

The N3F

Review of Books

Incorporating Prose Bono

Professor George Phillips, D.Sc., Editor
February 2022

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Editorial

Greetings from wintry Massachusetts, where another snowstorm struck yesterday. This issue of The N3F Review of Books Incorporating Prose Bono reviews two dozen novels and a sfnal historical work. We hope you enjoy what you find herein.

On a different note, we encounter some well-aimed criticism that most of our reviewers come from the same general regionals of the mundane-world political spectrum. That's not being done deliberately, but our efforts to find reviewers with a wider range of political orientations have not been at all successful. As a general statement, if you know anyone who writes reviews of SF novels, please call them to my attention.

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# Fiction

## A City of Ghosts by Betsy Phillips Review by Tom Feller

This is a collection of sixty-one short ghost stories, some of which are short enough to qualify as flash fiction. It is divided into two parts, 30 stories for April, because May 1 is the date for the pagan holiday of Beltane which celebrates springtime, and 31 for October, obviously for Halloween. The first group are lighter in tone than the second. They are all set in Nashville, which gives it quite a bit of verisimilitude for someone like me who lives in that city. For example, I have visited the Hermitage Hooters restaurant, where one of the stories is set, and my wife and I have used the Opry Mills mall entrance to the Opryland Hotel, although we have never seen the ghosts mentioned in the stories. The author also populates the stories with historical characters such as Timothy Demonbreun, one of the city's founders, and Jimi Hendrix, whose musical career started in Nashville. The first story is about the Bell Witch, the most famous ghost in the history of Middle Tennessee. My favorite involved a purple Impala car. Overall, this is a good collection of entertaining stories.

## All Things Huge And Hideous by G. Scott Huggins Review by Graham Bradley <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

After nearly a century of epic fantasy tropes, we know what happens to noble knights, prophesied heroes, plucky sidekicks, and dark villains.

But what about the working men and women of these realms? The ordinary joes who are put upon to do extraordinary things?

When the Dark Lord wins the war and rules the world, what does that mean for ground-level workers like a veterinarian and a barmaid?

The story

The writing moves fast and without much navel-gazing, aimed at readers who are familiar with the staples of Tolkienesque fantasy. There's a Dark Lord, he rules the world, the good guys lost, and now there's a dreary status quo where hope scarcely resides. But we get to look at this world through the unconventional eyes of a magical veterinarian and his assistant, a former student of witchcraft.

The chapters work rather episodically at first, like a chain of short stories based on individual cases that a fantasy veterinarian might handle in a fallen world. Then, after a few strange cases of sick animals and unique challenges in his field of medicine, Dr. James starts to find ways to solve larger problems using his skills as a healer.

The stories are as humorous as they are imaginative, and I was pleasantly surprised by the number of twists in each case. When Dr. James is stumped at first, he keeps trying. A few times he comes close to giving up, but in a Poirot-like fashion, his brain eventually tells him what he missed. This book is nothing if not satisfying, from the mystery angle.

## The characters

They are many, but the primary characters are the aforementioned Dr. James DeGrande, magical veterinarian. and his assistant Harriet, a former barmaid and expelled student of a witchcraft school. He's a grumpy drunk, she's a hunchback, and they're a great team.

## The world

If you're a fantasy reader or gamer, it's basically any pseudo-medieval setting with a technology level just preceding engines and other mechanical advancements.

## The politics

Compared to our world? Just about nonexistent. Under its own bubble? Post-war devastation under a despotic totalitarian.

## Content warning

All profanities up to the F-bomb, and a sex scene between a hunchback and an elf woman that—while relevant to the plot, for once—could have been left out.

## Who is it for?

Fans of fantasy and humor, who like to see the conventions of the genre turned on their heads.

## Why read it?

Because it's a great load of fun and imagination in a fantasy genre that runs too short on either.

## The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes by Suzanne Collins Review by Graham Bradley <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Suzanne Collins takes us back to the world of The Hunger Games with this prequel, giving the reader a gripping backstory for the villain: Coriolanus Snow.

But where did he come from? What was his family like? And how did he end up using power with such deadly results?

## The story

Coriolanus Snow is 18 years old, and his family has fallen on hard times. His parents are dead. He and his cousin Tigris live with their geriatric grandmother, who doesn't understand the dire straits they're in. The family fortune is gone, and with new property taxes coming down the line, their poverty will soon be exposed to the other noble families of Panem.

His only hope lies in winning the 10th Hunger Games. He'll be a mentor, and if his tribute survives the ordeal, there will be a cash prize as well as a scholarship to the University, securing his future among

the ruling class.

But if he fails, he will fall farther than he ever has before, into the dregs of society, the bottom rung of the working class, with no hope of ever clawing his way back to the top. And to make matters worse, there are officials within the government who are dead set on seeing him lose.

### The characters

Coriolanus Snow, who we already know ends up becoming President of Panem in the original trilogy, is the protagonist. Unlike the other books, this one is told in the third person, but it's always from Corio's perspective.

Sejanus Plinth is Corio's classmate, and his polar opposite in just about everything. He wasn't born to power, but rose to it from the lower ranks, as a direct result of the Snow family losing their fortune. He doesn't want the Capitol life, but rather to return to District 2, where he's from. And above all, he hates the Hunger Games. Due to his father's position, Sejanus is also given a mentor's berth, and his tribute is expected to win.

But perhaps the most surprising character introduction in the story was that of Lucy Gray Baird, the girl from District 12. The Reaping was rigged so that she'd be sent into the Games and killed; Coriolanus doesn't know why, but he's quickly charmed by her flamboyant personality and her seeming apathy toward her pending doom. She worms her way into his heart, and his infatuation with her drives the entire story forward from there.

### The world

We're a few iterations away from the society we currently have in this world. At some point North America becomes Panem, the borders of which are never specified. The States are dissolved, and the Capitol moves from the East Coast to somewhere in the Mountain West, likely Salt Lake City or Denver. Panem decays like the United States did, and the 13 Districts go to war with the Capitol, resulting in a nuclear holocaust, and the Capitol stays in power. The Hunger Games are designed as a constant punishment against the Districts for their rebellion.

While the original trilogy shows us Games 74 through 76, this prequel gives us an insight into just how crude and analog the Games were in the beginning. The Capitol wasn't completely sure how to use them and wanted to make sure they were effective in quelling rebellion. We see just how young this new version of Panem is, and how Coriolanus started to influence it all from a very young age.

### The politics

Among the many virtues of this book is that it doesn't concern itself with Current Year (TM) nonsense. It's asking bigger questions and tackling bigger topics about the role of government, the use of force, and what real fascism actually looks like. These things have plagued humanity since we became self-aware, and the lessons from it therefore become timeless.

### Content warning

There is hardly any profanity that would bump the language above a PG rating, and no sensuality beyond some chaste kisses. There are a few tap-dancing references to prostitution among the desperate classes, but it doesn't factor into the story much. The violence is present, given the subject matter, but Collins has always handled that element without reveling in it.

Who is it for?

While billed as Young Adult, the quality of writing and the depth of the story takes it outside of that audience and makes it accessible to adults as well. I started reading this series in my early 20s and I'm still reading it in my late 30s.

Why read it?

Because this is a master class on how to write a villain's backstory. In the past decade we've seen an abundance of origin tales where the bad guy was made to be sympathetic, a victim, or misunderstood. Frequently these stories end up justifying the villain's actions, which then casts the hero in an antagonist's role, muddying the waters between heroism and villainy.

Collins doesn't take that route with Songbirds. While you watch Coriolanus start out as privileged and bitter, you see him go on a journey away from those things, and ultimately end up with a choice between love and power. Given that he's the future villain of Panem, you know he chooses power, and thus becomes a cautionary tale about what we value, and what it costs us.

Most times when you read a literary tragedy, it's just verbose dog crap that public schools forced you to read. This was the first time I read one I'd actually consider beautiful and would want to read multiple times. Check it out.

## Between Home and Ruin by Karl K. Gallagher

### Review by Declan Finn

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

During Karl Gallagher's Torchship trilogy, I noted that he is as good as David Weber in the realm of space combat. It helps that he's a rocket scientist.

With Karl's previous book, Storm Between the Stars, he decided to show off his world building, with a little bite of weaponized physics at the end.

With the sequel, Between Home and Ruin, Karl just wanted to show off.

Make a book that's 25% world building/culture shock with some diplomacy and politicking? Sure.

Make the next 40% about logistics and a murder mystery thrown in? No problem.

The last 35% nothing but non-stop space battle? Why not?

And Karl makes it look so easy.

The story

In Storm Between the Stars, we followed a trade ship crewed by the Landry family. Much of that book focused on the father, Captain Niko Landry, as the crew explored the strange new space of the Censor—a space empire that has all the worst traits of George Orwell and Fahrenheit 451. I'd throw in the French Revolution, but those guys are amateurs compared to the Censor.

Between Home and Ruin focuses on the son, Marcus Landry, during his return trip. After the events of Storm Between the Stars, the crew reported to their government about contact with the Censor. The Landry's home system has decided that the opening step is to open negotiations and has taken (most of) the original crew (and their ship) to haul an entire embassy full of diplomats to the Censor. And after a while, his wife, the local Wynny, takes up a lot of heavy lifting in the book.

What follows is impressive, in part because everything advances the plot and contributes to world building at the same time. Even the recap of events from the last book services the plot, since most of it is to make the new characters understand exactly what the events on the ground really look like. And forget "Chekov's gun," this is more like Chekov's weapons depot. I haven't seen a story this well-structured since Die Hard.

When we get to the combat, I must admit that I haven't seen space battles this good since Timothy Zahn wrote Grand Admiral Thrawn. And Karl spends his time on only two ships during combat. Everything is either from the point of view of one freighter converted into a gun boat, or a capital ship. And if you told me you could make a large space battle tense just by restricting it to reports on a bridge, or capturing a space dog fight with fighters just by reporting what's on the screen, I wouldn't have believed it.

All in all, Karl has captured a book filled with readable and entertaining diplomatic negotiations, politics of warfare, cultural clashes en masse, interstellar warfare, a romance thread that I didn't mind, and a murder mystery thrown in for fun.

## The characters

The characters carry this book. Amazingly enough, half the book is carried by Marcus' wife, Wynny. Out of necessity during the book, she must solve a murder mystery, and it's surprisingly gripping. It's not a surprise because I doubt Karl's writing abilities, but because it's a murder mystery thrown into the middle of a military SF novel.

## The world

I also haven't seen this much visible intersection of culture impacting warfare since Victor Davis Hanson wrote Carnage and Culture. The Censor kills culture by making certain that any created work is destroyed with the author's death—which becomes a problem when it comes to writing military textbooks. Heh heh heh. Also, they get to learn the hard way what happens when their military hierarchy is run with political officers on hand.

The world building ties into the plot so much, it's mind blowing. Like trying to introduce Christianity to a world where oral tradition names God Harold (old joke: Harold be thy name) turns into a plot point. Even a three-page description of a local movie turns two seemingly unrelated "throwaway scenes" into a plot arc.

## The politics

I can sum up the politics in one image.

Koran Burning: Right or Wrong?



Content warning

There will be waterboarding as well as large-scale epic military battles.

Who is it for?

Between Home and Ruin is for anyone who enjoys old-school David Weber, military scifi Baen novels, or who wants to see brilliant world building translating into gripping action.

Why read it?

There are plenty of reasons to read it. It's fun. It's brilliant writing. It's a novel without one wasted word.

## Between Planets by Robert Heinlein Review by Chris Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

"I'm a citizen of the System," [Don] said harshly.

"Mmmm," said the headmaster. "That's a fine phrase and perhaps someday it will mean something. In the meantime, speaking as a friend, I agree with your parents. Mars is likely to be neutral territory; you'll be safe there. Again, speaking as your friend—things may get a little rough here for anyone whose loyalty is not perfectly clear."

The key to writing a juvenile book that appeals to all ages, as I will discuss later in greater detail, is balancing relative simplicity with a plotline and characters that don't insult adult intelligence. A juvenile does not want to try to figure out the complex metaphysics of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, for example, while an adult does not want to bore himself with the lacklustre simplicity of *Rocket Ship Galileo*. Juvenile books can and do have big ideas, as Heinlein proved time and time again, but they have to express those ideas in a way that, first and foremost, appeals to the target audience. Appealing to adults is a bonus.

*Between Planets* is quite successful in appealing to juveniles, and I enjoyed it a great deal when I was a child, but it isn't quite so good in retrospect. Rereading the book reminded me of just how much Heinlein managed to cram into a relatively short story, yet it also pointed out plot-holes and other weaknesses that let the side down. Truthfully, I would say that *Between Planets* is one of the lesser juveniles.

Don Harvey, a teenage schoolboy at a boarding school on Earth, wants nothing to do with politics. He comes from a mixed family – his scientist father was an Earth citizen, his scientist mother a Venus citizen and he was born in interplanetary space – and he doesn't have a side. Both worlds are quite strange to him. However, politics is about to take an interest in him. Earth, growing increasingly repressive under the Federation's law, has been threatening Venus ... and the colonials are on the verge of open revolt. Don is barely aware of how bad things have become until he gets a message from his parents, ordering him to travel to Mars at once. Oh, and he has to look up an old friend of his family along the way.

Dismissed from his school, Don meets the friend and is given a gift for his parents – a child's plastic

ring, wrapped in paper. He is still puzzling over this when he gets arrested and interrogated by the security services, who appear to believe that he was given a message for his parents. After much trouble, Don is released – with the ring. The security services keep the paper, apparently under the belief that there might be an invisible message on it and tell Don to leave the planet. His family friend apparently died of heart failure (which is, as Don realises, true of every form of death).

