

The **N3F**
Review of Books
Incorporating Prose Bono
Professor George Phillis, D.Sc., Editor
July 2022

FICTION

- 2 ... And What Can We Offer You Tonight? by Preme Mohamed ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
2 ... The Brave and the Bold by Hans Schantz ... Review by Ginger Man
4 ... Darkness Beckons by Nicholas Woode-Smith ... Review by Declan Finn
6 ... Dead Acre by Rhett C. Bruno and Jaime Castle ... Review by Graham Bradley
8 ... Defender of Llyans by Brian C. Hailes ... Review by Graham Bradley
9 ... Flowers for the Sea by Zin E. Rocklyn ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
10 ... For the Love of Death By Kal Spriggs ... Review by Declan Finn
11 ... Ghost of a Chance by Dan Willis ... Review by J W Stepanek
12 ... The Girl King by Mimi Yu ... Review by Christopher Nuttall
15 ... Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy NYPD by Declan Finn ... Review by Jim McCoy
16 ... The Icarus Plot by Timothy Zahn ... Review by Declan Finn
18 ... In Plain Sight by Dan Willis ... Review by J W Stepanek
20 ... Infernal Affairs by Declan Finn ... Review by Michael Gallagher
22 ... The Light That Never Was by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. ... Review by Heath Row
23 ... Little Fuzzy by H. Beam Piper ... Review by Heath Row
23 ... New Writings in SF—3 edited by John Carnell ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
23 ... The Poppy War by Rebecca F. Kuang ... Review by Christopher Nuttall
25 ... Robosoldiers: Thank You for Your Servos, edited by Stephen Lawson
... Review by JE Tabor
27 ... Stress Pattern by Neal Barrett, Jr. ... Review by Heath Row
27 ... Sun-Daughters, Sea-Daughters by Aimee Ogden ... Review by Perry Middlemiss
28 ... Trouble Walked In by Mike Kupari ... Review by Trevor Denning
29 ... Twilight by Stephanie Meyer ... Review by Heath Row

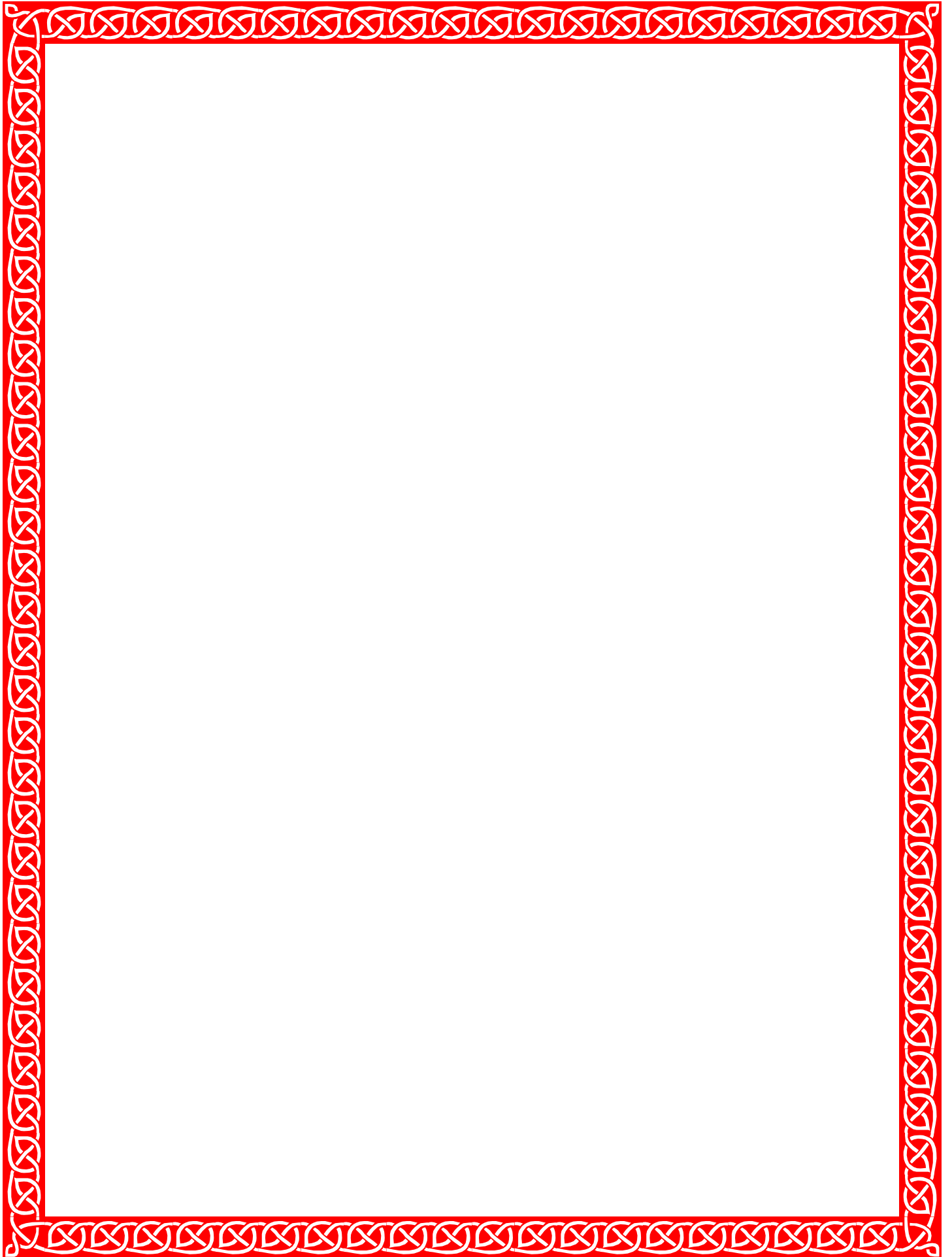
NON-FICTION

- 30 ... Charisma +1: The Guide to Convention Etiquette for Gamers, Geeks, and the
Socially Awkward by Jessica Brawner ... Review by Heath Row

PROSE BONO

- 31 ... Types of Editing for Your Work of Fiction ... by A.C. Cargill

FINIS



Editorial

Another issue with interesting reviews. Reviewers, please keep it up! Readers, if you have read a book this month, a review would be appreciated.

We thank A. C. Cargill for permission to reprint his article on editing. You can see the original at <https://mewe.com/i/accargill>

Melody Friedenthal writes:

N3F folks may be interested in: <https://www.metastellar.com/2022/07/29/first-anthology-released/>
The Best of MetaStellar Year One by Kerry E.B. Black, Glenn Bresciani, William C. Burns, Stephen Case | NOOK Book (eBook) | Barnes & Noble® (barnesandnoble.com) Print coming real soon!



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

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

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

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

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Fiction

And What Can We Offer You Tonight? by Premea Mohamed Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was a finalist for the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. Jewell works at House Bicchieri, one of the classiest brothels in a far future city. When her friend Winfield wakes up after her own funeral, she hardly seems to be put out at all.

Winfield decides to find the man who murdered her and gets Jewell's support in the endeavor. But the story here is more about Jewell's inner turmoil and her attempts to keep the job she hates rather than the murder investigation.

This novella promises more than it delivers, though it is evocative and beautifully written. Maybe if it had been a tad longer, it might have been able to integrate the two main parts of the story into something more rounded. It just leaves this reader wanting something else. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #22.)

The Brave and the Bold by Hans Schantz Review by Ginger Man <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Book Three in The Hidden Truth series takes the fight straight to the Civic Circle

Pete Burdell and company continue their infiltration and disruption of the Civic Circle's plans. Along the way, they stumble on an opportunity to cut the head off the snake.

The Story

As always, Schantz does a good job building a convincing narrative, with Pete working his way around and through various obstacles to get to a major meeting on Jekyll Island. His investigations also expand the lore, discovering more about the Circle's machinations over the centuries, manipulating events and suppressing many technologies that would improve the lives many and make them harder to control. The author does an excellent job describing how Peter weaves his way through various interrogations and alliances on the island, securing the aid of the Albertians (Order of St. Albert) and the Red Flower Tong, both organizations that were introduced in Rambling Wreck.

The World Building

Schantz's world building is, I think the make-or-break aspect of the book, and really the whole series, for most people. He goes into great detail describing the secret history behind the development of many technologies we take for granted today, as well as recapping some of the physics that the Circle is trying to keep secret. The intent is both to help the reader understand on a base level what the Circle is up to and how they go about accomplishing their goals of containing technological development and disrupting Western Civilization. Some readers might find the level of detail excessive. On the other hand, I find it draws me in even further, making the book difficult to put down to say the least. Part of that is because the author does such a good job describing things in an accessible way and the other is that most of the details are actually true. It makes you realize that the free market has never really been free.

Schantz also peppers the book with entertaining Easter eggs that serve to establish that these stories take place in an alternate timeline from our own. Examples include a reference to Declan Finn's books and the infamous incident at the Nakatomi Plaza. If you don't recognize that last one, you really need to go get yourself some culture.

The Characters

Pete continues to develop nicely, getting some of the tension between himself and his Uncle Rob resolved. They frequently are at cross purposes due to Rob's cautious approach, while Pete aggressively takes advantage of every opportunity. Not that Pete is a Gary Sue. The author gives him plenty of opportunities to learn from mistakes, some of those mistakes even having significant consequences.

Pete's sidekick, Amit Patel however seems a bit stuck. While he's an immensely talented software engineer, a gifted speaker, and a good friend to Pete, he also spends a lot of time chasing girls as an eager participant in the hook up culture. One wonders how he finds the energy for his exploits while also trying to save the world from the Civic Circle. I have hope for him in the next novel though as he was exposed to some things off page that might have shaken him up. His lifestyle also gets a pretty thorough, if indirect, dressing down during a conversation between Pete and Brother Francis, head of a cell of Albertian operatives.

The Politics

The Hidden Truth series is one that strongly values individual initiative and action, as exemplified in Pete Burdell. While the Circle has been opposed by organizations like the Order of St. Albert and the Red Flower Tong for centuries, there are also a number of important unspoken rules that govern the conflict. Pete doesn't know or care about those rules, which enables him to do more damage to the Circle in a year than the older and more experienced organizations have done in decades.

That doesn't make this an anarchist novel. Pete needs plenty of help from friends and allies who trust each other, emphasizing the importance of belonging to a community even for the cleverest of individuals. In the end, the overall politics are libertarian friendly, with both government and business shown as often corrupting institutions.

Content Warning

The Civic Circle is up to some disturbing things. They are discussed but never in terribly graphic detail.

Who is it for?

Anyone who likes stories of intrigue, hidden history and the like. If you like movies like the Manchurian Candidate, or books like Dean Koontz's Jane Hawk novels, with a dose of Crichton-like sci-fi, this is what you need.

