

The R3F  
Review of Books  
Incorporating Prose Bono  
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor  
January 2022

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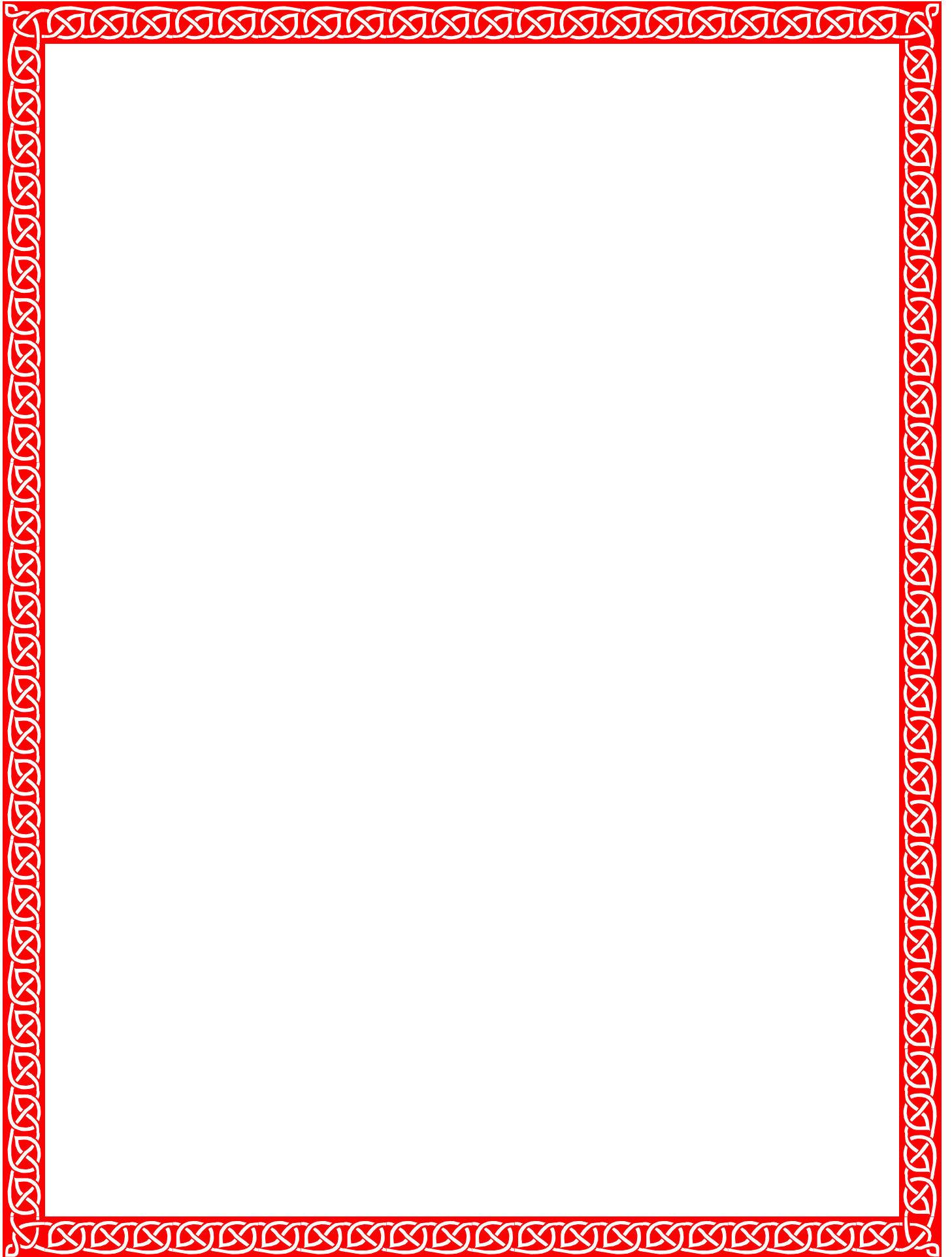
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Happy New Year to all!

As always, your Editor is profoundly grateful to our contributors, without which The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono would be impossible.



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# Fiction

## The Adventures Of Brain Man by Ron Whitehead and James Dennis Casey IV Review by William Mayo

This is the story of Bone Man, son of Goliath and Grendel and older brother to Muscle Man and a host of Furies, who commences to search for his other brother, Brain Man. Yes, Brain Man, that fabled writer that begins life in his attic room of the family's old Kentucky farmhouse with a tombstone in the center of his quarters, a skull, a stuffed raven, candles lit everywhere, the odor of incense in the air and references to everything from Bob Dylan to the Tibetan Book Of The Dead. When the book begins, Brain Home has long since left home and achieved both literary fame and notoriety and Bone Man, long taken with the fellow, spends long days in Brain's room, taken by the surroundings, before beginning his own travels that take him everywhere from Greece (the temple of Apollo plays a part here) to Oxford to meetings with a descendant of the czars to Dublin before returning home to Kentucky where he finds Brain Man seated in his own comfortable chair. This story, with its weird combination of poetry and prose, has an air of homecoming as well as discovery and is apparently Mr. Whitehead's own personal mythology and a masterpiece. I would recommend it to any and all readers. A good read to whoever finds it.

## Blood Cartel by Nicholas Woode-Smith Review by Declan Finn Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

In Part-Time Monster Hunter, we met Kat Drummond and her mentor Treth, the ghost of a monster from the other side of the dimensional rifts. Then, she only had to deal with zombies.

Now, she's attracted the attention of something else. It's evil. It's dark. it's colder than the dark.

And it is hungry.

The story

Kat Drummond can't catch a break. At the end of Part-Time Monster Hunter, her evolution brought her from being a glorified exterminator to taking down a necromancer that threatened to slaughter her entire college campus.

So of course, book 2, Blood Cartel, opens with Kat on trial for murder. Because you can kill all the zombies you like, but you kill one lousy human...

And that's just the opening sequence to reintroduce the characters and the world. The book only gets better from there. Surprisingly enough, the opening sequence makes use of a sequence from book 1 that I thought was a throwaway scene.

When Kat is allowed back on the streets, she discovers that people are going missing in the South African town of Hope City. It's not for the usual reasons. There's no blood from a vampire attack. There are no remains from a monster attack.

When it disappears one of her friends, the book turns into urban fantasy *Taken* and we're off to the races.

The characters

In *Blood Cartel*, Kat's friends are allowed more development than they were in the other novel. They become important players within the world, and to the plot. At least one gets more back story, and definitely becomes more interesting. We have a pixie with PTSD. We have a ghost who can't enjoy being dead. There's a goth who turns into a girly matchmaker. There's even a possible love interest who has no magic, but does have the power of bureaucramancy, as Jim Butcher would put it.

Kat, herself, is still entertaining. Even if it's just for lines like "If I've learnt anything from my time as a monster hunter, it is to chase anything that runs away." Her commentary on fashion is entertaining ("A zombie could grab that dress way too easily. Even a non-mutant zombie could probably claw and bite through the thin fabric. It was a death trap!"). Her focus on budgetary issues is a welcome touch of reality.

I especially like lines of "I awoke with that terrible feeling that workaholics get when they don't have anything to do."

And teaching her how to dance is ... special.

As I said in my first review, reading the Kat Drummond series makes me look back at *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and see a lot of things that should have happened in a sane portrayal of similar circumstances.

The world

The world here is still cute. I don't mean cute and cuddly. I mean the sense when someone says "Don't get cute." It's the only way I can describe a segment of

"[This is a] principle held sacrosanct by the Spirit of the Law."

My lawyer was, of course, referring to the semi-sentient spirit that governed the constitution of Hope City. An elemental being crafted by lawmancy."

As I said, cute.

As we go along through the story, we keep getting glances and theories of the world, and the history of magic and monsters kicking around. Some of it is Kat's observations, some of it is her classwork, and some of it is her discussing with in-world theorists.

Nicholas Woode-Smith also keeps a nice variety of monsters on hand, including a case involving a mimic that learns. He has some nice variations on traditional monsters, even vampires. It's obvious he put a lot of thought into this.

With Nicholas Woode-Smith being from South Africa, we also get some nice touches of local color, like “Tokai manor,” which is a real place, with a real ghost story attached to it. Like Daniel Humphreys or CS Lewis, a ghost here is just the remains of the dead’s consciousness, not the soul of the person in question.

It’s also nice to find someone else who knows what holy salt is.

The politics

While the politics of this world are not ours, there is still overlap. To say this is pro-weapon would be an understatement. Kat even gets an appreciation of guns in this novel.

And the opening court case looks like a certain trial last month in Kenosha. And the laws around self-defense are just as stupid here as they are in real life America. (For the record, the book came out in 2019)

It is nice to see that “Government is stupid” is a universal constant.

It’s still nice to see that author Nicholas Woode-Smith still keeps an emphasis on the importance of a budget.

Content warning

There’s too much blood to give this to children. The youngest readers should be limited to late teenagers.

Who is it for?

This should appeal to the average urban fantasy reader. There is more of Larry Correia’s Monster Hunters in Kat Drummond than Harry Dresden. To some degree, there is even a John Ringo-like air to some of the characters (“Detonation scrolls” are a thing). There are some great action bits here. For anyone who wanted more of Buffy, or more from Buffy, I can definitely recommend this.

Why read it?

Nicholas Woode-Smith has added a solid entry in the urban fantasy genre that’s fun, action-filled, with some interesting, smart characters.

**Fire Eyes Awakened by R. J. Batla**

**Review by Jim McCoy**

<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>

Okay, let's write a story. We'll start out with a little steampunk. Then we'll toss in just a bit of a classic Science Fiction feel. Then, just for shits and giggles, we'll throw in a HUGE dose of comic book style superhero action. And of course, we're going to need a super villain. And maybe a conflict for our hero. Oh, and we can't forget a sexy lady or two. We could do all of that. It sounds like a good story. Or, since I'm feeling lazy, maybe I'll just let R.J. Batla do it for us. He did a good job with it too. Seriously. Fire Eyes Awakened is a romping good time.

I'll get to our main character in a minute, but first let me say that I can't believe how much Batla managed to get into this book. I mean, not only does he have everything I mentioned above, but the themes in *Fire Eyes Awakened* are amazeballs. There's morality. There's a Christian theme. You've got good versus evil. You've got selflessness. You see the value of thrift and hard work. You get a look at the value of charity. There is really a lot here and not a single bit of it is preached at the audience. Batla just writes it in and away you go.

