooked my pointer fingers through the old wire grating that protected the bottom of the window and tugged sharply. Old nails grated and old wire gave, and I sneezed through the dry acid bite of ancient dust."

If you ever thought you were different from everyone else (and what SF reader hasn't); if you ever wondered what it would be like to have special powers; if you ever wanted a family that understood you and accepted you (yes, Henderson taps into that vein too) then you owe it to yourself to discover The People through Ingathering. NESFA Press has produced another volume, *Believing*, with Zenna Henderson's non-People stories. Maybe I should give myself it as a late holiday present.

## The Kingdom of Copper by S.A. Chakraborty— Review by Tom Feller

This is the second book in the author's Daevabad Trilogy which was nominated for the Hugo for Best Series. I don't know if it is necessary to read the first one, because the characters are constantly talking about the events that took place in it five years previously. It is set in the 19th Century Middle East, mostly in the legendary city of Daevabad, and the infodumps are kept to a minimum, so the reader has to sink or swim to understand what is going on. It is ruled by King Ghassan, a member of the Geziri tribe of djinns whose father had overthrown the Daeva tribe. (The Daevas actually come from Persian folklore rather than the Arabian.) In addition to the Geziris and the Daevas, the city has a lower class called the Shafits, who are half-djinn half-human.

The three point of view characters are Ali, Ghassan's younger son, Nahri, a Daeva healer with magical powers who is also a Nahid, a kind of Daeva royalty, and Dara, a powerful djinn warrior. Together, they comprise a kind of love triangle. However, Ghassan has forced Nahri to marry Muntadhir, his older son and heir. She would have preferred Ali, who has just returned from exile after five years due to the efforts of his mother Hatset and sister Zaynab. Nahri and Ali are allies in their efforts to build a hospital that will serve Geziris, Daevas, and Shafits alike. Muntadhir, who is a closet bi-sexual, and Nahri have had no children, because she has access to birth control potions which she takes secretly. She also would have preferred Dara, who is involved in a plot with Nahri's mother Manizeh to overthrow Ghassan and the Geziris during a holiday called Novatetum. The story lines come together at the end, and the closer the book gets to the climax, the more difficult it is to put it down. There is even a scene in which two of the characters travel on a flying carpet!

## Knightmare Arcanist by Shami Stovall Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

I'm not quite sure how it's done, but I recognize it when I see it: really GREAT writing. Shami Stovall generates GREAT writing. In fact, her writing deserves a better review than this, but I've been trying to get this written since 7:30 AM, and I don't want to put it off another day.



Look to her work, and you'll find she absolutely NAILS the execution of the ideas, putting everything into the just-right sequence. She has the ability and the stamina to infuse page 180 with the same energy that's found on page 1. I'm inclined to believe that the stamina is what keeps most people from getting that novel published; it's just too hard to sit down, hour after hour, day after day, and punch the words into the keyboard. If my count is right, she now has eight books published, and that is some pretty amazing output.

Solid writing is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for GREAT writing, though. To that, Stovall adds some AMAZING brilliance in the concept. I was overjoyed and flabbergasted when I discovered she had based one novel entirely on the concept of The Prisoner's Dilemma ("Star Marque Rising"), and that her construction was so flawlessly executed that it didn't come across AT ALL like a gimmick.

In this book, the concept that I cherish is the bonding between magical creatures and humans. We have seen similar items before, ranging from a witch's familiar, to were-creatures, to sinister mimics and pod people. Where Stovall differentiates herself, however, is in both the mechanics of the bonding, and in the transformation of both the human (the arcanist) and the magical creature (the eldrin). Some of each blend into the other, and they take on each other's traits with time. I'm not aware of anyone doing anything quite like this; the closest I can think of is Weber's treecats, but it's not the same thing.

So: she nails the technique; she nails the concept; what about the story?

It's a great old story, of poor and repressed folks, perhaps undiscovered royalty, arising from poverty to greatness. Surrounding them are people of privilege, which is given to them by accidents of birth. Tell the story the wrong way, and it is TIRESOME. Tell it the right way, and it refreshes the spirit, and gives you hope. Stovall tells it the right way.

Her Good Guys have flaws, her Bad Guys have good motives. There are sufficiently subtle plot elements that you might not be sure which are Good and which are Bad, until the story has progressed significantly. It makes for a really great read.

I have quite a few more books by Stovall to read and review, and I'm looking forward to the prospect.

Peace be on your household.

## The Lost War by Karl Gallagher Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

When I was sitting next to Karl Gallagher at LibertyCon, he mentioned that Torchship was about his day job (yes, he is a rocket scientist), and that The Lost War was about his hobby.

His Hobby?

Welcome to the SCA, the Society for Creative Anachronism.

IE: Welcome to RennFaire.

Buckle up. This is going to be fun. This was my fantasy pick for best fantasy for the Dragon Awards in 2019. It is awesome, and you are going to like it. And if you don't, you're wrong.

The story

Our main character is Newman Greenhorn — and if you can't tell that he's a newbie at a gathering of the Society for Creative Anachronism, now you know. When his girlfriend brings him to the pagan circle on the first night, well, what's the worst that can happen?

This. This is the worst that can happen.

As the circle disbands, the entire camp has moved. The flora is different. The fauna are different. The stars are different. And there are three moons in the sky. The entire camp has been moved and the struggle to survive has begun. They need food. They need weapons. They need to know what threats are out there. And look up in the sky! It's a bird... No, it's a plane... No. Aw crap, that's a dragon.

If you're thinking "SCA surviving in a fantasy landscape. Hmm, sounds like John Ringo's Council Wars"... that is a very superficial view of it. Let's put it this way, when I read Karl's Torchship trilogy, I said in a review "Well, if David Weber ever needs help finishing Honor Harrington, maybe he should take to Karl."

Having topped David Weber, Karl has apparently decided to top John Ringo. And I don't even mean The Council Wars. Because there is a very specific reason that Newman and the camp have been brought over to this new world. The world has a problem, and the humans are to be the pest control. Thank you, you rotten, mutha-bleepin elves. (Yes, think Posleen. Only worse).

Then the orcs arrive.

I have only one problem with the book — no chapters. The novel is more or less one continuous work. Luckily, I read quickly, so I didn't have to lose TOO much sleep.

The characters

The character of Newman himself is ... a lot of military guys with two brain cells to rub together. (Which seems to be most of them — I've only met one or two I wouldn't trust to breath into a paper bag.) Down to one section of "I'm more comfortable with strangers trying to kill me in the wild than dealing with protocol for nobility. Your excellency."

It was perfect. Down to the placement of the period.

There is a lot of easy character development. At least one character became my favorite in a one-page description (look for the character of "Burnout." I suspect she is a PA).

And then human beings start developing magical powers, and we have SCA X-Men.

This leads to some interesting moments, including several instances where the characters make a deduction, follow through on the deduction, and it is apparent to the reader what is going on — and it is AT NO POINT SPELLED OUT FOR THE READER. Because Karl figures that the reader also has two brain cells to rub together. And he's right. I didn't have to be told what was going on ... in fact, I had to double back to make certain that Karl didn't spell it out. It's great writing.

And it's so nice when a character calls out "Thalassa!" and I know what the bleep he's talking about.

The world

The plot is not what got me started on thinking about John Ringo. There is so much readable logistics in this book, it's amazing. There is a ton of effort put in on how things get done — are the flora safe? Are the Fauna safe? The amateur astronomer who confirms, “Yes, the stars are different. We are not in Kansas anymore, Toto.” Or “Oh look, here are piles of bones, we can deduce that we aren't the only hunters out here.” There are considerations about medicines, hygiene, resource consumption, resource allocation, down to “How do we make soap?” and the question of law enforcement.

Karl does a great job of setting up the situation, the variations of reactions to the setting, the governing of the new world — both official and unofficial. You can see how it feels a bit like a Ringo novel, as he's one of the few I can think of who can recreate and rebuild an entire society that completely.

Amateurs study tactics. Karl's a professional.

Also, I dare you to find someone else who will deal with fantasy parasitology, microbiology and serology on this level.

AND EVERY LAST MINUTE OF IT WAS EASILY READABLE AND ENJOYABLE. Unlike most geniuses, Karl writes plainly and easily without dumbing it down.

The politics

The entire society is ordered on SCA grounds. Everyone owns a weapon, and everyone is going to have to fight or die.

It's a little Biased.

Content warning

Fantasy violence is a thing. There is also rape — it's not on screen, but it does happen.

Who is it for?

We can recommend this to any fans of John Ringo, the Witcher, or anyone who enjoys military fantasy, or just basic logistics.

Why read it?

This is a great book, brilliantly executed, and I finished both books in one weekend. I'm hoping there's a book 3.

## Moving Mars by Greg Bear Reviewed by Sam Lubell

Greg Bear's Moving Mars is more a collection of incidents in the life of Casseia Majumdar than a conventional novel. It can be divided into three parts, The first has Casseia as an university student, getting involved in the early protests against centralization and starting a relationship with a young physics student. While the political protest part could have been Earth in the 1960's (except for the need for oxy-

gen masks), her relationship with Charles allows the author to explore the Mars he has created where humans burrow underground and corporate families make alliances through marriage. There is a good scene with the caverns of Mars and a running joke of machines needing repair.

In the second part, which I found the best section, we see Cassia as a fish out of water on Earth where she is apprenticed to the delegate from Mars. Here we get a sophisticated Earth, obsessed with intrigue, genetic modification, and implants. The Martian embassy runs afoul of dirty tricks that go on every day in our own Washington. The best new characters in this section is Alice, a Thinker (self-aware computer) and Orianna, a rich Earthgirl with seven different enhancements (genetic modifications) and very different views about just about everything. Bear does a good job of showing, not telling the differences between Mars and Earth.