Why read it?

Because while The Hidden Truth series is a work of fiction, it has enough reality sprinkled in to make it seem like it could be in tomorrow's headlines.

Darkness Beckons, By Nicholas Woode-Smith
Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Several months and a different URL ago, I reviewed Nicholas Woode-Smith's Kat Drummond series. Specifically, I reviewed Part-Time Monster Hunter and Blood Cartel.

Then I read the next two books—because I had purchased a collection of four books for \$0.99. Then book three went along at a good clip but went off the rails by the end with a muddled motivation for a vaguely defined villain. Book four ended with a cliffhanger I do not believe that the author earned. I still recommend the first two books, and I even liked the majority of book three before it went off the rails.

Then the next four pack came out of books five to eight. It was \$2.99. And I really did like the amount of work and the obvious effort put into designing the world. I wanted it to work. So I dove into book #5.

It works.

The Story

The last Kat Drummond novel ended with an attack on Kat's apartment during a friend's business presentation.

Her friend's brother attacked him.

Then her ex-boyfriend turned out to be a werewolf and attacked with his pack.

Then a vampire nest attacked, taking revenge for the events of Blood Cartel.

And in the middle of all that, Kat was kidnapped by her archenemy, a necromancer who had been dogging her since book one—the necromancer being a fourteen-year-old girl.

It was a very busy ending.

Now, the Necrolord holds Kat hostage for her own purposes, trying to make Kat an ally against a supernatural conspiracy.

Meanwhile, her fellow monster hunters Brett and Guy are going full Jack Bauer on the vampire community in an attempt to save Kat, assuming the vampires took her. Will Kat escape, or will she give in to the darkness? Can Brett and Guy survive long enough to save her? Or will they be swallowed up by darkness of their own?

If you like shootouts every other chapter—and who doesn't?—you'll enjoy this. If you want a novel driven by character and their interpersonal (and yes, even internal) conflicts, you'll still enjoy this. I'll discuss this more in the next section, but the action sequences are all tight and well-written and shows just how bad the monsters can get. The monsters here are on par with anything in horror or urban fantasy.

In the overall narrative, Darkness Beckons does for Kat Drummond what Spectre tried to do for Bond

films—tie all the stories into an overall narrative arc. Unlike that film, *Darkness Beckons* succeeds. Kat Drummond's South Africa seems to have its own demonic Illuminati, and someone is going to have to be James Bond.

Kat may have to be it.

The Characters

A superficial view would dismiss this as being a very fluffy plot. One part is Stockholm syndrome, and one part is a series of shootouts. The events and action don't change the world. But the characters drive this book, and they change on multiple levels.

In previous novels, Guy and Brett seemed to be shooters with backgrounds that were just fleshed out enough to give them depth. *Darkness Beckons* clearly proves otherwise. Both characters have in-depth biographies, their own traumas, and are more than being professional badasses. Even Kat's agent, Conrad, turns out to be more than he appears. Welcome to Babylon 5, no one here is precisely what they appear to be.

I even liked the exchange with Kat's ghost mentor, Treth, and his line,

“Pinky swearing? Is it some sort of binding ritual?”

The most interesting character here is, surprisingly, Candace Evergreen, the necromancer. Candace also has a history that parallels Kat's, without being trite or cut-and-paste about it. It's not a forced mirroring of events. In fact, Candace witnessed her own parents' murder by a necromancer... but he made the mistake of not killing her before she repeated his killing spell right back at him. Oops. That's not a spoiler, that's the first chapter

Candace is creepy as Hell, and sympathetic enough to be interesting. She wants to “tame the darkness” for noble purposes, and it seems like she might even be able to do it ... if she can keep her sanity and not become a world-destroying monster. Unlike a lot of authors who try to make the villain more interesting than the hero, “Because evil is more interesting” Candace is interesting because she's actively trying to not be a monster.

On the other hand, she read *Frankenstein* and concluded the Doctor's sin wasn't hubris, it was a lack of conviction.

The World

As always, this world may be the best part of the Kat Drummond series. This world is exceptionally well detailed. And it's nice to have a well-drawn world set somewhere distinct. The setting is very much a character. It's not even necessarily that it is South Africa, because Woode-Smith has built this world from the ground up. The entire planet had been so traumatized by the cataclysmic introduction of magic and monsters, the world is basically “before” and “after.” This universe has a distinct feel and flavor to it because it's rebuilt.

Again, Woode-Smith has a talent for weaving world building in with both events and character. Kat's desire for revenge comes with a thought that werewolves weren't a protected species—unlike vampires, they were considered more beast than human. Both Guy and Brett's childhoods sketch out more of the world's history, and it's about what you'd expect from a world that had a rampaging resurgent Zulu

empire. Oh look, child soldiers are still in vogue, even in 2036.

The Necromancer Candace offers an interesting great change of viewpoint on the world, not just because she takes over the narration for parts of Darkness Beckons, but Woode-Smith takes the opportunity to show off more aspects of how necromancy and magic works. Candace also knows things that Kat doesn't, and they're integral pieces of the world that are probably going to impact the entire series.

The Politics

This is going to be the strangest, most bizarre advertisement for home-schooling EVER.

Also, as usual, this series supports and encourages ownership of personal weaponry. A lot of weaponry.

If you think that religion and the possibility of redemption is political, then that's half the plot. If you think it's political to find evil and cut its heart out, then that's the other half of the book.

Content Warning

This is described as a Young Adult novel. Nothing is really particularly gruesome. But there are zombies, impaled birds that are still moving through necromancy, and ripping out human organs for use in arcane rituals. So you've been warned.

Who is this for?

This is on par with, if not surpassing early Anita Blake novels, and easily on par with Kim Harrison's Hollows novels. The in-depth world building may be the best part, but the characters are deep and sympathetic, with clear lines that one Does Not Cross... even if the lines are a touch deep into Jack Bauer territory.

Why buy it?

Buy this one for an interesting world, good action, and some surprisingly good character studies that may have carried this book on their own.

Dead Acre by Rhett C. Bruno and Jaime Castle

Review by Graham Bradley

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

An urban fantasy disguised as a paranormal western!

The gold standard in American urban fantasy is, naturally, Jim Butcher's Dresden Files. A series so successful and well-loved that it brought this niche genre into the mainstream and onto the bestseller lists, leaving readers hungry for more.

Many have imitated, but few have duplicated. Obviously, Charlaine Harris has had tremendous success with her Sookie Stackhouse novels, and Larry Correia's Monster Hunter series is a reliable home run machine. Other than that, you're basically left with generic pseudo-noir set in New York and LA, or bodice-rippers disguised as paranormal thrillers.

But a new challenger has entered the fray in the form of James Crowley, protagonist of the new Black Badge series. While not an urban fantasy in the chronological sense (it's not contemporary, it's not set in a large modern city, and it's not about a protagonist who's navigating the same mundane challenges as the reader), it feels like an urban fantasy. It just takes place about a hundred and fifty years before our time.

Really, it's a paranormal western, but it's got all of the familiar elements that offer a promising start: a fascinating protagonist, a world ripe for exploration, and a larger backstory that can unfold against the backdrop of individual mysteries.

So far, so good.

The Story

Crowley is a slightly amnesiac man who remembers that he was once a frontier ruffian, and that he died saving a widow and her young daughter...but nothing else. As both penance for his sins and a reward for his noble death, the angels of heaven give him a job on Earth, hunting down evil creatures in the name of the White Throne. He can't really die, since he's already dead, and the only things that can truly hurt him are fire and silver. Food and women offer his flesh no pleasure, and he must answer the call of the spirit that sends him on various missions.

The mystery of DEAD ACRE centers on the death of a small-town citizen who appears to have been butchered by werewolves. Crowley is guided by spiritual impulses to seek out Dead Acre and solve their problem. Naturally there's a plot twist, and a very good one at that, as it both resolves the mystery in a surprising fashion while providing the reader with more of Crowley's backstory.

The characters

Crowley is a protagonist you can cheer for, because he's got all of the powerful traits of an outlaw while still having the moral core of a good man. He made plenty of mistakes and committed plenty of sins in his mortal life, but he died to save someone else from a terrible fate. The years of crime give him a familiarity with evil while the moral core makes him the right man to hunt that evil.

While the cast of supporting characters could easily be a bunch of NPCs from Red Dead Redemption, they aren't without soul or personality. The authors use a good mix of western tropes and unique characteristics to round out this cast.

The World

I've got a soft spot for a good western. It's my understanding that die-hard fans of the genre are huge sticklers for minor details, most of which I am unfamiliar with, so I won't nitpick anything. Suffice it to say that it feels like Bruno and Castle built a realistic setting for these books, based on the Leonard and L'Amour titles I've consumed over the years.

The Politics

None, at least so far. This takes place in the wild west. You've got to have law before you can have politics about it. More to the point, I couldn't tell you about Bruno and Castle and their politics. The book was just a book, and a good one.

Content warning

Profanity up to and including “shit,” but nothing more severe than that. Some combat violence, and references to brothels. (It does get a little more intense than that in COLD AS HELL, though. Review forthcoming.)

Why read it?

I’m looking forward to this series because it feels fresh and familiar at the same time, with a “magic system” that’s based more on angels and demons than the jiggery-pokery of wizards that we’ve seen time and time again. If you’re looking for a fresh scratch to an old itch—especially while you’re waiting for Jim Butcher to get the next Dresden book out—grab a copy of DEAD ACRE and give it a shot.

Defender of Llyans by Brian C. Hailes Review by Graham Bradley <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Brian C. Hailes is a professional artist and college-educated illustrator, working at his craft full-time. He’s now published a handful of his own works in addition to the other projects that fill his docket, and he runs the YouTube channel Draw It With Me.

Being an artist, his worlds are very detailed and well-crafted, and his books are better read in print than in the audio format. That said, narrator Jonathan Waters does excellent work bringing the story to life.

On an isolated continent, three very different nations struggle for their way of life—one old and noble, one generally benign, and the last highly ambitious...with a dark streak. As the big-bads rise in power, it’s up to the other two to rally in time to stop them.

The story

Three different races—the verum, the micans, and the gorbane—all live on an isolated landmass (either a large island or a small continent) with long and storied histories against each other. The gorbane are making moves to conquer the whole place, slaughtering mican royals and taking their titles so that their campaign is both tactical...and legal.

It reminded me a little of Sanderson’s ELANTRIS in terms of its political entanglements and the amount of history involved in the central conflict. There’s a lot to follow but the reader is rewarded for doing so.

The characters

Each race gets a perspective character. Our ‘verum’ is a young man named Roan who works as a courier in the beginning. His travails will have him crossing paths with Karaya, queen of the ‘micans,’ who finds herself trying to unify different political powers against the rising ‘gorbane’ threat. And our Big Bad of the story is a guy name Amrog, hellbent on overthrowing the other two groups in the name of species supremacy.