Our main character, our hero, is one Jayton Baird, also known as Jay. This is a guy who worked and saved money his entire life to become *Awakened* and gain superpowers. You'd think a guy like that would be out for power, but he basically just wants a good paying job. He's hoping that through thrift and hard work he can overcome his poor upbringing and earn a decent living by putting his life on the line to defend the East Side (more about this in a minute) from the depredations of the evil monsters of the West Side. He's basically a really good guy who just wants what's best for himself and his parents and is willing to serve to do it. I like him.

I don't want to give too much away, but you can't get a feel for this book without knowing that he gains huge powers in like the first ten pages of the story. A lot of the book centers around Jay learning to use his powers. He also gains one power that makes him a threat to all around him. He spends the majority of the book under suspicion. All he wants to do is his duty. This kid is amazing.

The world of *Fire Eyes Awakened* is a dangerous place. On one side we have humanity and its allies. Superpowers are common among the non-human populace but are rare and expensive to acquire for humans. The good guys live on the East Side of the Break, a range of mountains with a huge wall across them. On the West Side are the monsters and they're pissed. They've been locked out. Granted, it's because their ancestors were tearing things up and hurting people, but they're convinced that they've been done dirty, and the other side has it better. There is a war coming.

Our antagonist is named Malstrak. He has the same power that causes Jay to come under suspicion – and he embraces it. Malstrak commands the armies of the West Side and he's on his way to cause havoc, if he can make it. He has been cast out from the East Side and is not at all happy about it. At some point, he's going to find a way to get revenge. He's got all the creatures of the West Side happy to help him do it. I seriously want to slap this guy. He's coming though.

There are several subplots and challenges contained within the pages of *Fire Eyes Awakened*. I don't do spoilers and I'm not going to try to go over them all here. The main focus, though, is on Jay and his training. The vast majority of the book is dedicated to his character arc. We get a really good feel for how Jay learns what his powers are and how to use them. We see Jay fight to control his dark side. We see Jay dealing with normal emotions as well. Batla did a really good job constructing this character and his travails.

That's not to say that the other characters are not well developed as well. Jay's friends and enemies are well thought out and live in the pages. We really do get a good idea of what makes the rest of the cast tick. They all go through their own arcs and we get a feel for what the good guys actually are: A family. Jay is a member of the Senturian Corps, a group that combines the responsibilities of army, law enforcement, fire department and often EMT and doctors all rolled into one group. They're responsible for just about everything regarding the safety of their people. They kind of have a military feel to them and then kind of don't. It's a weird middle ground, but it makes sense in context. Batla did a great job making the Senturian Corps his own instead of creating just another military SF organization.

My only complaint about Fire Eyes Awakened is that it is too short. I really wanted this book to give me an ending to a particular storyline, but it kind of ends right at the good part. I really shouldn't panic. I already have a copy of Tempus, the sequel, so it's not like I'll never know what happens, but still you can feel the lack at the end of this one. It's like ending Star Wars Episode Four just when the Rebel fleet finds the Death Star. I mean, it's like ahhhhhH!!!!!!! I want more! I'm SO TOTALLY gonna tell my MOM!!!!

Then again, I'm not totally certain that it's as bad as I'm making it out to be. At the end of the day, if the audience wants more, then the author has done his job. I definitely can't wait to see what happens next. Except that I'm going to, because I never review the same author twice in a row. Stay tuned though. I'll get there soon.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Train Whistles

## Hellgate by Morgan Newquist Review by Ginger Man

<https://upstreamreviews.com/>

Emilia is a recovering party girl, struggling to get her life in order after a bad breakup from a worse relationship. She thought moving in to take care of her grandfather would be a great way to get started.

Until a shapeshifting wolf-demon jumps through her bedroom window.

The story

Emilia is like a lot of twenty-something women in the modern day. She's attracted to the bad boy types and has spent most of her early adulthood partying. When her relationship with asshole biker Alan comes to an abrupt end, she moves in with her grandfather, Robert. Widowed, with creeping dementia, Robert is more than happy to have his Emmy take care of him.

If it sounds like Hellgate by Morgan Newquist is a quaint tale of redemption and delayed coming of age, I can assure you it is anything but quaint. Emilia notices cracks in the façade of normalcy in the neighborhood in the first chapter when Robert runs out of the house to chase away a monster with a plunger. She's quick to chalk it up to her grandfather's dementia until she runs into Kai, the inhumanly attractive and motorcycle riding neighbor, who points out that just because Robert has dementia doesn't mean there isn't a monster.

Our pink-haired heroine doesn't know what to make of that and doesn't have much time to ponder it when Robert has to be taken to the hospital with pneumonia the next night. Even as he's getting carted to the hospital, the elderly man seems most concerned about the Neighborhood Watch, something Emilia hasn't taken seriously. She realizes just how important it is when a huge wolf leaps through her bedroom window, a wolf that is barely fazed by a shotgun blast and only relents when Kai shows up and blasts it with a fireball.

Kai brings her up to speed on what the Watch is really about, dealing with supernatural threats. Emilia also learns Kai is a half Fae, her other neighbor Silas can talk to ghosts, the pregnant woman across the street is a witch and to make things even more interesting, the neighborhood is sitting on a literal gate to Hell. Before worrying about that though, Silas, Kai, and Emilia have to figure out how to kill the relentless wolf-demon.



## The characters

Emilia is definitely a girl with a few issues. No one has ever trusted her to be responsible and the false comfort of her relationship with Alan was lost when he unceremoniously dumped her stuff on the curb. Having failed so far at being a responsible adult and even at being a carefree party girl, she is desperate to prove herself. That motivation drives her throughout the entire story, pushing her to greater acts of bravery as things progress.

Kai at first seems like exactly the kind of asshole biker Emilia has sworn off. And while he is both of those things, he's also honest about it and the fact that Fae like him are not completely reliable. He also puts himself on the line for her many times. It also helps that Kai comes with a bit of family angst of his own as they don't approve of his choice to live as a human.

Silas is a bit of an enigma. Able to communicate with ghosts, he drifts in and out of the story at odd points, apparently following the direction of one ghost or another. He also is apparently frustrated by the lack of human contact brought about by his gift as evidenced by his jealousy of Emilia's attraction to Kai.

Then of course there is Emilia's grandfather, Robert. He's been head of the Neighborhood Watch for years and clearly has the respect of the other people in Strawberry Hollow. Even in his dementia, he maintains a strong sense of purpose and courage, willing to sacrifice himself to save his granddaughter.

## The world

Strawberry Hollow seems like a normal, quite little suburban town. Nestled between woods and a busier downtown, the lawns are well kept, the neighbors friendly; it seems like it should be on a postcard. However, Emilia soon discovers that hiding just below the surface is a strange and terrifying underworld of the supernatural. Ghosts linger, certain trees repel beings from another world, Holy Ground really is a safe haven, and circles of mushrooms might actually be gateways to the Faerie Kingdom.

Newquist also drops hints that there is a lot more to Robert's Neighborhood Watch than a collection of supernatural misfits looking out for each other. It seems the Watch is formally commissioned by something referred to as the Board of Directors. It remains unclear exactly what the nature of the board is, but one thing is certain, Robert does not want them involved, even at the cost of his own life.

These are just hints of a much larger world that I look forward to exploring in the sequel.

## The politics

Given one of the main aspects of the book is a Neighborhood Watch and the last thing the head of it wants to do is bring in the next level of authority, the politics of the book are pretty minarchist.

## Content warning

Emilia definitely lets her thoughts get away with her when it comes to Kai and Silas holds a séance to get in touch with one of their recently deceased friends.

## Who is it for?

It has plenty of action as well as some mystery as the protagonists seek to uncover the lore needed to

defeat their foe, making it something fans of Supernatural (when it was good) would be likely to enjoy.

Why read it?

Because it's fun, the characters are interesting, with a good deal of flaws as well as mystery behind them. And who doesn't like a good redemption story?

## Knight Training by Jon Del Arroz Review by Jim McCoy <http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

I don't usually read anything in a series out of order. I had a bad experience with that in the Nineties with L. Ron Hubbard's Mission Earth series. (Shut up. I was twelve.) I started at book six, not realizing it was book six and then had to start over and then re-read the sixth one. It made much more sense the second time. But, I figured I'd pick up Jon Del Arroz's latest novella anyway. I had heard it worked well as a standalone and it does. I still do plan on going back to pick up For Steam and Country, but Knight Training worked just fine without it. I had a good time.

Our hero is a young apprentice Knight named James. (I approve. I find all guys named James to be both awesome and humble. Yes, that is my name. What does that have to do with anything?) He has a problem: He's good at what he does, and he has the favor of the royal family. Why is that a problem? Because the other apprentices hate him. They basically see him as a teacher's pet. His life is hell.

I found myself identifying with this kid. I was the guy in high school whose teacher gave him a pet name (I spent my freshman year answering to "Scribble" in my biology class. Yes, my handwriting is that bad.) and check tests. A lot of people hated me as well. The difference is that this James can't just go home at the end of the day to get away from the crap. He spends his nights in a dorm with the people who are tormenting him. I couldn't help but feel bad for the kid.

The fact remains that this not some "Woe is me. My life sucks. I'm being bullied." story. James's solution to being tormented is to work harder and make his fellow apprentices eat their words. And, put bluntly, he really is that good. His instructors love him because of his talent and work ethic. He puts in the time. A competition is announced. It's just when that happens that James stumbles onto something...

I don't want to give too much away here, so I won't say what it is or where it leads, but James ends up doing even more than I expected him to when I picked this Knight Training up. I really like this kid. He's the kind of person I wish I had been at his age. He has been through a lot, but he keeps persevering. What didn't kill him really did make him stronger. James is a real dynamo.

James and friends do not have it as bad as the characters in a George R.R. Martin novel, but they don't have it easy either. In a way, James himself almost has a Harry Dresden feeling to him. Either that, or he's a Timex watch. Regardless of how you view it, he takes a beating and keeps on fighting. This kid can absorb more punishment than a quarterback for the Detroit Lions. If he were any tougher, he'd be your mama's pot roast. The last thing I saw get beaten like that was my...

Uhh...

Never mind.

The thing is, he's not that super competent, Honor Harrington type, omnipotently awesome dynamo that some other characters are. He's willing. He's able. He wants to do what he needs to do. The problem is that James is an apprentice. He knows that he doesn't know everything but that knowledge, in and of itself, is not enough to save him. He has to get some help from his friends sometimes and is not always smart enough to seek it. There is a bit of Harry Potter in this kid and it's not because he has a lightning shaped scar or gets treated like The Chosen One. No, James wants to do it all but can't always get 'er done. The thing is, he never stops trying.