Taking ship to an orbital station, where he was meant to board his ship to Mars, Don discovers that it was captured by a raiding party from Venus. Having nowhere else to go – and being vouched for by a Venus Dragon (one of the planet's natives) – Matt is allowed to go with them to Venus, where he finds himself in a political limbo. He gets a job washing dishes to save money to send a message to Mars; eventually, he gets close enough to a girl – Isabel – to ask her to take the ring for safekeeping. This is only just in time. Venus is invaded, Don is captured ... and, unsurprisingly, the invaders want the ring.

Don escapes and joins the resistance, eventually making contact with a group of interplanetary rebels. They tell him the truth: his parents are part of the society and the ring contains one half of the instructions for making a new kind of space drive (and various other things, including a forcefield). Don recovers the ring from Isabel, gives it to the good guys and – eventually – finds himself crewing the new spaceship. There is a brief and very one-sided battle with the bad guys ...

... And the story just ends.

I think that *Between Planets* is a fun read – and I enjoyed it a lot when I was a kid – but there are too many plot holes for me to take it seriously these days. The greatest of them, perhaps, is the simple fact that too many things could have gone spectacularly wrong. Don didn't know – didn't even guess – the true importance of the ring. He could have lost it, or sold it, or simply given it away at any moment along his trip to Venus, never knowing what he'd managed to lose. On one hand, what Don didn't know Don couldn't tell; on the other, Don could easily have thrown the ring away at any moment. The whole plot, which was thrown together at the last minute, could have gone badly wrong. Someone might easily have taken the ring off Don too. The security services could have confiscated it just to be dicks.

Indeed, the oddly businessman-like attitude of the security goons is at variance with real secret policemen. The kind of people who drift into those jobs love wielding power over their fellow men. They cannot tolerate any challenge; any more than a religious man can tolerate a challenge to his faith. It's odd to see such nasty bastards be so understanding of Don's hatred, let alone let him go (with the ring) afterwards. But then, there are limits to how far Heinlein could go in a juvenile book. *Sixth Column* was far more detailed in showing how secret policemen keep a society under control.

The second major problem is that the story reaches a certain point – the final engagement in space – and then stops. Don is not reunited with his parents, nor does he ever get to Mars; there's no hint of what the post-war system will look like, now the war is over. And it would have been nice to see what his parents made of their son, now a man.

Indeed, Don himself is the core of the story. The politically neutral young man who didn't care about politics is forced to realise, to borrow a line from Heinlein himself, that politics is sometimes interested in him. He's oddly passive, compared to some of Heinlein's other heroes, but he does a lot of growing along the way. By the time Venus is invaded, Don is prepared to fight for it. There are some odd moments – he doesn't seem to grasp the symbolism of giving Isabel a ring – but he is a genuine hero.

And yet, from another perspective, it's possible to see him as a little brat. Given what was at stake, it's

hard to blame some of the rebels for being irritated with him. But then, he also got pushed around a lot while he was on Earth.

On a wider scale, the book also touches on issues of nationalism. Man wants to be free, but man also wants to belong. People join groups because they want – they need – social contact and, in order to get it, they are prepared to suppress their individuality to some degree. Going against the group can be dangerous, particularly during times of trouble. A person who does not contribute, or is seen as The Load, will often find himself kicked out when times are hard and resources are limited. As Heinlein put it:

“[Don] was beginning to feel the basic, gnawing tragedy of the wartime displaced person—the loss of roots. Man needs freedom, but few men are so strong as to be happy with complete freedom. A man needs to be part of a group, with accepted and respected relationships. Some men join foreign legions for adventure; still more swear on a bit of paper in order to acquire a framework of duties and obligations, customs and taboos, a time to work and a time to loaf, a comrade to dispute with and a sergeant to hate—in short, to belong.”

Indeed, people who see themselves as global citizens – ‘citizens of the system,’ as Don puts it – are cutting themselves off from their homes. Why should someone who shows no loyalty to their country be defended by their country? It’s quite hard, now, to have any emotional attachment to an ideal – the European Union or the United Nations – and people who claim to be global citizens are only ducking the question of nationality. In the meantime, those who are nationalists regard them as potential traitors. Nationalism has led to many evils, throughout history, but so too has an absence of nationalism. It’s a question of perspective.

Don is not the only person – or organisation – in the book that can be seen from more than one perspective. Heinlein neatly points out that one person’s view of the situation may not be identical to another person’s view and what the first person might consider irrational behaviour might, to the second, be perfectly rational:

“The [invasion of Venus] should not have happened, of course. The rice farmer sergeant had been perfectly right; the Federation could not afford to risk its own great cities to punish the villagers of Venus. He was right – from his viewpoint.

“A rice farmer has one logic; men who live by and for power have another and entirely different logic. Their lives are built on tenuous assumptions, fragile as reputation; they cannot afford to ignore a challenge to their power – the Federation could not afford to not punish the insolent colonists.”

It’s a valid point. And one that is too often forgotten these days. Indeed, along those lines, Heinlein provides an explanation of why we don’t trust experts. They get too many things wrong:

“Everything is theoretically impossible, until it’s done. One could write a history of science in reverse by assembling the solemn pronouncements of highest authority about what could not be done and could never happen.”

Heinlein, as always, paints a fine universe. It’s clear, right from the start, that Earth is a repressive state on the brink of a war scare. His interplanetary travel descriptions are as excellent as always, although nowhere near as detailed as *Farmer in the Sky* or *Starman Jones*. And Venus, while bearing no resemblance to the real Venus, is a convincing colonial society, mingled with alien life forms that seem mildly amused with humanity. It’s the sort of place I might like to live, if there wasn’t the threat of an inva-

sion. There are also some moments where Heinlein predicts the future, including Don carrying and using something akin to a mobile phone.

But, in other places, the book is tissue thin. Don develops a relationship with Isabel, and at the end of the book seems to think he will be marrying her, but the relationship is so thin as to be unconvincing. (Heinlein himself pointed out that there were difficulties in including romance in juvenile books, running the risk of annoying either male readers or their parents.) The logic of using Don as an unwitting courier makes no sense and putting him on the spacecraft is a dubious decision, while the end of the war isn't explored at all. It's nice to see Don finding a place, of sorts, but the story just ends.

Truthfully, *Between Planets* is a fun little read, but I think it is perhaps the least of Heinlein's juveniles.

## Chalk by N. R. LaPoint Review by Michael Gallagher <http://UpstreamReviews.com>

I'd seen N.R. LaPoint's *Chalk* making the rounds all over superversive Twitter, but never felt particularly led to crack it open. It's YA designation and the undeniable weirdness of its premise kept me at bay, but eventually the cumulative exultations of its readers led to me grudgingly buying a copy.

All I can say is buckle up. Because *Chalk* is a strange, fantastic trip indeed, and it's a long way down.

We kick things off with Raven Mistcreek, tween Catholic school student who returns home one day to find her house and family missing as if they had never occupied the now-empty lot they once sat in. In fact, her neighbor's house is empty, and the entire cul-de-sac seems oddly, eerily quiet. Before she can really ponder this strange turn of events, a voice prods her to fish a hidden box of chalk out from a nearby tuft of clover and run to her neighbor's house as if her very life depends upon it, because it does. A pack of drooling, gorilla-sized demonic hounds are about to descend upon her.

It's soon revealed that the voice was coming from a—stay with me—invisible floating cuttlefish, and one of high station, at that. This is Lord Blackwood, an emissary from a reality beyond ours sent to try to steer Raven to safety. The aforementioned dogs are in service to the apocalyptic horseman War and making quick work of the neighbor's front door. With no time to spare or places to hide, Blackwood instructs Raven to draw a weapon with the chalk on a nearby wall, which she does in frantic tears, well aware of just how foolish it all seems. A moment after completing her crude rendering of a pistol, she discovers she can pull it into her reality, and uses it to blast her pursuer's head clean off. After hastily drawing a trap door on the floor, they escape to the downstairs of the house and out the back door.

It's after this pulse-pounding opening that LaPoint's wonderful weirdness really kicks in. In a previous review, Declan Finn described the book as "Alice in Wonderland if the rabbit hole went all the way down to hell." While it seemed hyperbolic to me at the time, LaPoint's work lives up to the claim. After eluding her pursuers, Raven walks around her town, finding that the familiar and comfortable have been replaced with alien structures and objects:

"Once we left the park, everything familiar about my city gradually disappeared. Landmarks I expected were either not present, or they were replaced by something alien. An old World War II monument was missing. In its place was a large black rock that flashed like glitter in starlight. Approximately where the post office should have been, was a dark mound and a hole that led deep into the earth. Lord Blackwood warned me not to get too close. The owner of the burrow might be nearby."

It turns out our reality is being dragged into deeper levels of The Continuum, a layered series of realms which, like Dante's Hell, get worse the farther down one goes. And things do get very weird, very quickly. Further along the pair arrive in Gnimaolg Village. The place is a clash of time periods, with quaint cottagelike houses and brutalistic concrete buildings with modern office furniture sharing the same space. Its streets are patrolled by police cars and filled with roaming bands of carnivorous jelly blobs. Oh, and a shapeshifting fox ninja has also joined our hero's ranks.

What exactly is going on here? The Mistcreek family are actually a highborn clan, overseers of a realm teeming with fantastical life and places. In its capital of Veridian City, churches with towering spires and rose windows look out over bustling streets lined with idyllic Old World architecture, where shops sell modern day clothing. Knights of revered religious orders protect the populace with swords of pure light and ride War Unicorns whose hooves are alight with rainbow-colored flames.

But a secret plot laid long ago is finally coming to its diabolical fruition; the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, seeking to take over the realm, have been slowly incurring on what was once a place of prosperity and peace. Sensing danger long ago, Raven's father smuggled his family to our world, where Raven enjoyed a relatively normal childhood and was shielded from most of the schemes unfolding elsewhere. Unable to avoid the conflict between realms any longer as monsters began to prowl our world (her house was eaten by reality-devouring fiends, it turns out), her family has retreated further down into the Continuum to marshal forces against the machinations of the horsemen.

In the absence of the Mistcreeks' noble and restrained custody, an oppressive reality has taken its place. Faceless monsters roam the streets, looking for any reason they can to drag people off to the dreaded Black Church, the home of a sleeping red-eyed cyclopean horror whom the horsemen want to awaken. The story is a journey to reunite Raven with the rest of her family and, once reunited, stop the horsemen from summoning an ancient malevolent all-devouring being.

## The characters

The cast of characters is tremendous, but somehow never feels overcrowded. The core of the story revolves around a party of four people who are assembled by the end of the first act:

Raven Mistreek, our heroine, is perhaps one of the more refreshing female protagonists I've read in recent years. She's pleasantly plain looking, a superintroverted jumble of anxieties ever on the verge of overstimulation. While she does possess her magic chalk, she seems to have no innate special ability, unlike her little sister Ariadne who can pass between shadows, or her brother Damian, a knight. All she's got is a brain that thinks things through differently, and a ton of heart and faith. Despair is never in her vocabulary. However dire the circumstances, she's willing to pick up her chainsaw (she draws herself a chainsaw, too) and charge forward into battle, even if it means getting battered in the process. She's humble, readily admitting and admiring the superior fighting abilities of her friends, as well as modest, at one point complaining that an outfit she's changed into doesn't cover enough. All of this makes her the antithesis to what passes for your average YA femme protag, which alone should have every parent with an eighth grader buying this book.

The other members of the party are the aforementioned Lord Blackwood, whose gentle counsel and charming Irish accent make him a standout as a side character; if Chalk ever goes big, I can definitely see plushies of him selling like hotcakes. A kimono-clad fox maiden named Kasumi offers swift bladework that carries the bulk of the fighting early on. She's bubbly if a bit scatterbrained, and she and Raven become fast friends. Lastly there is Percy, a handsome paladin sent to find and escort Raven to her family. While he certainly seems capable in battle, wielding his light sword in some truly gripping

scenes, he also has a checkered past that got him banned from his knightly order. This doesn't set well with Raven's protective brother Damian when it becomes clear his attention for Raven goes deeper than his mission.

And I didn't even get to the giant orange chalk golem!

The world

LaPoint's worldbuilding is truly a remarkable kind of strange; at several points I wanted to put the book down, thinking "alright I'm done, this is just too out there," but my eyes wouldn't have it; you couldn't have pried this book out of my hands, even if the clashing aesthetics and bizarre alien everything was in danger of giving me a headache at times. Still, what is there is beyond immersive, as LaPoint's world slowly slides from the mundane to the eldritch. His knack for describing landscapes, buildings and creatures is wonderful; his Horsemen range from a Pestilence armored in hideous vermin hordes to a Death that rides an ebony skeleton undead dragon while dressed in a smart black suit and tie. Boys (dudes in general) will probably be more impressed by War's armored dactyl-raptor outfitted with miniguns under the wings. Because I mean come on.

What eventually convinced me to write this review was the fact that there was so much about this book that shouldn't have worked — it's a blend of almost a half-dozen genres, I avoid YA like the plague it is, the protagonists' dialogue is purposefully halting and clumsy at times and the arrival of a single anthropomorphic being in a book usually results in me catapulting said book into the sun — and yet here I am. By all rights this should have been a buffet of self-indulgent literary gorging. LaPoint manages to not only tame the chaos but craft a world from it as wide and sprawling as it is deep and treacherous.

"N.R. LaPoint's fantasy makes Neil Gaiman look like a poser," Finn wrote in his June 2021 review of the book. Consider my voice added to the chorus.

The politics

None.