The character of Roan was the most likeable, as he’s a “ground-level” character that helps the reader see things from the right angles. Karaya is always playing the diplomacy game so unless you keep a

solid handle on the intricacies of the story, she's more of one that you observe from afar, and Amrog is the zealot who wants to conquer and subjugate.

The world

This is a big subject to tackle, because not only did Hailes put together a detailed geography, he also went all-in on the history and culture and politics of it all. This is a really rich and complex world, and the illustrations fortify that. (Though once again, the narrator performed the roles in the story excellently.)

Perhaps my only nitpick with it is the use of the word "Ilyans" in the title, as it sounds exactly like "lions," the flying creatures you see on the cover. They all ride "lions" and yet I wasn't sure if there was a distinction. The eponymous "Defender of Llyans" is a title given to a prophesied warrior.

Again, I suspect this is cleared up in the print edition. As you listen to the audiobook and get to the end, clarity arrives, so just enjoy the ride.

The politics

Only relevant to the monarchies and court intrigues of the world of the book. Nothing from ours.

Content warning

Remarkably clean. Even the battle scenes, while heavy on the action and unambiguous about the injuries, don't focus on gore or violence. No sex, no profanity.

Who is it for?

Readers who enjoy Tolkien, Jordan, Sanderson, all those hugely detailed and well-crafted fantasy stories. This one just has a bunch of great art in it as well. Hailes does his own interior illustrations (obviously) and his own covers.

Why read it?

The more epic fantasy I read, the more I appreciate a bold concept well-executed. The visuals of this world make it unique; I could see this as a tabletop RPG with vibrant minifigures shuffled about, adding a layer of engagement. Looking at Hailes' artwork will give you a huge appreciation for his skill as a realist illustrator, and that makes this fantasy really cool.

Flowers for the Sea by Zin E. Rocklyn Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was a finalist for the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. The debut novella from Rocklyn features a group of survivors from a flooded kingdom who now live on an ark at sea, surrounded by fearsome creatures that harass them day and night.

The main character, Iraxi, is pregnant with a child who might be something more than human. But will it be a monster or the savior of this group of survivors? Iraxi has been ostracized in the past from her community for refusing a marriage offer from a prince, and now she has to contend with scarce food

and resources, the enmity and open hatred of her fellow travelers, and the difficulties of her pregnancy and birth.

This is a dark, disturbing fantasy that has an impact, but which also seems only half formed. You'd have to expect that it will be expanded into a novel at some time in the future. As a result, it doesn't all come together for me. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine *Perryscope* #22.)

For the Love of Death By Kal Spriggs

Review by Declan Finn

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

Is Colorado's latest serial killer an escapee from Hell?

We've already reviewed the first two of Kal Spriggs' Angel of Death series, *In Death's Shadow* and *A Quiet Death*. We've seen our hero, Ari Kiehl get sucked into a war with over a dozen of Hell's escapees, including an army of werewolves and a one-demon zombie apocalypse. Along with his guardian angel, the grim reaper Ari calls Sam, Ari and his allies have come away unscathed.

But now, Ari has to protect a musician from a serial killer that stalks its prey, and plans to kill everyone around her, before killing the musician herself.

The Story

The FBI has been tracking a serial killer for over two years. His MO is the same: kill seven men around a female musician, then kill her. When the FBI bring this to Ari Kiehl's Colorado, he thinks that something is afoot. Could this be related to one of the escapees from Hell that he has to destroy? And does the latest target, Jenny Silver, have secrets of her own to hide? And while he's at it, does this have anything to do with the mysterious artefact the Vatican wants Ari to get his hands on?

The first novel in this series was a taught, tense thriller. The sequel was more of a paranoid thriller.

For the Love of Death is interesting because it's more like a mystery than the others. First, Ari had to profile a serial killer to find out if one of the demons on the loose could be responsible—and if so, which escapee. Then it's a matter of whittling down the suspect list. THEN there are shootouts.

The Characters

This is one where Kal Spriggs got cute. We have a dancing singing violinist with backup dancers named Silver (as opposed to Stirling), a band called *Shadow Torment* with a lead singer named *Renegade* (see: *Cruxshadows* and their leader *Rogue*). These side characters are very well developed and entertaining. Heck, I even wanted to see more of them.

Once more, Ari is the narrator. He's more stolid than Harry Dresden or Paxton Locke. He doesn't crack wise all that often. He's basically very tired of putting up with an awful lot of BS. He's at the point where he's wary of everything to do the supernatural, and sometimes even his friends and allies. Ari has a bit of the Down the Rabbit hole syndrome to world building — he doesn't really know what he's doing, he's trying to figure out what's going on, and he solves problems in part by attacking it from the different angle of a newcomer.

The World

The world building in Kal's books is really top rate. Each book dives deeper into the lore and fine tunes everything.

The Politics

There aren't any politics here. Despite Ari being a cop, I wouldn't call it a pro-police novel, but a pro-Ari novel.

If you want a message: Carry guns, because you never know when you may have to shoot a demon in the face.

Who is it for?

We've got dashes of Jim Butcher with pinches of police procedural. If you like either, give this a shot.

Why Buy it?

It's solid fun. It's good entertainment with thoughtful metaphysics and world building.

Ghost of a Chance by Dan Willis

Review by J W Stepanek

<http://www.declanfinn.com>

The Arcane Casebook series continues in Ghost of a Chance. This is book 2 of 8 so far. It continues much like the first book in the series with no drop off in quality. Once again, we are treated to a well done mix of hardboiled detective action in a world of magic.

The Story

Alex is back from the rather extreme ending of In Plain Sight, still plugging away as a low-profile private eye. Heck, he starts the book pawing through refuse in a dump. Nonetheless he ends up with some high-profile cases stacked up simultaneously. This time he has to work for another of the powerful sorcerers of New York City, solve a locked door murder mystery (really a series of them), and help his friend on the police force with a curious stolen goods case.

Ultimately though odd twists and turns, and his usual bits of roughhouse action, he finds a way to resolve the cases. He also picks up a love interest along the way. Once again Willis does not disappoint and keeps you guessing until the resolution.

The Characters

Again, Alex Lockerby is the central character, with his normal supporting cast. A love interest alchemist is added, as well as another of the sorcerers residing in the city. The characters are well fleshed out, with solid motivations and personalities, and no anachronisms. They are people of the 1930s, and act like it.

The World

Willis takes some time to expand the readers understanding of his world's magic and how it works. He does not use exposition, but by adding characters who specialize in those less familiar areas of magic (sorcery, again and alchemy). You get to see something of the nuts and bolts of how those bits of magic are made to work (though of course the sorcerer bit is rather more vague).

There is also an expansion rune magic with a previously unheard-of school, which makes for an interesting twist, and provides a classic Pulp feel of enemies from the unrecorded past.

The politics

As with his previous volume, Willis isn't really writing about politics, though it is clear that he's no fan of bureaucracy and the deficiencies are demonstrated. This is not at all central to anything though, so the reader can be of any reasonable political stripe.

Content Warning

There are a few intimate scenes between Alex and his new lady love, but there's nothing explicit. It's not much racier than a movie of the 1940s.

Who is it for?

Certainly, if you were a fan of the first book, you will enjoy this one. If you haven't read *In Plain Sight*, you might as well get that out of the way since the books are inexpensive. You can probably follow the story well enough without it, but things will be clearer.

The book is placed into the steampunk genre as well as urban fantasy. I think there may even be a sub-genre 'diesel punk' which covers it, but I'm not overly big on splitting into minute sub categories as Amazon enjoys. If you want a good mystery yarn with magic used as a tool along with 'ze leetle grey cells' to solve the conundrum, give it a try. You'll enjoy it.

The Girl King by Mimi Yu Review by Christopher Nuttall <http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

I first heard of *The Girl King* through a discussion on 'diverse' books, which – unfortunately – prejudiced me against it from the start. Like most fantasy and SF readers, I have nothing against books set in foreign lands or drawing influence from non-westerners or mindsets (come on, how many of us actually live in Middle Earth?) but I have a great deal against authors being touted as anything other than authors. When an author is described as being a great 'person of colour' author rather than a great fantasy author, I get worried. It suggests, very strongly, that the author has nothing else going for them.

Fortunately, *The Girl King* has quite a lot going for it.

In an empire that is very clearly based on Imperial China, complete with a diverse collection of nationalities brought unwillingly under the empire's banner, there are two princesses, the only children of the reigning emperor. The older girl, Lu, is a classic action princess, learning to fight with swords as she awaits her nomination as her father's heir. Min, her sister, is a far tamer character, a timid girl who ex-

pects to be married off as soon as she becomes a woman. Their lives are suddenly disrupted when their father names Set, their male cousin, his heir instead and commands Lu to marry him.

Determined not to take this lying down, Lu challenges Set to a contest to determine who should be the rightful heir. The challenge – a hunt – ends badly when Set’s men try to kill Lu, then – adding insult to injury – blame her for the death of her father. Lu flees into the countryside, meeting up with Nokhai, the last surviving wolf shapeshifter. They form an uneasy partnership – her family has done his people a great deal of harm – and go in search of an army to take back the throne. They eventually reach a lost city and kingdom, with a strange magic of its own that promises aid, but their enemies catch up with them before they can ready themselves for the fight.

In the meantime, Min finds herself married to Set, caught in a network of court intrigue and experiencing gruesome visions that are the first sign of her magic coming to life. She hopes to be a good wife and empress, but instead becomes a tool of Set and his allies as they start to hunt down Lu. Her powers growing out of control, Min descends into madness and – in the aftermath of the first desperate battle, where her husband is killed – declares herself the empress. The stage is now set for a struggle between the two sisters, as only one of them can rule ...

In some ways, *The Girl King* is not as diverse as its fans argue. On one hand, it is a very Asian-themed story; indeed, on the other, the plotline could easily have been set in something akin to medieval Europe without losing anything of its overall shape. The runaway princess trying to regain her throne, taken from her unjustly by evil patriarchal men, is far from uncommon. This works in its favour, to be fair; the names may be foreign, but the characters are very human, and the stakes are understandable. There’s nothing incomprehensible or outrageous – a ‘heroic’ character acting in a manner we don’t consider heroic – in *The Girl King*.

The worldbuilding is a curious mix, to be honest. There’s a very definite flavour of Imperial China, but we don’t learn enough about the magic – and how it fits into the world – to grasp how this world actually works. We are left to fill in the blanks far too often, rather than being shown the key to understanding the system. (The attack on the hidden city makes no sense, as far as I can tell.) There’s also a sense that the world is small, rather than immensely huge. Either Lu travels a vast distance at an astonishing pace, which is possible, or the empire is nowhere near as large as the book claims. And the book pulls no punches about how devastating wars can be on the commoner populations, where they are caught in the middle or abused by victorious soldiers. Lu learns, firsthand, that her father has unleashed a nightmare on his people.