I hear a lot of people complain about the boarding school cliché in Young Adult literature, but it works here. Knight Training starts at the knight training academy. James states (the book is in first person) early on that he has the goal of becoming the youngest Journeyman knight in history. I find myself wondering if that's because of flat out ambition or if he's just trying to escape all of the assholes. It may actually be a little bit of both. Either way, the reason the boarding school has become so common in these types of stories is because they provide a big enough place to tell a story and a place small enough to keep things from getting out of control, especially in a novella where the author may not have room to introduce an entire planet full of people.

You know, I keep telling myself I'm going to read more Steampunk and then not doing it. That's sad because this really is a great genre and I am looking forward to reading more Steampunk by Jon Del Arroz soon. I love this setting and others like it. I confess to being more of a fan of the “electronic stuff hasn't been invented yet” thing than the “all the electronics have failed” gimmick but the former is what Del Arroz uses here. It really does work. Because electronics haven't been invented yet, Knight Training is able to focus on the future instead of constantly pining for a lost past.

Del Arroz also avoids the trap that some Steampunk works fall into. Any good story focuses on the people in it. Don't get me wrong. Any Steampunk novel needs to have Steampunk tech in it, but the author needs to keep in mind that the tech is part of the setting and not the whole story. The 1999 version of Wild Wild West fell into this trap, but Knight Training didn't. You might read about horseless carriages in the background or a special gun, but the tech is kept in its place. Kudos to him for getting the balance right.

Bottom Line: 4.75 out of 5 Wooden Swords.

### Monster Hunter Bloodlines by Larry Correia Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.com/>

The eighth installment in Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International series delivers on the expected, hits you with a few plot twists, and high-fives the fans several time along the way.

The story

When you get into book 8 of anything, it's hard to summarize it without recapping everything that came before, but I'm not going to do that. Basically, there's a bunch of companies that hunt monsters and collect bounties from the government, and MHI is the focal company for this series. Our hero, Owen Pitt, is now a father, and he and his wife are juggling the monster-hunting duties with their role as parents.

The main part of this book focuses on a McGuffin designed hundreds of years ago by Isaac Newton. It's a powerful ward stone that can be used to slay giant cosmic gods, like the one Owen used in a previous volume. Several factions want to get their hands on it, and this leads to a dangerous game of hot potato, running afoul of competitors and big-bad villains alike.

## The characters

You've got the core characters like Owen, a chosen champion of the gods in the Eternal War; his wife Julie, a Guardian with special powers of her own; Trip, the resident geek; Holly, a former stripper who's very adept at killing baddies; Milo, the mad genius inventor; and Earl, the boss who's secretly (sorta) a werewolf.

While we get some more screen time with guys like Gutierrez of the Vatican Guard or Stricken who was formerly the head of Special Task Force Unicorn, nobody was more interesting than Sonia Gardener. Fans of the series will recognize that surname from the Monster Hunter Memoirs trilogy co-written with John Ringo. Yes, she's Chad's daughter, and that's all I'm going to say. No spoilers.

## The world

It's our world, but the hidden side of it. We've got a Monster Control Bureau in the government, basically a subdivision of the DHS, that keeps monsters a secret from the public. Since our protagonists spend their time in that hidden side of the world, they don't hang out too much in the spotlight, though there is a fun pursuit through DragonCon where Larry gives a wink and a nod to his readers.

## The politics

To the extent that it comes up at all, the politics can pretty much be boiled down to Guns Good, Government Bad, Kill Monsters.

## Content warning

Correia doesn't really write sex, but he does violence and profanity on the R-level. This one toes that line.

## Who is it for?

Fans of action and urban fantasy who like a lot of details in their battles. My only complaint about these novels is by the time I'm done reading one, I've got action fatigue. Correia's very thorough with writing those scenes, but they're still entertaining.

## Why read it?

If you're a fan of the series, you'll see some payoffs to things that have been set up a few books ago, especially with Chad's memoirs, which I really liked. It's just good plain fun and it's nice to know there's still a series out there with something to look forward to.

## Night's Black Agents by Daniel Humphreys

### Review by Declan Finn

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

Yesterday was Halloween, so we still have time for a ghost story.

If you don't recall, a few weeks ago, we reviewed Dan Humphreys' first Paxton Locke novel, *Fade*. It was a fun variant of everything you love about Harry Dresden. Magic used in inventive ways. Much snark. Solid fight scenes. It's all in the review.

And now, we have the sequel, *Night's Black Agents*.

Let's just say we should all be grateful book 3 and 4 are already out.

Why? We'll get to that.

The story

SPOILER ALERT FOR *FADE*.

So, at the end of *Fade*, the creature that spawned Paxton Locke, his Mother, escaped from jail. With the support of her groupies, they had themselves a little jail break.

But Paxton has neither the time nor the resources to hunt her down on his own. Not yet anyway. He's got a cop friend in Arizona with a problem that only Paxton can help with.

The book has two arcs. One is a subplot detailing the travails of Mother Dearest after her escape from supermax in the last novel — as well as the hunt by Humphreys' own version of the Monster Control Bureau — only with a different mission.

Our main plot follows Paxton hot on the trail of a magical murderer. The book opens only a week after the end of *Fade*. (Even Harry Dresden gets more time to rest.) And it begins with "I was halfway through a stack of pancakes when the dead guy walked in the door." Probably the best opening line since "The building was on fire, but it wasn't my fault." (Yes, I hate to open with comparing it to a line from *The Dresden Files*, but really, it's one of the few works I can compare it to. One of the lines in the novel is literally "With the exception of magic, the only real talent I had was taking a beating." — tell me that doesn't sound like Jim Butcher.)

We open with a random encounter ... which will become less random over time. Because this random encounter sees Paxton for what he is and sees him as a snack.

And this is just the opening.

There are a lot of "oh crap" moments like this scattered throughout my notes. Looking at notes I made on the Kindle, many of my comments even at the start of the book are "Oy." "Oh crap," "Aw f\*\*\*\*", and "What do you mean she has groupies!?" et al. (By the way, a line for Larry Correia fans: "Forensic accounting, it seemed, was a class of sorcery all its own.")

It's even worse when Mother Dearest turns into Kilgrave from *Jessica Jones*, only creepier.

And all these comments are from Chapter 1. It just gets better from there.

Of course, Dan has great lines to put a backspin on tropes. As Paxton describes his world: “Sheer moments of terror followed by hours of law enforcement shouting.” And there are a bunch of ... repurposed lines from classic Star Wars (as opposed to EU novel Star Wars; as we all know, there were no other films).

And all of the one-liners are fun: “an orphaned teenager with sudden-onset wizard syndrome was a fertile field for the corrupting possibility of power,” or even the casual “Buddy, you’re about the ninth worst thing I’ve seen this week.”

And the feds hunting Mother actually serves to tie the main arc plot very neatly back to the primary plot for the individual novel. Overall, it’s a great balance of series arc and book plot.

(If the author is reading this review: “So, what, you think this is the end of the world?”

“Maybe. Dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria. Fire and brimstone.”

Ahem.... smartass).

Now here comes the boom.

So, why did I wait so long to review this? Because this ends on a cliffhanger.

Imagine the first time you ever saw *The Empire Strikes Back*. Now imagine if it stopped at the point where Luke was dangling in mid-air in Cloud city, Han is still frozen in carbonite, and the last we saw of the Millennium Falcon, it was being chased by TIE-fighters into the clouds. That’s what the end of this book felt like. The last note I made on the book was two words, and they are often favored by Samuel L. Jackson.

Don’t worry. Lucky for you, book three is already out. So if you enjoy *Night’s Black Agents* (and you will) you can go straight into book three.

### The characters

This time, Paxton Locke isn’t carrying the book entirely on his own. There are some law enforcement types hunting *Mommy Dearest*.

Now, I really must compliment Dan on making an interesting federal agency to hunt black magic. These are obviously fictional feds, as the characters are colorful, interesting and entertaining. Also, to add to the humor, they’re attached to ATF (or BATFE, if you want to be picky). I guess black magic is a sort of firearm. They have their own R and D section, complete with the sort of mad tinkers you’d expect to be working in Q’s lab.

### The world

Hell, to be perfectly honest, while I tend to skip the sections on the villains (which is a mistake I made for the *Honor Harrington* series... oops) Humphreys manages to make these sections readable and tolerable, but more importantly, relevant to the plot as a whole. This is the point where Humphreys fits in magical mechanics in a way that doesn’t make your eyes bleed. Hell, who am I kidding? He actually

takes the time and effort to MAKE MAGIC MAKE SENSE. (I'm not naming names, JK). Mother Dearest turns into a little bit of a Final Fantasy villain, but it makes more sense in book 3. Not to mention that the Mother subplot is put to great effect when the villain of the week is enough to make her nervous.

And Humphreys does a great job of slow world building. Just casual references to gremlins on satellites, or magical abilities of X or Y person.

The politics

Night's Black Agents likes cops who do their jobs, but not the government hacks who oversee them. Guns are considered a plus, if only because it helps to have stopping power when you're battling things from the abyss.

Content warning

This one is a little more of a horror novel than the last book.

Who is it for?

Anyone who enjoys Larry Correia's Monster Hunter International or Jim Butcher's Dresden Files will love this book. It makes good use of magics, weapons and tactics, and snark.

Why read it?

Like everything Daniel Humphreys does, it brings new and inventive ideas into Urban Fantasy, magic, and action, along with an uplifting, positive attitude fighting the forces of Hell.

### The Paths of Cormenor by Jim Breyfogle Review by Caroline Furlong

<https://upstreamreviews.com/>

The women of Cormenor possess the power to transform into cormorants, an ability which allows them to fly and dive for fish, the bones of which are carved for ornamentation and sold. Hearing tales of these fantastic women Prince Kellen, the seventh son of a seventh son and the youngest heir to the throne, sets out to visit Cormenor and see the women's magic for himself.

Amara, the youngest female member of Cormenor House, is tasked with keeping an eye on the prince while her sisters show off. Distracted by her desire to fly with them, she misses seeing her youngest cousin falling into the lake. Noticing him fall, Kellen dives in to rescue the boy – inadvertently giving a lurking enemy the chance to strike.

The story

Following Kellen into the lake, Amara helps retrieve her cousin and the prince from the water, despite the efforts of something to prevent the rescue. While her cousin is fine the prince remains unresponsive even after they manage to get him breathing again. The matriarch of Cormenor determines that Prince Kellen's soul has been stolen by the monster of the lake, the Grimly.