Content warning

Blessedly, much of the raw sewerage that most mainstream YA lit is marinated in is absent from Chalk. This is LaPoint's face-punch to the subversive, nihilistic poison that permeates so much of postmodern culture. The romance that is teased between Raven and Percy throughout the book is sweet and demure, but the book is up to the skirt hem of its Catholic school uniform in monster blood and guts. The fighting comes fast and often brutal; people and monsters are clawed, seared, katana'd and outright cut in half with a chainsaw. The exact detail of the gore is left largely to the reader's imagination for the most part, which keeps it safely within PG-13 violence.

Who is it for?

While I'm a forty-something year old living testament that this book has the potential to win just about anyone over, I think the audience it should most critically reach is young teens. One of the more noble goals of the Superservice literary movement is to create heroes and legends for a generation without them. Raven Mistcreek is this. Loyal, grounded, relatable, able to draw hope and strength out of her own human limitations; she is a worthy heroine for any girl coming of age to spend time with. For boys, they'll find a classic reluctant hero archetype whose love of family manages to conquer their fear

of the unknown, finding within themselves the bravery to help fight the forces of evil. The hallmarks of a great adventure tale are all here, if at times a tad chaotic and rushed, but always exciting and enjoyable, and that is what made finishing Chalk my YA Road to Damascus moment.

Why read it?

Chalk is something to be experienced, especially by younger teen readers. Kids eager to grow up are targeted by major publishers who often introduce adult levels of violence and sexuality to an audience ill prepared for them. And the slime is even dripping down into the Middle Grade genre. A trip to your library's Children's or Young Adult section will have a wide variety of hagiographies for corrupt politicians like Joey (allegedly) by First Lady Jill Biden, a plethora of titles uncritically lauding the virtues of transgenderism such as Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* or *He's My Mom!* by Sarah Savage, and ultraviolent vile garbage like Adam Rapp's *The Children and the Wolves*. It is a cadre of the entertainment industry which can be as morally bankrupt as Hollywood, but twice as pernicious, since its agenda is often not as obvious when hidden within the printed page.

As I've said, the book stands on its own for nearly any audience. But kids need a lot more characters like Raven Mistcreek, and books like Chalk, to help redirect the imaginations and minds of impressionable readers upward again. And that's the best reason there ever could be.

**Flight of Vengeance by Andre Norton  
with P.M. Griffin & Mary Schaub  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>**

When an army threatened from the south, the Witches of Estcarp pooled their power together to save their country. Physically twisting and reshaping the mountains along Estcarp's southern border, they saved their nation from destruction.

But using that much power came with a price. Many Witches perished after The Turning, as this event is called, leaving Estcarp leaderless. Although the human army was stopped, the movement of the mountains stirred other things to wakefulness, sending monsters and Dark powers roaming the lands once again.

The story

Like *Storms of Victory*, its predecessor collection, *Flight of Vengeance* contains two novellas. The first is Mary H. Schaub's "Exile" while the second is the sequel to P.M. Griffin's entry in *Storms*. Griffin's tale is called "Falcon's Hope" and begins where "Seakeep" left off, while Andre Norton once more introduces us to both tales through the eyes of former Borderer turned scholar and chronicler Duratan. "Exile" follows the life of Nolar, a young girl from a noble family who is cast out due to the odd, large red birthmark that mars her face. Her father cannot bear to look at her because she resembles his first wife, her deceased mother, too closely. His second wife – who is of Falconer stock – holds to her race's distaste for imperfect offspring and wants Nolar gone.

Sent to live on a farm, Nolar becomes friends with an old scholar named Ostbor. A kind-hearted man, Ostbor takes her in, teaches her to read and write, and makes her his apprentice. When he dies of old

age some years later, she inherits his house and remains as a healer for the local residents. At least until her father summons her to the castle to attend one of her half-sister's weddings.

Nolar soon discovers she was actually called home in order to try and match her with a young nobleman. But when the prospective groom's family sees her marred face, they turn the offer down and she is cast out once again. Among the relatives who have come to the wedding, however, are two Witches. One of whom is related to Nolar through her mother but shows little interest in her. Her companion, on the other hand, studies the young girl before admitting in private that she has dreamt of Nolar and of Lormt, the repository of knowledge the Witches shun because most of the scholars are men.

Not long after this, the Turning occurs. During the upheaval Nolar receives a desperate telepathic summons from the same Witch, asking for her help and telling her to go to Lormt. Compelled by the call, Nolar sets off into an unknown future – and a battle for control of a source of power that can heal or kill, depending upon who wields it!

“Falcon's Hope” carries on the tale of Una of Seakeepdale and Tarlach of the Falconers. At the finale for “Seakeep” Tarlach had come to Lormt in the hope of finding a means to save his race, which has been rendered homeless and now faces extinction. For while Falconer men are celebrated mercenaries known to keep their oaths to the death, they are also infamous for hating women. When they had their base in the mountains of Estcarp's southern border they could keep their own females in secluded villages, to visit only when they needed to produce a new generation to follow them.

The Turning destroyed all of that, and the situation is dire, made more so when Una is injured on her way to Lormt to join in the nigh-hopeless search. Tarlach rushes her to safety and healing as fast as he can, but soon he and the Holdlady find another threat knocking at their door. A force of fighting men from another world plans to invade the Witch World to take it for themselves, and they want to establish a base in High Hallack from which to launch this incursion.

What unfortunate Dale will be the first to fall? None other than Una and Tarlach's beloved Seakeep. If they cannot return in time and mount a defense, the Dale and all the world is lost!

The characters

Duratan actually receives some extra characterization in *Flight of Vengeance*, being a member of the cast of “Falcon's Hope.” Nolar, an interesting and endearing character in her own right, does not get to interact with him much in “Exile” but it is hinted that the two grow closer the longer they work together in Lormt. Nolar herself is a thoughtful, curious, and determined character one is happy to travel with. The reserves of will power she unlocks facing her foes in her own story will make a reader cheer.

Una and Tarlach's return is a welcome one as readers will be able to follow along with their continuing relationship, which they must keep secret due to his race's customs. Falconers see any man who falls for a “mare's” wiles as a rabid dog, and with the two of them trying to save his people, that is the last thing they need.

The addition of the Falconer healer Pyra, who escaped to Estcarp before the Turning, only adds to the fun as this no-nonsense woman decides to intervene on her friends' behalf and that of her race. It's too bad we didn't get more stories with these characters – I would love to see what they would get up to next!



## The world

“Exile” takes place in familiar territory in Estcarp, but it offers a new look at the early days following The Turning, when the mountains were freshly changed, and people were still coming to terms with the event. Though Schaub delves a little too deeply into the worldbuilding for my tastes, she manages to keep things interesting and maintain the thread of tension as Nolar searches for a way to cure the Witch who summoned her.

“Falcon’s Hope” delves more deeply into not only the intricacies of Falconer life but adds “urban legends” of a sort to the area around Lormt. In itself the idea is fascinating and entertaining but added to the threat that builds in the latter half of the story, it’s absolutely mind-blowing by today’s standards. This is some of the best worldbuilding I have read yet.

## The politics

Once again, there are little to no politics in the narratives beyond a few comments that make it clear the male and female sexes occasionally have erroneous opinions regarding one another. Some might think the major enemy in “Falcon’s Hope” are political, but given the book was first printed in December 1992 and the bombing of the World Trade Center occurred in February of 1993, that’s more coincidence than a political commentary of some kind.

## Content warning

As stated previously, the Falconers survive as a race via rape. Though it is handled in delicate terms, that is something which prospective readers may dislike. It also must be said that the “urban legend” of Lormt has some nightmare-level physical effects; the victims’ bodies decay rapidly while they are still alive after they encounter the creature described in the story. While it is not dwelt on, this moment in the narrative is certainly disconcerting.

## Who is it for?

Andre Norton fans will enjoy this book, particularly if they have already read Storms of Victory, to which Flight of Vengeance is a companion. Fantasy readers and those who love a good romance will find it entertaining as well, and there is just enough genuine horror to give fans of that genre proper goosebumps, too.

## Why read it?

Who likes cliffhangers? “Seakeep” was the first half of the story, and “Falcon’s Hope” is the second. If you like one, you are going to want the other, making purchasing this book a necessity.

**Good to the Last Drop by Declan Finn**  
**Review by Ginger Man**  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

In Good to the Last Drop, Declan Finn brings the story of Love at First Bite to its epic, if not unexpected, conclusion.

In the previous book, vampire hunter extraordinaire Marco Catalano and his now girlfriend, the Catholic vampire Amanda Colt, confirmed the existence of a secret council that stands atop the vampire world. Now, the council's last surviving member is coming after them, and he is not happy.

## The story

Things really get kicked off with a werewolf attack on Marco, an attack that leaves him infected with the werewolf virus.

At first, you may be tempted to think that this isn't too big of a deal. After all, Marco with super-strength and enhanced speed should only make him a better hunter. While that is true, Father Rodgers (local head of the Vatican's own vampire hunting team) points out that this is far from a good thing. The werewolf virus doesn't just grant extra strength, speed, and senses, it also increases the host's personality traits. Given Marco's own intense and often violent personality, one can see where the priest would be concerned. That is the least of their worries though. As a newly turned werewolf, Marco is susceptible to control by other werewolves. Werewolves that will probably not be on his side.

Soon it is revealed that the werewolf that attacked Marco was sent by Misha, the final member of the vampire council uncovered by the last book. While he may be the last surviving member of the council, Misha isn't exactly alone. Marco and the others begin to wonder about this after Misha leads an attack on Marco's home in broad daylight. Not only does Misha seem immune to daylight, he shrugs off hundreds of rounds from the Vatican Ninjas, seeming to only respond to wooden bullets and holy water. I've no desire to give anything away so I will only say here that the vampire is able to do this because of a very close partner, an enemy Marco has already met and defeated once.

## The characters

How deep does Marco's darkness go? Will he give in to the worst of his urges and succumb to the werewolves? As it turns out, there are two things deeper than Marco's violent streak, his love for Amanda and his Catholic faith.

Amanda in this book finally develops into the vampire she has been afraid of becoming all along. She has feared her possible power but with the relationship between her and Matthew finally acknowledged she has an anchor and a reason to take the plunge.

Misha may be Mikhail's brother, but he is much colder, much more intelligent. This, plus his alliance with a certain demon, his personal vendetta with Marco and his history with Amanda make him the most formidable foe Marco and his team have faced.

## The world

We now have vampires, demons, werewolves, and shapeshifters populating Marco and Amanda's world. Not only that, there are wizards, vampire societies and an apparently hierarchy amongst the creatures of the supernatural. The forces fighting them are also extensive as at one point there is a fleet of helicopters dumping Holy Water on an army of vampires.

Finn also applies some of his trademark creative thinking in putting together his creations to get around their weaknesses. The result is a foe that leads to Amanda finally unleashing her full potential as a white vampire.

The politics

The UN is a haven for blood sucking denizens of the undead. What else do you need to know?

Content warning

The recently acknowledged romance between Marco and Amanda gets pretty heated and racy at times. While things on the romantic angle stay PG-13 (passions aside, they are good Catholics after all), the amount of blood necessary to keep Marco in check definitely would push a movie based on the book into R territory.

Who is it for?

If someone combined John Wick, Batman, and Blade, you would have Marco Catalano. If you like seeing the undead get what's coming to them, you're going to love this. Or if you liked characters like Shi or Red Sonja, then Amanda Colt will be right up your alley.

Why read it?

If you've come this far with Marco and Amanda, why wouldn't you finish the story? More importantly, if you want an action-packed adventure mowing down the undead hordes, then this entire series is something you should get into. And once you're done, you'd be remiss if you didn't check out Finn's St. Tommy series.

## Grave Injustice by Allen Goodner

### Review by Declan Finn

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Michael Remington is a half-angel with a certain set of skills, skills that make him a nightmare to the forces of Hell. When angels need a mission done on earth, they call in Heaven's Hitman.

The story

The story of Grave Justice is well set up and quite effortlessly executed, if you'll pardon the expression. Michael Remington appears to be a private investigator, but when minions of the forces of darkness need to be put down, he's called in to finish the job.

But now, zombies are rising all over Dallas. Whole cemeteries of the dead are on the move. People die and immediately come back with a desire to kill. The Hosts of Heaven have tagged Remington to put down the threat.

Grave Justice was an odd one. To start with, I was given a copy to review, and this is book two. Funny enough, at times, it almost felt like book one. Many of the characters had been previously established, but they were very well set up here. It's clear that Goodner wants people to be able to pick up this book without an issue. Unfortunately, there are some parts that suffer from not reading book one. So be certain to do that.

There is a good use of police tactics scattered throughout, even though they can do little to stem the forces of Hell.

## The characters

Like Harry Dresden, Michael Remington is a supernatural PI, and that's where the similarities stop. He's still recovering from the death of his wife. He has an interesting relationship with the Texas Rangers. It's a refreshing change that we have a hero who can play well with others. And while Remington is as serious as a member of the clan MacCloud, every time he mouths off at the Host of Heaven, it can get amusing— especially when his Mission: Impossible briefing is as clear as mud.

Goodner also has a new take on the supernatural: TELL PEOPLE. Because they more people knew about the forces of Hell on the loose, the more people would go to church and combat it.

Goodner also has an interesting array of characters throughout. The secretary that was used by a succubus, and still has some leftover problems. There's the assistant who's a Shaman of some sort. Remington's girlfriend is ten times older than he is, but works as an EMT.

## The world

Allen Goodner at least tries to write Urban Fantasy with metaphysics that make sense. He clearly puts in an effort. Limiting the narration to Remington's perspective means that anything Goodner wants to leave vague, he can just say that Remington doesn't know; occasionally, this leaves Remington to fill in the blanks by himself, and he has a cynical perspective that probably stems from being over 130 years old.