In the third section, *Moving Mars* lives up to its title with a superscience discovery that causes Earth to feel threatened and launch its own attack. The political maneuvering and hostilities is reminiscent of Heinlein's *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress* without being cloned too obviously.

Characterization is especially well done, and may be the book's strongest point with all major characters, especially Casseia and Charles, having their own personalities. While coincidence does play some role in the novel, with the prime inventor of the superscience device being Charles, Casseia's ex-lover, this is justified by Mars' small population and the character's different goals for themselves that led to the breakup in the first place.

*Moving Mars* is deeper than many hard science fiction novels. While its scope in time and space is limited to our single solar system, it goes into greater depth, providing the reader not just with adventure, but exploration into motivations and a complicated all-too-human situation that cannot be solved by Earthling's innate superiority over aliens, trickery and cleverness, or even superscience. A spaceship can be viewed as a little world, especially those that travel for generations to reach a given point. But they are still vehicles, a larger version of the family car or a faster and higher airplane. They are developed and built for the purpose of motion. However, when the spaceship is replaced with a more usual home, a city or a planet, the book becomes less a voyage of exploration or military might, but a more inward journey, questioning the very nature of travel and of home.

## The Poppy War by R. F. Kuang— Review by Tom Feller

Nikan, the fantasy world this novel is set in, is based on imperial China during the Song dynasty, although the dominant religion is polytheistic. Other countries are the Federation of Mugen, loosely based on Japan, and the Republic of Hesperia, loosely based on the United States. The main character is an orphaned female named Fang Runin, aka Rin, whose skin is darker than the other people in the area. She eventually learns that she is a native of the island of Speer, whose population was wiped out by the Mugenese in a deliberate act of genocide. She was adopted by a family of provincial opium smugglers who had planned to marry her off to a rich, middle-aged merchant when she turned fourteen. However, with two years of intense study, she not only passes the Keju, a standardized test required for admission to one of the imperial universities, but qualifies for Sineward Academy, the most prestigious university in the empire. After her first year, she apprentices under an enigmatic master named Jiang with the intention of becoming a shaman. This part of the novel felt like an edgier, grittier version of *Harry Potter*. Other students at the university include Nezha, the son of a warlord and her worst enemy among the members of the student body, Venka, Nezha's girl friend and Rin's second worst enemy, Kitay, the son of the imperial defense minister and her best friend, and Altan, an older student who is

the school's finest martial artist. He is a fifth-year student during her first year, so they have few interactions until later.

Unfortunately, the Mugenese invade, and, like all her classmates, Rin has to leave school to join the army. She is eventually assigned to the Cike, which just happens to be commanded by Altan. In peacetime, they are assassins for the Empress but during wartime, they serve as a special forces unit. With a few exceptions, they are all shamans with different powers and resemble a superhero team. Some of the scenes and events are based on the Rape of Nanking during World War II. This action-packed novel is very dark and intense, but also quite fascinating. Although this is the first novel in a trilogy, it actually has an ending while leaving enough loose ends to make sequels possible. This trilogy was also nominated in the Best Series category.

## The Second Star by Alma Alexander

### Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

It's an interesting premise: the first humans to venture out into deep space return two hundred years later — only they're not the same when they come back. They now each have multiple personalities. Was it caused by something they encountered? Or did they succumb to madness due to the crushing isolation of being out in the middle of nowhere?

Upon their return to Earth, the crew of the Parada are quarantined, and the military pulls in psychologist Dr. Stella Froud and Jesuit priest Fr. Philip Carter to determine whether or not the six astronauts pose a threat to humanity. In the course of their investigation, as they get to know the astronauts better, they start to realize there's more to the story than they initially expected. What started out as a simple psychological evaluation turns into a conflict between the civilians and the military officers. And while Lt. Col. Martin Peck seems to sometimes straddle the line between priorities, he's partially set up to be the "hindrance" character for Stella (a name that means "star" and yes, that factors into the story a bit).

On the whole, I thought this was a pretty solid story. It holds together well, escalates the stakes at the right pace, and it's an intriguing premise that has you wondering just what's causing the Dissociative Personality Disorder that afflicts the crew of the Parada. If it's just a psychotic break, what circumstances would obtain for everyone to be affected? And what does it matter that there are twins among the astronauts?

Having said that, I think the story breaks down a bit at the end, with the resolution — and the questions that resolution raises — feeling a little tossed in, because the implications of what it means for humanity could generate its own 300-page book in itself. But it doesn't feel like enough weight is given to that moment, other than how it affects Philip. It doesn't feel rushed, really, but it feels... incomplete, let's say. We spend so much time in one location (the quarantine facility) that when we finally get outside, we don't spend enough time in the world to get a sense of what impact it could have to re-integrate the astronauts into society. There's a lot of talk about it, but we don't actually get to see it.

Additionally, there are plenty of places where the dialogue feels ... forced? Things get repeated a lot, and there are passages where it feels like characters are giving speeches instead of having conversations, and some of those speeches repeat back to a character what that character actually just said. Also, there are quite a few passages explaining Dissociative Personality Disorder, that feel like they've been lifted from medical texts and massaged a bit to fit the character who's speaking. It's not distracting

enough to pull me out of the story, but it's distracting enough that I notice it and wonder why it's there for me to notice.

Staying inside one place makes the world-building easy, as there's only a little of that necessary. But really, this is a story about the people, and it's applicable enough to work in any time period, not just the future. Which is good, because I think there's plenty of opportunity for stories to get into the long-term mental effects of space travel. It's still a fairly untapped vein of material to mine.

While the story didn't go where I expected, it's an interesting and thought-provoking story that makes you consider the long-term effects of space travel and what mental health concerns should be considered as we return to space. Worth a read.

## Simple Service by Laura Montgomery

### Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is a pathetic shade of a review of an excellent book; I hope to come back and fill out the bones later.

The series Montgomery has started is called "Martha's Sons." This Martha is a person of literature, living on a planet that was Not What We Were Looking For, and thus designated as NWWWLF. She has multiple sons and daughters, and two of them in particular are the main characters of this compelling book, addressing themes of family loyalty and conflict, the difficulty of living on a planet which requires extensive terraforming, the tendency of oligarchies to resort to ever-more repressive measures to keep in power, all giving us a lovely, lovely back-story to her "Waking Late" series.

Tiny addition to the utterly pathetic paragraph above: Simon is the older brother, Peter the younger, and Simon is a not-nice older brother. The central government has impounded the weapons of the farmers outside the city, and the brothers decide to go steal them back. Two young men, with sibling rivalry issues, against an army. Yeah. What could go wrong?

You may wish to read Rudyard Kipling's "Sons of Martha" understand the meaning of the title, and the burden the family operates under.

## Unmasked by Kai Wai Cheah

### Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

In the Heroes Unleashed world of Silver Empire Press, Kai Wai Cheah's Adam Song has been described as the Punisher.

In Unmasked, that comparison becomes closer.

I described the first book in Kai Wai Cheah's Song of Karma, Hollow City, as Larry Correia and Michael Connelly writing a superhero police procedural. Complete with gun porn and noir stylistic writing. This time, our hero, Adam Song is back. By the time we're done with the first chapter, it feels very much like Raymond Chandler, with knife porn instead of gun porn, and superhero action on par with a Hong Kong Wu Xia film.



The story

It is not a spoiler that *Unmasked* begins with Adam Song outed as the SWAT superhero “Amp.” Due to Hollow City being a cross of the worst of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago, he’s being prosecuted for murder of a gangbanger and his girlfriend, largely because of political hacks who are all too eager to throw him and the police under the bus. With the pressure building from anti-superhero group “Cape Watch,” and anti-law enforcement hate groups, their first instinct is to throw the book at Adam Song. It’s so bad, the restaurant owned by Adam’s family is under siege by Cape Watch and their gangbanger friends.

Lest you think that this is being inspired by recent events, I read an ARC of this novel in January of 2020. Any and all inspirations from real life were at least five years old before everything old became new again last summer. If Kai Wai Cheah becomes any more predictive, he’s going to give me a run for my money.

The trial segment is as well written as any trial written by Michael Connelly, and he’s done more than a few. For anyone who has followed the series, the court sequences feel like Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch is on trial ... again. The trial sequences are all very well put together and are used to great effect. One of the opening trial bits was a great bit of recap. And the trial itself is fast-paced and entertaining. Despite how much of the plot revolves around Adam being suspended from the police force, the trial itself is only four chapters.

But while Adam is being prosecuted for murder, he has other old friends pulling at him. “Don Peterson” (if that’s his real name) is a part of Adam’s old life in wet work and black bag operations, offering Adam a Faustian bargain to make everything go away if Adam just came back to government service, taking down the supervillains who are too powerful to merely throw in jail. It’s a nice bit of spy thriller that reminds me of the classic Adam Hall Quiller novels, with the sort of deal that will remind the casual reader of *Suicide Squad*.

Meanwhile, Adam is keeping busy with a paying job. An old friend, a Buddhist monk, is being pressured by the People’s Republic of China to come home to China... and if he won’t accept the invitation gracefully, they intend to force the issue by any means necessary. It seems like an easy job for a SWAT superhero—until the Chinese reveal a superpowered minion of their own. (I await some people to cry racism against China... until someone realizes that Cheah is a Singapore native.) In short, the People’s Republic of China has not changed in the slightest in this world. China is still China.

Cheah does a great job of balancing the three plots—fighting China, the trial, and the espionage aspects brought in with the character of Don Peterson. And when they collide in the finale, it will blow you away.