Having failed to watch over the young man as she was told, Amara takes on the task of retrieving his soul to make amends for her error. With her grandmother's blessing and her family's prayers, she sets off to the east side of the lake, where the Grimly lives. Transforming into a cormorant, she dives into the water and finds the monster's lair, into which Amara swims before turning back into a human.

Amara soon finds her way into the old hag's rooms, but her investigations are interrupted by the Grimly's horrific son, Shrecken. Shrecken decides that this young woman won't be his mother's meal but his. When the Grimly summons him, he hides Amara in a wardrobe to keep her out of sight.

Of course, the girl frees herself quickly and manages to find Kellen's soul. A brief fight ensues when the Grimly finds her but, through luck and determination, Amara manages to defeat the monster. She escapes the lair as Shrecken discovers his mother's corpse, howling in rage and grief.

Although Amara makes it back to Cormanor and restores Kellen's soul to him, there is a slight snag: the Grimly imbibed a small part of the prince's soul when she captured him. When Amara killed her, she absorbed that piece into herself. Now Kellen has to find a way to recover that piece without harming Amara, whose family becomes the target of Shrecken's greed and vengeance.

## The characters

Without a doubt, the characters are what make this novel. Amara and Kellen are not the main viewpoint characters: at first glance, the book seems to be a typical fairy tale retelling from Amara's point of view. But the next chapter is told from her cousin Einar's perspective, which is exchanged for Vilmar the Marksgraf's, and so on and so forth.

The transitions give readers a better understanding of Amara and Kellen by interpreting their actions through their interactions with others. Rather than confine the audience to two specific viewpoints, Breyfogle expands on his main protagonists and their world by showing the hero and heroine through the eyes of others, villain and hero alike. It makes the two more memorable and fun to read about than they would be otherwise.

## The world

Paths of Cormanor has a rich world that is deeper than it first appears. After the first chapter it quickly expands and takes on the breadth of a novel set in a mythic past that has just enough Medieval or Dark Age pageantry to differentiate it from the Norse sagas and Beowulf. This isn't some paint-by-numbers modern narrative dressed up to look like a Medieval tale. It is a genuine story steeped in Germanic lore, rooted deeply in the traditions it seeks to bring back to readers' attention.

## The politics

One of the most refreshing things about Paths is the absolute lack of politics. There's no talk of women's rights or sexism in the story at all; the men are men, and the women are women who are not at all averse to having men come to their rescue. It is a good story well told – a rare gem in today's fantasy market.

## Content warning

The violence described is no more graphic than that mentioned in Beowulf, though a child is murdered



horribly “offscreen” during the course of the story. On the whole, this is a PG-13 book.

Who is it for?

To paraphrase the song, this book is “for kids from one to ninety-two.” Anyone can read and enjoy this novel, but those who love Norse myths and Germanic fairy tales will find it especially engaging. Fans of J.R.R. Tolkien will also love this story for delving into “that great northern spirit” which inspired the professor so much.

Why read it?

It’s a well-written, well-conceived fantasy written in a modern day that too often waters down myths and fairy tales to make them “relatable” for the audience. If that isn’t reason enough to buy it, read it, and keep it safely on one’s shelf, then the world truly has gone mad.

## The Return Of George Bowman by Celine Rose Mariotti Review by Will Mayo

This is the story of George Bowman, country singer newly resurrected from the dead along with his band the Tennessee Strollers who appears at a concert only to be upstaged by those Hollywood legends from the heyday of film and television, Mickey Rooney and Richard Dawson. Along the way, George reveals the truth of the afterlife which is seen not to be so much a heaven or a hell but rather more of a waystation between lives. As this is more part of a series than a standalone novel, it ends on a bit of cliffhanger. Nevertheless, it makes for a fun couple of days spent reading it in the days of the plague. Check it out if you like.

## Riverworld by Philip Jose Farmer Review by Will Mayo

Among the novels that thrilled me in younger years was the one by Philip Jose Farmer called Riverworld about a planet with an enormous world-spanning river on whose banks all the Earth's dead wake, alive again and ready to play again. Later on in the series (yes, this book forms the beginning of a series of novels) it all gets bogged down in details of philosophy. But there in that beginning it was all laid out as Mark Twain, Richard Francis Burton and the woman that inspired Lewis Carroll to write his Alice In Wonderland story, yes, all of them embark on a series of adventures in which our world's past, present and future come to play. By now, this is a classic in the field of sciencefiction. It deserves to be checked out. Go ahead. Are you game?

## The Spark by David Drake Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

The cover art is by one Todd Lockwood, with whom I am not familiar. I think it does an excellent job of representing the science-magic in the sword and shield being wielded, and the font chosen is a great fit. While I didn't have a clear picture of the protagonist in mind, the figure here displayed reminded me too much of a youngish Arnold Schwarzenegger, YMMV.

The HIGHLY significant introductory material is listed in the TOC as "A Map of the Territory." It's NOT a literal map; it just explains things that I found to be important. Don't automatically skip it.

I've been a fan of David Drake since the early 1980's, which is when I picked up my copy of "Hammer's Slammers." I went from recognizing HIS name, to realizing that if the book had the little spaceship on the cover, I was probably going to enjoy reading it.

I did NOT enjoy the "Northworld" trilogy, which I picked up in the early 1990s, nearly so well. Because of the magic/fantasy woven into the story, I couldn't see myself as one of the players in the same way I had with his straight mil sf. His introduction to "The Spark" and the next book in the series, "The Storm," explain the discontinuity: he was exploring the (exceedingly dark) themes of Norse mythology, and I hadn't a clue about those.

I mention this because in that same introductory material, he discloses that he is using "The Matter of Britain," known to most as the stories of King Arthur, as the basis for this series. Thus, just as with "Northworld," here we have a mix of non-magical themes of people brought into conflict with other people and the environment, but with strong elements of skills we would call magical. NOTE: it may just be sufficiently advanced technology! (I'm gonna call it magic, though, and let it go at that.)

The tragic core of the story of King Arthur is the romantic love between Arthur and Guinevere, between Guinevere and Lancelot, and the brother love between Arthur and Lancelot. As depicted, all these relationships are true, and therefore desolation is inevitable.

For the person of wisdom and understanding, it's a ridiculous set-up, as it supposes that both Guinevere and Lancelot possess the fidelity virtues that commend them to Arthur, and simultaneously the complete LACK of the fidelity virtues that would permit them to ignore their attraction to each other.

So, a great deal of the interest of the mature reader (ie, someone older than the eight-year-old reading Disney's "Sword in the Stone) has to examine the skill in which the author breathes reality into an utterly unreal set-up. In "The Spark," Drake manages this by admitting the infidelity of Guinevere (the Consort Jolene), and MOSTLY ignoring the character of Lancelot (Lord Clain). It works, for the purposes of the story.

Instead of banging on about that worn-out drama, Drake gives us the character of Pal. He's a bumpkin, raised somewhat incompetently by a couple he discovers to be his foster parents, who do manage to instill in him a profound respect for others, and a code of behavior that the greatest Southern Gentleman would envy. The fact that his mother (surrogate) can't boil water without burning it does have some value eventually, in that he can accept the rudest food without dismay. However, it's his chivalrous conduct, even as a bumpkin, that sets him apart.

Another trait that sets him apart is his ability as a Maker, one who can manipulate reality at the atomic (or at least molecular) level by mental processes (one of the magic bits). Despite that ability, what he intensely desires is to become one of the Champions of the Leader Jon (the Arthur figure). So, he sets out for the court of the Commonwealth in Dun Add, with great virtue and inadequate weapons, to join Jon in his unification of the scattered elements of the Here.

The Here is another of the magic bits; it being the reality that people can perceive. There is also the Not-Here and the Waste, and don't worry about it. Nobody else understands it, either; they just live their lives in what they have. And YOU must accept that as an element of the story, else you'll get flummoxed.

A brief seduction attempt, exposing a left breast, and an attempted act of necrophilia, interrupted by the lethal punishment of the wrong-doer, makes this NOT the right reading material for the aforementioned eight-year-old who is looking for something after Disney. However, there is NOTHING at all erotic about the corpse-raping scene, and with appropriate guidance about the nature of the depravity, I might offer this to my 15 year-old son. You be the judge on that; there are also gory fighting scenes.

I found it to be a fast read, and I'm immediately starting on the next installment.

## Stellaris: People of the Stars; Les Johnson, Editor

### Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Foreword by Robert E Hampson. PLEASE don't skip the Foreword! Not only do you get the story of the genesis of this volume, but you also get a brief, interesting review of problems already encountered in real life in sustaining human life in space, as well as the science fiction treatments.

Burn the Boats by Sarah A. Hoyt. They say Sarah A. Hoyt is a real person, but I'm not so sure. I'd say that she might be a cyborg, but for two things: she writes about cats in a way only a human could; she also ALWAYS respects the science in a story, but her stories are incredibly perceptive studies of the PEOPLE who interact with the science. The people in this story must accommodate themselves to changes they had NEVER considered or go extinct. And they have children.

Bridging by William Ledbetter. At first, I thought this was a Norse fantasy, and I recoiled; I mostly don't appreciate fantasy. It's NOT, though; it just incorporates names (and maybe themes) from that mythology into a science fiction. There are two groups of space colonists living in close proximity, but one lives under a gravity field much stronger than that of Earth, while the other lives in free-fall. They hate and fear each other, because of ancient stupid acts, but if they can't find a way to join, they both are at risk of going extinct.

The Future of Intelligent Life in the Cosmos by Martin Rees. The first non-fiction article in the collection, this one is particularly wide-ranging. (First impression? It's more of a concept dump than I prefer.) Advances in bio-tech, AI, and space propulsion are all essential. A significant point: if the exploration is funded by the government, can the level of risk needed to progress be accepted? He thinks not.

Stella Infantes by Kacey Ezell and Philip Wohlrab. There is a tiny sub-plot in one of James Michener's massive works (I THINK it's "Hawaii," but am not sure) about the missionaries who were sent on long voyages to set up missions on potentially hostile shores. Despite their reputation of being sexual prudes, almost all of the young couples had their first child SIGNIFICANTLY before nine months had elapsed after reaching their destination. If it was like that on long sea voyages, what about long space voyages? There is plenty of discussion here about medical implications of space pregnancy, and for that, I feel certain we can thank Wohlrab. Ezell, once again, utterly fails to disappoint in her ability to make a person in crisis come alive.