But unlike some books that have all the direction of a demagnetized compass, it is very clear that Remington is battling the forces of Hell.

Goodner also pulls off a lot of things that you won't see in your average zombie film.

One thing Goodner does is to have demons be escapee souls from Hell. While theologically irksome, it does distinguish threat levels, making "demons" different from "Fallen Angels," which are a different class of Hell on Earth.

## The politics

Heaven and Hell are relatively apolitical. Though guns are considered a good thing. After all, it's Texas. Goodner makes it clear that there is good and evil here. And while Remington does try for the redemption of souls, it's also clear that he will put down evil if it is without remorse.

Also, politicians are stupid, but that is a universal constant.

## Content warning

Zombies and attached gore abound. You've been warned.

## Who is it for?

Fans of Harry Dresden, Highlander, or just noir PIs will have fun with this.

## Why read it?

This is Harry Dresden with a more serious tone, but better theology. While not completely devoid of humor, this honestly feels like Harry Dresden meets Highlander.

I definitely recommend book one. But once you're done with that, certainly try Grave Justice.

**Hell Spawn by Declan Finn**  
**Review by Michael Gallagher**  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

New York City and cop drama go hand in hand. Said same city and violent crime that can only be described as the demonic go hand in claw.

In Hell Spawn, the first book in the Saint Tommy series of novels by Declan Finn, the two are brought together.

But how do you arrest a demon?

The story

Detective Thomas Nolan is a family man and by-the-book homicide detective in New York City's 105th precinct in Queens. He's also a devout Catholic who's active in the Opus Dei and ministers Holy Communion to the sick. He's seen a lot on the job, but when he suddenly bilocates (appears in two places at once) while foiling a mugging, even that manages to throw him for a loop. With an arrest on his plate before he's even arrived for his shift, his day only gets busier when he discovers he can detect a stench that no one else can: it's the literally ungodly smell of evil.

He traces it through the building, barely keeping his breakfast down all the way. Its source is a transient with bloody hands that had been picked up that morning in a park, who upon seeing Nolan, attacks our hero in a homicidal rage. The ensuing brawl trashes half the building as the undernourished, unkempt attacker easily holds multiple people at bay while also fighting Nolan. It's only through a literal Hail Mary that our protagonist eventually gains the upper hand, all before he's even had a chance to sign in.

This absolute roller coaster ride of a kick-off thickens quickly after people in Nolan's neighborhood and life start dying in excruciatingly gruesome fashions. After a taunting message is left at one crime scene, it becomes clear the killer has Nolan in his sights, and he's got otherworldly help. However, Nolan eventually learns that he does as well: supernatural abilities previously only known to be attributed to saints.

The characters

Nolan himself eschews several of the well-worn cop tropes prevalent in traditional crime drama. There's no bitterness at an unappreciative public, no jaded stoicism from years of seeing the worst in humanity day in and day out, no secret mistress. He's just a decent man who holds his faith and family close to him. It's his deep faith in particular that acts as a bulwark against the coarsening of the soul that creeps into the heart of every New Yorker. As he says during an interview with Internal Affairs following the ruckus: "A lot of the guys we arrest aren't bad guys, just guys who do bad things. No reason not to talk to the parts that are still okay inside."

He's an able marksman and fighter, but humble enough to be in outright denial when a priest friend of his suggests he's imbued with saintly powers. His ability to continue to see the humanity in everyone

he interacts with, even on the streets, is a refreshing change from the cynical cop stereotype we've become used to seeing on shows like *Law & Order* or, Christ forbid, anything Shonda Rhimes has had anything to do with.

Nolan's wife Mariel and son Jeremy fit their roles as supporting characters well. Mariel in particular plays the part of a doting and protective mother, even wielding a shotgun with aplomb against would-be home invaders. Jeremy is present to a much lesser extent, but still given enough of a presence and personality to care about once demons start menacing him.

Backing Tommy up on the case are his trusty partner in the older, more sarcastic Detective Alex Packard, and Father Richard Freeman, a Dominican priest who is also an expert profiler and psychiatrist. It's Freeman who initially floats the notion that Tommy is getting divine assistance and helps piece together the cryptic clues left at murder scenes in order to help gain insight into the killer's motivations. Packard is never at a loss for a dry wisecrack (at times, maybe a bit too often), but doesn't hesitate to leap in the fray to help Tommy when his back is against the wall. The team plays well as a complimentary whole, each offering their own skills and insights as the case progresses. Nolan's unquestionably the star of the bunch, but Finn balances the three personalities well.

## The world

It's modern-day New York City in all its awfulness. As an expat from Brooklyn myself, I can confirm that Finn definitely nails the atmosphere of the cramped old metropolis, right down to commutes along its serpentine tangle of highways, streets and bridges. The particular layouts of residential Queens versus cosmopolitan Manhattan are visualized well and the tone and tenor of the speech and personality of the various locals is spot on. It's accurate if largely nondescript, since for all its fantastic elements, the setting is more slice-of-life than set piece, but it works in the story's favor.

## The politics

Hoo boy. While no political hay is being made for the most part, a major turning point in the plot centers around abortion both as act and industry. Finn himself is a practicing Catholic and makes no bones about this. One should not be surprised to discover then, that the procedure the Church refers to as "an act of intrinsic evil that cannot be allowed under any circumstances," isn't portrayed in a positive light. You've been warned.

As far as the book is concerned, abortionists, and those actively furthering the goals and objectives of the abortion industry are the bad guys, and they are portrayed as such. To the point of caricature? Is it message fiction, as some of those leaving one-star reviews would have you believe? I don't think so; Finn for his part still manages to treat his antagonists less as caricatures than the likes of John Scalzi and company would treat a socially conservative character. But this is without a doubt the 600-pound gorilla at the top of the heap as far as issues go. Reader be advised.

Additionally, Nolan's first-person commentary touches briefly on the various *crie du coeur*s that flit through the cultural landscape from a law enforcement perspective: headaches caused by Antifa and BLM, along with their lawyers get passing mentions, but otherwise the story stays focused on the action and finding a demon-possessed murderer.

## Content warning

While the book contains nothing involving sensuality and only a single four-letter word, the book is awash in blood and violence. It's always contextually relevant, yes, but there is a lot. Finn's forces of

Hell are seething with hatred, malice and wonton bloodlust, and in describing their travesties, he does not flinch. You might. If you've seen the video for Slayer's Repentless and got through it okay, you'll be able to take the final confrontation. If it turns you off, well . . .

Who is it for?

Christians (particularly Catholics) will get more mileage out of this than non, naturally. Nolan's faith is a major part of his life, but Finn is careful to write him as authentic without being preachy. If you can handle that, Saint Tommy still stands up as a worthwhile and virtuous hero figure. Aside from that, this book probably has some of the best written action sequences I've read. Finn's words set the pace for his conflicts in a way that gets you turning pages.

Why read it?

The dialogue is great. The horror is indeed horrifying. And as a police procedural, its a decent effort despite its supernatural trappings. If you can stomach the violence, the action and gunplay is taught and lightning fast. The Saint Tommy NYPD series is one that wears its heart on its sleeve, but its a big heart willing to face down anything the Evil One has to throw at it. I'm definitely checking out book 2, Death Cult.

## Invasion: Contact: Book One by David Ryker

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimbosSFReviews.blogspot.com>

So, let's say that you're a prospective space fighter pilot. You're a member of a military that is dedicated to protecting humanity from alien threats, only they've never had an engagement. There are no known alien species. You're out among the stars testing to receive your wings. Command calls with a course correction. What happens next? If you didn't guess that two alien species would show up and start shooting at each other, I'm guessing that

- 1.) You haven't read David Ryker's Invasion: Contact: Book One and
- 2.) You're having a better day than Cadet Eddie Pale.

(For the record, no, that isn't a spoiler. It all happens in like the first three pages.)

What comes next? I guess you'll have to read the book. Nope, I'm not saying. Ask my daughter how many times she fell asleep watching The Half Blood Prince before she found out who the movie/book was named after. I'm a stinker. Nope, no spoilers here.

What I will say is that Invasion: Contact is a masterpiece of military action and political intrigue. There is a lot that would go into fending off an alien invasion and Ryker nails it. There is always something going on. Someone is always up to something and it's not always helpful. Then again sometimes it is, or at least the character thinks it is.

Ryker seems to have a really good grasp of human nature. When the end of the world comes knocking and we all need to work together to preserve ourselves as a species there are those who look to their own personal benefit. That's realistic. Whether it's a US President known to "never let a crisis go to waste" or Winston Churchill using a war with the Nazis to gain the office of Prime Minister, that's how

some people will always act. In a lot of cases, they're powerful people, because they've found and/or manufactured so many opportunities in the past and it's become habit.

Oh, and factionalism still seems to be a thing too. That also is human nature, and it works. Something that has kind of bothered me in the past is that a lot of Science Fictional work assumes that something will happen, and humanity will start all working together and it will instantly be all hunky-dory. With Star Trek it's the arrival of the Vulcans. With Robotech it's the crash landing of the SDF-1. It's like one alien shows up and we all join hands and start singing Kumbaya (or Internationale if you prefer, I guess). It wouldn't work that way. Groups will still have their agendas and will be working for their own benefit, even if they're working together in public. Ryker gets that.

But there's the other side of the equation too. Sometimes a Commanding Officer makes the wrong call. Sometimes he makes the right one. Regardless, there are times when an officer's decisions are going to result in the death of his subordinates. It's not pretty but it's the way the world works. The good ones will note the losses and keep fighting. They'll mourn when they can, but they'll understand that the job requires them to keep fighting until then. That's a pretty good description of Red Hand Loreto, commander of the human fleet. He's hard but fair and he gets the job done. I like this guy.

Invasion: Contact is called Book One for a reason. There are at least two sequels planned to be released in very short order. In watching some of these characters develop, I'm wondering if Ryker isn't already showing us some future villains. I'm thinking of one character in particular who appears to be more than just a little disgruntled. I know we've all blamed the boss for something that went wrong before. I just think that some cases are worse than others and that sometimes people are in a better spot to do something about their anger than others. Time, and the next two books, will tell if I'm right or wrong, but I know which way I'm betting.

The battles in this book are mesmerizing. Ryker does a damn fine job of not only keeping it interesting, but also making it believable. Yes, things blow up. Yes, troops are lost on all side because that's how things work in real wars. Sometimes shots hit. Sometimes they miss. It all makes sense. And if I got a chuckle out of one ship's weakness well, hey, that just makes the story better.

The aliens in this book actually don't think like human beings. That's awesome. I mean, I mentioned Robotech earlier, right? Who can ever forget Exedore appearing and saying, "Take me to your leader"? but I find it hard to believe that a species that evolved on another planet under separate conditions and with a totally different biology would think like human beings. I mean, look at the planet we live on. There are so many differences here and biologically we're all compatible. Why would something with a completely different brain structure think like us? They wouldn't. That's one thing that really works in Invasion: Contact. The motivations of one of the two alien species can be figured out, but their mode of communication is just not what any human being would consider normal.

That leads into my only really complaint about the novel. One of the alien races is pretty cardboard. We know that they're the attackers. We know that they're to be feared. We just don't know why. I mean, it's possible that they're just xenophobic and out to destroy all other life as a threat. If so though, it would be great to know that. As of right now, they're just targets with better tech than humanity has. I hope that changes further into the series. A mysterious villain works well but a truly evil one would be even better. So here's hoping. I'm looking forward to reading the rest of the trilogy because Invasion: Contact is an absolute blast. David Ryker has hit it out of the park in his first book.

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Rusty Fighters



Jesus/Crawdads/Death by Betsy Phillips  
Review by Tom Feller

This is another collection of short stories by the same author, but there are only three and that are all longer than the longest one in the other collection. In “Jesus Has Forgiven Me, Why Can’t You?”, the narrator discovers that her boyfriend has both a wife and a family so, obviously, they break up. Her ex-boyfriend then asks her forgiveness, hence the title of the story. Now one thing they had in common was a love of professional wrestling, and he is even an “amateur” professional wrestler, which means that he participates in matches that do not pay much money. To get revenge, she recruits Jesus Christ Himself as a partner in a wrestling tag team match against her ex-boyfriend and one of his friends.

“Mother of Crawdads” is a witchcraft and ghost story about a woman who persuades the witch grandmother of a man she murdered, who was also her brother-in-law, to help her stop a real estate development that will destroy a creek. Now in this world creeks and rivers are intelligent and can have relationships with people. The woman and the witch do so by creating a new species of crawfish and seeding them in the creek. They then get the crawfish declared an endangered species, and the development is halted. In “Little Sister Death”, Death is shown to be a young woman who meets St. Francis of Assisi, William Faulkner, and author William Gay and has conversations and dealings with them. All the stories have an original and unique voice.

League of Angels by Thomas Tan  
Review by Caroline Furlong  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

God is dead, they said, and religion is a superstition which man has outgrown. All those who do not bow to the Lumen Corporation are enemies that must be hunted down and exterminated.

Forced to hide and run, the truly religious strike back from the shadows. Forming underground churches, passing refugees from safe house to safe house, they find ways to fight as the Lumen Corporation brings real demons into the fray. Amidst the prayers and the tears, the faithful whisper tales of the three men who fight the demons head-on: the Archangels.

Governments the world over have fallen under the sway of the demonic Lumen Corporation, which preaches an end to religion and a new dawn for man. Vatican City is intact, but barely; throngs of angry people fill the square outside St. Peter’s Basilica. Rather than greet the pope and call for his blessing they chant hate-filled statements while demanding his downfall – and the destruction of the Church. Hope remains, but as the pontiff himself says, they cannot rely on God and do nothing. They have to take action. They have to fight back.