Or, as the book itself says, “Riots, gangsters, spies and supervillains. It’s going to be a perfect f\*\*\*ing storm.”

And it is.

One paragraph I feel compelled to quote is the opening of chapter one.

“Everybody wants to be a superhero.



They want the fast life, filled with adrenaline and excitement and superpower showdowns. They want to haul in the bad guys, show off their scars, earn the adoration of the faceless masses on the Internet. They want the sponsorship deals, corporate paychecks, Gucci gear, crowdfunded patronage. After that, it's easy street all the way.

Funny thing is, it never works out that way.”

Tell me that isn't a great opening.

Cheah also has more humor in this one. The chapter headings are entertaining.

And of course, there is the end, which brings together two threads of this universe together with a bang.

### The characters

Over the course of the book, we see Adam balance being a law enforcement officer facing overwhelming threats. Despite edging closer to becoming the Punisher, Adam is still a cop by training, and works hard to stay on the side of the law, even when the lines become just a wee bit blurry. And while the plot may feel like a slower start than the first book, that's only because the last half has twice the action as the entire first novel.

And the writing is wonderful. The character development is great. All the little touches paint quick, complex characters with ease. I even think the primary Chinese villain here comes from *Fist of the North Star*, but my anime is rusty. Cheah brings in a large cast of characters, and more of them are original to this novel. It's a superhero team up story without a large body of characters spread throughout the universe. The descriptions are... well, one villain is referred to as “The Shadowless Ghost,” with “low friends in high places.” Two cops are “a teddy bear paired with a wolf.”

### The world

This corner of Silver Empire's series has great world building from the aspect of law enforcement and espionage in a world of superpowers. It's nice to see that the FBI... is still absolutely useless (while they have a Hostage Rescue Team for superpowers, it's a superpower conflict. By the time they get to the scene of the incident, it's all over but the screaming. And a lot of the screaming is over too).

Cheah goes into the licensing and training for superheroes, and it is ... very California. Even the elements with Don Peterson have a very rigorous logic of assassination. Worst of all, Cheah delves into how many superheroes, or “primes” go into public service, and it is so very human.

### The politics

This novel is pro-gun, and as “pro-cop” as a Michael Connelly novel (those who do their jobs are great. But everyone else can take a hike). For a novel that has mind control and people throwing lightning bolts, it is solidly grounded in reality—or at least pragmatics.

### Content warning

I would not call this graphic violence. There is less blood here than in a John Wick film, but the body count may be higher.

Who is it for?

This book is for anyone who wants the Punisher back as a badass killing machine. If you want Larry Correia gun and knife porn, Michael Connelly noir mystery, and a war on par with David Weber writing a DC Crisis, read this book.

Why read it?

Overall, Unmasked is a smart, face-paced adventure novel for people who want to see character growth and just how things get done.

## Violin by Anne Rice Review by Will Mayo

And I on a night like this I think of the recently deceased novelist Anne Rice's story, "Violin," in which the sounds of a ghost's music carry away on a New Orleans dark. A haunting melody, it escorts the dying to the other side and makes young girls fall in love with the long deceased. This is one of Anne's sadly overlooked novels. I suggest you check it out. It will stay with you long after you turn the final page.

## Waldo and Magic Inc. by Robert Heinlein Review by Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

Grimes had been afraid that the handicapped child, since it was not subjected to the usual maturing stresses of growing up, would remain infantile. He knew now—had known for a long time—that he need not have worried. Young Waldo grasped at what little life was offered him, learned thirstily, tried with a sweating tenseness of will to force his undisciplined muscles to serve him.

He was clever in thinking of dodges whereby to circumvent his muscular weakness. At seven he devised a method of controlling a spoon with two hands, which permitted him—painfully—to feed himself. His first mechanical invention was made at ten.

Robert A. Heinlein was never pleased with the publisher's decision to put Waldo and Magic Inc in the same volume, a custom that has continued up until the most recent editions of Heinlein's works. They went together, he complained, like 'watermelon and mustard.' And yet, they do go together. Heinlein showed, in Waldo, how the modern-day world can come to terms with a whole new form of 'science' – magic, in other words, while Magic Inc describes a world where magic is just another form of science, where magicians hang their hats in public and both government and criminal factions seek to make use of magic for their own ends. The settings might be fantastical, and they are not linked together save by the common theme of magic, but the heroes are human.

The titular character of Waldo – who later gave his name to waldos – is a crippled genius, born with an acute disease that, eventually, drove him to move to a private space station and turn it into a home suited for his unique needs. Waldo, despite his many infirmities, never despaired, but sought ways to turn his disabilities into an advantage. His genius may be exactly what a major corporation needs. There's just one small problem. Waldo hates them.

But the situation is desperate. All over the world, radiant energy receptors are failing. Flying cars are falling out of the sky, power plants are dying and human civilisation may be on the verge of a complete stop. (Worse, there's a good chance that radiant energy may be adversely affecting the human race, an early case of the paranoia about mobile phone emissions.) Waldo draws a blank, until an old-timer man somehow manages to repair one of the receptors. The sight of a repaired receptor drives one of the corporation's scientists mad, but Waldo is enthused. He eventually deduces that the radiant energy system is reaching into another world, altering the laws of science. The receptors failed because the people using them lost confidence in them. Waldo uses this insight to solve both problems – the failing generators and the problems caused by radiant energy – and then, learning more about magic, he eventually solves his own problems. By the end of the book, he can walk under his own power.

Magic Inc, by contrast, features a handful of magical shopkeepers who are threatened by the titular Magic Inc. Magic Inc is a de facto protection racket – work with us or you won't work at all – which is steadily expanding until it threatens to become the dominant power in the magical industry. Eventually, Magic Inc manages to convince the state government to pass laws giving them exclusive access to magic, putting the heroes out of business. Angry, realising that the power behind Magic Inc is definitely inhuman, the heroes take the battle to hell and defeat the demon in magical combat. In the aftermath, Magic Inc collapses and the status quo is restored.

The core of Waldo focuses on expanding one's mind, on accepting that the laws of science – as man understands them – may not be as inflexible as we suppose. Indeed, just as some people had trouble accepting everything from steamships to rockets, the people of Waldo's world find it hard to believe in the Other World. On a more mundane level, some people even have a very solid interest in denying the suggestion that radiant energy is weakening the human race. But the book also shows, again for Heinlein, that science (or magic, in this case) brings problems and solves them.

Waldo himself is a walking advertisement for letting disabled babies live. (His doctor admits, at least to himself, that there were times when he wished the child would die.) Many years before Stephen Hawking, Waldo would show that disabled people have something to contribute to society. (The suggestion that Heinlein never showed a disabled hero is obviously incorrect.) And yet, at the same time, Waldo's character has been shaped by his experiences. He is, very much, a grumpy old man. Heinlein makes sure to point out that this is a stupid attitude. A man as dependent on others as Waldo cannot afford to alienate the people on whom his livelihood (and indeed his very life) depends. But, at the same time, he will find it hard to get the social contact he needs.

Magic Inc is a form of magical realism, another genre that Heinlein influenced even if he didn't invent. Set in a world of 1940s America, only with magic, it blends the mundane and the fantastical together. Most notably, it details how a protection racket works – and, more importantly for our current era, the danger of allowing bad laws to be written and put on the books. Indeed, the current fad for poorly written convention codes of conduct illustrates the danger quite nicely. It also touches on the importance of keeping one's legislators honest – a difficult task at the best of times – and the problems with monopolies. The dangers of a closed shop – where you need permission from the bosses to work in a certain field – should be obvious. Magic Inc has no compunction about forbidding its enemies to work, driving them underground. The only people who come out ahead are criminals.

Unsurprisingly, for Heinlein, there is a considerable amount of diversity in the book. Waldo himself is disabled, obviously, and yet that doesn't stop him from making himself one of the most significant researchers in the system. The old-timer who helps him peer into the Other World is German, something that might have been a little odd in 1942. Magic Inc features Doctor Worthington, who speaks with an Oxford accent ... and is, much to the surprise of the protagonists, very definitely black. (Thinking

about it, a world where Africa contributed a great deal to magical knowledge might be one where Africans got a better deal.) And one of the most competent magicians is an old lady.

Heinlein is not commonly associated with fantasy. Indeed, these two stories and *Glory Road* are perhaps his only magical novels. And yet, in these stories, Heinlein showed both the importance of stretching one's mind while, at the same time, reminding us that people are human. Waldo and the heroes of *Magic Inc* are gleefully flawed personalities who have to fight for their victories ... and, as such, they serve as an inspiration for the reader.

Overall, I have to argue that Heinlein was wrong. Waldo and *Magic Inc* do go together.

## Winter's Tale By Mark Helprin Reviewed by Sam Lubell

Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* presents an unforgettable collection of images--a white horse plodding around in a circle, determined not to give up, the same horse jumping, flying. A Brigadoon-type town frozen solid. A living painting. The last of the bushmen. The bridge spanning into the next century. The perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone. The fog eating the banks of the city and the woman trying to outskate it. The sick woman sleeping in the snow on the roof, rising to perform miracles. While there is a narrative, or rather, several narratives in this nearly 700 page book, it is the imagery and the quality of the writing that holds the book together:

"Then, from atop a long rise, they saw the village sparkling like a group of colored candles. It was on the edge of the lake, which was crowned by the blue-and-green aurora now hanging in the sky in astounding silent ribbons. Smoke from the Coheeries chimneys crept up in intertwining white garlands and tangled on the moon. Now skiers, countrymen, they raced in contentment, hissing down the slope, speeding toward the Christmas candle that danced before them by the frozen lake..."