Maintaining Crew Health and Mission Performance in Ventures Beyond Near-Earth Space by Mark Shelhamer. With respect to long-term residence in space, it doesn't even appear that we know what it is that we don't know. Shelhamer examines the current process of assessing the risks, and then moves forward. The ability to simulate living in a gravitational field appears to be essential, but there is no way of controlling for everything that MIGHT happen.

At the Bottom of the White by Todd McCaffrey. Although there is some nifty tech in the story, most especially the technique of using people in re-entry ships to ‘bounce’ cargoes up and down (just read the story, ok?) what really makes this story pop is the evolved culture of a long-term trader, journeying between star systems, which have developed on their own, in isolation.

Pageants of Humanity by Brent Roeder. Tee-hee! Roeder has captured the brainless chatter of talking heads, providing commentary on a beauty pageant in which the outcome determines whether a far-flung system still meets the requirements for humanity. It contains some well-conceived rationale for making the determination, but it’s such a yock to read it presented this way. Loved it!

Homo Stellaris — Working Track Report from the Tennessee Valley Interstellar Workshop by Robert E. Hampson and Les Johnson. Ummm...this is the report, it’s PACKED with info, and if you have any interest in people in space, read this. It’s a summary of a LOT of work, and I can’t further distill it.

Time Flies by Kevin J. Anderson. If you have chosen to travel, but not to arrive, how do you manage to do it? These are people who trade information and goods between far-flung star systems, and they have the technology to go into a super-slow time. Every so often, they shift from slow to normal time, to check on ship functions, and when approaching a planet. If you were able to, essentially, live forever that way, would you do it?

Our Worldship Broke! by Jim Beall. Although NICELY presented, I had to ask for help on this one. Fortunately, my son-in-law, Sam Blackstone, used to be one of the guys who run the nuclear teakettles on a submarine (and that’s all he can tell us). So, I had him read this one, and he said: a person without some engineering background might struggle with how some of the concepts work with each other. He really liked the accuracy of the article “speaking directly about the success of nuclear power and how the Navy organized it from the very beginning;” the people, places, and things Beall references are all as described. Sam also suggested I’d find reading up on Hyman Rickover, the Father of Naval Nuclear Power, to be interesting. Thanks, Sam!

Nanny by Les Johnson. The POV swaps between Angela, beginning when she is age nine, and Manuel, an adult crew member on an interstellar voyage. Soon we begin to wonder: how did all these kids wind up with no adults? We find out.

Those Left Behind by Robert E. Hampson. Melisande, bka “Mace,” and her older brother Sandy are dedicated space people. Besides having the brains to do the science, they were highly motivated to get away from home essentially destroyed by Dad’s alcoholism and Mom’s fluttering from cause to cause. So, they both opted for some physical changes, to make their bodies more adapted to working in space. A final home visit for a Thanksgiving meal became explosive (or nearly so).

Securing the Stars by Mike Massa. You cannot allow sabotage, or even sloppiness, to interfere with spacecraft systems; there are no convenient repair shops. Massa identifies some similarities between the isolation and hostile environment on a space mission with some Earth-based environments; the conclusions are inescapable: a space mission isn’t a democracy.

The Smallest of Things by Catherine L. Smith. Just because SOME things are similar in our exoplanets, that doesn’t mean they are really Earth-like. Smith shows us the challenge of alien strangeness, compounded by human goofiness.

Biological and Medical Challenges of the Transition to Homo Stellaris by Nikhil Rao, MD. Before we go, while we are going, and once we get there: what can kill us? What can just mess us up? Well....

Lots of things. Here are some of them.

Exodus by Daniel M. Hoyt. (Okay, if Sarah A. Hoyt ISN'T real, then they are doing a really good job of covering that up.) Ginny is a science geek born to parents who "Only know of physics like Ex-lax," and are proud of it. She devotes all of her efforts to get away, but it turns out not to be that easy, because, evidently, a LOT of people want to get away, and then she finds there are some things hard to leave. This story does an EXCELLENT job of showing the results of alternative, and competing, research tracks: if the other guys make it work, all that you have done may go into long-term storage.

Afterword by Les Johnson. Nicely reflective on What It's All About.

Tennessee Valley Interstellar Workshop, by Joe Meany. A further explanation of the group, and how to join them in the goal of becoming People of the Stars, Homo Stellaris.

## The Storm by David Drake Review by Pat Patterson <http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is volume 2 of Drake's retelling of "The Matter of Britain," a term he explains in the prefatory material to volume 1, "The Spark." It's a classical reference to Arthurian legends, and is linked with "The Matter of Rome," re stories of Alexander the Great, and "The Matter of France," for stories about Charlemagne.

In my review of "The Spark," I praise the way Drake avoids rehashing the tedious and ridiculous premises of the Arthur/Guinevere/Lancelot triangle, a situation that is based on the emotional reactions of middle school age children, not mature adults. He continues to sidestep this goofy issue in this volume, while presenting a most interesting tale of magic, character, and adventure.

Disclosure: I am NOT an authority on the Arthurian legends. Those fragments I have likely come from listening to Robert Goulet singing when I was 10 years old, supplemented by watching a community college musical performance when I was 23. I also picked up a bit of the legends from reading C S Lewis, notably the last of the Space Trilogy, "That Hideous Strength." Therefore, I am POSITIVE that I have missed some of the subtleties in Drake's work, as he is nothing if not a scholar.

Even so, I am aware that part of the legend involves: 1) Merlin being trapped in a cave, and 2) a mysterious woman of power. And those bits are the primary themes in "The Storm." Guntram, the Merlin figure, has vanished, and a nameless mysterious woman of power shows up to contact Pal, the protagonist. Things follow.

(I can rather imagine Drake reading this, and pulling out his hair, screaming, "NO, it's not MERLIN, you idiot! This is the WINSTON CHURCHILL figure, you dolt!")

Other delightful elements:

Semi-delightful: May, Pal's lady love, starts to act stupidly, accusing him of disloyalty. As that is decidedly NOT one of Pal's failings, he can find no way to counter her criticisms.

Semi-delightful: Pal sponsors a young man with family connections to be enrolled as an Aspirant for Champion status. The young man promptly demonstrates his ability to be a lazy drunken lout.

Semi-delightful: the boat that Pal and Guntram were able to restore to pristine Ancient working order asks Pal NOT to similarly restore the boat belonging to Jon, the Leader (and Arthur figure). Pal complies with his boat's request, knowing he can probably get away with it because Jon can't talk to his boat the way Pal can.

VERY delightful: Pal's mongrel dog & fighting companion Buck was injured in his climactic battle in "The Spark," and can no longer serve as a fighter. As a great sign of favor, Leader Jon offers one of his own collie's offspring as a fighting companion. Pal is HIGHLY honored by the gift, recognizing it as a direct measure of the value Jon places on him. He then replaces it with another mongrel. He has a REASON, of course, and it's a good reason, but he never, ever, gives a hint that he might be concerned that his act could offend Leader Jon.

Delightful: Guntram also has an animal that helps him see the Road and get through the Waste. It's not a fighting dog, though. It's a hedgehog, and it sleeps in his pocket. Small children like it, and name it "Arthur."

Some of the combat scenes and contexts might be a bit too creepy for a 10-year-old, but this one wouldn't require any prep work on my part for my 15-year-old-son to read, or my 13-year-old daughter, either. In fact, my daughter might get a kick out of reading of the clumsy attempts by one of May's fellow ladies-in-waiting to seduce Pal while May is away.

Otherwise, recommend without reservation.

## Storm Between the Stars by Karl Gallagher Review by Declan Finn

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

Anyone who follows my reviews knows that I've been a fan of Karl Gallagher's books. He delivers character and plot, even at times when you don't know which he's delivering on.

Torchship was a better Firefly than the actual product.

His Lost War series is criminally underrated, even though I think it's even better than Torchship.

And now he's back to a slightly harder SciFi, with a bit of a twist.

Storm Between the Stars: Book 1 in the Fall of the Censor is his latest release. I was worried about spoiling the key threat in this book... but the series title has already given that away.

The story

To begin with, Niko Landry is Captain of a family-owned and operated freighter. Like all shipping companies, he makes a lot of deals based off of what will sell better in X system over Y, and never leaving his cargo hold empty.

When Niko and his crew find himself lost in space, he finds himself in the midst of a great business opportunity. After three thousand years of a human diaspora caused humans to flee Earth and being subsequently cut off from the home system, they find themselves to be the first ones to have found a way back. Since the Landry family business is private, they don't have to report anything to anyone.

They're the first ones back to the home system, and therefore, the first ones to find what new resources and technology may have been developed in the last three thousand years.

But Earth and the associated systems are now ruled by something called "the Censor."

Karl essentially unveils a system, piece by piece, that builds into 1984 / Fahrenheit 451 IN SPACE, and ends with an interstellar space chase that David Weber would have been happy to have written. It feels a little like the end of On Basilisk Station, only our heroes are being chased, and they don't have real weapons. Their only weapons? Physics.

The only problem with this entire novel? We could have spent five pages on the crew being a bit more impressed with "This is something no one on our side has seen for thousands of years." In the book, they were all business. Five pages would've been enough. It's a minor quibble, but I have to find a flaw somewhere.

In short, it's great world building. And I definitely enjoyed it. I recommend it. There's sequel bait, but since there isn't a cliffhanger. So this won't cause you to throw your book against a wall.

### The characters

The characters are sketched out well in this one. They appear to be simple stereotypes (the crank, the captain, the ladies' man, et al), but they're all much deeper than they appear.

To steal a phrase, no one here is exactly as they appear to be.

Though to be perfectly fair, they get so much development in the succeeding books, it's not even funny.

### The world

Karl does a good job of developing a world. Many of the ideas are sane libertarian. I have to make that distinction because there are the libertarians I know, versus the ones I've seen in public. He has a smart and sane approach to extended families, marrying into a family business, barter to get around taxes, how to work around oppression, and a lot of cultural elements that would make some libertarians I know scream like a sunburnt vampire.

There is also a great bit of work on language. I haven't seen this much effort put in since John C Wright's Somewhither. It's not as extensive, but it works well for the story.

And there are nice little touches here and there. Character names that are very ... Welsh. Details on spaceship cargo loading. Human zebras (long story). Bringing back the zealots.

And what seems to begin as a system of bureaucrats is slowly revealed to be a creepy, terrifying system of oppression. Each new revelation makes the reader feel new levels of dread every time. It goes from "aw Hell" to "aw f\*\*\*" to "why aren't they running?"