Enter Chelsea Shields, a pop star sitting at her dying rock star brother’s bedside. She’s desperate to save him and has called for a doctor, but there is nothing that can preserve her brother now. He’s dying, and if they want him not to suffer for eternity, it’s his soul that needs rescuing.

Chelsea does not take the arrival of Father Raphael well, but she likes what his prayers and sacramentals reveal about the state of her brother’s soul even less. Pursued by the Lumen Corporation, Chelsea and Fr. Raphael are only saved by the timely intervention of Father Michael, who brings blessed bullets and bombs to kill the Hell Hounds chasing the two. From there they take Chelsea to meet Father Gabriel to exorcise the devils in her soul.

Pursued by the very powers of Hell itself, Chelsea has to make a decision: rejoin the people hunting her down or stay with the priests. Meanwhile, the Archangels' faith is tested as they are hemmed in on every side. In the process, they struggle to understand what fighting for and saving on God's behalf actually means in a world ravaged by the devil "devouring souls" all around them.

## The characters

By far, the Archangels are the best characters in the book. Father Raphael is calm, quiet, and the least combative member of the trio. A doctor by training he mediates disputes between his compatriots and sees to the wounds of others, whether they're physical or spiritual.

A Dominican, Father Gabriel is the youngest Archangel and the most cheerful. Descended from a samurai who converted following the martyrdom of St. Paul Miki, he literally carries his ancestor's blessed blade into battle. An exorcist, he is relied upon for his knowledge, but the inexperience and idealism of youth means he is better at personal combat than planning and executing a mission.

Finally, there is Father Michael. An ex-soldier, Father Michael is haunted by memories of a crime he committed on behalf of the Lumen Corporation before he converted and became a priest. The Archangel most adept with weapons and therefore the default leader of the group, his combat practicality occasionally clashes with Father Gabriel's idealism. The story is as much about his search for redemption as it is about rescuing Chelsea Shields.

## The world

The world looks like ours, but worse. Governments persecute and hunt down the faithful, and while some nations resist, the Lumen Corporation has operatives all over the world. Where the local government won't cooperate, they simply send their own operatives to do the job. Things are looking darker by the minute, and what hope there is remains firmly rooted in God, as trusting in man is what put everyone in this position in the first place.

## The politics

Satan's on the prowl and the only way to escape him is to hold fast to God. That is the extent of the politics in this novel.

## Content warning

Lumen Corporation's president shows Chelsea just what the corporation has in mind for humanity, and it isn't pretty. There is also a description of rape, an abortion clinic haunted by the bodies of the slain, and a few similar items meant for adult eyes only. This is not a book intended for children. Oh, and it ends on a cliffhanger. As yet, Tan hasn't written the sequel hinted at in the final pages of the novel.

## Who is it for?

Thriller fans, horror aficionados, and readers who like an apocalyptic setting. No, this book isn't apocalyptic in the strict sense, but events make it clear things speeding toward the Second Coming. If you like any of that, then this book is for you.

## Why read it?

For all the darkness in this novel, hope shines brightly from the pages. The devil may have his hour, but

God will have His day. Even with a cliffhanger ending the Archangels are worth cheering on and make for excellent traveling companions. If you want something that reminds you God is with those who are with Him, then League of Angels is for you.

## Lost Souls by Tim Rangnow

Review by Becky Jones

<https://ornerydragon.com>

Jack Dalish is a private investigator in San Antonio, Texas. His cases include the usual cheating spouses, or someone trying to find hidden or embezzled funds; cases that are not exciting or exotic but pay the bills. Jack is also one of the few humans who knows that monsters are real and are living among us, disguised as humans. He has a talisman that allows him to sense when one of the Filii Nox is, or has been, nearby. Because of that, his cases include those with supernatural victims and perpetrators.

This first book in Rangnow's Jack Dalish series opens with Jack's quiet breakfast interrupted by a distraught grandmother seeking his help with the case of her missing granddaughter. The police appear to have reached a dead end and she's been sent to Jack by his friend Sergeant Oliver "Ollie" Williams, who has reason to believe that this case is one that only Jack can solve.

Since the death of his sister and his acquisition of the talisman he wears around his neck, Jack has devoted the majority of his time and efforts to helping humans and Nox solve crimes involving Nox while keeping the existence of the Filii Nox hidden from humans.

After talking with Ollie, Jack dives into the case of the missing granddaughter. In the course of his investigations, he meets a reporter who tells him there are several other unsolved cases of missing little girls. Are they all connected, and what exactly is the Nox creature whose essence he keeps picking up at the abduction sites? The further Jack gets in this case, he finds more questions than answers. The tension builds nicely as Jack races to save the kidnapped children before it's too late.

Rangnow creates a San Antonio that has a sizeable Nox population blending in with the regular human population. There's even a bar on the Riverwalk (similar to a certain bar in Chicago) where Nox can get together without fear of exposure.

Jack Dalish is a well-rounded character with admitted flaws and room for growth. The secondary characters, especially Ollie, are complete as well. The only one who felt a little flat was the reporter. Her attraction to Jack was so fast that I became suspicious of her motives. But then, that may have been the intention.

The world-building is thorough, the world is consistent, and it's done without huge info-dumps breaking up the story. We learn how the Filii Nox came into existence through a conversation with the reporter and that Jack's use of his talisman also comes with a cost, which is nice for the reader. Jack isn't some superhero with a super-charged Deus ex Machina trinket that solves all problems with no after-effects for the user. There were also a couple of nerd/geek cultural touchstones that were fun to run across; kind of like finding an Easter egg in a game.

Lost Souls is a good, fast read and is available through Kindle Unlimited and as a paperback. It's the first of seven books in the Jack Dalish series and I plan on working my way through the rest of them. Rangnow has an extensive catalog that is worth checking out as well.

Mamelukes by Jerry Pournelle  
Review by Pay Patterson  
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

This is likely going to be an EASY review to write. That possibility DOES exist, for two reasons:

1. There was a period of time, starting somewhere in the 1970s, when I thought science fiction had abandoned me. It was dreadful! I think I found “Have Spacesuit, Will Travel” when I was 10, in 1963, and suddenly, I had a refuge, safe from the world. But gradually, it seemed that refuge had vanished. Then I discovered Larry Niven in 1978 or 1979, and then Jerry Pournelle, and David Drake; and, eventually, Baen brought me treasures I could not have imagined.

Janissaries, the first volume in this series, was one of the books that kept me going. It was published in 1979, and somewhere in my baggage there is still an illustrated copy that I picked up at a used bookstore prior to 1986. So, I have MUCH affection for the series, and thus for this book.

2. I have a bit of a track record for not wanting to finish a series that I love. I have yet to watch the final episode of a Ricky Gervais series about a lovable autistic nursing home attendant. More recently, I didn't watch the final episode of “The Mandalorian” until the previews for the new season went live. My rationale: as long as I don't watch the last episode, the story isn't over.

HOWEVER!!! I did NOT allow that to stop me in this case. I grabbed it, read it between meals and while waiting to see the doctor, and finished it last night, despite being dead tired. And thus: I think this will be an easy review to write, because love and stuff.

The book review begins. This is what will appear on Goodreads and Amazon, with, perhaps, minor edits.

The title page states that this is a book by Jerry Pournelle, with contributions by David Weber (a long-time fan) and Phillip Pournelle (Jerry's son). The Wikipedia entry on the book provides interesting information about the development of the text. I could only find ONE Weber-ism I was reliably certain of (a reference to BuShips); the story, and the text, are entirely consistent with Jerry's earlier writing, and we may truly thank those involved in the revival process for that.

The story arc starts as Captain Rick Galloway waits for death, an expendable pawn in a proxy war in Angola. On his side are a platoon-strength body of men, all that survived out from a battalion, recruited and supported by the CIA. His command is scattered in hasty defense positions scraped out on a hill that was supposed to be an extraction point. But Headquarters just told him no evacuation is possible.

Coming up the road is a vastly superior Cuban-lead force, intent on their destruction.

How will they survive THIS? Well, they don't, actually. Instead, a spaceship lands and rescues them. Sort of. As it turns out, the rescue has only two exits: exile to lifetime incarceration, or exile to supervise production of a particular harvest on a distant planet, containing various primitive cultures. They elect the farming-supervision choice.

Over the first three novels, which have since been combined into one volume in “Lord of Janissaries,” we follow the progress of Rick and his men as they emerge into the strange world of Tran. There never seems to be good stopping point to the story, because the life-and-death conflict never ends. First, there

is the conflict that quickly forms among Galloway's troops. Lead by the other surviving officer, some realize that their weapons are so superior to those of the indigenous people, that they can set themselves up and rule as kings.

Second there are the conflicts with the various groups existing on the planet. It appears that the aliens have regularly kidnapped small-ish military units for the same purpose as Rick's group, and some of them had enough of a core group that they were able to sustain a solid cultural presence over the centuries. And, with few exceptions, a state of war exists wherever there are people. Even though their weaponry is primitive, compared to what Rick is supplied with, even a rock can kill you.

Finally, there is a conflict with the aliens that brought them there. From oral traditions found on the planet, combined with some clues provided by the abductors and other members of the Galactic society, Rick discovers that the plan is to have his group organize the harvest of the desired crop. As a reward, they might all be killed, probably by kinetic strikes from space. But, if they do NOT cooperate, they most certainly will be killed.

In this last volume, we finally get to the endgame for Rick's command. The endgame can't come too soon for Rick; he has become sick and near death from the strain of command, and the knowledge that there are innocent civilians who die as a result of the constant war. Other than the few troops left out of the group he brought from Earth, he has scarce sure allies; the most powerful nations always have their own best interests at heart, and require constant attention to keep them on the same path as Rick. That grows more difficult with each battle.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, the aliens are preparing for another abduction, with a very strange composition: a woman who was formerly a member of the San Francisco Police Department; a disgraced high school science teacher who is methodically drinking himself to death; and, a former heroin addict with a long-ago tour as a community builder in Africa. They collect a vast assortment of educational technology, and a few other things, and anticipate being relocated to a primitive village in a distant part of the world. As with Rick's troops, they don't find out the truth until too late.

And another group of aliens is interfering with the process.

And Rick grows more weary...

It's a great last chapter. While I think that new stories could easily be written in the universe, the cycle of the tale is finished. At the end, we know what will happen next; not the details, but the path. Since it's been almost forty years since I started my relationship with Galloway and Company, I'd like to send a letter to my youthful self, promising that the read will be satisfactory, not only in the short term, but also in the end.

## Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Remember 80s action movies? You know, they were fun, a little mindless, sometimes goofy and would on occasion break the laws of physics? Or would have magical ninjas? Maybe something like Commando or The Running Man, Firewalker, or American Ninja Warrior part 19.

Now imagine if the writers were on a combination of drugs that not even the 80s would have touched,

an unlimited budget, and stuntmen who don't fear anything.

You now have a slight idea of what you're in for with Maxwell Cain: Burrito Avenger.

The way this was described on Twitter? By the author himself?

John Wick, only with a burrito instead of a puppy.

The story

This one isn't ... quite as insane as it first appears. Honest.

Kind of. Sorta.

It's complicated.

To begin with, unlike the deep, complicated events and emotions behind John Wick's "Puppy = killing spree," the burrito in this instance is less the puppy, and more the last straw. In a city that is as corrupt as Chicago, only with an extra layer of scum at the top, Pan Pajita's police force is so overwhelmed that the police "can't respond to every little shooting." But no one at the top minds, because the criminals pay "fines" (usually a portion of the take from the crimes) that goes into the private coffers of public officials.

Okay, fine. It could also be Dirty Harry's superiors in LA.

This one opens with one of the best opening lines since Jim Butcher's "The building was on fire and it wasn't my fault."

Adam's is "Maxwell Cain had killed dozens of men. In fact, that was kind of the problem."

It even has a little setup tag that sounds like an 80's film trailer. You can just hear the narrator read "In a world where one man..." etc.

But after a day where Maxwell Cain (I'm sure that it's a coincidence that Max Caine sounds like Matt Payne, honest .... especially the parts that go into bullet time) kills six bank robbers, then is fired for it, all before lunch, he's pissed off and hangry (No, I didn't misspell it).

When some random gangbangers hipcheck Caine into spilling his burrito, he whips out the cheesy one liner ("maybe I'll be a teacher.") and goes to beat up some thugs. (The next chapter is called "Lesson Plan", and the joke concludes with the line "Class dismissed.")

When the thugs need to be put down, it turns out that they were off to pay a mafia bag man — who still wants his payoff.

That confrontation spirals into a war with an entire mafia family, who assume he's a hit man out to destroy them.

With a few breaks to pause for something strange, like character moments, this is basically a 250 page running shootout. The scene that best exemplifies this is where a gunship blasts a monorail train off the track, causing the car to land on top of a hotel roof, which eventually crashes through every floor to

land into an electrified swimming pool, into which Max Caine Sparta-kicks a thug while declaring “THIS! IS! SAN PANJITA!”

Did I mention that there’s a bit of hat tipping in this book? I admire Adam’s restraint— at no point does Max end up losing his shoes while walking through broken glass. Thought he may have lost track. There’s every set piece shootout ever seen on film — shooting up a mall, a hotel, a public art exhibit (the Pieta re-imagined with lizard people — kill it with fire!), a run and gun car chase, a mobster’s home, a train, “the docks,” the standard warehouse, and a few other places thrown in. And Caine double-wields every chance he gets. We have Jackie Chan’s baseball wielding thugs in suit and tie. He has John McClane’s habit of yelling at gunmen (An RPG tears up the street, he yells, “Do you have any idea how much it costs to fix a pothole that big?”). At least one man killed during a poker game had aces and eights (subtle).