At every page there is something new to astonish, new phrasings to delight. The book would be excellent even if there was no plot, but the plot is almost as extraordinary as the language and imagery. The book starts with Peter Lake meeting the white horse and escaping the Short Tails, little is explained at first of Peter Lake, the Short Tails, and the reasons for the chase. The Short Tails are a criminal gang whose leader is known for liking color and occasionally returning stolen paintings with notes on why he didn't like them, "Take any American city, in autumn, or in winter, when the light makes the colors dance and flow, and look at it from a distant hill or from a boat in the bay or on the river, and you will see in any section of the view far better paintings than in this lentil soup that you people have to pedigree in order to love. I may be a thief, but I know color when I see it in the flash of heaven or in the Devil's opposing tricks, and I know mud..."

Peter falls in love with Beverly, the daughter of a rich newspaper magnate, when he tries to rob their mansion. Together, they spend a magical winter, including a visit to the mythical Lake of the Coheeries ("which was so far upstate that no one could find it") and a final dance on New Years where as Peter tells Beverly, "You were queen of the world. First you put Pearly to sleep. Then you seem to have opened the doors, stoked the fire, and made the clock spin..."

In the second part, which seems connected to first only by the Lake of the Coheeries, a young woman leaves the Lake to go to New York City and a man begins a quest for the perfectly just city after choosing his father's salver instead of his fortune. The salver has the words "For what can be imagined more beautiful than the sight of a perfectly just city rejoicing in justice alone." This section is most notable

for its wonderful descriptions of New York City and its two warring newspapers, the Sun (and the morning edition, the Whale) and the New York Ghost which continues into the third section. "His [the owner of the Ghost's] power over them was nearly absolute. For example, he made them change their names to the guide words on the bindings of The Encyclopaedia Britannica. This was so that he could remember better who they were, since he spent a lot of time staring at his encyclopaedia." This newspaper "was run by headline writers. Over the years, the success of their sensational declarations had transformed them into a caste of elevated mandarins, and they discovered that their headings did not need to have any bearing whatsoever on the copy below..."

In the third section, Peter Lake wakes up a hundred years later, without his memory but with his extraordinary knowledge of machines intact. He is able to explain all the old equipment to the workers at The Sun which is still operating with the original printing press but without an understanding of how to maintain it. "And as they [the machines] puffed and revolved and did their mad angular dances, Peter Lake realized that he was a mechanic. In each section of the half-acre of machinery, years of knowledge charged out from the interior darkness and stood at attention like brigades and brigades of soldiers on parade. The realization was locked in place as if with strikes and bolts. At last, a victory."

Meanwhile dead people from his past are trying to build a rainbow bridge and, somehow the Short Tails are still chasing him. This last section gets a bit chaotic, and some of this is not fully explained (which merely pushes the book a notch closer to magical realism rather than destroy its charms.)

The mystery begins with a strange ship "For the illusion of fields and orchards across the water, and the light western sky itself, were slowly and steadily obliterated by a wall that traveled sideways, the prow of a ship that moved slowly up the Hudson, a massive guillotine, the lid of the world, closing from south to north." This giant ship, thousands of feet long, appearing on the eve of the millennium, seems to signify approaching miracles and the city-dwellers fight over the meaning. The ship and the people on it are closely connected to Peter Lake's forgotten past and to the city's future.

Winter's Tale is highly recommended as one of the best fantasies not published as a fantasy novel. There are no dragons or wizards, but instead magic is revealed in the grandeur of language and in the meaning of strange events half taken for granted. (The cover of the book, a horse outlined in stars flying above the city would not look out of place on the fantasy shelves.) And yet, because the author had a history of publishing in the mainstream and worked for The New Yorker, this magical book was called mainstream.

**Zombie Death Extreme:**  
**Neeta Lyffe, Zombie Exterminator**  
**by Karina Fabian**  
**Review by Declan Finn**  
<http://www.declanfinn.com>

A while back, I had been involved in an online conference. I ran a workshop on fight scenes and ran a discussion on creating a villain. During the course of that latter chat, I mentioned that it helped if the villain had the brain. Mindless, shambling zombies were not really that much fun, as villains go...

Then I remembered that one of the people in the chat was Karina Fabian ... who had written – surprise – a book about a Zombie Exterminator.

Now, if I had had my wits about me, I would have noted how, in zombie films, zombies are generally NOT the main bad guys. They set the scene, they act as cannon fodder (for an action franchise like Resident Evil, where the real villains are the Evil Corporation du jour), but most zombie movies are more about the people in the Zombie Apocalypse du jour rather than about the zombies. The zombies are window dressing.

Instead, my witless wonder moment had me hasten to add “Though I can’t speak for every zombie storyline, I have yet to read Karina Fabian’s.” I think I inserted a smiley and went on from there.

Within two minutes, I heard an email click. I had just received an e-copy of Karina Fabian’s *Zombie Death Extreme: Neeta Lyffe, Zombie Exterminator*.

When I shoot from the lip, I have no idea what’ll happen.

The story

*Zombie Death Extreme* takes place in the 2040s, several decades after the zombie outbreaks started. There are no zombie apocalypses here. It never happened. However, the undead can be annoying, so exterminators have to be called in — exterminators with chainsaws. Zombies are attracted to certain strong smells, and they don’t like standard household cleaners.... don’t ask.

Neeta Lyffe, a second-generation exterminator (motto: “I want to be buried like my mother, with my head cradled in my arms”) is sued after an extermination call went into property damage. Now, in order to generate income, she’s agreed to do the most terrifying thing in her life.... host a reality show.

Yes, you read that right. The reality show *Zombie Death Extreme*, where Neeta is stuck with a handful of exterminator wannabes, training them to re-kill the occasional nests of undead that threaten LA (then again, if parts of LA were turned into shambling mindless hordes, would anyone notice?).

Also included: re-grief training ... for when you have to mourn for loved ones a second time, when they come back; and flash cards to tell the difference between a stroke victim, a drunk, and a zombie. And you can probably guess, this has a sense of humor, unlike most zombie films (“We throw the grenades on the count of 3. 1, 2, 3.” Second person shouts “Five,” and throws the grenade ... sorry, Monty Python joke.).

In short, it’s one part satire, one part action, and all parts fun.

The characters

The cast looks like it should be stocked with the standard cliches: an ex-marine, a farm boy with a stutter, an African American woman from an urban environment, an Afghan emigre whose first language isn’t English (he speaks it perfectly well, but the producers want him so speak more like Hasan from a Bugs Bunny cartoon). The Producer of the show is the standard two-dimension cardboard cutout, which means he’s drawn very accurately — however, he’s never had to negotiate with someone who carries a chainsaw on a daily basis, including the occasional brainstorming session for the show.

All of the characters are vivid and brightly drawn ... and heavily mocked, in some cases. Everything you have ever hated about reality television is skewered ruthlessly, and wonderfully.



The world

Possibly one of the best parts of this book (and there are plenty to choose from), are the running excerpts from a documentary on the rise of zombies, detailing a somewhat funny look on the matter, down to and including Darwin Award winners who tried to play tag with a zombie. That was fun and does a great job drawing the world.

The politics

None. Except that Hollywood is populated with idiots and fools.

Okay, it is libertarian in the same way Ghostbusters is. When zombies are a pain and causing havoc, call in the small business to fix the problem.

Content warning

Zombies, decapitation, and cannibalism— and that's just on the first page.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys lampooning the horror genre or reality television.

Why read it?

It's funny as heck, and better than most of the zombie genre.

## Prose Bono

Wanted: Readers  
by Cedar Sanderson  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Only, not necessarily for the reason that popped into your mind. I have an idea, but it's not something I can do. It's something an author, any of us, cannot do. So? I'm looking for a few good readers...

There's a crying need for book reviews. Yes, Amazon, but also no. Not Amazon. We need diversity and putting up reviews on book sales sites is important. It's also a fragile ecosystem. We've all heard the stories, if we haven't experienced it ourselves, of the 'Zon or social media or... deciding that this review, this post, this whatever opinion, is not worthy, and making it vanish. What is needed is something more durable.

I've been trying to coax my mother into blogging book reviews: she is a voracious reader, and has a blog, and it would be really helpful. Not to me, so much, as there's an obvious bias! but to other authors out there. Besides which, it would be great if there were a site with reviewers that readers could build up a trust relationship with. Honest reviews, that could be relied on as indicators of 'I'd like that, too!' are a vital part of marketing, and it's something money can't buy.



Seriously, this is... does anyone know of a reliable book review site?

Crickets?

Yeah... there are review sites. I can name a couple offhand. One is... um, very much not my genre, the political tilt button started blaring a few years back, and now I don't go there even though I used to visit just for the snark. But that odor of 'political correctness' pervaded their reviews, and I found I could no longer trust that they were putting forth an honest portrayal of a book, or if it was skewed towards activism. And I don't care which side of the political spectrum you're on. Activism in fiction is never fun reading.

Relying on word of mouth is a great way to find books. We've been doing that over in the Book Club with Spikes with recommendation threads, or folks just dropping in a link to something they read and enjoyed. And this is great, but it's ephemeral and not at all publicly searchable. That's why I'm thinking there needs to be a blog, or a website, for reviews. They don't need to be long literary critiques (please, no...). They don't need to be terribly witty (although funny is always good, snarky is good too) on days the reviewers aren't up to that. I know readers are not writers, but some of them can be.

It's nothing I can run myself. Terrible conflict of interest. But perhaps I can plant the seed that could grow into something wonderful.

Readers? Toss a coin to your authors?

## Doffs Hat by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

I'm a deadline junkie. I've never denied that. The adrenaline rush of bringing it in just a hair before it's too late? Yeah. That.