### The politics

This varies between loosely interpreted libertarian, and social conservatism of the 1800s.

And, again, 1984.

Content warning

It's as scary as 1984 should be

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes physics in their science fiction will enjoy this. Anyone who likes watching the development of a full world built up from the ground, like for Dune.

If you like Frank Herbert, David Weber, or most of Baen Books output, you'll want to give this a shot.

Why read it?

I'm not the only one who likes Storm Between the Stars. If you don't take my word for it, check out our other review on Karl's work.

## Sworn to the Light by Denton Salle

### Review by Declan Finn

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

Today's review sees author Denton Salle creating a new fantasy world.

It has wizards, Russian folklore, necromancers and dark magic, and adorable panda cub.

This is not your typical magic school novel.

The story

Eleven-year-old Jeremy has a slight problem. Seemingly no reason whatsoever, he randomly turns into a panda cub. His father takes him to see the greatest of the living volkh wizards, Master Anthony ... who Jeremy's father calls "Tony."

The world of the volkh has students who call lightning, raises golems, or talks to the dead.

But it's not all fluffy bears and understanding professors. To advance through the levels of study, there are rites of passage that are more than just formalities. This power (technically not magic) comes either the Light or the Dark, and neither is forgiving towards the other.

But when a new threat arises, can Jeremy survive when it comes calling?

Much of the book is character driven, not so much by plot. However, there's nothing wasted here. These aren't character studies. There is even the standard bully in the novel. But unlike some school bullies, he's relevant to the overall plot.

Denton explained to me that this was originally the first quarter of a large novel. Much like Lord of the Rings, it sort of comes to a dead stop. But the action has slowed down by the time this book stops, so the reader doesn't get whiplash.



Even the writing is awesome. At one point in the novel, we get a high fantasy after action report. Upon discovery of some fairly nasty horrors perpetrated by those who worship “the dark,” the result was reported as

“At [discovering] this, the volkva left all restraint as a man leaves an empty wineskin, and the shadows bloomed with deadly flowers. Any with a taint of the dark died.”

Tell me that doesn't sound like an after-action report classic fantasy authors wouldn't have loved to have written.

### The characters

Jeremy is ... a kid. A good kid, but a kid. He develops nicely over the course of this book, showing more personality than some magic school protagonists I can name. He's smart and curious, and stubborn enough to keep hitting his head against the wall of a problem until it gives. It's not so much that he's powerful at his age, but that he applies the world building in different ways. He doesn't know the rules of this power, so he doesn't know he can't do something. You can see his evolution through the novel, even just by the nature of his observations.

Even “his bear” has a character. How? For example:

“[To the bear] Jeremy insisted that they shouldn't eat people, and the bear argued that people who hurt friends weren't really people.”

Good bear.

Master Anthony is a fun character. He's a bit of a nerd who prefers his research, dislikes people, and is married to a redhead healer who is a real fox (sometimes literally). And then, when it's time to throw down, he goes from curmudgeon academic to Saruman before he went bad.

I even appreciate the dark sense of humor (“The volkva would even serve an enemy. Well, yes, because sleepy, well-fed foes were easier to kill.”)

### The world

The world is as well built as the characters. Denton Salle carries out world building and exposition like David Weber; there are no data dumps, but the information is conveyed in stories within the narration and tied into little details along the way. It's also fun to go from the land where Jeremy grew up, which knows nothing of magic, to a very casual attitude towards it.

Like with other fantasy we've reviewed here, it's nice to have a fantasy world built from traditions that aren't Western Europe. The land is obviously Eastern Europe, with a distinct blend of local cultures ... “local” in this case casting a wide net. And Denton Salle has a great visual style to show off this mix. It's basically a mythological blender. And there are a lot of little magic touches as well, including a Time Lord suitcase that's bigger on the inside.

There are even enough details around the development of metal working to show that Denton knows his stuff there, too. And it becomes relevant to the story when it comes to using “the flows” of power.

Even the time period is interesting, since “the dark” has basically been put in its place. This looks like a time period after Lord of the Rings, so everything is nice and quiet, and there’s no threat whatsoever... right? Heh heh heh.

The development of the enemy of this book is simple and straight forward.

“All of the Dark’s power came from death, whether the sacrifice of victims or the defilement of the dead. It was because of the latter that the volkhvy burned their dead.”

Nope, not creepy at all.

The politics

Most of the politics is that of the world. Even then, it’s mostly “evil exists, and it needs to be killed.”

Content warning

When Lord of the Rings is broadcast on television, it’s labeled with a warning of “Fantasy violence.” Pretty much what we have here. Body parts are severed by swords, but Denton doesn’t linger on blood spurting. Even when someone is cut in their femoral artery, blood isn’t even mentioned.

Despite there being a lot of shapeshifting, there’s no nudity.

Who is it for?

By the stupid rules of traditional publishing, as our character is a kid, therefore this must be YA. But like Narnia, this is too good to be wasted on children.

To be honest, if you’re a fan of Jim Butcher’s Codex Alera, you will want to read this book. It has depth of world building, but with a different mythology.

Why read it?

Because this is a great new high fantasy world that’s as well written as any author you can think of.

And lucky for you, book two is already out.

**Time for the Stars by Robert Heinlein**  
**Review by Chris Nuttall**  
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

“Now two things stick out like a sore thumb: the first is that you don’t like your brother.”

I started to protest but he brushed it aside. “Let me talk.

“Why are you sure that I am wrong? Answer: because you have been told from birth that you love him. Siblings always ‘love’ each other; that is a foundation of our civilization like Mom’s apple pie. People usually believe anything that they are told early and often. Probably a good thing they believe this one,

because brothers and sisters often have more opportunity and more reason to hate each other than anyone else.”

If you need proof of Robert Heinlein’s prowess as a wordsmith, you don’t really need to look further than my reaction to *Time for the Stars*. The blurb on the back made it sound boring – and my childhood self-refused to pick the book up and read it – but when I finally did read it, I was impressed. There’s little of the action I like in this book, for all the wonder of telepathy and advanced technology, but the story is still captivating enough that I read it in one sitting and enjoyed it enough to overlook the handful of regressive (and problematic) aspects.

In an overpopulated future, Pat and Tom (the narrator) are twins – but they’re not identical. Pat is very much the dominant twin, to the point that everyone realises that he’s in charge ... even without him doing very much. The twins were surprise babies, something that shaped their early life as their father – a man who hates paying court to the taxman – vigorously resists the need to pay extra taxes for his final children. Anyway, as Pat and Tom enter their late teens, they are recruited by the Long-Range Foundation and taught how to use their telepathic talents for actual communication. Eventually, the LRF reveals the real purpose of the tests; they’re sending out a fleet of starships and they need the telepaths to maintain communications between the ships and Earth itself. Unfortunately, there’s a catch. One twin of each pair has to remain behind on Earth. But which one gets to go?

To Tom’s dull resentment, Pat steals that slot for himself with a minimum of effort ... until he has a skiing accident that puts Tom in the slot instead. Tom is rushed to the ship before it can launch and hastily prepared for departure, while Pat remains behind and marries the girl they both liked. The ship departs and, in the space of a few months (for them; years pass on Earth) they explore a number of worlds, encountering dangers ranging from deadly alien diseases to intelligent (and hostile) aliens. Tom loses touch with Pat, but – fortunately – is able to establish a link with his descendants. Finally, after an exhausting trip, the crew are on the verge of mutiny ... when they are picked up by an FTL ship from Earth. They are taken home, where they discover they’re yesterday’s news. Pat (now a very old man) tells Tom that he expects Tom to take over the family business (on the grounds that Tom is the only male heir left). Tom, who has grown into a man since being separated from his twin, tells him no ... and marries one of Pat’s descendants, whom he has been in touch with since birth. And they both resolve to head back to the stars ...

Heinlein does a very good job of showing us the relationship between Pat and Tom, through the eyes of an unreliable narrator. The relationship between them is oddly co-dependent, even though it’s clear – as one character points out later in the book – that Tom simply doesn’t like his brother very much. The real joke is that Pat genuinely didn’t want to go on the trip and his subconscious desire to escape provided the accident that put Tom in the slot (and Tom didn’t really want to go either.) Indeed, the story is more about Tom learning to stand up for himself – first against an unfortunate roommate, then against Pat himself – rather than naked adventure. This should be boring stuff, particularly given the situation, but Heinlein makes it work.

The book also draws a line between the settled, the people who want to stay at home (even though it is increasingly overpopulated), and the pioneers who want to explore and settle brave new worlds. Pat makes fun of a pair of girls who are horrified at the concept of interstellar exploration, although – in hindsight – it is clear that Pat isn’t keen on the idea either. And yet, even the explorers have their problems. It’s clear that the reason many people signed up for the trip is to explore, which is why so many telepaths (and others) resent the suggestion they should remain on the ship when they find a new world. People didn’t sign up to be communicators, they signed up to see new worlds with their own eyes. This clashes with the military discipline invoked by the ship’s captain, which is – quite reasonably – the only

way to run a ship under such circumstances. But not all of the crew are trained military officers and men.

It's also clear that the stresses of interstellar travel gradually wore the crew down until, after an encounter with hostile aliens, they are on the verge of mutiny. Heinlein neatly demonstrates how this puts the captain in an untenable position, where he can neither give in without fatally undermining his authority nor continue the voyage without risking outright mutiny. In some ways, Heinlein cheats at this point. Tom and his fellow crewmen do not cross the line because an FTL ship arrives to pick them up and provide (nearly) instant passage back to Earth. For a juvenile book, it has some pretty dark sections.

On a wider scale, Heinlein crafts a world where overpopulation is a serious threat – to the point that, if you have more than two children, you have to pay a head tax – and the LRF is trying to push the borders of human knowledge. Indeed, the description of the LRF's charter is quite amusing:

“The charter goes on with a lot of lawyers' fog but the way the directors have interpreted it has been to spend money only on things that no government and no other corporation would touch. It wasn't enough for a proposed project to be interesting to science or socially desirable; it also had to be so horribly expensive that no one else would touch it and the prospective results had to lie so far in the future that it could not be justified to taxpayers or shareholders.”

Time for the Stars also has some wry moments of humour, even in the darkest sections. At one point, Tom notes that good intentions really should be considered capital crimes; at another, Tom's attempt to court a female telepath is spoiled by her sister, who remained on Earth but keeps looking over her sister's shoulders. (The fact that this isn't too different to the relationship between Pat and Tom is ignored by Tom.)