Did I mention that the mafia enforcer dresses in white and carries a golden Desert Eagle — meaning that he’s the man with the golden gun?

And like with John Wick, for Max Caine, cars are his only weakness... and I mean getting hit with them. That, and the running gag that every time he sees a burrito and reaches for it, he summons more gunmen.

Then there’s the new stuff — like “gunfight selfies” (I can see that being a thing) a running gag of shopping while they work, and this is the first Catholic action hero I’ve seen since my last Saint Tommy novel. There’s comparing someone’s home to a serial killer den. And the prescient line of dialog that says, “The city council declared it was unfair for cops to get protective gear when civilians don’t, said we needed to even the odds.”

Most of the combat is very well done and highly detailed. All the action is tightly paced. Though after a while, even Adam stops detailing the path of every bullet and discusses how everyone is just firing on automatic and spraying faceless gunmen with bullets. To be perfectly fair, Adam does try to describe every minion who lasts more than a few lines, though that’s a lot of bald or bearded men after a while, and I wondered when there would be other descriptors used. Though that’s probably just “one writer nitpicking another.”

And the one liners. Oy, the one liners. To fit in more one liners, Max Caine talks to himself. A lot.

Some examples?

After his lunch is ruined and one of the killers is run over: “Lunch hour traffic will really kill you.”

“I’m the best cop in the department.”

“You’re the most violent cop in the department.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I don’t want water. I’m thirsty for blood.”

While surrounded by gunmen:

“Well, yippe ki yay.”

This feels like a Dirty Harry movie starring Ahhnuld, meets Falling Down, but with John Wick-level stunts.

Anyway, I fully recommend it in all of its utterly insane glory.

## The characters

The characters and characterizations are what Terry Pratchett would do with cliches. Our hero grew up in this nightmare town, but he learned to shoot from his mother, who was tougher than he was. Our heroine is a baker, whose father was a cop, so she also shoots. Because everyone in this town has a gun.

## The world

The world-building here is impressive, because you don't really notice how thoroughly they've built up the world until a quarter to a half way through the book. It's not very SciFi, but there are some touches along the way.

We won't even go into the commercials.

## The politics

This is pro-street cop, anti-bureaucrat. It's also pro-killing in self-defense, pro-gun, pro-God and country, and pro-hot babes.

... I'd say it leans a little to the right

## Content warning

The sexualization of burritos. I'm not kidding, It's part of an advertisement, and it's played for laughs, but still...

Oh, yes, and hundreds of people are gunned down. If you can't watch Commando for the violence and body count, you may have a problem with this book.

And if you don't understand how John Wick can kill dozens of people over a puppy, then you definitely shouldn't bother reading this one.

## Who is it for?

If you read Larry Correia or watch action films, and enjoy over the top action, then this book is for you.

## Why read it?

You read this one just to appreciate how utterly, wonderfully insane it can get, with some fun action bits and as many laughs.



Overlook by Jon Mollison  
Review by Ginger Man  
<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Set in the Heroes Unleashed universe, Jon Mollison's *Overlook* delivers an exciting thriller with one of the most interesting and original heroes I've ever come across.

#### The story

Joe Smith has an unusual talent, almost no one ever notices him. While the talent is innate due to Joe's being a Prime, he has also cultivated it, adopting every bit of tradecraft that he can to make himself virtually invisible to the casual observer. Not truly invisible, just part of the background noise of life. Joe has put his skills to good use, first as a military sniper and more recently as a freelance investigator and security consultant. It's also something that comes in handy when he needs to take down a trio of thugs harassing a convenience store owner in Serenity City. Joe doesn't much like drawing attention to himself like that but when the owner's kid is threatened, a guy has to do what a guy has to do.

Joe's life gets a lot more complicated when a beautiful woman in a red dress named Celeste waltzes into the diner Joe is having his quiet dinner in. She does the highly unusual act of walking right up to Joe and addressing him directly. Joe is even more intrigued when Celeste recruits him to help find the murderers of an old student of Joe's, a student who had been working with the woman as part of Sonlight Inc, a private investigator firm.

Eager to avenge his friend, Joe accepts and gets involved in more than just a murder mystery. Before Joe can begin to wrap his head around what is happening, he is getting stalked by the mysterious Phoenix Ring, who seems to know exactly where Joe will be, which again, is something Joe is not used to. Before the end of the book Joe is wrapped up not just in seeking vengeance for his friend but in a battle for the fate of western civilization.

#### The characters

Joe Smith is a simple man. He prefers to keep his life uncomplicated, something made very easy by his natural ability to not be noticed. He can't even turn it off. Just going about his own life the way most people do, he tends to escape notice. In most books with a similar character, he would be plagued with angst, anger, and probably crippling depression. Mollison fortunately does none of that. Joe is in fact well-adjusted and surprisingly comfortable with his life. He also is happy to put his skills to good use, making a good deal of money and helping people out at the same time.

Celeste is an enigma. Able to not just find Joe but also to actually keep her attention on him, Joe finds her naturally appealing. The fact that she's an attractive blonde doesn't hurt either. However, she is no mere love interest as she is clearly able to operate off the radar and utilize a lot of tradecraft to keep her activities secret. And of course, there is her driving that would make any stunt driver proud.

The Phoenix Ring in Serenity City is run by the Director. We don't get to know him terribly well, but he is exactly what you would expect, mostly. He is confident, dedicated to the Ring's nefarious mission, and charming when he isn't ordering your death. He also has a couple of unexpected surprises up his sleeve.

#### The world

Overlook is part of Silver Empire's Heroes Unleashed series. It's a world in which big cities like Serenity City are heavily populated with costumed heroes and villains. Unfortunately, most of the heroes are usually out drumming up social media clicks and advertising sponsorships instead of fighting crime. That means there is always plenty of crime operating just under the surface, the kind of crime that won't be uncovered by the livestreamed nightly patrols. That's where the low key Primes like Joe come in. Not concerned with the glamorous lifestyle of would-be comic book superheroes, Joe can slip in and out of places and take the time investigate the web of connections between the various crimes in the city, a web with the Phoenix Ring at the center.

The Ring isn't the only secret society in this world. Opposing them is the Order of St. Hadrian, for which Sonlight is merely a front. Existing for hundreds of years, the Order has been a thorn in the side of the Ring, slowing down their plans to tear down civilization so they can remake it in their own image. Unfortunately, most of their efforts in Serenity City have been relegated to dropping tips to the media and the police. The Ring of course has enough agents placed in both places to stop the tips from really going anywhere. With Joe on the team though, the Order can finally go on the offensive, assuming Joe survives.

The politics

The Phoenix Ring operates not just outside the law but largely above it. Their extensive vault of blackmail material and control of the media and many in law enforcement make it necessary for Joe and the Order of St. Hadrian to take matters into their own hands. In short, the politics of Overlook are basically Batman.

Content warning

There is mention of many horrible activities the Ring is involved in, but they are almost entirely off page.

Who is it for?

If you like a good cat and mouse story with a healthy dose of pulp, this is for you. Joe and his adventures remind a bit of Jason Bourne, James Bond, and especially Mission Impossible. If you are a fan of any or all of these franchises, then Overlook is right up your alley.

Why read it?

Because Overlook's hero isn't constantly questioning his decisions or his worth or anything like that. He has an unusual set of skills that he willingly accepts while using them to fight the bad guys. In short, Overlook is a refreshing return to stories where the hero is happy with who he is while not being much different that you and me.

**Overlooked Again by Jon Mollison**

**Review by Ginger Man**

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

Having severely disrupted the Phoenix Ring in Serenity City, Joe and Celeste take their show on the road to Halo City to stop the Ring from stealing an election. Unfortunately, the Ring has more than a few tricks up its sleeve.

## The story

Jon Mollison brings us up to speed with Joe not long after the events of *Overlook*. He and Celeste may have taken out the Phoenix Ring's Director in Serenity City, but it takes more than that to keep the centuries' old secret society down. That's why they've been taking out other members of the Board, which has kept the Ring off balance. It's also attracted a lot of attention, enough for the cabal to bring in their own Primes, specifically those who have a better than average chance of actually being able to track down the elusive Joe Smith.

Yes, Primes. As in more than one. The first is Hibou, a Prime with senses enhanced enough that even Joe can't evade him for long. The Frenchman nearly captures Joe during their first encounter at the beginning of the book and manages to stay on Joe's trail for most of the story. The other is the First Magus, an unlikely villain who proves able to pinpoint Joe's location with eerie accuracy.

Thanks to the connections the Ring has in the Mayor's office and with Alderman Marco Perlas, Joe and Celeste have to continually dodge not just Hibou and the Magus, but the police as well. And it should never be forgotten, the Ring is an organization that is big on revenge, something Joe and Celeste learn by the end of the book.

## The characters

Joe of course is still himself, the well-adjusted Prime who has found a way to develop and use his relatively unimpressive power of not being noticed to fight the Ring in ways that the flashier Primes could only imagine. The big change is that he and Celeste are in a relationship now, one that Celeste's father, the Padre who runs their tiny cell of the Order of St. Hadrian hopes will get a ring put on it sooner rather than later.

The villains in *Overlooked Again* are welcome additions to the world. Hibou is exactly what his heightened senses would suggest – a hunter. He clearly enjoys the game of trying to track down Joe and corner him at last. He comes close several times, allowing him the chance to prove that he is also a skilled combatant.

The First Magus is someone who would easily be mistaken as a cosplaying convention nerd. In fact, he is exactly that. Except he is also capable of wielding various kinds of magic. He not only can make use of Atlantean magic and artifacts but also demonstrates the ability to summon demons to do his bidding. Despite still living in his mother's basement, Magus is a formidable adversary.

## The world

Silver Empire's *Heroes Unleashed* universe continues to grow. Beginning in Serenity City with *Heroes Fall*, the number of Primes, and the variety of their powers have continued to grow. There are hints of alternate universes, the existence of the supernatural, aliens, and even Atlantis (explored more in *The Last Archon* that I'll be reviewing soon). In short, when the Event began the Prime phenomenon, the world didn't just get superheroes, it got a peek behind the curtain of reality. The pieces are still coming together but I am eager to see how things continue to develop.

Another world-expanding element in this book is that we see more of the Order of St. Hadrian. Not another cell so much as the true extent of Padre's cell. It turns out there are people who provide IDs, vehicles, and a probably a host of other things, something that causes Joe to have a few questions about

how much he is really trusted by Padre and Celeste.

Thanks to some conversations with the bad guys, we also learn just how secret, and isolated, the Order really is. While it began as a sanctioned order of the Catholic Church, its continued existence is a secret even from the Vatican given that the Phoenix Ring has agents within those walls as well.

The politics

As before, the heroes operate well outside the system, with Joe literally going around knocking off the bad guys. That may bother some fans of the four-color superheroes but given the world that Joe operates in, it's clearly justifiable.

More surprisingly, there is the fact there is still some faith in the ability of good men to make a difference within the system. Remember, Joe and Celeste are in Halo City specifically to stop Marco Perlas, an agent from the Ring from stealing an election from his challenger Richard Carter.

Content warning

Joe and Celeste engage in some heavy innuendo and there is some discussion of the depravity of the Ring's activities, but it is all at a PG-13 level.

Who is it for?

Certainly, any fan of the Heroes Unleashed series is going to want to read this, especially as it continues to expand the universe and the things we can expect to find in it as the series continues. Any fan of the more intelligent spy movies are games where the main character hides in plain sight will enjoy this. I'm especially thinking of the tradecraft shown in the Bourne movies, where a ball caps, or bending over to tie a shoe are often all that's needed to escape notice.

Why read it?

Because why wouldn't you want to read an amazing cat and mouse story involving agents of two warring secret societies?

**Planetary Anthology Series: PLUTO**  
**Edited by Dawn Witzke and Richard Paolinelli**  
**Review by Pat Patterson**  
<http://Habakkuk21.blogspot.com>

Somewhere, there is likely an explanation for this series, as collections of stories with themes related to a specific heavenly body. Other than a slight reference in the "From The Publisher" chapter at the end, I didn't find it in the text of my book. But Amazon lists this as the first in a series. It DOES provide some opportunity for vile calumny to be poured on the perpetrators of the banning of Pluto from the Nine. Some of the stories are quite lovely, in the Trees in the Fire Swamp sense.

Westley: [entering the fire swamp] It's not that bad.  
[Buttercup stares at him incredulously.]

Westley: I'm not saying I'd like to build a summer home here, but the trees are actually quite lovely.

NEWS UPDATE: After re-reading the stories again for this review, I find this overall negative approach to be unwarranted.

Like So Many Paper Lanterns by B. Michael Stevens. Not a Lovely Tree; in fact, this is by far the Ugliest Tree in the Fire Swamp. Undoubtedly, there is an audience who greatly enjoys writing of this type. I am not included in that number. This is the fourth sentence, but I could have picked just about any other; ALL of the writing is like this:

With every passing day, I drink deep of guilt and anguish, but when the Leviathans pass over, I taste something sweet in the normally bitter brew of my reflections; I taste hope.

Ummm...no. Too purple. There IS a story of love, pain, sacrifice, desolation wrapped up in the black sparkly packaging, but getting to it was just too tedious for enjoyment. And I don't know what it had to do with Pluto, either. Possible explanation: the blurb says the author writes horror. I do not READ &\*^%\$% horror, mostly because I'm a sissy, but having to read stuff like this is a sufficient reason in itself to avoid it, IMHO. YMMV. NEWS UPDATE: Here's the deal: I did not like the first story, at all. I didn't like the characters. I didn't like the plot. And the execution was worthy of a Hugo nomination, and I mean that in the worst way possible.