The thing about being an Indie is that deadlines seem squishy. If you move one, who cares besides you? Most of them don't as long as they get the book soon enough. This thing I've done to myself where suddenly I'm a real publisher? \*switches hat\* Cover Artist. \*switches hat\* Editor. \*switches hat\* Author. Oof. Hello, deadlines!

Which is why this is a scattered post taking a little break from fighting with Word over bloody italics (and why, you misbegotten goat's turd infested with little white worms, do you keep losing my formatting? You should have been drowned at birth, when your programmer first hit save and the evil that is Word came into being...it warms my cold heart to imagine that crackle of frying electronics as the hard drive went under) instead of a joyful announcement of 'it's alive!' which hopefully you'll get tomorrow over on my personal blog. \*huffs a big sigh\* Yes, I bought Vellum, and the bedamned computer to run it, since the Vellum programmers value their personal honor over money and refuse to create a Windows version of their software. They make less, I spend more... but I did spend it. Business expense, and I had the capital in the account to make it happen. But before I upload the file to Vellum and start \*that\* learning curve, it has to be right in Word. Auuughghgh

I was asked in an interview for *Blasters and Blades* if I'd consider doing another anthology. Uh. Get back to me on a year I haven't moved, switched jobs twice, and been apart from my husband for eight months out of the year. Don't get me wrong, there have been wonderful aspects to this. Reading stories and finding some amazing ones to put in the anthology and crying while I was editing... not those kind

of tears. Hush you, author! It's been an experience. It's nearly done. Just have to convince Word that yes, I really do want italics in there!

I'm out of words. I'll give you the foreword I wrote (editor's privilege) to the anthology.

"Yea though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil...because I am the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the Valley."

What if you came home, and there was a thick glass wall standing between you and your loved ones? You can see them, but you can't touch them. Nor can they touch you.

The trauma that rides some people like a demonic monkey on their backs keeps them from going home again. This collection of stories is about such people, and how they found the thread of hope, and healing. It's a long road to get home again, to phase through the glass, to find your place in the world where you can be at peace.

It's a journey worth taking. Don't let that demon-whisper convince you that the world and your family would be better off without you. It's a lie. You are loved. You are wanted. Life is pain, I'm not saying the suck isn't real. I've walked through that dark valley, and it's not a trip you can take friends along on. You're alone. You can't see the hands reaching out to help. What you might be able to see? Hope. Not in the day-to-day crawl of misery, but in these stories. You might be able to find a mutter of truth in the tales we've pulled out of the horrors we've seen, we authors.

We've read about things we knew, before. Where we understood, and it gave us a glimpse of what could be. Learning through reading, and stepping outside one's self to see how a character would do it? Sounds weird, but it works. I've done it. At the lowest point, when I could no longer see any light, I discovered the concept of a reset button for one's personal honor in a book I was reading, and a lightbulb of comprehension flashed. It led to the first little step on the path out of the dark valley.

"Accept the challenges, so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory." –Gen. George Patton

The challenge is to walk the valley. To know that yes, there is a problem, and yes, you need help. You can't do this alone. There are tools which can help, and if one of you reading can find a small spark in this book? That's all we ever wanted. If you reach out, we'll take your hand and help you.

The butcher's bill has come due, and the fight is now invisible, in the heads of those who can't go home again.

# Literary Criticism

First Fandom Annual 2021 —  
Remembering Erle M. Korshak (1923-2021)  
Edited by John L. Coker, III and Jon D. Swartz.  
Review by George D. J. Phillis, D. Sc.  
<http://Books-by-George.com>

Erle Korshak was one of the first modern science fiction fans. Born in 1923, he began reading science fiction in 1934. He attended the first WorldCon, NyCon in New York, and was the only fan known to have attended each of the next fourteen WorldCons. In 1947, he joined with Ted Dikty to found Shasta Publishers, one of the first publishers of hardback SF.

After the 1950s, he left fandom for thirty years, returning in the late 1980s to revive the Shasta imprint. Now, almost a century after his birth, First Fandom gives us this tribute to his life and his contributions to all sf activity. This 60-page beautifully produced volume was printed with a limited count of numbered copies.

From Korshak, we have recollection of the early days of Fandom, the first WorldCon. Without making a point of it, there is considerable name dropping of all the fans, pros, and artists who passed in his sight, including Forry Ackerman, A. Merritt, and Hannes Bok. The First WorldCon led to the Great Exclusion and thence to the decision that the next WorldCon should not be in New York...it should be in Chicago.

Following memories of ChiCon there were other conventions, World War 2 creating challenges. Of particular interest to moderns are recollections of Julian May, who was the first woman to chair a WorldCon, and who along the way before her death had written 300 books.

A short article recalls the time when used book stores were common, this being before World War 2. The recollection of Shasta publishers centers on their effort to break into the big time, which instead broke them. The Westmore Beauty Book needed to sell 40,000 copies, only sold 25,000, so that Shasta went under.

Before it went under, Shasta published 19 titles. Korshak believed that John Campbell's *Who Goes There?* was the most important of the books he published, and the failure to publish *Dianetics* was his largest error. The other fantasy book publishers are listed and described.

Throughout the volume are many photographs of Korshak with other famous authors and fen. The volume closes with memorial comments by prominent authors and fen, and an extensive bibliography of Korshak's publications.

John Coker can be reached at POB 608056, Orlando, FL 32860.

This volume is a labor of love that, alas, because of the very limited press run, most fen will never get to enjoy.

Murray Leinster: The Life and Works  
by Billee J. Stallings & Jo-An J. Evans  
Review by Jon D. Swartz, Ph.D., N3F Historian

This William Fitzgerald Jenkins biography, written by two of his daughters, concentrates on his science fiction (SF) stories, most of which were written under his Murray Leinster pseudonym. SF historian James Gunn provides a Foreword in which he tells what the Leinster stories meant to him when he was growing up. Gunn writes that Leinster understood that “science fiction was the literature of the human species.”

Writing as Murray Leinster, Will F. Jenkins (1896 – 1975) was at one time known as The Dean of Science Fiction. He started using the Murray Leinster pseudonym when he was twenty-one.

This biography begins with Jenkins’ writing efforts when he was a child, and covers all of his print fiction and non-fiction, as well as his work in movies, television, and radio. Under his real name, he was also an inventor.

He was proud of his Southern heritage, and his first article, written when he was in the sixth grade, was about his “ideal” Southern gentleman, General Robert E. Lee. His first publication probably was a poem, “Love,” printed when he was nine years old. He and his older brother George both contributed epigrams to the literary magazine, *The Smart Set*, when they were teenagers.

A chronological Jenkins/Leinster bibliography is included in this fascinating book, even the stories published under his other pseudonyms, such as William Fitzgerald, Louisa Carter Lee, and Florinda Martel. In a career spanning 50+ years, he published more than 1,500 short stories and over 100 books.

In addition to the bio-bibliographical material contained herein, two of Leinster’s pieces are reproduced as appendices: the story, “A Logic named Joe,” and the essay, “To Build a Robot Brain.” Both were originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, the story in 1946, and the essay in 1954.

Eight Leinster SF stories were broadcast on radio in the 1950s, mainly on NBC’s *Dimension X* and its successor, *X Minus One*. Among these were “The Lost Race,” “First Contact,” “A Logic Named Joe,” “The Mad Planet,” and “The Castaways,” five of his most popular stories.

His daughters also describe his inventions, the most useful of which was a front projection process that was used in producing special effects for movies and television. He was issued two patents for this process in 1955. A diagram in the book shows how this process worked.

Several family photos and other illustrations add to the book’s attractiveness and usefulness.

Published in 2011 by McFarland & Company of Jefferson, North Carolina, I don’t know how I missed this book for so long -- as it is the kind of non-fiction book I love to read.

*Murray Leinster: The Life and Works* is highly recommended for anyone interested in Jenkins/Leinster, SF, or the history of the genre.

## The Hugos: How I Voted and Why By Tom Feller

### Black Sun by Rebecca Roanhorse

Most fantasy stories are Eurocentric in the sense that they are based on European myths, legends, and/or history. Game of Thrones and The Lord of the Rings are good examples of that. This novel, on the other hand, utilizes Mayan, Incan, Aztec, and other pre-Columbian myths and legends. It is set on a world called Meridian, a continent surrounding a sea. The title refers to an event called the Convergence, which is a solar eclipse during the winter solstice. There are three primary and one secondary point-of-view characters.

When Serapio is twelve years old, he is blinded by his mother in a religious ceremony during a solar eclipse. She kills herself immediately afterward, and he is raised by three consecutive tutors who train him for a mission. The main part of the story takes place ten years later when he journeys from Obregi, an inland city, to Tova, the religious center of Meridian and his mother's home, for the Convergence. Despite his blindness, he is an expert martial artist and has magical powers. Much of his story is told in flashback chapters.

Xiala is a Teek, a kind of Amazonian mermaid with magical abilities. For reasons not explained, she has been exiled from her people and earns a living as a sea captain. She meets Serapio when she is hired by a mysterious nobleman to transport him to Tova. (Ship transportation is not advanced in this world. They travel in what is basically a giant canoe and rely on rowers for propulsion rather than the wind.) Serapio and Xiala fall in love, but there is a huge impediment in that he is on a suicide mission.

One part of Serapio's mission is to kill the Sun Priest, who is actually a woman named Naranpa. Her family came from a Tova slum called the Coyote's Maw, but she escaped by becoming a servant in the temple of the Watchers. After 23 years, she has worked her way up to the very top of the Watchers, but immediately finds herself in the middle of political intrigues and has to seek help from her younger brother, who has become a crime lord in Coyote's Maw.