The characters of the book are a curious mix. Lu is very much the standard rebellious princess, although – and this is a point in its favour – this is deconstructed as often as it is feted. Lu thinks tactically, not strategically; she doesn’t seem to realise, for example, that she isn’t guaranteed her father’s throne, nor that she needs to make alliances with the older men surrounding her father to convince them that she’s the best possible person for the job. This would not have been easy, certainly not in a world where men and women (particularly royal women) were kept separate, but she doesn’t even appear to try. She’s also prone to being very self-centred; again, something that blows up in her face more than once. Her storyline is about her learning how the world really works, just as much as it is about her trying to survive and raise an army of her own.

Min, by contrast, is – on the surface – placid, timid and compliant. Unlike Lu, who wants to climb out of society’s box, Min wants to embrace her future role as a wife and mother. Her personal tragedy is that she cannot be a mother, at least; she is kicked out of the box because she is barren (the price for her magic). As she strives to develop her magic, caught between Set – the only person who was ever really

kind to her – and her stepmother, perhaps it is no surprise that she starts to descend into madness. She doesn't want much, but she cannot have what she wants. It's a curious reminder that not everyone wants to rule the world (or at least the empire.) And while she spends most of the book as a helpless pawn, she does – eventually – come into her own.

The two main male characters in the book – Set and Nokhai – are both dragged down by the past, both held back by humiliations caused, directly or indirectly, by Lu. Their resentment keeps them from moving forward, at least at first. And yet, they're not bad people. Set is actually kind to Min, while Nokhai grows to accept that Lu is growing up. Set is also quite clever – and certainly better prepared for the game of thrones than Lu – in that he takes advantage of his position to secure himself, which is more than Lu managed to do. (Lu's stepmother points this out to her, quite bluntly.)

But the weakness here lies in how the characters relate to one another. I can easily believe that Lu and Set hated each other, even before he took 'her' place as her father's heir. There's a lot of bad blood there, so much that I wonder why her father expected Lu to marry Set without protest. On the other hand, Lu is – to some extent – dismissive of her sister and it's hard to see them as having any real relationship. (Min does plan to try to get Lu 'pardoned' for the crime she didn't commit, which is something more sisterly than her elder sister did for her.) I did expect Lu and Min to have a major argument, something to account for their split, well before the main plot actually started. And the constant shift in relationships between Lu and Nokhai started to grate after a while.

The wider plot is also hampered by relatively little of it making sense, at least from what we are given. One of the princesses is a bastard, but which one? What are Set and his allies, including the stepmother, trying to achieve? What role is played by outsiders from distant lands? It isn't clear. Hopefully, these issues will be cleared up in the sequel.

I found *The Girl King* to be slow going at first, partly because the author took too much time for character development. This caused an odd stop-start effect where Lu's side of the plot advanced rapidly, while Min and Nokhai's sections seemed to be moving slower. On the other hand, once both sides started to advance ... they advanced. It is also remarkably clean, particularly given the stakes: rape is mentioned and threatened, but not shown; Min is not expected to consummate her marriage to Set immediately, which is something of a relief as she only just started puberty.

And yet, the book came to an end before any of these matters were resolved ... (roll on the sequel).

The book also hammers in the 'royal privilege' mantra more than once, although it does take care to deconstruct it. Lu (and Min) were astonishingly privileged, by the standards of the time, yet they were also birds in a gilded cage. Their mistakes and character failings stem from their upbringing just as much as their intellects; when they are taken from their cage, they don't know the rules and they don't know how to act. Lu is very lucky to survive Set's bid to kill her, let alone remain alive long enough to start planning revenge. And when she appears to be nothing more than a helpless peasant ... well, she discovers that their lives are not comfortable or safe. Thankfully, unlike some of the other books I've read – *Sorcerer to the Crown*, *The Collapsing Empire* – *The Girl King* is well aware of their flaws and works to show their disadvantages as well as their advantages. Lu, at least, is well on the way towards becoming a heroine when the story ends.

Overall, *The Girl King* is a good fantasy novel. Not great, not on the scale of *Lord of the Rings* or *Mistborn*, but well worth a read. And, as a first novel, it shows lots of promise to come.

Hell Spawn: Saint Tommy NYPD by Declan Finn

Review by Jim McCoy

<http://JimboSFReviews.blogspot.com>

Did you ever stop to look around you and wonder what the Hell just happened? Yeah, so has Detective Thomas Nolan. In his case though, he meant it literally. I have to hand it to Declan Finn. I really didn't think you could do much to make a homicide detective's day worse. In Hell Spawn Finn decided to throw a demon at one. He owns it and when a demon comes out to play, it gets ugly. Like, double plus ungood ugly. Like, this thing is eviller than evil ugly. Like, I'm cackling evilly remembering how evil this thing was ugly. It's a good time.

I'd be careful with Hell Spawn though. It almost caused me to stay home from work because I couldn't put it down. Oh, and I was reading it while eating solo at a local diner and the waitress was looking at me funny because I wouldn't leave after eating my meal and paying my bill. She was a bit confused. I just wanted to know what happened next. Chick obviously doesn't have a reading problem. Her bad.

Seriously though, don't start this one twenty minutes before you need to be somewhere. Hell Spawn starts off fast and accelerates continuously. Finn has redefined the term "page turner" here. It almost felt like the pages were turning themselves and I was just watching. Sometimes as a reviewer I find myself reading something because it's my job to. This is a book that made me want to read it.

Now, Declan Finn has always considered himself to be a fantasy author. He has stated this on his blog, but I'm too lazy to go find a link. Hell Spawn is a damn good book, but this isn't fantasy. Finn has a much better sense of how to write a plot than most Eighties slasher movie writers, but he's got them beat for gore as well. A lot of what happens in the tome is sick, twisted, disturbing and awesome.

Myself and Mr. Finn don't necessarily agree on all of the finer points of theology (the whole Catholic vs. Protestant thing) but something we do agree on is the power of prayer. There is a lot of it in Hell Spawn. As a matter of fact, there are an awful lot of times when Christian attitudes are shown. I approve. Actually, I'd like to see more of this kind of stuff. Hell Spawn is a Catholic writer telling a story about a saint in the making. It fits. The fact remains that Finn/Tommy's takes on a number of controversial topics, including abortion, are on display for all to see. They're pretty stinkin' close to what I heard from my pastor a few weeks ago. If you're the special snowflake uber liberal type and just can't stand the thought that someone might disagree with you, this might be a good time to go buy a biography of Che Guevara that conveniently omits his stances towards homosexuals and black people. I hate to say it, but Hell Spawn may not be for you. Finn pulls no punches. I love it.

Finn's view of the police is somewhat nuanced as is - surprisingly- his view of saints, but make no mistake about it: Hell Spawn is about a battle between good and evil. Saint Tommy versus the demon (and no, I'm not telling you which demon. That would be spoiling.) is an epic throwdown between the darkness and the light. That much is made clear.

Somewhat missing though, and this may be intentionally, is a clear view of where Tommy v. Demon fits in the framework of the grand battle of God and Satan. It's treated as a personal battle, albeit one fought with allies. We're not really given much of a sense of the more colossal grand battle. That's the view I became accustomed to a long time ago as a fan of fantasy fiction. Then again, this is horror. It works differently. And Hell Spawn is book one in a series, so maybe I'll get to see where this fits in later. Maybe not too. The book was freaking awesome without it and it's Earthbound, so personal appearances by God and Satan might not work.

Finn lives in New York. The book takes place in New York. I've never been to New York (I know, I'm working on it) but having read Hell Spawn I almost feel like I have been. Finn's relationship with New York is in some ways analogous to Anne Rice's relationship with New Orleans. Both have stories that take place outside of their respective hometowns, but both continuously return to the city they love in their fiction. It shows in the work. Both authors lay things out in their work that make you love their cities too. I'm really impressed by this. It's almost like you could make the car trips that take place in the story using the directions in the book. Oh, and do you know how I could tell the book was written by a native New Yorker? There were no references to the Statue of Liberty, Wall Street or Broadway. There is not a single scene in Times Square. It's almost like Tommy had lived all his life in the city and had no desire to comment on things that he took for granted. It made him feel more real and human.

I can't say much more about the plot without giving the whole book away, but it moves. It's logical. The entire thing works within the rules of the work itself. There is no massive, gaping plot hole that you could float an aircraft carrier through sideways. That's always a fear when reading a work like this. It's pretty epic and it's easy for an author to get excited and forget about something. That doesn't seem to have happened here and that's good.

That's not to say that Finn tied up all the loose strings. Hell Spawn is the first in a series, not the last. There are some very obvious plot threads still dangling but there need to be. I am, after all, looking forward to the next book. How could there be one if Tommy solved everything the first time?

Oh, and if you're wondering: Hell Spawn is the current front runner for my Dragon Award nomination for Best Horror Novel next year. That is, unless Finn beats himself with the sequel to this master piece which is due out in mid-December, just in time for my birthday.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Praying Chaplains

The Icarus Plot by Timothy Zahn Review by Declan Finn <http://www.declanfinn.com>

Today's book review is of a book that has not yet been released: Timothy Zahn's The Icarus Plot. Zahn is the man who single-handedly revived the Star Wars franchise with his 1991 release Heir to the Empire. But he has multiple series and worlds that have nothing to do with film franchises, and he's returning to one with The Icarus Plot. It's a surprisingly tight thriller, where the tension revolves around the simple question: Who trusts who?

The Story

Six years ago, the freighter Icarus disappeared with all hands aboard. Five years ago, bounty hunter Gregory Rourke and his partner Selene were hunting the Icarus' captain Jordan McKell when they were both ambushed. Now Rourke and Selene are trailblazers, surveying unknown worlds. Now they're hired by a mysteries pair who want them to return to bounty hunting. The target? Another member of the Icarus. For Rourke, it looks like payback time.

But Rourke is about to find himself hip deep in a plot with more players than he can possibly realize. His employers are untrustworthy. Other bounty hunters are in on the chase. One of the worst drug lords in the spiral arm of the galaxy has added his own bounty. And the woman Rourke is hunting is playing

a game of her own, and she has her own allies.

When I first heard about this book at a Baen panel, Toni Weiskopf described it as a sci-fi caper novel. While it may be the best genre description for the book, it is a serious understatement. This is one long Mission Impossible scenario, only several groups are running their own long cons on everyone else. Can Rourke discover the truth in an endless stream of lies? Can he find out who to trust before he gets stabbed in the back? If he survives, can he manage his revenge?