But the book also does have its regressive moments. The de facto leader of the telepaths, up until his near-death on an alien world, is 'Uncle' Alfred, a sixty-plus year-old black man. He's described as being practically a saint, the kind of person who “had the saintliness that old people get when they don't turn sour and self-centred instead.” It passed me by on my first read, because no one makes an issue of his skin beyond the simple physical description, but 'uncle' isn't always a compliment when addressed to a black man. (Where I grew up, 'uncle' was what we called elderly people who were family friends, even if they weren't relatives, so I wouldn't automatically see it as an insult.) Furthermore, Uncle Alfred (to be fair, he tells Tom to call him Uncle Alfred) is a very manipulative character, neatly manipulating the captain into giving him what he wants without ever crossing the line into outright insubordination. (He also gives a speech on the importance of obeying lawful orders, which reads a little awkwardly these days.) But this is a trait shown by Tom's Uncle Steve too, who offers some good advice on the limits of arguing with one's superiors:

“Being a staff rating, I've served with a lot of high brass. When you are right and a general is wrong, there is only one way to get him to change his mind. You shut up and don't argue. You let the facts speak for themselves and give him time to figure out a logical reason for reversing himself.”

Oddly, Uncle Alfred is not paired with a twin – he doesn't have a twin – but with his six-year-old niece. (He took the LRF's money to ensure that his niece would have a decent childhood.) In some ways, this undermines the central issue of the story – although it hints that the telepaths can build rapport with non-family before it becomes front and centre – and suggests that, eventually, we will all become telepaths. Perhaps twins just find it easier to breakthrough into real telepathy.

A secondary issue, perhaps more irritating, is a certain kind of sexism. Neither Pat nor Tom has much respect for their mother, who is – to be fair – a whiny woman-child when her babies are at risk. Pat manipulates her so well that it's clear why her children don't respect her. Later, Pat declares that he doesn't have any heirs ... and what he means is male heirs, as he had daughters. (To be fair, he means he wants the family name to continue ... and it won't, as – in those days – a married woman would take her husband's name.) And there is something disturbing about Tom marrying his grandniece, although the romance is so poorly developed that it's not as noticeable as it was in *The Door into Summer*. It seems to come right out of left field. To be fair, thanks to time dilation, Tom isn't that much older than her.

The book also touches on the effects of battling government bureaucracy, although it isn't clear if we're meant to applaud or roll our eyes. Pat and Tom's father is too stubborn to take the easy way out (by trading birthrights with another family, for example) and he keeps fighting, even though it's clear that it's pointless:

“Dad was stubborn. He could have paid the annual head tax on us supernumeraries, applied for a seven-person flat, and relaxed to the inevitable. Then he could have asked for reclassification. Instead, he claimed exemption for us twins each year, always ended by paying our head tax with his check stamped "Paid under Protest!" and we seven lived in a five-person flat. “

But this wasn't all bad:

“Dad used to talk about the intangible benefits of being poor—learning to stand on your own feet, building character, and all that. By the time I was old enough to understand I was old enough to wish they weren't so intangible, but, thinking back, maybe he had a point.”

It's clear that *Time for the Stars* had a greater impact on the science-fantasy field than science-fiction. Anne McCaffrey's famous *The Tower and the Hive* series clearly draws on ideas Heinlein put forward in *Time for the Stars*, from telepaths serving as starship communicators to intergenerational marriages. (In *Damia*, Alfa Lyon marries the titular character, who he helped raise from birth. There's at least twenty years between them even though both characters are of legal age.) Heinlein, however, dives much more into the science of interstellar travel, something McCaffrey chose to overlook. But then, her Talents are much more flexible than Heinlein's telepaths.

*Time for the Stars* is not the best of the juveniles, nor is it the worst. It's a little more idea based than I would have expected, from a juvenile, but the story is developed enough that it doesn't matter. Overall, despite some regressive moments, it is well worth a read.

## Valley of Loss by Mark Wandrey

### Review by Pat Patterson

<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Preliminary Statement. I'm going to edit out all the ravings for my Amazon review, the entirety of which is contained within. But this is MY blog, so you get the ravings.

Raving One. This is a 36-page Kindle document, as it is currently formatted on my screen. How can I justify a LONG review, of a SHORT document? And yet, I am known for long reviews. Sometimes, that's how I find them. I page rapidly through the Amazon reviews, my eye only caught by verbosity.

Raving Two. I picked this book up from Kindle on March 18, 2020. It's now November 3. Any FRESHNESS my perspective may have given is long since stale. Heck, my memories of that time are stale.

Raving Three, and the most significant, dealing with SPOILERS. Admittedly, I was sucked into a black hole of circumstances, just after I brought myself current on all of the related storylines, and thus I MIGHT be wrong, but:

THERE ARE SOME THINGS THAT LOYAL READERS WILL KNOW ABOUT THAT THE CHARACTERS DO NOT.

Now, for the reader, that likely only enhances the experience. Alas for the poor reviewer, though! We dast not violate the no spoiler rule in our reviews!

Over the next few galactic cycles, I plan to convene a reviewer council to come up with a comprehensive program. Until then, I plan to mask spoiler-sensitive material with some sort of snark. You'll know it when you see it.

The review. This is all that's going on Amazon.

I obtained this book through the Kindle Unlimited program.

Jim Cartwright, the youthful, obese but dieting commander of Cartwright's Cavaliers, has a closely defined set of goals for his mercenary company. At the top of his list: obtain as many of the massive, ancient fighting machines, known as Raknars, and restore them to function.

While certain members of his team don't quite understand the degree to which these devices inspire him, Jim can always count on his drop-dead gorgeous, passionate, faithful, and utterly committed girlfriend Adayn. Somehow, out of all the human females, she alone has discerned the bodacious hunk hidden inside Cartwright's corpulence.

Jim is also the recipient of support from his good buddy Splunk, a harmless and playful alien of limited intelligence; perhaps a savant, though, for somehow this miniature creature has been able to discover ways to harness the potential of the Raknar.

Exciting things ensue.

This is a delightful background interjection into the main story lines of the Four Horseman Universe and MUST be read that way.

Well, that was the Amazon review. I hope the snark came across.

**Witchy Eye by D.J. Butler**  
**Review by Graham Bradley**

<https://upstreamreviews.com/>

Witchy Eye by D.J. Butler - novel review - MySF Reviews In an alternate American history riddled with magic and religious conflict, a young woman learns that she's the heir to a very real Eden-esque empire, and must navigate treacherous political waters with powers she doesn't fully understand.

## The story

Sarah Calhoun is an Appalachian farmer in an alternate America, set in the mid-1800s during a contentious religious revival. After a run-in with a “New Light” preacher at the local market, she discovers there are dark forces that seek to capture her. Fortunately she’s got allies out in the world, men who know her true lineage and will help to guide her through the murky waters of the coming war.

## The characters

Sarah Calhoun, though the latter is only her adoptive surname. She’s orphaned and estranged from her royal parents, and also learns she’s one of three triplets. The eponymous ‘Witchy Eye’ of the story, she has a defective eye that is actually the mark of powerful magic, allowing her to see the world for what it really is. She travels with her adoptive nephew, Calvin Calhoun, who becomes rather enamored with Sarah after learning that they’re not really blood relatives.

Thalanes is a traveling monk who finds the teenaged Sarah and explains to her the truth of her ancestry, there there’s a war going on between the visible world and the spiritual one, and that she and her two siblings have to be reunited in order to stave off an invasion from paranormal powers.

Sir William Johnston Lee, a swordsman for hire known in Louisiana as “Bad Bill,” was a involved with Thalanes 15 years ago when it came time to hide Sarah and the other two children from those who would hunt them. Now that she’s been found, he answers the call to protect her, and fight the war that few others can.

The principal antagonist is the Right Reverend Father Ezekiel Angleton and his henchman, Obadiah Dogsboddy. Angleton is the “New Light” preacher working in league with the dark powers that want Sarah and her siblings, so as to use their bloodline to take control of the unseen Eden beyond the veil.

There are many more characters, but those are the central ones.

## The world

Hoooo boy, this one is rich. It’s equal parts recognizable and distinct, a North America that refers to familiar places by different names (“Pennsland” instead of “Pennsylvania”, etc). But the uniformity that we enjoy in our timeline doesn’t quite exist; nothing was homogenized to the extent that is has been in the real world, each different culture has its stronghold and Butler shows that he did his homework in shaping the world. You’ve got your English, your French, your Cajun, your various African tribes (primarily Igbo), your Native peoples, and some fantasy species besides.

I recently finished reading this book for the third time and I’m still getting a feel for the depth of what Butler created. It’s not a fast or casual read; it’s a freaking feast, and a satisfying one at that.

## The politics

The politics take a backseat to the religious tapestry, which might make it a little bit confusing for any reader that doesn’t have more than a passing familiarity with Christianity. However, the lessons from Thalanes to Sarah help shed light on the power structures in this world.

Leadership positions are held by kings and emperors, not governors and presidents, so there’s a differ-

ence there, but these offices are still held by men like Thomas Penn and Andrew Jackson.

Other than that, there's nothing Current World or Current Year about it.

Content warning

Circumlocution is the word of the day on this one; sensitive subjects are dealt with in older vernacular, and the profanity stays on the softer side of PG-13. Violence is on display, as was typical of a pre-industrial world.

Who is it for?

Readers who really dive deep into Tolkien and Herbert will appreciate the pacing and details in this story.

Why read it?

It's a novel story based on old religions in a new-ish country, a fresh take on the Big Scope epic fantasy genre. The first time I read it I admittedly struggled because I was used to reading fast-paced thrillers and urban fantasies, but even when I put it down, I wanted to come back to it. Butler created an engaging cast of characters in a world that deserves to be studied. A very fulfilling read.

## Non-Fiction

### Star Trek: A Celebration

Written by Ben Robinson and Ian Spelling

Review by Jason P. Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.com>

The challenge: after all this time, with so many behind-the-scenes and “making of” material that's already out there, with the Concordance and the Compendium and everything giving us all the insights about the original Star Trek, how do you bring something new to the mix?

Ben Robinson and Ian Spelling have met the challenge with Star Trek: A Celebration. The format is somewhat limited, but I get the impression that it's self-imposed because there's so much out there to cover. The book looks through all three seasons of the show with brief overviews of “key episodes” as well as profiles of the main characters and members of the cast, including some of the more obscure and least-known performers such as Maggie Thrett, Celeste Yarnall, and Carey Foster. There's even a couple of new bits of information about Mark Lenard.