Although he gets relatively few pages, the fourth POV character is Okoa, a warrior. He is the son of the head of the Carrion Crow clan, which is the clan of Serapio's mother. Decades previously, the Watchers and the other four "Sky Made" clans slaughtered many of the Carrion Crows. Serapio's mother was one of the survivors and vowed revenge. The clans are matriarchal, and upon the death of Okoa's mother, his sister becomes the head of the clan and he becomes her chief bodyguard.

This novel was hard to put down and is the first book of a trilogy, which explains its abrupt ending. The author's world building was so skilful and efficient that I would compare it favorably to Tolkien's and Martin's. I look forward to the next books. I ranked it as #4 and so did the other voters.

### The City We Became by N.K. Jemisin

This Lovecraftian fantasy is set in New York City, where the author has lived full-time since 2007. It is the first book in her new trilogy, and her Hugo-nominated short story "The City, Born Great" is used as the prologue. The premise is that cities can become alive and have human avatars with magical powers. New York is on the verge of being born, but it is menaced by a monster from another universe, which, not coincidentally, resembles one of Lovecraft's elder gods. The avatar for New York, a

young gay African-American homeless man, is in some sort of magical coma from the events described in the prologue, so the city awakens avatars for each of the five boroughs, like a superhero team. The avatar for Manhattan, “Manny”, is a newly arrived mixed-race graduate student who loses his memory in Pennsylvania Station; Brooklyn is a middle-aged African-American city councilwoman and former rapper; the Bronx is represented by Bronca, a soon-to-be grandmother who is gay, artistic, and descended from the Lenape, the Native-American tribe that sold the island of Manhattan to the Dutch; Padmini Prakash is a South Asian graduate student, a math whiz, and Wall Street intern here on a visa who lives in Queens; and Aislyn Houlihan is the thirty-something daughter of an Irish-American cop who lives with her parents on Staten Island, where she works at a public library.

While not one of the original avatars, Veneza, an associate of Bronca from Jersey City, plays an important role. They are assisted by the avatars of Hong Kong and Sao Paulo, who come to mentor them. The monster from the other dimension is represented by several different avatars, but they are all European-American women dressed in white. One of the most humorous scenes consists of Lovecraftian monsters emerging from Starbucks stores.

The author is influenced by Lovecraft but explicitly at odds with his racism, xenophobia, and misogyny. The racists and homophobes are clearly on the side of the monster trying to take over the city.

Like most first books in a trilogy, it comes to an abrupt end and leaves several loose ends to be resolved in later books. It moves along fairly well, except for talking head scenes that seem to take place whenever one or more the avatars try to share the same page. It finished number two in the Hugo voting, but I ranked it #5.

## Harrow the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir

This is the second book in the author’s gothic Locked Tomb science fiction trilogy, which is set at least 10,000 years in the future, and proceeds directly from the first book, Gideon the Ninth. The 17 year old title character and another female necromancer named Ianthe, all of 22 years of age, have survived the tests of Canaan House, become frenemies, and are now Lyctors-in-training. A Lyctor is a semi-immortal close associate of the God-Emperor of the universe, aka Teacher, aka John Gaius to his 10,000 year old friends. This God-Emperor is not all-powerful. In fact, he is being threatened by beings known as Resurrection Beasts.

The main story line is set on a space station called Mithraem about 40 billion light years from Canaan House and consists of the Teacher and his oldest Lyctors, Mercymorn, Augustine, and Ortus, teaching Harrow, whose specialty is bone magic, and Ianthe advanced necromancy before a Resurrection Beast and its Heralds arrive to attack them. The secondary story line initially appears to be an alternate version of the events of the first novel in which a character killed off early in the first book is still alive and the title character, Gideon, is absent. However, the true situation is finally revealed about three-quarters of the way in.

This is a long novel of about 500 pages, and the author never met an adjective she didn’t like. The main story line is written in second person for most of the novel, which makes it difficult to get into, especially for someone like me who read the first book a year ago. During the last hundred pages, however, it gets a lot better. The ending is ambiguous, which gives the reader a good reason to read the next book. It finished sixth in the voting, which is how I ranked it as well.



## Network Effect by Martha Wells

This is the fifth story in the author's Murderbot series, which was the winner in the Best Series category this year. The first four were novellas, and this is the first full length novel. The main character and sarcastic narrator is a security android (it has organic parts and can pass for human) with an addiction to trashy video serials. It refers to itself as "Murderbot". Some time prior to the first story, it killed the people it was supposed to protect, but its owner considered it too expensive to destroy so it simply erased its memories, almost. Murderbot still retained a fleeting recollection of the events, but no understanding of them. In the course of first four stories, Murderbot disables its "governor module", giving it free will, and solves the mystery of the murders. By the time of the current book, it is living on an independent planet called Preservation, but because interplanetary law does not recognize free androids, it has an official owner, Dr. Mensah. Fortunately, she considers it a friend and allows it to do as it pleases.

At the start of the current book, Murderbot is providing security for a survey starship owned by Preservation. Members of the expedition include Dr. Mensah's daughter Amena and her brother-in-law Thiago, and they know it only as "SecUnit". On their way home, they are attacked by the starship Perihelion. The attacking ship is actually run by an artificial intelligence that Murderbot knows as ART, who is one of its best friends. The Perihelion breaks off the attack after kidnapping Murderbot and Amena and takes them to a planet, where an alien has possessed the members of a human colony. Although it lags in places and the plot is quite complicated, I found it to be a fascinating read. However, I would only recommend to someone who has read at least one and preferably all of the novellas. Having previously won the Nebula, it was the winner in the Best Novel category, although I only ranked it #3.

This book also introduces a second narrator which refers to itself as SecUnit 3. Like Murderbot, it is a security android, and its governor module is disabled during the course of the story. It remains to be seen if this is the start of a spin-off series.

## The Relentless Moon by Mary Robinette Kowal

The author's Lady Astronauts alternate history series, which was a finalist in the Best Series category, has two premises. The first is that Dewey defeated Truman in the 1948 presidential and greenlighted Werner von Braun and his rocket science team in their efforts to put satellites in orbit so that the satellites can be armed with nuclear warheads. The second premise is that in 1952, a meteorite crashed into Chesapeake Bay, wiping out all the cities on the American east coast as well as others on the other side of the Atlantic. The U.S. capitol is then relocated to Kansas City. A further consequence of the crash is that the resulting climate change will cause Earth to become uninhabitable in fifty years, so an international crash effort to colonize space begins. This is the third novel in the series, and it is set in 1963. By this time, there is both a space station and a lunar colony with about 300 people, and the first manned expedition to Mars is underway.

The narrator is Nicole Wargin, the 50 year old anorexic, arthritic wife of the Kansas governor Kenneth Wargin, who has presidential ambitions. She had been a WASP (Women's Air Service Pilot) and an O.S.S. agent during World War II, became one of the first female astronauts through her husband's political influence, and was a minor character in the previous two books. An organization called Earth First, deniers of climate change from the meteorite, is attempting to halt the space program, using both legal and illegal means, such as an attempt to assassinate a key figure in the space program and the sabotaging of a rocket launch. After determining that there is at least one Earth First agent embedded

among the lunar colonists, Nicole is sent to the moon as a courier and agent with the official cover that she is to become the secretary of the administrator for the colony. Hopefully, no one will notice that she can't type! However, her shuttle to the moon is sabotaged, and while no one is killed, Nicole's left arm is broken. Her efforts to ferret out the mole or moles attempting to sabotage the colony give this novel a strong plot, despite the sometimes clunky prose, and it is quite a page turner. My Nook edition was 476 pages, but it seemed shorter. I ranked it #2 on my ballot, but it only finished in fifth place.

One of the key plot points is a polio outbreak on the moon. Because of the meteorite, the Salk vaccine was never developed, and only some of the people, even in the space program, are vaccinated with the Sabin one by 1963. This gave the book some immediate relevance, as there was an anti-polio vaccine movement in the Sixties, which the author describes in her afterword.

## Piranesi by Susanna Clarke

The narrator and title character of this novel is both amnesiac and insane. He inhabits a labyrinthine three floor house for which the dimensions are measured in kilometers, and it is located on the seashore of a parallel world. The lower floor is completely flooded, high tides get into the middle one, and the top floor is open to the sky and populated by birds. Piranesi lives on fish, mussels, and seaweed, uses dry seaweed to make fire, and has forgotten anything about his life before living there except that he believes he is 35 years old. The house is full of statues that he has named, and he keeps meticulous journals recording both the tides and what he discovers in each room. He also tends to the remains of thirteen people that he has found. His only human companion is a man he calls the "Other" with whom he meets twice a week for an hour at a time to discuss what Piranesi has found in the house. The Other brings him items such as shoes, sleeping bags, vitamins, sandwiches, and plastic bowls from time to time. (The Other's real name is eventually revealed to be Ketterley, a reference to C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*. Another Lewis reference is a statue of a faun.) Piranesi erroneously believes the Other lives in a part of the house that he has never visited and never questions the fact that he is always immaculately groomed and dressed or where the shoes and the other items come from. One time Piranesi meets a man he calls the "Prophet", but finds their conversation confusing. In the later chapters, he encounters a person he refers to as "16", because after the 13 corpses, the Other, and himself, this person would be the 16th person in the house, or world, as Piranesi sees it. "16" is instrumental in Piranesi discovering his true identity, which he learns about three-quarters into the story. The name "Piranesi" is what the Other calls him. (It is a reference to an 18th century Italian artist who drew imaginary prisons and labyrinths.) This novel is the most original of this year's Hugo finalists. It is relatively short and a fast read, because you want to learn the secret of this world and who Piranesi really is and how he got there. I actually would have liked it to have been a little bit longer, because I wanted to see Piranesi explore the house a little more. It was my first choice for Best Novel, but the other voters made it #3.