The Icarus Plot is everything readers have come to expect from Timothy Zahn. If there were any justice in the world, someone would have labeled him and Kevin J Anderson SciFi Grandmasters twenty years ago.

The tone of the narration is not quite SciFi noir, but close. The writing is smooth and effortless, serving multiple purposes at once. The opening involves four pages of thought, observations, cultural notes, and analysis in order to head off a bar fight, and it's all entertainingly readable.

The next 350 pages are pure Hitchcockian thriller, only in science fiction. There are no Weber-tonnage of missiles. There are no grand shootouts or fistfights. There's only the ever-looming threat of total annihilation if Rourke makes even the slightest slipup.

That is Timothy Zahn.

(A quick note: When looking up the image of The Icarus Plot, I tripped over a Zahn novel from 2000 called The Icarus Hunt. Apparently, this is a sequel, but I could not tell from reading The Icarus Plot. You can always tell a sequel is well-written when it doesn't even feel like a retread.)

The Characters

Gregory Rourke is like many Timothy Zahn characters: he makes deductions like Sherlock Holmes, reasons like a spy, and thinks his way out of situations just as often (if not more than) he fights. He has a collection of sayings from his father that I heard in the voice of James Garner from Maverick (the TV western, not the Top Gun sequel). Add some of the multi-dimensional chess playing one would see in Leverage, and you have a sense of Rourke's character.

And of course, the writing is... let me give you an example.

Her eyes' vertical pupils widened visibly, despite the bright sunlight beating down on us. Her nostrils flared, then contracted almost shut, then flared again. Surprised and upset. A wonderful combination to come home to.

Zahn is one of the few people I know who can fit in character description and have a character moment for observer and the observed (because how many folks casually read people with micro-expressions?).

Oh, and those lines about Maverick?

As my father used to say, it doesn't take much to morph a gift horse into a white elephant.

When there's a bad penny you can't get rid of, at least you're never completely broke.

The hand doesn't have to be quicker than the eye if the hand's out of sight.

Rourke's partner Selene is interesting. His relationship with her is more on par with Han Solo and Chewbacca. She's an alien bloodhound who can read emotions through scent, and the depth of the sense is put to use in innovative ways that I would expect from Zahn.

Rourke's employers at the start of the novel are Geri and Freki, who feel like one of the better fictional thug duos since *Diamonds Are Forever's* Kidd and Wint... or maybe an evil Penn and Teller.

The World

The *Icarus Plot* isn't heavy on worldbuilding. There's just enough to move the plot along. The interesting elements of the worldbuilding come in part from the business aspects. Unlike some of Zahn's work on the *Quadrail* series (I was fond of his commando chipmunks), there aren't many alien cultural aspects explored in *The Icarus Plot*. Though looking at one alien race, the Patthaaunuth (brought to you by the man who made Thrawn's full name Mitth'raw'nuruodo) makes one think of the bureaucracy of *The Screwtape Letters*.

Another interesting element is the pharmaceutical angle of planetary exploration, where alien seeds can be tapped for hidden potential. The theory is simple: newly discovered plants made into drugs couldn't be made illegal overnight, if at all. It was touched upon several times in the novel, and I expected it to be. If there's another sequel, I expect this to be explored a little more.

The Politics

There are no modern politics here. The politics are strictly that of the world.

Content Warning

There is no harsh language. There's no sex. The violence is minimal (again, Zahn's characters prefer to think their way out than shoot).

Who is it for?

Anyone who has ever been interested in noir science fiction and espionage should read this. Take the espionage of John le Carre, the deduction of Sherlock Holmes, the twisty nature of *The Sting*, and you have *The Icarus Plot*.

Why buy it?

It's a science fiction spy thriller written by one of the best authors in the business. Why wouldn't you buy it?

In Plain Sight by Dan Willis

Review by J W Stepanek

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

This is the first novel in the *Arcane Casebook* series. Dan Willis did not have a large bibliography beforehand. Willis now has eight books in *Arcane Casebook* and a spin-off series (*Arcane Irregulars*) with a single entry so far.

The series is what you'd get if you took the works of Dashell Hammet, or Raymond Chandler, and dropped them in a coherently constructed world with magic. In Plain Sight is a hard boiled detective story where the protagonist is a practitioner of magic in addition to being a P.I.

The story:

The story is set in an alternate 1930s with magical effects changing the nature of society and civilization. Our protagonist is a fairly unknown private eye and runewright (one of the magic forms in the world). In the process of taking on a series of cases from both private individuals and the police, get gets tangled into a web of deceit and trouble. The story is how he figures out how the problems relate, and how to untangle them.

It's all rather more like a detective novel with magic coloring the world, than any traditional fantasy (urban or not). Yes, magic is certainly important, but the character wouldn't change much if you took it away. He uses his mind and his fists to solve problems as much as anything.

The twists and turns of the story are not predictable, and the way in which all the threads are resolved is well done. An aspect that I appreciate is that the characters, and the world are all time appropriate without the anachronisms in thought or action which you often find in works about other eras.

The Characters:

The characters, from Alex, the main character, to Leslie, his secretary are all of their era, smartly written, and have depth. Also, as I mentioned before they are of their era, which I consider important if you want to be able to write about how the world actually worked then. If people thought and acted in 1930s like they did today, it wouldn't have been the same world.

Motivations are well done, with different people in different lots in life having vastly different motivations. Alex, for example, both wants to make a buck and do the right thing.

The World:

Willis has done a very interesting job of building up a magic system to operate in his work. The effects of this system are pronounced in the function of New York City, and the world building has taken into account a reasonable amount of this. Just the presence of sorcerers as basically a superior class of humans has repercussions that he deals with intelligently. The author has clearly done his research on the period, and you can read that in his descriptions of daily life in the city.

Magic in this world comes in three flavors- alchemy, rune magic, and sorcery. Each has some amount of innate talent as prerequisite, but sorcery is by far the most rare and powerful. Alchemy and rune magic both involve intensive study, time expenditure and can involve expensive materials. Sorcery is innate, and capable of bending the world in big ways. Most of the differences you see in the world from the real world of the 1930s are due to sorcery.

If I had to nitpick (as is my nature), I would say he doesn't necessarily deal with the implications magic would have had on history very well. He basically assumes a history more or less in keeping with what we experience in the real world up to the 1930s. There's a bit of explaining that away by historical repression of magic, but I felt that could have been better explained. Magic is too powerful and pervasive in the world for history to have run the same course. In his Grim Noir series Larry Corriea only starts with the introduction of magic in the mid-1800s, and even then, the effects on the timeline are drastic. Willis has magic as a fixture since ancient times, and to re-write the entirety of history is too big a task

to be worth it so it is understandable how he approached it (or perhaps didn't).

The Politics:

There's a bit of politics relevant to real world history since we're dealing with the USA during the Great Depression. Alex is not a huge fan of the government, and this is due to watching it close up. Nothing is extremely overt however; it's mostly just grumbling. Politics are not at all a central feature of the book.

Content Warning:

There's one sex scene, but it's pretty tastefully done, certainly not explicit. There is some harsh language, but it doesn't read like a drunken sailor on shore leave. Violence is pretty common, but if you're reading this style of detective novel, it is to be expected. This is basically detective pulp with magic added.

Who is it for?

If you like urban fantasy, alternate history and hardboiled detective stories, this is right up your alley. I like all of the above, so it suited me perfectly. If you liked the aforementioned Grim Noir series by Correia, you should like this.

Why buy it?

It's a reasonably priced book which should entertain you. So far there's seven more books out to keep you busy, and the writer produces more on a regular schedule. He also keeps people informed of his progress on Facebook, so you know when the next book will drop. I heartily endorse the series.

Infernal Affairs by Declan Finn Review by Michael Gallagher <https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

The third installment of the Saint Tommy NYPD series brings the heavy firepower

The Story

Death Cult ended with a massive suburban fire fight against a Moloch-worshipping cult. With Detective Thomas Nolan having thrown a wrench into their using baby parts for rituals, the book ended with one hell of a twist. Despite being thrown into a raging fire pit, the smooth-voiced nemesis Bokor Baracus was not only alive but dutifully employed with a cozy spot in City Hall.

Infernal Affairs picks up months later, with Nolan enjoying a stretch of pleasant home life. Having settled into his new house, his son is getting along with new friends and he and his wife are enjoying their newfound free time together.

The idyllic times are short-lived, of course. One night after a dream of a gigantic angelic figure demands he rise up and act as Judge and Executioner against the forces of Satan, he rouses from his sleep just in time to engage a team of heavily armored gunmen.

After one of Finn's most brutally described firefights to date, he's shocked to discover his attackers were corrupt members of SWAT. Then the really bad news arrives: there's a ten million dollar bounty on his head; "They don't even want you alive. It's dead all the way down."

The Characters

This novel, closing the arc of Nolan's fight against the various and sundry forces of evil at the top of the city's political ladder, focuses its finale on Mayor Richardo Hoynes and his right hand man Bokor Baracus. The ride up until there also welcomes back MS-13 gang member Rene Ormeno from the first book, newly released from a mental asylum and souped up on diabolical strength.

Nolan's loyal partner Alex Parker is by his side until the very end, and his grenade lobbing arm is a lot more limber this time. No new characters are introduced from outside the previous two books; a suitable choice for wrapping up the long and protracted battle that had been waged so far. It's for this reason, I think, that the dialogue is probably at its best here, as familiar personalities all make their appearances re-entering the ring against Tommy and Alex. I especially found the banter between those two to be especially good this time around.

The World

Finn's New York City of the previous books returns. The biggest difference in this entry are the sheer number and brazenness of the supernatural elements that come roaring out of the gate as the pitch of the battle picks up. The bounty on Nolan's head has gunmen scrying to find his location, fire-breathing wyverns sprout from traffic drones and hellhounds whose paws singe whatever they touch bound across rooftops to chase him down.

It's eventually discovered a powerful warlock is the one behind the bounty. It turns out the heat rising on the intensity and frequency of the attempts on Nolan's life are tied to something deeper as well; the warlock requires an increasing amount of blood sacrifices be made to keep the dark forces bestowing his powers happy. This leads to broad daylight attacks by mythical creatures along major highways, open gunfights with literal truckloads of enemies, and collateral damage being cranked up to fifty as the attacks become more desperate.

The Politics

The particular politics of Hell Spawn and Death Cult falls off the radar in *Infernal Affairs*. As this novel is stuffed to the gills with action, the plot focus is on the far more primal goal of survival rather than any nuanced issues.