This book is a collection of notes from various sources that have been previously published, and it's an interesting mix of information. But most of it was stuff I already knew from reading other material or watching interviews and documentaries about Star Trek. I was hoping for a greater amount of new material. Perhaps I was spoiled by Marc Cushman's trilogy of BTS books (reviewed here). That doesn't mean this book has no value. I enjoyed reading it, and I recommend adding it to your Trek library. But it feels like the appetizer before the full meal. There's a lot of material, but it's mostly surface level.



# Prose Bono

## Unleashing the Imagination

by Cedar Sanderson

<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

My apologies, but I'm not ready with the art for the children's book slash coloring book slash humorous illustrated rag just yet. So the cover design post will happen likely next week. This week? I'm somewhere between aughh! and hngghh... this morning. My dear lovely husband suggested I write this post last night. I was tired. I decided I'd have more brainpower in the morning. Dear reader, I was wrong.

I've been struggling to write for several months now. Moving last year took a lot of the wind out of my sails, compounded by moving into the research job. Don't get me wrong. I do love my job, and I love that research is something I get paid to do now. But in the interests of not crossing the streams (although if there is some interest in the history of cosmetics? That's not a topic I think we've touched on...) I don't usually talk day job on the blogs. Anyway, the reading took a dive, along with the creative energy required. I have cemented something I'd learned a while back.

Writing and art (by which I mean making marks on a surface, because yes, writing is an art) use different bits of the intellect. I hesitate to say different parts of the brain, although it would be fascinating to see if anyone has checked to see which bits light up when doing what. Also, the mental image of one of those gadgets strapped to someone's head while they are trying to write or paint just kicks over my giggle box. Whichever it is, they aren't co-located. I know this, because I can do both. And I can do them consecutively (but not concurrently) when all is well in my world. So it's not a one-or-the-other proposition any more than the reactions to 'an artistic scientist? it's not done!' when I was in college were valid. It most certainly is done, and I'm betting there will be oddles (ok, that should be oodles, but oddles is a good word. I'm a little odd, does that make me an oddle?) of examples given in the comments.

There should be footnotes to this post. Ok, maybe not. I've been binging Terry Pratchett and the man is an influence. I'd mentioned above that I haven't been reading. I meant by that I hadn't been reading fiction, by and large. I'd been plugging through various non-fiction books, but fiction? Not so much. This last week, I was under the weather. A cold, not the Dread Lurgy, although at this point you'll have more and more trouble telling one from the other, but that's a topic for a 'nother day. When I'm sick, I binge-read. It helps me escape the dull misery of illness and get into someone else's imagination because goodness knows mine is dragging along behind flopping lethargically. Specifically, I was binging through the witches. There are some forty books in the Discworld series, but you don't have to start at the beginning and go right through. I didn't. I first discovered Sir Pterry with Going Postal, and the sub-arc of Moist. My second sub-arc, and one of my favorites, was the Watch and Vimes. The others I really love are DEATH, and now?

I spent two days reading all of the Witches sub-arc. I realized I had encountered Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax at points in reading the other books, but... look. Back in my day, sonny, you read what you could get your mitts on. None of this log into Amazon and bobs-your-uncle you click one button to buy the whole series and then your app presents you with the lot of them lined up neatly in publisher-

it's not fast, for most. It's also been treated with great mystery for much of human history, as it's a mystical time in many cultures.

With many SFF writers being men, who were in recent century-or-so excluded from labor and delivery rooms, and only introduced to their offspring later, cleaned up and wrapped in fluffy blankets, it's little wonder they weren't going to get gritty in their storytelling with the details. On the other hand... there was also a trend for years of anesthetizing Mama, fully in some cases... But I'm not going to go into a screed here on the horrors of interventionist delivery doctors. Suffice it to say that pregnancy and birth are not illnesses and treating them like they are is not a healthy strategy.

So! I had four children. My first three were born at home, with midwives in attendance. I chose to have my final child at the hospital, also with my midwives, for the sole reason that I had three small children at home and really wanted to have 24-48 hours in a room by myself. A vacation! That this turned out to be the only delivery where I had problems, was ironic.

If you are writing labor, it is a varied as women are themselves. Long labors for the first child are not uncommon, as the body goes through significant physiological changes to accommodate the passage of a small human through the pelvis. The first child is often (and I'm not speaking in absolutes here in this post, as statistical probability doesn't always hold the exceptions back from happening) the smallest child if a mother has multiples over her lifespan, which helps in this process of the body altering into motherhood. These changes are permanent, by the way, which is why a forensic anthropologist looking at only the bones of a woman can tell you if she had delivered a child. My first labor was 24 hours, my second was 13, my third 6... and this is another pattern that is common for mothers. The body, figuring the process out, tends to be more efficient with it. You'd think my fourth birth would have been rapid. Except this is where the pattern altered for me, as my son presented with his head tilted, and jammed like a cork in a bottle. It wasn't until some interventions happened that he was able to be born... 23 hours after labor began.

You can already begin to see some of the complexity of writing an accurate labor. The temptation to gloss over it is strong – and likely valid if the description is not going to advance the plot. Birth is also a messy process. There will be blood, amniotic fluids, meconium (the infant's first bowel movements happen prior to birth, or even during, due to the pressures), and even feces from the mother that are forced out in the process. Then there is a placenta, which must be delivered after the baby, and takes some effort, the umbilical cord, and sometimes what is called a caul. You'll see the last referenced in some fantasy tales as there are myths surrounding this membrane. The baby has been in a sack of fluid for months, and as a result, will be coated with (to some degree, some more than others) vernix, a creamy white film that protects their skin. I'm just giving a brief overview here – I could write much, much more, having studied this intensively from the time I first learned I was pregnant and continuing through all my pregnancies.

Describing any of this is rare in fiction, but you should know it's there. If you want to write birth with any accuracy, you should not be making it all clean and clinical unless you are going to also make it happening outside the mother. Which is a whole 'nother topic. The concept of external incubation has been well-handled by Lois McMaster Bujold, and we do see that science is advancing to make it possible. The problem is that we are also understanding better just how important the maternal presence is to the developing child. From the ability of the mother's body to cushion and protect the womb with its precious cargo, to the babe's ability to hear and react to the mother's heartbeat, voice, and even the voice of others who are nearby – like their father – the human starts to become aware of and connected with the world around them very soon in the gestation period. If you are going to postulate a culture

recommended (1) order. I have Sir Pterry's books on my bookshelves (er. Figure of speech since half my library is in boxes and elsewhere) as I found them. I even have treasures of hardbound versions imported from across the Big Pond.

Where was I? Oh, yes. I hadn't read the whole of the Witches sub-arc. I'm in a position where I can't spend all the money I'd like on books (I'd need a bigger house, to begin with) but I certainly can buy three or four modestly priced ebooks on a whim. I could have done the longer, more painful process of dipping into KU to try and find something worth reading. I didn't have the patience. I wanted reliably good – it's not that there aren't good reads in KU, it's that there are so many books out there, and Sturgeon's Law applies. Sir Pterry is reliably brilliant.

The end result of that, and of my commitment to write every day in 2022, is that my writing brain is creaking back into motion. No idea what happens next. I'll let you know when something happens that isn't basically a writing exercise. Like the words, I'm working on the muscles, and as a metaphor it's not a bad one. I'm slow, achy, and when I do squats or stretches, more than a little creaky along with some popping noises that mildly alarm the dog. I give myself a month, at least, before the words start to come a little easier and walking a mile doesn't leave me feeling spent.

I've taken the leash off the imagination and am letting it run wild. Later? Then I can put it back on lead, and let it know it's time to work, and focus on a specific plot it needs to sniff out. Until then I'll just keep amusing myself. And there may be footnotes.

Unlike the Chronicles of Narnia, which really ought not to be read in chronological order because you'll understand much more if you come to the Magician's Nephew later in the reading rather than possibly spoiling some of the magic of The Lion The Witch and the Wardrobe.

**A Celebrated Birth**  
**by Cedar Sanderson**  
<http://www.CedarWrites.com>

Merry Christmas, one and all!

I'm taking a week off from the cover art tutorial. It's a holiday, I'm traveling, and frankly the last week was crazypants, so I'll do a better job when I have less demanding my attention elsewhere.

This week, I thought about the day of my post, when many of our readers would be celebrating the birthday of a savior and realized there's a topic I'm not sure I've seen discussed for writers and it's one that is sort of important.... birth. Pregnancy, yes, as a precursor, but today specifically it's about the delivering of a child from the womb to the cold hard light of the world. I've been through this process five times, but I only remember four of them. Those were the times I was a mother, bringing her child into the world.

I suspect that the reasons you'll not often see birth in science fiction (or, for that matter, fantasy) are myriad. Pregnant women usually aren't traveling, having adventures, or giving birth in uncertain circumstances. They did, in the past, and also, not coincidentally, infant mortality was terribly high. As was maternal. Even today, the outcome from labor is not always guaranteed to wind up with happy healthy mom and baby. Worst case always has been losing one or the other, or both. This is only one reason most writers are either going to steer clear, or use it as an off-screen plot element to pitch a Hero into the thick of it, if it's mentioned. More than this? Birth is a messy, vulnerable, fraught process. And

with external incubation, you much also postulate the developmental and psychological impacts this leaves such creche-born children with.

Even the 'violence' of birth itself has purpose. During the passage though the birth canal, the liquid that has been in the infant's lungs is forced out. There is some fascinating data on this, the development of lungs, and how we can save and nurture even very premature babies, in the last couple of decades. The baby is also exposed to the mother's microbiome during this process, and in the time-honored tradition of laying the newborn on the mother's skin for bonding time. This gives a newborn essential immune protections which are reinforced through breastfeeding. Not being able to do this, through delivery via C-section, or a mother that is unable to nurse, gives a newborn hurdles to cross from the first moments. Feasible, of course, but still, not the ideals.

I was thinking about all of this, and the Biblical account of Jesus' birth, the other day. There is no mention of a midwife – and in a small town overwhelmed with an influx of visitors, she would have existed but likely been busy, or simple matter of not knowing who to contact. However, being in the stable was not a bad thing for a woman in the throes – less contact with stranger's germs. Also, although Joseph was a carpenter, and would not have had much experience with birth, the first responders to the Star were shepherds, who would have been intimately familiar with birth (I leave aside the Wise Men, as they likely arrived when the child was a year or two old, certainly not to the stable as the holiday cards depict for brevity and art's sake). A young mother, but not completely alone, with perhaps shepherds arriving in the aftermath? I can see it. Birth is as old as time and happens whether we are ready or not for it!

~Finis~