## Novellas

### Ring Shout by P. Djeli Clark

The title refers to an African-American tradition of singing, dancing, and feeling a spirit. It is usually depicted in scenes set in churches, but in this novella, it reverts to its pagan roots. The premise of this historical Lovecraftian fantasy in the new tradition of the *Watchmen* sequel, *Get Out*, and Lovecraft

Country is that the leaders of the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan were all sorcerers. (Presumably the Union also employed sorcerers, but they are not mentioned.) The release of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 was really a ritual created by the sorcerer D. W. Griffith to summon demons. This novella is set a few years later in 1922 Georgia. Maryse Boudreaux, the 25 year old African-American narrator, calls the demons Ku Kluxes to distinguish them from human members of the KKK, which she calls Klans. Besides using ordinary firearms, Maryse also wields a magical sword to kill the monsters. She also has some psychological demons she must exorcise by the end of the story. She is aided by three “Aunties”, who resembled the Fates from ancient mythology. Maryse’s human allies include Nana Jean, a Gullah woman with magical powers who always speaks in Gullah dialect; Sadie, a sharpshooter who carries an 1895 Winchester rifle she has named “Winnie”; Emma Krauss, a Jewish-German socialist; Molly, a Choctaw woman who studies the corpses of the demons; and Chef, a woman who masqueraded as a man to serve in the Negro regiment Harlem Hellfighters during World War I and gets her nickname from her ability to make improvised explosive devices. The principal villain is a demon masquerading as a European-American man known as Butcher Clyde, who also reminded me of Cthulhu worshippers in his efforts to summon a being he calls the “Grand Cyclops”. (I did not care for this name, because I kept thinking of the “Grand Puba” in *The Flintstones*.) There is a lot of action and a little romance in this both entertaining and thought-provoking story. This was the Nebula winner in this category, and my first choice. However, it only finished second in the voting.

## Riot Baby by Tochi Onyebuchi

The title refers to the birth of one of the two point-of-view (POV) characters, who was born during the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992. He is Kevin Jackson and the other POV character is his older sister Ella, and they are both African-Americans. He is highly intelligent, but she has superpowers, including pre-cognition, telekinesis, astral projection, invisibility, and teleportation both in space and time. However, she really doesn’t use them to accomplish anything except to travel and witness events. Kevin, on the other hand, has the unfortunate experience of growing up in the “hood”, getting involved with gangs, and becoming incarcerated. Their mother is also an important character, although she is seen only from Kevin’s and Ella’s points-of-view, while their fathers are completely absent. Toward the end of the story, Kevin is paroled to a community reserved for ex-cons and has a computer chip implanted into his thumb that serves as a key card, a monitor to track his movements, and a regulator of the chemicals in his body. He works in a shop that manufactures parts for cyborg police officers. Again, the author really doesn’t do anything with this. Written in a non-linear and rather disjointed manner, the story is full of graphic description of their experiences of racism, both individual and institutional, but it seemed a lot longer than the 91 pages in my Nook edition. I ranked it #6 and so did the other voters.

## Come Tumbling Down by Seanan McGuire

This author has an “anything but the kitchen sink” approach to fantasy. This is the fifth story in her *Wayward Children* series for which the premise is that in our world there are many portals, including rabbit holes, wardrobes, and looking glasses, to other worlds. However, only children can pass through them. Eleanor West established her Home for Wayward Children for the ones who came back to our world but wish to go back to those other ones. (There is also a home for such children who never want to go back, but I have yet to read one of those stories.)

Christopher, who had visited a world inhabited by animated skeletons, is lying in his bedroom in the basement of the home when lightning strikes the room. Then a door appears, and two young women

come through. He recognizes one of them as Jill Wolcott, a former resident of the home who had returned to her world in a previous story, “Every Heart a Doorway”. In another previous story “Down Among the Sticks and Bones”, along with her twin sister Jack, she had traveled to a world called The Moors which resembles the Universal horror movies of the Thirties and Forties. Jill was then adopted by The Master, a vampire, and Jack by Dr. Bleak, a mad, but kindly, scientist. In “Every Heart a Doorway”, Jack had killed Jill before re-animating her and returning them both to The Moors. Christopher and three other children quickly learn that the Master had forced Dr. Bleak to transfer the minds of Jack and Jill into each other’s bodies, so it is really Jack who has returned to our world. (One of the rules of that fantasy world is that re-animated corpses cannot become vampires.) They also learn that the other young woman is named Alexis, a re-animated corpse who is also Jack’s lover. Jack’s enlists their help to return to The Moors in a quest to regain her true body. The other students are Sumi, who had lived in the Confection, a kind of candy land, and is irritatingly perky; Cora, who had been a mermaid and still has blue-green hair; and Kade, who had been a Goblin prince. Except for the “Beneath the Sugar Sky” in which they visit Confection, I have enjoyed all of the stories in this series and can recommend it to anyone with a taste for the author’s kind of fantasy. They don’t necessarily have to be read in order, but I do recommend reading “Down among the Sticks and Bones” and “Every Heart a Doorway” before tackling this one. I ranked it #2 in this category, and the other voters ranked it #3.

### The Empress of Salt and Fortune by Nghi Vo

This fantasy story is set in a world loosely based on China. Chih, a cleric from Singing Hill Abbey, and Almost Brilliant, a talking bird with perfect recall, are on a journey to witness the crowning of a new empress when they stop by Thriving Fortune on Lake Scarlet, the former residence of the late empress In-Yo during her exile from the court. There they find a servant woman living there who calls herself Rabbit. The woman had been the long-time servant of the empress and tells them the story of how the empress came to power. In-Yo had originally been a princess from a kingdom called the North, presumably based on Manchuria, but became a prize of the Emperor of Anh after Anh, presumably based on China, had conquered the North. After fulfilling her marriage obligation by giving birth to a son, she is sent to Thriving Fortune so that she is out of the way. One aspect of the story is a romance between Rabbit and Sukai, another servant, and it becomes critical to In-Yo’s rise to power. The author’s style is quite beautiful, and I really appreciated her “less is more” approach after reading some of the other finalists. The story itself is quite intriguing. However, the fantasy elements could have been deleted, and you would have exactly the same story. I ranked it #3, but the other voters made it the winner in this category.

### FINNA by Nino Cipri

When I was working, we were strongly discouraged against having romantic relationships with co-workers. The reasoning was that if you broke up, it affects the work place. Ava and Jules were co-workers at an IKEA-like big box store, became a couple, and then broke up. Their employer tries to deal with this by scheduling them for different shifts. Then one of the workers on Jules’s shift calls in sick, and Ava has to come in to work. They try to stay as far apart as possible, but then there was an emergency in the form of a wormhole that sucks a customer, an elderly woman, into a parallel universe. Apparently this was not an unheard of situation, and the store already had established procedures and protocols for rescuing such customers. Using a device called a FINNA, the two employees with the lowest seniority are supposed to go into the wormhole after the customer. The author uses terms like “quantum entanglement” to explain how the FINNA works, but it is just technobabble. Naturally, those two employees are Jules and Ava, and they have some strange and wacky encounters with things like

people-eating chairs and a food court that takes payment in blood. It is a very fast read and definitely amusing, although rather slight for a Hugo finalist. By the way, I've never actually been in an IKEA store, although I have been in Home Depots, Sam Clubs, etc. I ranked it #4, and the other voters ranked it #5.

## Upright Women Wanted by Sarah Gailey

The future described in this novella reminded me a lot of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The government of the United States has fallen and been replaced by a patriarchal, fundamentalist society, although there are areas of resistance in Utah, Maine, and Florida. The main character is a young woman named Esther Augustus, who has just witnessed of hanging of her best friend Beatriz for possessing "unauthorized materials". She and Beatriz were also lovers, which would have gotten both of them hanged because homosexuality is a capital offense. Esther's father is a high government official in Arizona who sexually abused her, and she runs away from home rather than marrying a much older man chosen by her father.

She does this by stowing away in the horse drawn wagon of traveling librarians. (Vehicles powered by gasoline or diesel fuel are reserved for the military.) Librarians are an all-women profession, and they are expected to be chaste and "morally upright", although they are allowed to carry firearms in their travels. They go from town to town distributing "authorized materials", i.e. books and videos (where the electricity is still working) meant to teach morality.

However, it turns out that these librarians are actually smuggling contraband, such as "unauthorized materials", secret messages, and even people. The head librarian and her associate, Bet and Ida, are even lesbian lovers, and their apprentice Cye is bi-sexual! After discovering Esther, they agree to transport her to Utah. They have encounters along the way with ordinary people, posses, bandits, and even a female assassin named Amity. Written on a young adult level, it is a solid story with interesting details about life on the road in this future, but, except for the LGBTQ theme, not really original. I ranked it #5, and the other voters ranked it at #4.

## Novelette

### Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super- by A.T. Greenblatt

The title character is an ordinary accountant until one day, in a bar, his head bursts into flames and a video of this event goes viral. Now since he lives in a world with superheroes, once he mostly gets this ability under control, he gets invited to join a superhero team as their accountant. He accepts this offer, since his previous employer had fired him. (Discrimination against people with superpowers is tolerated in this world much like the X-Men universe.) He has a lot of work to do, because their accounting records are a mess, and occasionally helps out the main members of the team by trying to do tasks like crowd control. He makes friends with Miranda, the team's coordinator, office manager, and head of both human and public relations with the ability to create small tornadoes out of glass, and Danielle, their building's janitor. Written in short chapters or "episodes", it is a nice story, but I only ranked it at #6 and that is how it finished.