However, as the mayor's agenda becomes increasingly radical—or more mainstream, if you like—we see a series of new policies and attitudes playing out. Of course, the city is toying with the idea of harassing the Catholic church for its bigoted stances on gay marriage and abortion, and a few details that were no doubt written to seem over the top in 2018 (like sex education for first graders taught exclusively by trans teachers) impress from their sheer prescience in 2022.

Perhaps this was my only significant criticism for the book; I'm all for a good political dragging, especially by anyone with wit to really pull it off. I can laugh at those on my side of the aisle and Lord knows I enjoy roasting progressives extra crispy. There are times though, when it feels like Finn does visit this well a bit too often, especially towards the end. The final conflict is an adrenaline bomb so chaotic and fiery I'm convinced it could never be put to film but delivers on its promised thrills and

ends satisfyingly. The villain monologuing sprinkled in and some of the closing scene dialogue did begin to border on grating a bit however but stops short of ruining anything.

Who's it for?

If you're on *Infernal Affairs*, you, like me, are likely a Tommy Nolan fan; it's definitely for those invested in the story and have already read the first two books of the series; a LOT of the impact of the plot and character appearances will be lost on you if you haven't read *Hell Spawn* and *Death Cult*, which you absolutely should. You can check out my reviews for those particular titles [here](#) and [here](#).

Why read it?

It's a huge, two-fisted culmination of the escalating battles between the forces of good and evil that's been brewing for two books. Despite my above criticism, it does tie a satisfying bow on this leg of Tommy Nolan's enlistment on the side of good before starting an intriguing new leg of his journey in the next novel, *City of Shadows*.

The Light That Never Was by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. Review by Heath Row

Biggle was a musicologist with a PhD in musicology, a musician, an educator, and an oral historian, so it might not come as a surprise that the arts—and aesthetics—play a major role in this delightful science fiction novel and in much of his sf writing. Biggle also served in various roles for the Science Fiction Writers of America, founded the Science Fiction Oral History Association, and turned to writing full time in the 1960s. Kelly Freas's cover painting for this paperback edition captures the themes of the novel well: alien humanoids considering a human sculpture.

For the most part, *The Light That Never Was* is a mystery novel set on other planets. A planet is well known as the location for many artistic works of historic importance, and its Fountain at Zrilund remains an often-captured site by sometimes amateurish artists selling their wares to tourists. How can the planet and its economy cope with changing tastes and styles in the art world? How can the local citizens manage an influx of politically sensitive immigrants, art critics, and tourists?

Similarly, a dealer begins to sell extremely innovative and interesting pieces of art by an artist whose identity is a closely guarded secret. Who is the artist? What methods do they use?

And thirdly, the book is a novel about political unrest, race relations, attempted genocide, and the surviving refugees—and art becomes the tool with which the refugees can make claim on a new home initially safer than their old. That path is not an easy one, and they are challenged by the planet's residents.

The story is enjoyable and multi-layered, and the portrayal of artists, dealers, and critics is occasionally quite critical and funny as Biggle considers the economics of art and the politics of indigenous art and artists. What qualifies someone as an artist? What makes fine art fine? A surprisingly interesting book on a number of levels, *The Light That Never Was* introduced me to a writer I'll seek out in the future. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine *Faculae & Filigree* #13.)

Little Fuzzy
by H. Beam Piper
Review by Heath Row

This is the first of two books featuring the alien race of the Fuzzies, or the Gashta, that Piper wrote before killing himself in the mid-'60s. It tells the tale of the discovery of the Fuzzies by an older miner on the planet Zarathustra, which had previously been thought uninhabited by sentient life. The miner's discovery of the little humanoids, which are one of the most charming alien races I've ever encountered in reading—even more awesome than the Ewoks or Gizmo the Gremlin!—causes a bit of a stir as various groups try to classify them as sentient beings—or as not sentient beings, in the case of the business interests active on the planet.

It's a story of first contact, of developing friendship, of corporate malfeasance, of crime and the judicial process, of anthropology and psychology, and of what it means to be sentient. The passages of the book that work through defining sentience were quite interesting.

After Piper's suicide, there were rumors that an unfinished Fuzzy manuscript remained; it was later published in the '80s. Several other authors have also written books featuring the diminutive humanoids, including John F. Carr; Wolfgang Diehr; Ardath Mayhar, who rewrote Little Fuzzy from the point of view of the Fuzzies (similar to Beowulf and Grendel!); and William Tuning. And John Scalzi "rebooted" the series with his more recent novel Fuzzy Nation.

Definitely a writer and series to return to. And based on this book alone, a creative life cut too short because of personal troubles. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine Faculae & Filigree #13.)

New Writings in SF—3 edited by John Carnell
Review by Perry Middlemiss

I'm continuing my slow way through the many volumes of this original sf anthology series out of the United Kingdom. This is a fairly standard selection of sf stories from the mid-1960s. There isn't anything much that stands out here other than the stories by John Kingston (a pseudonym of Keith Roberts) and Dan Morgan.

The rest of the stories are competent, with Colin Kapp offering one of his Unorthodox Engineers stories ("The Subways of Tazoo"), and a so-so story from Australian author John Baxter ("Testament"). (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #22.)

The Poppy War by Rebecca F. Kuang
Review by Christopher Nuttall
<http://ChrisHanger.wordpress.com>

The push for more diverse writers (and identity politics in general) has had the unfortunate side-effect of convincing many readers, on both sides of the political aisle, that a number of writers were only published because of their gender, or the colour of their skin, or because of something that the vast majority of writers are unable or unwilling to leverage to their advantage. The fundamental unfairness of affirm-

ative action makes it harder to accept that a book might not be your cup of tea, but others may feel differently. ‘Diverse’ writers therefore have to deal with the stigma of being ‘diverse,’ of being prejudged as having effectively cheated their way to publication. This is fundamentally – brutally – unfair, but it happens.

The Poppy War is an excellent demonstration of precisely why it is unfair.

When I read it for the first time, I was hooked. I slid into the story as easily as I slide down a ramp. When I finished, I decided that the author had jumped to the top of my A-List; I promptly started reading it again. On the second read, I noticed a handful of problems with the text, but the author’s writing skills were more than good enough to convince me to overlook them. In short, I really liked this book.

In an Empire that bears more than a passing resemblance to Imperial China, Rin – a young war orphan – sets out to escape her unwanted foster parents by taking and acing the empire-wide tests to find the best students in the empire. Winning a scholarship to Sinegard, the foremost military academy, she thinks she has it made ... until she discovers that a brown-skinned peasant girl sticks out like a sore thumb amidst the grandees. Ill-prepared for the academy, facing bullies of both genders, she forces her way up the ladder ... slowly uncovering hints of magic and power beyond her wildest imaginations. Eventually, she learns how to call on the gods themselves for power ... at a hefty price.

Her studies are interrupted by war. The empire is being invaded by ‘Imperial Japan.’ She is pushed into defending the academy, then a city under siege; she discovers, too late, the truth behind her origins ... and how she can use them to stop the war. Betrayed by her superiors, she unleashes a nightmare upon ‘Japan’, takes control of her army unit and sets out to avenge the betrayal ...

It’s easy to draw comparisons between The Poppy War and The Girl King. They do have much in common, being based on Imperial China, but The Poppy King is a vastly superior piece of work. The author effortlessly evokes both the grandeur and squalor of China, taking us on a ride from the heartlands of empire to lands devastated by war. She makes no bones about the multiethnic dimensions of the empire, discussing races within the empire that had strange powers ... some of which proved very dangerous. Her description of corruption within the empire, of racism and opium smuggling and how the warlords refused to work together, is a very accurate description of what happened to our China. The failure to unite and adapt to an outside foe eventually brought the whole system crashing down.

The Poppy War also has the advantage of a fundamentally different magic system than most books, one that is both rational enough to be understandable and yet manages to maintain a sense of wonder. Martial arts are not magic, the tutors say ... except they are, under the right circumstances. (Shades of Iron Fist and countless other stories featuring oriental wisdom here.) Rin learns she can call on the gods, but the price for doing so can be very high. Her first real teacher is terrified of his power, with reason; her second accepts the price and pays it willingly. And, in the end, Rin herself makes the same decision.

As always, the core of a great book lies with its main character. And Rin is fundamentally likeable, right from the start. She works hard to get what she wants; she never gives up, even when pushed to ‘admit’ she cheated. (She points out, rather dryly, that if she cheated, she somehow beat an anti-cheating system that was lauded as unbeatable.) She faces immense difficulties, from the standard bullies to the anger of the gods themselves but overcomes them. Her character sharpens as she grows older, she loses some of her more likable points, but ... she stays a great character. There is much for writers to learn from The Poppy War.

The book also managed to give life to a wide cast of other characters, from her first teacher (who ap-

pears, on the surface, to be a little crazy) to aristocratic students who have huge advantages over her. The author does manage to develop them, for better or worse: the school bully becomes a partner, then a friend; the queen bee is captured by the enemy and gang-raped ... an experience that leaves her broken. And the author does not hesitate to show that each level has its own problems. The greatest student at the academy is introduced to us as a Marty Stu, but – when we meet him properly – it becomes clear that he’s just as insecure as everyone else.

It is rare, these days, for a ‘diverse’ book not to take a few pokes – deserved or not – at colonisation. The Poppy War largely avoids this by having the main enemy be an analogue of Imperial Japan, although it does make a snide comment about ‘westerners’ documenting the war rather than doing anything about it. (A common problem; the west has often been a day late and a dollar short when it comes to intervention.) One may quibble about the portrayal of the ‘Japanese’, from their ruthless dehumanisation of their foes to their willingness to carry out horrific experiments on their captives, but it is firmly rooted in reality. Imperial Japan could have – and did – give the Nazis lessons in committing atrocities.

The book also manages to illustrate the high cost of privilege without being too preachy about it. In theory, the empire-wide examinations are fair (and they are, as Rin manages to pass without being disqualified for being a peasant girl); in practice, kids raised amongst the nobility are trained in everything from classical literature to fighting from almost as soon as she can walk. She is hopelessly outmatched, at least at first. Worse, even when she does get to the academy, she finds that she is still at the bottom, and she has to keep climbing the ladder. The system is designed to present an appearance of social mobility while, in reality, keeping things relatively static. This ensures that it is rare for new blood to reach the rarefied heights of power, weakening the empire and eventually ensuring its collapse. The people raised in the aristocracy simply don’t understand the conditions on the ground. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen this in a book, but it is remarkably well done here.

If there is one major flaw in The Poppy War, it is that it reads a little condensed in places ... the action skips forward midway through the book, something that may weaken elements of the storyline. (But, on the other hand, it doesn’t need to glide through class after class once the academy is firmly established.) There are other moments – the heroine makes a string of decisions that may be regarded as practical, but utterly heartless – that darken her character (she ends the book by effectively committing genocide); there’s also the odd question of precisely why no one recognised her origins, if her skin was that distinctive, although in such an era it’s possible that no one really knew what made her people stand out.