Time Out For Pluto by P. A. Piatt. A BARELY Lovely Tree. Spoiled brat/adolescent godling Pluto is aggravated at his loss of planetary status, and sulks. And then he plots. NEWS UPDATE: I didn't like the protagonist. He's a nasty teenager, even if he may be a few thousand years old. I don't like nasty teenagers; I was a middle school counselor for 16 years. Still, the story holds together.

NEWS UPDATE: From this point on, the stories are delightful; they are clear, cool, refreshing water. The funny stories are funny. The dramatic stories have drama. They. W.O.R.K!

A Brush by J.D. Arguelles. Another pleasantly Lovely Tree. I'm not sure why this is on Pluto, BUT it's a cool story. The pen might be mightier than the sword, but the brush is even better.

The Pluto Chronicles by Bokerah Brumley. A happily Lovely Tree. Truly, a ridiculous concept (a giant, marauding chicken), told as if it is a matter-of-fact occurrence.

Bat Out Of Hellheim by Corey McCleery. For all, I think this will be at least a nice background Lovely Tree. For some, though, could be the LOVELIEST TREE in the Fire Swamp. Uplifted Space Vikings from Midgard fight the undead denizens of Helheim.

The Rainbow-Colored Rock Hopper by J. Manfred Weichsel. A classically great Lovely Tree! A wicked bad guy of the "If you don't give me the deed to your ranch, I'll tie you to the railroad track" type against the poor-but-honest pioneer-type. So, naturally, he must catch a leprechaun (figuratively speaking).

The Heart Of Pluto by Christine Chase. This one is a personal contender for Loveliest Tree in the Fire Swamp. We have an old dude astronaut, first to land on Pluto, and about to become the first to die on Pluto. So, he hallucinates; except maybe he isn't. Loved this one.

NEWS UPDATE: Everything that follows was written today. Everything above was written in August. And, since I had the epiphany about these all being well-written, I dumped the "Lovely Tree" approach.

The Case For Pluto by A.M. Freeman. Pluto was deprived of planetary status by a wicked cabal of vampiric earth creatures, bent on crushing the spirits of nice people everywhere. In this legal procedural, will the right win out?

Marathon To Mordor by Karina L. Fabian. It's a space race, with all the glam and glitz and hype that we are accustomed to when the Super Bowl or the Olympics rolls around. Not the World Series, though; people CARE about this sporting event.

Miss Nancy's Garden by Jim Ryals. Some cooks are sweet and polite, and always ready to give you a cookie. Some cooks will cut you in half for showing up late for meals, BUT they will go the last mile to get your food to you, hot and yummy, in the middle of a flooding earthquake. Got it? Well, Miss Nancy is like the second type. And she doesn't put up with anything. By anybody.

On Eternal Patrol by L.A. Behm II. Dead submariners save the world, even when the world is more bizarre than the concept expressed in the first four words of this sentence. Sea monsters and technological limitations combine. Work it out, people, we have a job to do!

Pluto Invictus by W.J. Hayes. On a cruise ship in space, con men, semi-heroes, and priests have to work together to destroy Vile Evil plots and robots.

Worst Contact by Arlan Andrews, If you think about the gold disc that got sent out with Voyager, you'll recall it had our best wishes and info about the planet and people. Well, not every galactic follows that pattern.

Ambit Of Charon by David Skinner. When the advanced-technology-indistinguishable-from-magic shows up, somebody still has to make sure the lights get turned off and the blinds get closed and the cat gets fed. Not much drama in that; just essential. But when the boogums slide down the chimbley, those are the guys you need.

Sunset Over Gunther by Frank Luke. The statement "All is fair in love and war" becomes even more meaningless, when war is a prerequisite for love. How many impossible choices can you make, and still be a person who can love, and be loved?

Adaptive Reasoning by John M. Olsen. Andy's job is to prepare for the triumph of his people. He is willing to do whatever it takes, in order to reach that goal. But it seems that more is being taken than was in the original plan.

Judgment Of Anaq by Andy Pluto. When I was three, I asked my grandmother if it was true that if you put salt on a bird's tail that you could catch it. She said it was, so I took the salt shaker outside to catch birds. Didn't work. They flew away! And that is the kind of story that this is: the more you grasp some things, the further they slip away. It also reminds me of 'Appointment in Samarra.'

Life At The End by Jake Freivald. This is an excellent story to study and discuss, and to seek some understanding about isolation. The physical distance between Earth and Pluto is isolation but is easily overcome with travel. The isolation of the heart is the greater problem.

A Clockwork Dragon by Allen Goodner. Wait, WHAT? You sacrifice your daughters to a DRAGON? Are you out of your MINDS? I'm gonna kill that monster, if it's the last thing I do! You people are CRAZY!

The Collector by Declan Finn. Evidently, there are some museum collections which will never be shown, because there is simply too much in storage, and not enough space. And there are other reasons, as well. Listen kids: Stay in school; don't hoard.

Yes, Neil D. Tyson, Pluto Is A Planet by Richard Paolinelli. A nice, old-fashioned, feel-good story about the average family on the average vacation. Well, average for SOME locations.

Okay; that's it. Now, let us discover whether with this one completed, I can start cranking out reviews for the dozen or so I have in the queue.

**Son of Cayn by Stormy McDonald,  
Alan Isom and Jason McDonald  
Review by Jim McCoy  
<http://JimbosSFFreviews.blogspot.com>**

Umm...wow. I just finished reading Son of Cayn and I honestly don't know where to start with this review. Don't get me wrong, it was a really good book. I enjoyed it. I'm just not sure where to begin because there was a lot in here. I mean, I guess I expected that. It's the first book in a fantasy series and those are frequently pretty busy. When an author (or in this case team of authors) has to not only introduce their characters but also their world, there tends to be a lot of information necessary. Every fantasy setting is different and when you couple in the setting and how magic works and what fantasy races exist. Yeah, it's a lot.

The good news is that Son of Cayn not only very effectively manages to introduce the characters and show off the world, it also manages to do so without bogging down into infodumps and leaves room for later expansion. I'm an as yet unpublished fantasy author myself. I should probably go back and take notes on how they did it because they did a damn good job. I feel like I could go on a wagon trip (Most of the story is spent on the trail, facing danger while traveling.) along the same path the crew in the book did and not get lost. I'm not sure I'd wanted because I tend to be big on not risking my hide unnecessarily, but that's a separate issue.

If you're going to read Son of Cayn, and I recommend doing so, you had best be prepared for some pretty major twists and turns. Nothing is quite as it seems. Most people are not quite who they say they are. This is a very tightly plotted story, and it turns on a dime. I enjoyed that.

I'm reminded of a movie I watched with my dad back in either the 80s or 90s called Legal Eagles. It wasn't Science Fiction or Fantasy, but it had a great story and an ending that worked but that you never saw coming. My dad marked out because he couldn't figure it out and he was usually good at that stuff. It's that kind of a book.

Part of the surprises are people being precisely who we thought they were, even though they're nowhere near what we thought they were. Certain things happen that only make sense in retrospect. Sometimes a new talent emerges out of nowhere. Allegiances are sometimes a little murkier than you would first suspect. Seriously, don't trust any of these characters.

The fight scenes in Son of Cayn are awesome. I have been known to play the occasional game of Dungeons and Dragons and I really want a couple of these weapons. I mean, they're pretty awesome. I have a sneaking suspicion that one or more of these authors might be roleplayers themselves and that part of

the reason these characters get such cool weapons is wish fulfillment. I'm okay with that though. It's entertaining regardless.

As if I haven't already made it obvious, Son of Cayn moves. There always seems to be something going on. It may not be what the reader thinks it is, but it's happening. You may not get a chance to catch your breath, but do you really want to? What's the point of catching your breath anyway? No, Son of Cayn is a book you go through at Mach Two with your hair on fire. It's more fun that way. Slowing down is for sissies. I mean, if you want to know the truth, if I wanted boring I'd read romance. The authors of this one keep things interesting, most often in the sense of the ancient Chinese curse.

I'm also reminded of another movie when I read Son of Cayn. I know not everyone is a fan, but there is a strong leaning toward The Godfather 3 contained within these pages. It's not really all that clear who the enemy is. It's not exactly clear if our heroes really have a singular enemy. Events happen but even after reading the book I'm not altogether certain which ones were related, and which ones weren't. I totally feel like Michael Corleone reading this one. "Our true enemy has not yet revealed himself."

I really did get a feeling that there are several major players still missing from the board. Somewhere out there, our true villains are hatching their plots. Somewhere out there, there may very well be someone, or maybe a group of someones, that are on our side as well. We're being led into a much larger world than either we or our heroes anticipate. It's obvious that it's there, but not how far it goes.

I'm excited to find out because there is a Lord of the Rings feel here. Right now, it's just the Fellowship, but there may be entire kingdoms out there that we still get to journey to. None of the heroes of the book are kings or even nobles (well, probably. I mean, given the surprises so far...) but I can't help but think that at some point in the future of this series we'll be meeting oodles and bunches of them. Or maybe I'm wrong but hey, I'm a fan I get to have my theory.

That leads me to my one complaint about Sons of Cayn. It doesn't really have a Big Bad. Our heroes are totally worth rooting for. They're honorable and they're a caravan of people off to simply sell some soap. Their goals are the everyday kind of noble: Money to be earned, families to feed, etc.

They're normal people for the most part, at least until things start to change. But there is no one person or thing to hate as such. I'm no fan of thieves and brigands, but they just don't engender the type of ill will that a Khan Noonian Singh or an Emperor Palpatine can. That much having been said, there is a strong case for keeping the reader wondering. It's always good when an author's audience wants more. That's why it's a series, right?

Speaking of which, I published this review on the release date of the book. It's about twelve thirty PM my time. I wonder: Should I start bothering the publisher for the sequel NOW, or should I wait until after dinner?

Bottom Line: 4.5 out of 5 Bars of Soap



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

Once upon a time, and multiple times since, I pointed out that my FAVORITE reading material is military science fiction. By and large, that is still the case. Yes, it's true that for the 2019 Dragon Awards I had to review something that claimed to be in that category, and found it to be small-minded, depraved, poorly written, and nasty. Didn't have any impact on my opinion of the genre, however; it just provided me with a good reason to suspect Simon and Schuster of attempting to curry favor with haters, and to be very careful of any endeavor featuring an author with a name rhyming with Hameron Kurley.

At any rate, I find that when I hit a period of stress, my comfort-food-for-the-brain is almost always military science fiction. And that's why I picked up a copy of "Terra Nova: The Wars of Liberation" as soon as it became available. I was not able to review at the time; I was really even having problems reading.

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

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

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

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

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

The stories:

1. The Long, Dark Goodnight by Vivienne Raper. This tells the story of the failed first attempt to colonize Terra Nova. Earlier volumes give the bones of a story of cultural conflict exploding into violence. This story breathes life into those bones. The price paid by those who tried to keep the peace comes across almost as clearly as if it were happening in real-time.
2. The Raiders by Mike Massa. The UN holds dominion over the planet. It's not a monolith, though;

there are facets! And those facets look out for their own interest, and really don't mind making others pay the price. Massa once again shows the perspective of troops who know that the price they may have to pay is ultimate; they will do their job, as long as it's worth it.

3. Sacrifice by Peter Grant. The hatred between competing factions that existed on Earth turned out to be the most easily exported commodity. True, the planet is designed to kill intelligent life. Unfortunately, people seem to have that same design. In opposition to that is a man of war, turned to peace, who must again take up the tools of war.

4. Doing Well by Doing Good by Chris Nuttall. Not every UN official was intent on literal and/or figurative rape. Those who attempted to perform ethically found themselves at odds with The System.

5. No Hypocritical Oath by Robert E. Hampson. This story combines techno-thriller, with a bit of romance, and the nastiest examples of personal bullying and vindictiveness. And then more, in the form of institutional bullying and vindictiveness.

6. Bellona's GIFT by Monalisa Foster. It's not easy to be the child of the leader; no one REALLY feels safe around you. So, how can you feel safe around them? But outsiders really don't know the rules.

7. The Panther Men by Justin Watson. A Colonel of the warriors, and a Prince of his people, Alexander has conflicting loyalties even before he sets his feet on the ground. Once there, though, his conflict grows more intense. On the one hand, he finds purity in the cleanness of straight-forward combat. On the other hand, the things he finds he much do seem to be killing his soul.

8. Desertion by Kacey Ezell. Captain Lele Campbell can fly like an angel, but her world is nothing like Heaven. She must always be on her guard; her commanding officer makes no secret of his lascivious intentions toward her, and the system provides no escape. Everywhere she turns, she finds more betrayal. Everywhere.

9. Blood, Sweat, and Tears by Christopher L. Smith. Whether a fish is caught or not, the bait is certain to be mangled. All Marko wants is to be able to do his job. However, his reputation prevents him from fading into safe obscurity.

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

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

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

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

We all need comfort food for the brain, after all.

## The Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger Review by Will Mayo

This is a delightful tale of a time traveler as told by his wife from the time he visits her when she is a child to the time when they make love for the first time to random events at the time traveler's job as a librarian when he transits in and out of the present to the traveler's death to even a visit at a time of the time traveler's wife's old age. It is funny, delightful and romantic and sums up a love that is of time and yet beyond time. Surely worth the read.

## To End in Fire by David Weber and Eric Flint Review by Jason P. Hunt <http://SciFi4Me.com>

Officially, technically, and if you squint just right, To End In Fire is Book #4 of the Crown of Slaves series offshoot in the Honorverse. And yes, technically, an argument can be made that it flows directly from the events of those books: Crown of Slaves, Torch of Freedom, Cauldron of Ghosts, and now this entry.