## The Inaccessibility of Heaven by Alette de Bodard

The concept of “Fallen Angels” is a recurrent one in Christian literature with Lucifer being the prime example. Lucifer is a minor character in this story, although I would not call this Christian literature but rather a secular version of the idea. For example, in this world, fallen angels can be killed, although it takes special methods such as silver bullets. Someone or something in this city called Starhollow, which is based on Paris, is killing fallen angels. The only pieces of evidence are claw marks left on the bodies. Sam (short for Samantha) de Vera is a witch who provides shelter for homeless angels. Her best friend among fallen angels is Cal (short for Calariel), but Sam is brought in to investigate the murders by Arvedai, another fallen angel and a drug lord. He assigns one of his human minions, O’Connor, to assist her. Cal considers the situation too dangerous for Sam to get involved in and opposes this. Vazrach is a fallen angel who survived the attack upon him and that turns out to be the key to solving the mystery. As a whodunit, this story is pretty good, although I was less than enamored with the fantasy world in which it takes place. I ranked it #3, and it finished in second place.

## Monster by Naomi Kritzer

Cecily was a nerd in high school in the 1980s, a conscientious student who liked to read science fiction. Her best friend was Andrew, a Chinese-American who also liked science fiction but was an underachiever in school. He introduced her to a group of other “weirdos”, which gave her a circle of friends who shared her interests. After high school, their paths diverge quickly. She goes to an elite college where she excels and goes on to a successful career in academia, becoming a professor at John Hopkins specializing in genetic engineering. Andrew, because of his poor grades, has to go to a community college before transferring to a state university, but he never actually gets a degree. He does, however, become a “mad scientist” trying to develop a “super soldier” serum, as in Captain America, but exploits homeless teenagers as test subjects. Some of them die, which brings him to the attention of the FBI, so he travels to Guiyang, China to hide out from them, the CIA, and MI6. Cecily goes to Guiyang to find him, and the ending is both surprising and satisfying. I thought this was the best story in this category, but it only finished in third place.

## Helicopter Story by Isabel Fall

Barb, the narrator of this story, is a helicopter pilot, originally a Korean-American woman named Seo Ji Hee, whose gender was changed by the military to “attack helicopter”. Along with her gunner named Axis, whose gender is now “helicopter gunner”, they attack opposition groups within what used to be the United States. In other words, in this future gender has been weaponized. The plot recounts their attack on a former high school and their avoidance of missiles fire by a jet fighter for the opposition. It is a very interesting story about gender, and my ranking was number four in this category.

Ignorant person that I am, I had never heard of this story prior to its listing as a Hugo finalist and did not know that it was controversial until after I read it. Nor did I know that the original title “I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter” deliberately uses a term once used to disparage transgender people. The Twitter attacks on the story, which originally appeared in the online magazine *Clarkesworld*, were so vicious and personal that the author checked into a psychiatric ward and asked that the zine take the story down 15 days after it was published out of fears for her personal safety.

Obviously, the story had enough supporters to get it on the Hugo ballot. A previously unknown author



who had not published anything else, much of the controversy appears to have revolved around speculation of whether they were transgender or cisgender, and, if the latter, whether they had the right to write such a story. Apparently, they could not let the story speak for itself. (It eventually revealed that the author was a man transitioning to a woman.) For all the hullabaloo, it finished in fifth place.

## The Pill by Meg Elison

I guess the holy grail of pharmaceuticals would be a medication that would enable people to lose weight and keep it off. The premise of this story is that such a medication is discovered, but it kills about 10% of the people who take it. Nonetheless, the FDA approves it on the grounds that the benefits outweigh the possible side effects, such as death, although they do restrict it to people over the age of 18. Bianca, the narrator, is a fat teenage female whose mother, also a fat person, participates in one of the clinical trials. It succeeds so dramatically that both her father and Andrew, her older brother, also fat people, take it. It kills the father and really does not change Andrew's life because he was the same person both before and after taking the pill. When the narrator turns 18, she refuses to take it and suffers discrimination until she finds a place to live in this world of judgmental thin people. I ranked it #2, but the other voters only ranked it #4.

## Two Truths and a Lie by Sarah Pinsker

Stella is helping her old friend Marco clean out the house of Marco's deceased weird brother Denny, a compulsive hoarder, when she mentions The Uncle Bob Show, an old children's television show that was broadcast locally when both of them were children. Denny had actually appeared on the show, which ran from 1980 to 1985, and they find a VHS tape of that episode. Denny still had a working VHS player, and they take a break to watch the episode. They both find Uncle Bob to be rather creepy in retrospect, a kind of anti-Mister Rogers. He would tell strange and morbid fairy tales while the children would play with toys that they were allowed to take home. When Stella asks her parents about the show, they mention that she was also on the show, which Stella had completely forgotten. She then returns to the station and finds that they still have tapes of the show and allow her to view the ones in which she appeared. Although she saw herself on the screen, she still did not remember the experience but was disturbed by the story that Uncle Bob told that predicted how her life would turn out. This is a very effective little horror story with no wasted words, but I only ranked it #5 because this was a very competitive category. It was both the Nebula and Hugo winner in this category.

## Short Stories

### Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse by Rae Carson

Giving birth is challenging under any circumstances, but what if it takes place during a zombie attack? In this story, zombies are actually attracted to the fluids expelled by women both during menstruation and during the birthing process itself. Nine months pregnant at the beginning of the story, Brit is living in an all-women enclave built in a barricaded former school 10 years after the rise of the zombies and attending Eileen, an elderly woman with cancer who lost her daughter to the zombies, when she starts to feel labor pains. (The biological father is an itinerant trader who was visiting nine months previously.) To protect the other residents, the enclave has a special birthing refuge set up in a shipping con-

tainer in a nearby abandoned rail yard. While the zombies are massing outside, Brit and Marisol, her significant other leave the enclave via a hidden escape tunnel. However, after they leave the tunnel and get into open ground, Brit's water breaks, so the zombies are able to follow them to the rail yard. Brit successfully gives birth to a son after they arrive, but they discover that the shipping container is not as secure as they had thought. I would not have thought that there could be any more original variations to a zombie story, but I was pleasantly surprised by this thoughtful and action packed story. I liked it so much that I ranked it #1, but the other voters were not so positively impressed and ranked it #6.

## A Guide to Working Breeds by Vina Jie-Min Prasad

The story consists entirely of text messages among robots. Robot K.g1-09030, aka Kleekai Greyhound, has just come out of the factory and is randomly assigned a mentor numbered C.k2-00452, aka Constant Killer, aka Corgi Killer. The new robot finds a job in a café, and the reader gradually learns about them and their world. K.g1 is naïve and enamored with dog videos, while C.k2,, apparently a kind of professional gladiator who may be killing human beings, is quite patient with it. It is rather cute and charming, but so trivial that I ranked it #6. However, the other voters ranked it #3..

## Little Free Library by Naomi Kritzer

Meigan, the narrator of this story, has just moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and sets up a "little free library", a kind of "take one, leave one" book box in front of her house. This consists of a couple bookshelves in which she places books that she has enjoyed but does not want to keep and invites people to take them and leave their own books. She has one mysterious participant who takes books, especially ones like Lord of the Rings, but leaves little gifts instead, such as whistles and gold coins. Eventually, the reader figures out that the other person lives in a parallel world and is involved in a kind of "game of thrones". It is a very nice little story and has an ending that begs for a sequel. I ranked it #3, and the other voters ranked it #2.

## The Mermaid Astronaut by Yoon Ha Lee

In the classic Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, "The Little Mermaid", the title character falls in love with a human male and makes a deal with a witch to exchange her tail for legs. In this story, a mermaid named Essarala falls in love with the stars and, assisted by her sister Kiovasa, makes a deal with a witch to exchange her tail for legs so that she can join the multi-species crew of a visiting spaceship. She promises her sister that she will return, but does not become aware of the concept of time dilation until it is almost too late. This is a very sweet story more in the tradition of Becky Chambers' Wayfarer series than the author's own Machineries of Empire trilogy. I ranked it #4, and the other voters ranked it #5.

## Metal Like Blood in the Dark by T. Kingfisher

Like the previous story, this is a science fiction version of a fairy tale, but instead the Grimm Brothers' Hansel and Gretel. There are two sentient robots, called Brother and Sister by their creator, an old scientist they call Father. Powered by solar energy, they use nanotechnology to frequently re-invent themselves, but they live in a planet that has been so thoroughly mined and developed that it is metal poor. Father has to leave them to their own devices because of a heart ailment, and they eventually launch

themselves into space to mine asteroids. After finding what they think is a derelict spaceship and starting to harvest its metal, they are captured by another robot which they call the Third Drone. In order to free her and Brother, Sister has to learn to lie and tell half-truths to the Third Drone. This is a very interesting story from the point of view of an artificial intelligence. However, I only ranked it #5, but the other voters made it the winner in this category.

## Open House on Haunted Hill by John Wiswell

The house at 133 Poisonwood is only mildly haunted. The only person to ever die there was an old woman who died peacefully while under the care of a hospice service. The house is now for sale, and it wants a nice family to move in. Then a widowed father named Ulisses who works in IT and his four year old daughter Ana visit during an open house. Although the father hates the wallpaper, the house likes them so much that it opens a sewing room that the old woman kept secret. When Ana loses a locket that contains a picture of her deceased mother, the house moves it to a place where it can be easily found. Although technically a haunted house story, this is a very sweet and heartwarming tale that won the Nebula. I ranked it number two, but the other voters only ranked it #4.

~ Finis ~





