But ... overall ... The Poppy War is a very good book. I liked it.

You might like it too.

Robosoldiers: Thank You for Your Servos

Edited by Stephen Lawson

Review by JE Tabor

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Robosoldiers is an anthology all about - you guessed it - artificial troopers. Some of these futuristic servicemen are mechanically enhanced humans, some are all software, but all were built with warfare in mind, whether that be bomb defusing, PTSD counseling, or straight up blowing stuff up.

The story

The stories in this anthology run the gamut from straight-up action adventure to political thriller to psychological sci-fi. Stories range from a soldier pinned down in the Hindu Kush with only her robot companion at her side to a retired technician with a new calling as feral robot tamer to a bomb squad expert working with an AI colleague to resolve a hostage situation to an astronaut having to deal with a computer that has fallen in love with her. Each of these stories is different enough that it doesn't feel repetitive, but each maintain a common thread that keeps the anthology working as a coherent whole. I would not say that the stories all have the same tone, but when the tone does change, it does so seamlessly without jarring the reader going from one story to the next.

The characters

You might expect the most interesting characters in *Robosoldiers* to be the robots and computers, and you would not be far off: the artificial warriors are the main show more often than not. But their human companions are not given short shrift, either. The interplay between artificial intelligences and the human protagonists is where this anthology really shines, often playing with the gaps in perspectives between humans and computers that can lead to deadly misalignment of priorities on one hand or, on the other hand, a gestalt combination superior to either synthetic or biological alone. Some of my favorite characters include a double amputee astronaut, a computer that thinks it's in love with its operator, a PTSD survivor with an AI therapist implanted into in her brain, and a bomb defusing robot intent on being the best it can be.

The world

The worlds span the globe and beyond. Settings range from the jungles of Belize to the mountains of Afghanistan to Russia to the Strait of Taiwan to Antarctica to near-earth orbit to the Lunar surface to down home on American soil. The varied settings bring out the distinct subgenres of each of these stories well, whether it be the Tom Clancy-esque globe hopping around a near-future showdown between the USA and the PRC, or the intimate setting of the living room of a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress from enduring a brutal period in captivity.

The politics

Real world politics in this anthology only really comes to play in a global sense, save for a few instances. By and large, the Russians and Chinese are the enemies. Americans are generally the protagonists, and usually the "good guys," though there is some grumbling about U.S. politicians, and an instance of domestic conflict within the states.

Content warning

There is plenty of violence in the anthologies, although most of it is not described in graphic detail. That being said, there are on-screen depictions of decapitations, maiming, and plenty of gunshots. There are offscreen implications of rape, abuse, and torture.

Who is it for?

Robosoldiers is easily for anyone who loves military sci-fi thrillers, especially if you love depictions of unmanned robots in combat situations. I also think anyone interested in the psychology of artificial intelligence will be pleasantly surprised by the anthology.

Why read it?

Read *Robosoldiers* for the thoughtful depictions of human interactions with unmanned combat drones, cybernetics, and nanobots, as well as the barriers in communication between human and artificial intelligences. Also read it for the awesome scenes of robot soldiers blowing stuff up and being blown up.

Stress Pattern by Neal Barrett, Jr. Review by Heath Row

The protagonist in this novel, which I reviewed briefly during an LASFS meeting not too many weeks ago, crash lands on an alien planet populated by a number of alien creatures. He spends much of the novel trying to figure out the flora and fauna, the geology, and the ecosystem, discovering that he stands above and apart from the planet's denizens.

That the novel focuses so intently and intensely on exploring the alien world is a highlight of the book. Largely nonsensical and a little surreal, the book is definitely not hard science fiction, though the text largely focuses on the living systems of the planet, how the geology affects the flora, how the various fauna relate to their world and each other—and eventually, why the world is as strange as it is.

Josh Kirby's delightfully and surprisingly phallic cover painting showcases one of the planet's fauna, which might remind some readers of the sandworms of *Dune* and subsequent books. Yes, it looks like a penis. Yes, the aliens on the cover look like scrotal sacs. Sex and reproduction even play a role in the book, presented in quite a comic fashion—and resulting in an offspring I certainly didn't expect.

At the end of the book, the protagonist learns about the origin of the world's ecosystem, and without giving too much away, I can safely say that the book is really about the power of the creative impulse, of one's will, and of the forceful power of one's personality and emotions.

Barrett is perhaps better known for his Aldair series, some of which are in my personal library. He also wrote Hardy Boys books for the Stratemeyer Syndicate. *Stress Pattern* is definitely a strange little novel, and I recommend it highly. It is unlike any sf book I've ever read: World building and witticism in equal measure. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine *Faculae & Filigree* #13.)

Sun-Daughters, Sea-Daughters by Aimee Ogden Review by Perry Middlemiss

This book was a finalist for the 2022 Nebula Award for Best Novella. In this science fictional retelling of the Little Mermaid fairy tale, Atuale is a mermaid (or maybe selkie, it isn't really clear) who has turned her back on life in the sea on the planet of Maraven. Fifteen years later, her husband, Saareval, and his clan have been stricken with a virus that is proving to be 100% fatal.

In order to save her husband, Atuale turns to the World Witch, a former lover, for help finding a cure. After a journey across the galaxy, the two finally arrive at a place that might be able to help them, if they can get past the quarantine regulations.

This is a very predictable story that has the basic plot and world-building elements for a reasonable piece of fiction, but the whole thing seems too rushed with little tension or drama. It's not often that I wish a story were longer, though in this case, that need is very obvious. (This review was previously

published in slightly different form in the ANZAPA apazine Perryscope #22.)

Trouble Walked In by Mike Kupari Review by Trevor Denning

<https://upstreamreviews.substack.com>

Ezekiel “Easy” Novak has a nose for trouble, which is probably what makes him the best private eye on Nova Columbia. In the future, when humanity has colonized distant planets and fought many wars, there’s still a need for the good man willing to do bad things for the right reasons.

When Dagny Blake walks into Novak’s office and hires him to find her sister, he knows he’s in for a world of trouble.

The Story

It’s not unlike Chinatown, where a private investigator finds himself mixed up in a family drama and the local politics. Unlike Chinatown, the fate of an entire planet is at stake. Ezekiel “Easy” Novak, war hero turned gumshoe, works out of a small office in Delta City and takes what work he can find. Need to know if your spouse is cheating? Missing person? He’ll find out. When Dagny Blake comes in and asks him to track down her missing sister, Cassandra Carmichael, his instincts tell him there’s more happening below the surface. How much more he can barely comprehend.

Cassandra works for a powerful corporation with tentacles stretching into some dark places. As the investigation progresses, Easy and Dagny uncover a conspiracy involving alien technology, and are nearly killed in the midst of an assassination. Dagny and Cassandra’s stepfather may have answers, but can he be trusted? The same question applies to Easy’s maybe-not-so-former secret agent informant.

Once the pieces start falling into place, it’s with earth shattering impact.

Kupari follows in the footsteps of all the hardboiled greats, introducing what seems like a simple problem that gradually snowballs into a cataclysm. Several genres weave together seamlessly, as Kupari draws from mystery, sci-fi, romance, and even works in a heist. Easy has a wry sense of humor, a pocket cannon revolver, and well-stocked liquor cabinet that even Phillip Marlow would admire.

The Characters

Easy Novak is our protagonist narrator. A former soldier with a strong sense of dignity and honor, he’s a good man. But he’s not always that good. We never despise him for his flaws and are on his side when he justifies a mistake. And in a refreshing change from most genre fiction, there’s nothing “chosen one” about him. Novak is just an average guy.

Every detective needs a good Girl Friday, and Easy’s is his secretary Lily. Young enough to be his daughter and worldly-wise in ways Easy isn’t, she has his best interests in mind and he hers.

In less capable hands, Dagny Blake might have been just another femme fatale. If anything, she’s more developed than Easy, with a backstory that defines her and damaged just enough to make her irresistible to everyone she meets. Feminine in all the right ways, hopefully we haven’t seen the last of her.

The World

Even though this takes place in the distant future on a far-flung planet, the world doesn't feel that far out of reach. It's familiar so that the learning curve for the reader isn't very steep. Cell phones and taxis still exist, if by different names. A disease that has people wearing masks is a cause for concern, of course, but crime and corruption are the real threats. Virtual reality brings in elements of cyberpunk. Aliens have been met and fought but aren't integrated into daily life. As usual, neither disease nor an outside force is as dangerous to man as man is to himself.

Really, the focus is more on the people that inhabit the world than in building out a detailed world itself.

The Politics

It's political, and yet it's not. The future as presented is realistic in that humans never really change. Corrupt mega corporations and the government work hand-in-hand when they aren't stabbing each other in the back, while the anarchists are still young and dumb. The job of maintaining society falls to the worldly-wise individual, who should be as strapped with as many guns as possible.

Content Warning

All the usual suspects are here: sex, nudity, violence, and language. Nothing too outrageous, so approach it with a tasteful R rating in mind and you won't be shocked.

Who is it for?

There's no missing the homages. Anyone who loves everything from *The Big Sleep* to *Blade Runner* or needs a fix while waiting for the next installment in *The Dresden Files* or *Monster Hunters International*, will feel right at home between these pages. There are also shades of *Arrival* for the more philosophically minded.

Why read it?

It opens with a quote from *Tracer Bullet*, and if you know who that is, isn't that enough? At the end of the day, it's a human story that addresses our deepest fears and failings, and never denies our sense of wonder. And it's a tight mystery besides.

Twilight by Stephenie Meyer Review by Heath Row

When my wife and son saw me reading *Twilight*, both of them laughed out loud. "Dad's reading *Twilight*!" my son crowed. Yes, I finally read *Twilight*. And while I wouldn't say that it's a good book, I'm glad I did. Hannah Mueller's *The Politics of Fandom* included commentary on the impact that *Twilight* fen—particularly media fen—had on sf cons and fandom, and I decided I needed to see what all the fuss was about. As it turns out, the book—and I presume its sequels, which I will most likely not read—is all fuss and very little muss.

For the most part, the book is your standard young adult romance. Good girl falls in love with the bad boy. But this boy is so bad that he doesn't just want to kiss her or screw her, he wants to kill her. That's

pretty bad. It amplifies the romantic and sensual tension—the frisson—quite a bit, going beyond the teenage girl wondering “Will he kiss me?” to “Will he kill me?” How risqué!

The other thing that struck me is that for a book ostensibly about vampires and lycanthropes, there’s very little of the action we’ve come to expect from the blood-sucking fiends and werewolves.