But I can also argue, I think successfully, that To End In Fire also pulls together threads from the Saganami Island story thread as well as the main thread starring the now-retired Fleet Admiral Lady Dame Honor Harrington-Alexander, Duchess and Steadholder Harrington, former commanding officer of Grand Fleet. And it's been a very long time coming.

Since the introduction of the Mesan Alignment way back in At All Costs (at least, I think it was that far back), this plot thread has been woven in and around a number of different events in the overall universe, and it's nice to see parts of it start to pay off finally. One can only build and build and build before some kind of resolution has to be served up, and we get the beginnings of that here, following the events of Uncompromising Honor, in which we get some light bulbs going off over atop people's heads. Those "aha!" moments are going to start rolling in quite quickly from here on out, I do believe.

On the flip side, there's a down side to having such a continuity-heavy story play out over a couple of dozen books. To End In Fire is definitely not a book one can just casually pick up and start reading without any advanced knowledge. I read all of the mainline and sideline books to prepare for this, thinking this is going to be the one that wraps everything up in a neat little bow.

It doesn't. Not yet. But it's a start. And I'm glad to see the inevitable cross-over of characters. Having pretty much everyone in this book is quite satisfying. Not only do we get some interactions between people who are normally in different parts of the galaxy, but we also get a bit of a reset to make sure everyone knows where everyone sits in terms of the relative timelines and story threads. And who doesn't enjoy Victor Cachat playing pirate again?

Still and all, it's nice to finally get some significant movement forward in the whole Mesan Alignment thread, as we've been building to this confrontation over the past two or three books, and I've been very curious about the resolution of the whole thing. Not that we get that here, but Weber and Flint move forward with a significant confrontation that satisfies the immediate need while leaving things open for the next act.

And that's what this feels like — the first act of a new arc. Uncompromising Honor brought things to a close on a number of fronts, even giving us a retirement for Honor Harrington, and while she's in this book in a significant way, it's not until the last part of the book, and that event gives us one last boost when it comes to the Mesan Alignment and the next potential threat to the Detweiler Plan.

I always enjoy the Honorverse books, and I've been looking forward to this book for a long while since it was first announced. It initially wasn't what I expected, being in the "side" narrative, but it's a fun, satisfying read nonetheless. The mix of established characters interacting with more recent additions to the cast, along with new potential allies and enemies, keeps it interesting. The only "negative" aspect of this, if you can say there is one, is that it depends heavily on knowing what came before.

But that shouldn't be a problem, since you've all been taking my advice and reading these books, right?

Read these books.

### The Undertakers by Nicole Glover

#### Review by Mindy Hunt

<http://SciFi4Me.tv>

At the end of my review of Nicole Glover's first book *The Conductors*, I made comment that "If this is the start of [her] career as a writer, I look forward to what else she has ahead. I would even like to see more stories in this period. It could be a fun universe mixing genre into this period of history." Well, it looks like someone was listening because Christmas came early with her sophomore book, *The Undertakers*.

This story picks up a couple months after the end of the first book, with Hetty and Benjy Rhodes settling into their new place, a new job as undertakers, and of course, solving mysterious problems that arise. Fortunately for them, their two businesses tend to work well together when they converge. This story is about a couple of deaths in a family, some magic-resistant fires, and a treasure hunt enchanting the minds of the local population. Usual stuff for the sparrow and finch.

As they start to investigate the strange fires, they come to a house completely spared by the flames and the beginning of a tunnel system under the streets of Philadelphia. Knowing that the tunnels existed to help travelers on the Underground Railroad, their journey leads them to the underworld of black-market magical items run by a ghost from their past. For Hetty and Benjy, missing items, old nightmares, fires, and the pile of murdered bodies are not a coincidence; however, trying to tie them all together with who and why is not so easy. Through a series of oddly placed events and strangers, they are able to smoke out the culprit (sorry for the pun) and have another successful ending while discovering the some of the deeper secrets of those close around them.

Did I mention in my review of her last book how much I enjoyed her weaving of stories and plots? She still does not disappoint. I will say that this story was not as tightly spun as it was in *The Conductors*, but Glover also does not fail at it. It is impressive to have one story with so many different side lines that don't get left behind. She puts nothing in these stories that don't have a purpose which keeps the reader tuned in. One instant missed could confuse you thirty pages later. Of course, this made it more difficult for me to choose my reading times to make sure I was awake enough to pay attention....

I also enjoyed the relationship between Hetty and Benjy. Even though they're married, at the end of the last book it became a romance rather than a relationship of convenience for the work they did. Now they openly express their feelings, and you see how easily they settle into the relationship that they already had and the new level of concern over each other's safety.

Glover also gives us more insight into the pasts of Hetty and Benjy's friends, and as they learn more, they discover what motivates the bad guys. We had already learned some of the basics of the people around Hetty and Benjy, but now that we're past introductions, Glover is able to jump right in with them and use them however she needs them to bring the story together.

I think that's one of the best parts about this book: She does just jump right in. She gives minor background but assumes the reader knows who these people are, so she can skip right ahead to the meat of the story. Even if the reader is new, jumping into book two without book one, Glover peppers just enough information to not leave her reader in the cold, which also works as nice little reminders for returning readers.

If Nicole Glover decides to continue down the story path of Hetty and Benjy Rhodes, I definitely will be a returning reader. Once again, she's dazzled me with her story telling, a critical part of our history while weaving magic in it without being out of place. I would think it would be tricky and go sideways easily but Glover manages not to get lost in her attempt to mix the fantasy world into our history.

I'll say it again, and yes, I'm quoting myself: "Her storytelling seems effortless and well thought out. She left no stories unfinished. I'm sad I have finished the book but I will keep my eye out to see what Nicole Glover comes out with next."

### The Widowmaker by Mike Resnick

#### Review by Michael Gallagher

<http://UpstreamReviews.com>

The story

If you'd like a bit of backstory as to why Resnick is among the greats of not only science fiction but space pulp at large, check out my previous article here. As for the *Widowmaker* series, it's further proof that Resnick's tried and true formula remains just as popcorn-light and tasty decades after he began writing it. It features a new peerless assassin from the author's extensive gallery, traversing the galaxy with a band of colorful side characters who aid in the hunt for a notorious criminal. You know exactly what you're getting when you pick up one of Resnick's pulps, and he's about the only one who could go to this well so many times and still draw water.

The first book, *The Widowmaker*, features one Jefferson Nighthawk, forced into retirement in his sixties after contracting a deadly wasting disease known as eplasia. His extensive life earnings have paid

for decades of cryogenic sleep while a cure is worked on, but eventually hyperinflation hits the The Rim. That's when he's unceremoniously awakened with an offer from his lawyers that he literally can't refuse: be cloned and freelanced out for the government in exchange for keeping the cryochamber plugged in.

A copy of a 23-year-old Nighthawk is created at at his peak physical prowess and with minimal oversight from the Oligarchic government, sent on his way. But the kid, while physically capable, is immature; he's emotional and moody, falling fatally in love with an alien dame who's no good. While he accomplishes his mission, he does so sloppily, with a lot of collateral damage, and leaves a trail of fresh enemies for the future Widowmakers in his wake.

The second entry, *Widowmaker Reborn* sees a second clone of Nighthawk made, this time aged 38 and considerably more level-headed and tactical. His money's run out again, and this time his mission is to rescue the daughter of a planetary governor from the mysterious revolutionary Ibn Ben Khalid. Nighthawk agrees, not having any choice, and his clone is sent on his way. Before he begins his mission proper, however, he makes sure to exact revenge on the military bureaucrat responsible for treating his predecessor as disposable at point blank range in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

As is par for the course with Resnick's space westerns, Nighthawk recruits a motley team along the way. This includes, but not limited to a stoic space samurai who trained the first clone, an alien explosives expert only willing to hold back his genocidal urges against humans for a chance to work with the legend, and an empathic hooker (don't worry, the book's PG). Things of course take a turn when he finally tracks down his elusive target and it turns out they're quite different from what he's been told.

The third entry sees Nighthawk finally cured of his disease and restored to health, ready to retire to a quiet Frontier world, and for a while he manages to do just that. He's got a wife, and a few good friends and he's not being bothered, which is just the way he likes it. The legendary once-lawman even puts on a badge again to help protect the quaint town he now calls home.

The problem? Well, word gets out before long that *The Widowmaker* is back, the real one, and all those enemies his clones have been making for the past two books are looking to collect their own pounds of flesh, along with every dime-a-dozen hired gun looking to make a name for themselves.

## The characters

As mentioned in my review of Resnick's masterpiece *Santiago*, he's got a wonderful knack for unique and colorful characterization, be it his heroes, villains or side characters. There are too many to list here, but with names like Father Christmas, Johnny Colt, Friday, Blue Eyes and the Marquis of Queensbury, there's plenty of memorable supporting cast members helping to flesh out the adventure. The two mainstays in each book are Nighthawk himself and the samurai turned sidekick Kinoshita, who plays Tonto to his Lone Ranger.

Nighthawk himself, being introduced to the reader suddenly as clones in the first two books, isn't allowed room for conventional character growth. Resnick, however, accomplishes a satisfying amount through well-flowing dialogue — each character's distinct voice, fears and attitudes come through. The brash impulsiveness of the young clone, the abrasive yet cold confidence of the middle-aged one, and the decidedly softer tone of the elderly *Widowmaker*, wondering if he's still got the killer instinct in him, knowing hitmen and bandits are being drawn to his doorstep.

## The world

Resnick's sci-fi books usually take place in the massive timeline of his Birthright saga. Many planets exist under a series of slowly corroding forms of government. *Widowmaker* takes place during the Oligarchal period, when inflation and government corruption are rampant, and life is cheap. Laws are especially heavy handed: a bot at a customs checkpoint informs Nighthawk that the penalty for being caught with any amount of an illicit substance is death. The same government also isn't above enlisting people to do their dirty work in exchange for insulation from those same laws (and money). These are even flaunted fairly openly by the government itself — cloning is technically highly illegal throughout the galaxy but is a tool that is repeatedly used by them to achieve their ends. Of course black markets flourish, drawing buyers and sellers into contact with one another, making it believable when Nighthawk manages to find the people with the necessary talents to recruit for his various missions.

## The politics

While these books do tend to feature the role of various greasy government officials, such characters are handled in a neutrally libertarian way--inherently untrustworthy and involved enough to get their part of the plot moving forward before moving on to the action. If Nighthawk treats some bureaucrat or military official with sarcastic scorn, it's more focused on a universal disgust for selfish or corrupt authority figures and not on proselytizing on behalf of some political viewpoint.

## Content warning

Not really necessary; violence is not gratuitous and fade-to-black sex scenes are rare, brief and tasteful, Cursing is minimal, but does occasionally happen.

## Who is it for?

If you like space westerns, especially with plenty of laser fire, fun characters, and dry but snappy dialog, the *Widowmaker* novels can't miss. If you've read any of Resnick's stuff and enjoyed it, these are as sure a bet as any.

## Why read it?

The *Widowmaker* novels, especially *Reborn* and *Unleashed* have a bit more depth to them, given the nature of the ethical morass that is human cloning. The second incarnation of Nighthawk and the original especially take issue with the government holding his life virtually hostage while they ignore their own laws to exploit his genetics: it's a layer of human ethos not typically found in many of Resnick's gunslingers, but never crosses the threshold into dour navel gazing. If you read online reviews, you won't find as many fans of it as Santiago, but feel free to ignore them: this is as enjoyable a ride as they come.

# Literary Criticism

Fiction House: From Pulp to Panels, From Jungles to Space

by Mitch Maglio

Review by Jon Swartz, N3F Historian

This massive book of over 300 over-sized pages, whose first printing was in 2017, is an illustrated history of Fiction House, an American publisher of magazines and comic books from the 1920s to the 1950s.

The publisher's founder, John W. "Bearcat" Glenister (1874 - 1937), was a champion swimmer before he decided there was money to be made in pulp magazines. His first venture into the field was Action Stories, a multi-genre pulp, in May, 1927. Other pulps followed, but he died before his company entered the comic book field.

Included in this valuable reference work are reproductions in color of complete strips from the company's "The Big Six" of comic books: Planet Comics, Wings Comics, Jumbo Comics, Jungle Comics, Rangers Comics, and Fight Comics.

There is also an Introduction by Roy Thomas and a Foreword by Hames Ware, both of whom are historians of popular culture. To the enthusiast, the informative chapter, "The Secret Origin of Fiction House," is almost worth the cost of the book.

The place of women in pulps and comics is discussed, with brief biographies and photos of prominent women editors, writers, and artists who worked at Fiction House. Some of these women were responsible for the publisher's reputation for creating Good Girl Art.

Included are Audrey Blum, who was reputed to have used the most pen names of anyone in comics; Ruth Roche, who became a partner in the Roche & Iger Studio; Nina Albright, who worked for most of the big packagers of the day in addition to Iger; and Lily Renée, who escaped the Nazis, came to America, and became one of Fiction House's star artists.

Male artists profiled included Murphy Anderson, Will Eisner, Nick Cardy, Lou Fine, Matt Baker, Bob Lubbers, George Evans, and Jack Kamen.

In addition, the final section of the book is devoted to the artwork of Joseph Doolin (1896 - 1961), who did many illustrations, including covers, for Fiction House's pulps and comic books.

The author, Mitch Maglio, is also the author of Jungle Girls, an anthology of the comic book adventures of jungle heroines, published in 2019.

~Finis~



