In stark contrast to Captain Kronos—Vampire Hunter, which posits a near endless variety in the characteristics and qualities of vampires, the vampires in *Twilight* mostly don’t even kill people for the blood they require. (Though some do, supposedly.) They can walk about in daylight, though they’re drawn to cloudy parts of the country such as the Pacific Northwest. They glow. They run really, really fast through forests while carrying people on their backs. And they play baseball—playing baseball so forcefully that they need to do so under cover of thunderstorms, lest a more mundane human hear the sharp crack of their bats when a swing connects.

Even what might have been the most vampiric action—the boyfriend vampire fighting an actual blood-sucking vampire over the life of his lady love—goes untold and undetailed. Narrated through the point of view of the heroine in the first person, the lady love passes out, and when she comes to, the fight is over. Meyer didn’t even write what would have been some pretty brutal vampire-on-vampire action.

So *Twilight* is a very restrained book, a young adult romance, and not at all a horror novel or YA approach to the work of Anne Rice. I was a little surprised, very amused, and quite disappointed. Why write a book featuring vampires if you don’t let the vampires do what vampires do? It’s as if you don’t even like vampires. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine *Faculae & Filigree* #13.)

Non-Fiction

Charisma +1: The Guide to Convention Etiquette for Gamers, Geeks, and the Socially Awkward

by Jessica Brawner

Review by Heath Row

This slim print-on-demand volume is one of very few books available about the experience and etiquette of going to fandom cons. Written primarily through the lens of the introverted or socially awkward, the book includes a con packing list and addresses social niceties such as hygiene; social interactions; the combination of cosplay and crowds; and etiquette for panel participants and attendees, the dealers’ room, art shows, and interacting with professionals, volunteers and staff. The book draws on the author’s personal experience attending, volunteering for, and working at Dragon Con. (In fact, Brawner also wrote the book *The Official Dragon Con Survival Guide*.)

Long-time congoers might find the book silly or simplistic, perhaps even unnecessary. But as sf and comic cons move ever closer to media cons and become more mainstream, this book is actually quite useful for newcomers. The book is particularly friendly toward women, offering advice and guidance on the soft no and hard no, managing unwanted attention and stalkers, cosplay and consent, the art of flirting, and interacting with “booth babes.”

You might not think you need such a book personally, but I'll bet dollars to donuts that you know someone who might very well benefit from some third-party feedback on how they interact at cons. You might even know a neo-fan who might need some help getting over the hump to their first con.

I know I'll recommend this slim book to people who aren't sure whether going to a con is for them, what to do at a con, or how to behave. (This review was previously published in slightly different form in the LASFAPA apazine *Faculae & Filigree* #13.)

Prose Bono

Types of Editing for Your Work of Fiction

From A.C. Cargill

<https://accargillauthor.wordpress.com/writing-tips/>

Your hard work as a writer of a work of fiction deserves proper attention before you take it to the next level – publication. In this age of self-publishing, though, you might consider skipping the services of a professional editor because of cost or worry over the process. The good news is that there is an absolute ton of information online about fiction editing. Even better news is that there are various levels, some less expensive than others. And the even better news is that this article sums them up for you.

First, there is a lot of discrepancy between how many levels of editing there are and between the terms used for each. This article presents the key levels and terms. Individual editors out there may vary a little. You will want to clarify with them what they mean and what to expect from each level.

The order here is not cast in cement. Some of these are done simultaneously, depending on the editor.

See the list of articles at the bottom of this post with more information.

1. Editorial Assessment

Also called: Manuscript evaluation — Manuscript critique — Editorial report — Big-picture editing

Features:

Optional starting point for an early version of your manuscript that might be a bit messy.

Editor gives you broad and hopefully useful feedback on strengths and weaknesses in your plot, characters, or structure in a written report (2-3 pages usually).

No rewrites, no corrections for grammar, spelling, etc.

Just to give you a basic idea of the readability of your work and anything you might want to fix before sending to a beta reader or literary agent.

Generally more affordable than a full developmental edit.

2: Beta Reading

Also called: Advance copy read

Features:

For new writers wanting general feedback.

A good beta reader (and someone who might charge you) will give you a 2-3 page report.

If your budget's really tight, as most are these days, consider a writing critique group.

Caution: There are people on social media who routinely offer their services as a beta reader. They might charge, or they might not. Check them out thoroughly, though, before sending off your masterpiece or you could find yourself trying to sue for them publishing under their name.

3. Structural

Also called: Developmental editing — Evaluation editing — Manuscript critique

Features:

Some combine with Developmental edit.

Begins when larger conceptual issues have been addressed and a draft is complete.

Editor focused big picture issues like overall story structure, logical flow, style, tone, general quality of writing

Editor will usually provide a short memo summarizing key points, areas of concern, and mark up manuscript at a high level, may shift paragraph or chapter order as well as make suggestions for new material or deletion of existing material.

If all goes well, you're ready for copyediting and proofreading.

Otherwise, you might need a developmental editor for organization and structure issues or a line edit or content edit to address writing issues.

4. Developmental Editing

Also called: Content editing — Substantive editing — Conceptual editing — Manuscript appraisal

Features:

Most valuable to new and inexperienced authors.

Often the first step of editing a manuscript and the broadest level of editing.

Editor includes an editorial report as well as in-text comments.

Might be major changes – additions, deletions, items moved or completely rewritten – so this step should be done before any further editing.

Focus on: Starting point, First scene, Plot structure, Point of view, Pacing, Setting, Character development, Tension and intrigue, Images and metaphors, Narrative techniques, Themes

Goal is a more vibrant, engaging, and believable story.

5. Editing

Features:

Sharper focus than copyediting, looking at sentences (does each deal with one idea?) and paragraphs (does each discuss one topic?).

Editor checks for consistent and correct usage of terms and ideas; repetitive or redundant words, phrases, or sections; wordy phrases; excessive use of passive voice; shorter words that can be substitut-

ed for longer ones; page and word limit fit; and awkward phrases that disrupt the flow of your writing.

If all is well, your document will be ready for copyediting.

6. Substantive

Also called: Developmental editing — Line editing — Content editing — Full editing

Features:

Some lump with Developmental Editing, others with Copyediting.

Takes place at the beginning of the publishing process.

Not as detailed as a line edit. In-between high-level developmental/evaluation edit and ground-level a line editor takes.

Editor will look at the big picture and address paragraph and sentence clarity, coherence, and flow, ensuring that your content is compelling and suitable for your intended audience, medium, and purpose.

Editor will note directly in your file, using the change tracking and comments features, things for you to consider, recommend changes, delete sections, and/or suggest additions.

Sometimes, editor rewrites sections. You could see substantial changes, including new content. Be very clear when requesting this service if you want such rewriting to be done.

Editor will not rewrite stories but only change what is necessary while maintaining the author's personal voice and style.

7. Copyediting

Also called: Line editing — Stylistic editing — Light Copyediting

Features:

Happens midway through publishing.

Making corrections to spelling and punctuation.

Editor generally focuses more on grammar, word choice, enhancing overall writing quality (active vs. passive voice, overly long or awkward phrasing), basic factual correctness, and ensures that the tone and style of a piece are consistent and appropriate for the target audience.

Experienced editors ensure your original tone remains intact and use a revision-tracking system so you can see changes and quickly accept or reject them with the click of a button. They may create a style sheet documenting hyphenation style, capitalization style, and other items. Keep it handy for the proofreader and feel free to add to it.

Expect noticeable changes to your original document and review them carefully. Never feel obligated to accept those changes, though. It's your book.

A good copy editor collaborates with you and will put your vision first.

8. Fact-checking

Features:

Particularly crucial for nonfiction but helpful for works of historical fiction and hard sci-fi, too, or even fiction books that deal with a lot of current events.

Can be part of copyediting, substantive editing, or developmental editing.

9. Line editing

Also called: Copyediting — Stylistic editing — Medium copyediting — Comprehensive editing

Features:

For manuscripts and scripts that are in final draft.

Editor goes through your writing “line by line,” focuses on the words you use to communicate with your reader, things like clarity, examining word choice and impact, making sure your writing is clear and eloquent, pointing out clichéd phrasing and jargon, suggesting fixes for run-on sentences.

Some editors will do both copyediting and line editing together if you specify it up front.

10. Proofreading

Also called: Light copyediting — Mechanical editing — Baseline editing

Features:

Final, most technical edit to seek and correct remaining errors, often done just before book is published.

Hire someone who did not do the copyedit, so he/she sees your text with fresh eyes.

Traditional publishing: a proofreader edits after the book has been designed and formatted, and works on page proofs.

Indie publishing: a proofreader often edits after the editor and work on a Word document. He/she serves as a second pair of eyes on the manuscript. The proofreader also does his/her job before the book is designed and formatted for publication to save the cost of inputting changes into the program used for generating the book (InDesign, etc.)

Proofreader will check grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, verb-tense consistency, pronouns, spacing, editorial style, and formatting consistency.

Don't expect radical changes to your sentences or words.

Furnish that style sheet mentioned earlier.

Proofreader will return a marked-up document for your review.

After you make changes, you should be ready to send your manuscript into production.

Bottom Line

Again, I stress that this is a general guide. And I also stress the need for some level of editing for your work, even if it's a check for typos, which are rampant in both traditional and indie publishing.

Personally as the author, I do a “deep read,” combining most of the above, of manuscripts that have sat and cooled awhile. The changes I saw needed in my first three manuscripts were significant – chapters realigned or combined, parts moved to other chapters, heavy copyediting, tons of line editing.

Communication between you and the editor is vital. Be sure you're both speaking the same language! Go to the editor's site to see how they divide the different editing levels and what they charge for each.

A few articles presented as a starting point:

“The Different Levels of Editing” (PDF by Louise Harnby – the definitive guide, it seems)

“The Different Levels of Editing: What Do You Need?” by Louise Harnby's guest article

- “What Level of Editing Do I Need?” PDF by Denise Cowle (very good)
- “5 Types of Editing: Which One Do You Need Right Now?” on Reedsy.com blog (very good)
- “Levels of Editing” by Kristi Reilly, Editor
- “How to Choose What Level of Editing You Need” by Crystal Herron
- “4 Levels of Editing and Their Pricing Explained” by Katie Chambers
- “What Are the Different Types of Editing?” by Tucker Max
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- “Levels of Editing: What They Are & What They Involve” by Gail Kerzner
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- “What Are the Different Types of Editing?” on Enago.com
- “Levels of editing” on Editsmadeeasy.com
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- “4 Levels of Editing Explained: Which Service Does Your Book Need?” on Thebookdesigner.com
- “Types of editing” on Iped-editors.org

Hope you found this helpful and have been inspired to start and/or continue writing!

Please check out my novels. And thanks for reading.

~Finis~

